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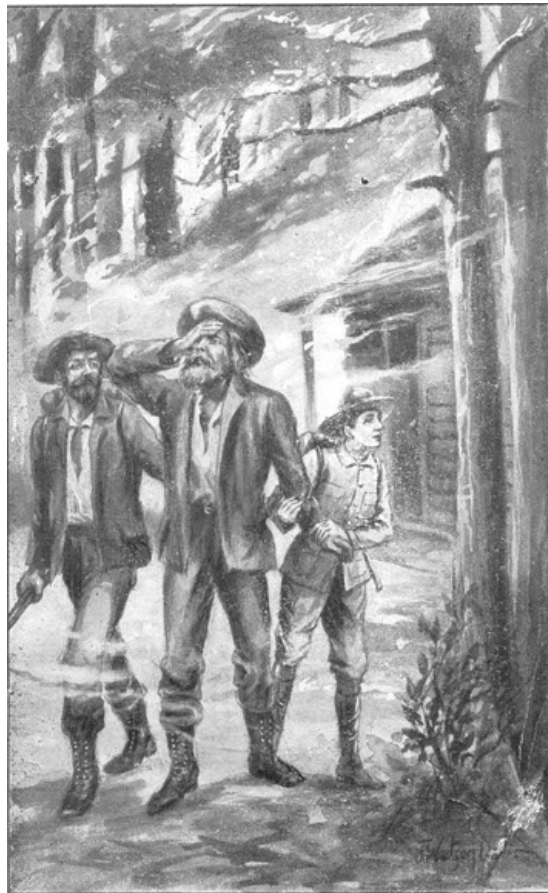
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE MAINE WOODS;
OR, THE NEW TEST FOR THE SILVER FOX PATROL ***



“Can we make the pond, Jim?” asked Thad. “Not the big pond,”
Jim called back; “but there’s a little one about half way.”
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The Boy Scouts In the Maine Woods

OR

The New Test for the Silver Fox Patrol

By HERBERT CARTER

Author of "The Boy Scouts First Camp Fire," "The Boy Scouts
in the Blue Ridge," "The Boy Scouts on the Trail,"
"The Boy Scouts Through the Big Timber,"
"The Boy Scouts In the Rockies"

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THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE MAINE WOODS.

THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE MAINE WOODS

CHAPTER I.

AFLOAT ON THE WINDING AROOSTOOK.

"I tell you, Bumpus Hawtree, I can do it as easy as turn my hand over, once I get the hang of the thing!"

"Oh! you don't say so, Giraffe? Here you've been trying for these three days past, with your silly old bow and stick, twirling away like an organ grinder; and never so much as struck a single spark of fire yet."

"Well, you see, there are a whole lot of things about the thing I don't know."

"Sure there are. You can do everything but the right thing. You spin that stick with the point that fits in the hole you made in that block of wood, like fun; but your fine tinder don't even smoke, as far as I can see."

"Huh! you'll see it do more than that, and before the end of this Maine trip, I'll give you to understand, Bumpus."

"Oh! will I? How kind of you, Giraffe."

"You needn't say that like you didn't believe I'd ever beat it out. I've made fires ten different ways, and you know that. And listen to me—I'm just bound to get one going in that South Sea Island method we've read about, 'or give up trying!' You hear me, Bumpus?"

"No trouble about that, Giraffe. Tell you what I'll do, though, in the generosity of my heart—make a wager with you about that fire business; and it's a treat of ice-cream for the crowd, for the loser."

"I take you on that," quickly snapped back the long-legged Boy Scout who was curled up in the stern of the canvas canoe that was being pushed along by the energetic arms of a sturdy guide, as straight as his name was the opposite, it being Eli Crooks.

"Then let's have a clear understanding," observed the fat lad, squatting rather awkwardly in the bow of the same craft; "say, you other fellows, d'ye hear what we're talking about?" and he raised his voice a trifle, so that the occupants of the two other boats that were close by, might listen; just as if they had not been keeping their ears wide open; for when Bumpus and Giraffe got into a hot argument, there was generally plenty of fun in the air.

One of the other canoes contained three scouts, as could be told from various parts of their khaki uniforms that they wore, even when off on a hunting trip. The clear-eyed fellow who seemed to be in charge of the party was Thad Brewster; one of his companions was known as Step Hen Bingham, because, as a little chap he had insisted at school that was the way his name should be spelled, while the third was an exceedingly wiry boy, Davy Jones by name, and who had always been a human monkey when it came to athletics, climbing trees, and doing all sorts of queer stunts.

In the third boat was a shorter Maine guide, a sort of slow chap who came by the name of Jim Hasty just as the other did that of Crooks; and the scout with him was Allan Hollister, a lad born in the very State they were now exploring; and who assisted the scoutmaster in his duties.

All these six boys belonged to the Silver Fox Patrol connected with a troop of scouts located in a New York town called Cranford. Two more had been unable to take the Maine trip, which had

already carried the bunch through some adventurous times in another part of the State, whither they had first gone in order to overtake a gentleman just then moose hunting, and with whom Thad had to get in touch for certain business reasons.

Now they were on the Aroostook River, the three boats, as well as the party, having been transported from Grindstone by rail, and launched at the junction of the Masardis with the first mentioned stream. 6

One of the guides having been brought up in this region, had promised the boys rare sport, if only they would trust to his judgment in the matter. The trip was of indefinite length, the only stipulation being that they should not go outside the United States, when approaching the New Brunswick border along the great St. Johns River.

All of them seemed to be just bubbling over with enthusiasm and spirits. With a new voyage before them, plenty to eat aboard the canoes, guns with which to secure game, tents provided by Jim Hasty at his home town; and "everything lovely, while the goose hung high," as Bumpus had put it, really there was no excuse for any of the scouts to feel downcast.

In their former trip around the Penobscot region the boys had had the good fortune to be chiefly instrumental in causing the arrest of a couple of fleeing yeggmen, who had broken into several banks, and for whose arrest quite a decent reward was offered. Not only that, but they had recovered valuable bonds and papers, that would undoubtedly cause the bank officials to back up the offer they had made, which was to the effect that two thousand dollars would be paid to the parties returning the said bonds, and no questions asked.

Bumpus had been the one who seemed chiefly concerned over this money matter; for it happened that the fat scout wanted dearly to visit the Far West, and was always talking of California, together with the game to be met with in the famous Rock Mountains. And with this windfall coming to their almost exhausted treasure box, it now seemed as though the Silver Fox Patrol might get away when the next vacation came around. 7

Giraffe, the boy with the long neck, which he could twist around in a way his comrades despaired of ever imitating, had one particular weakness. He was a regular fire worshipper. They depended on Giraffe to start the fires, whether a cooking blaze or the big camp-fire around which they loved to sit or lie, after supper was over.

Many times did Thad have to caution him about his recklessness in this regard; and his vigilance increased, now that they were in a State where forest preservation was of such moment that a special fire warden, with many assistants, was employed, to see that the laws were strictly enforced; and intending hunters were not allowed to go forth without being accompanied by a licensed guide, to make sure that all fires were utterly extinguished before breaking camp.

Of course, when Giraffe took it upon himself to find out if he could not make a fire after every known method, there was more or less fun for the crowd. But he had proved that his studies in this direction were worth while; for he had used flint and steel, matches, a burning glass for the sun to do the business, and various other methods with stunning success. 8

But he had thus far been "stumped" as he himself expressed it, when it came to starting a blaze after the formula of the South Sea Islanders. His little bow was made according to directions, and would whirl the pointed stick with tremendous force in the basin that had the hole in the bottom; but thus far, just as Bumpus so exultantly declared, the aspiring Giraffe had failed to accomplish the object he had in view.

"Well, now," remarked Giraffe, "since you've got all the bears and moose in the Aroostook country to listen, suppose you go and explain what we're driving at, Bumpus," when the other boys had declared that they heard the whole argument.

"The wager is cream for the crowd at the first chance," the fat boy went on, with pointed emphasis. "Giraffe says he can start a fire with that bunty little bow of his, and the twirling stick that heats things up, and makes the fine tinder take fire-when you've got the hang of things. He's got to do it before we wind up this particular trip; and at a time when one or more of us are on deck to act as witnesses. Hear that, fellows?"

"What he says are the exact conditions," added the confident Giraffe. "And just make up your minds I'm going to do that same stunt yet. Why, half a dozen times already I've been pretty close to getting fire; but something always seemed to happen just at the last minute. Once my bowstring sawed through. Another time the plaguey stick burst. Then Bumpus had to fall all over me just when I felt sure the spark was going to come in the tinder. And the last time, you may remember, when I sang out that I had it, why, down came that heavy rain, and put me out of business." 9

A general laugh followed these complaining remarks from the tall scout.

"Looks like you might be hoodooed, Giraffe," said Davy Jones.

"All right, no matter what's the matter, if grit and perseverance can accomplish the business, you'll see it done in great style sooner or later!" cried Giraffe, who could be quite determined when he chose.

"Then let's hope it will be sooner," remarked Step Hen; "because you know him well enough to understand that we'll have no peace of our lives till he either gets his little fire started, or else makes a failure of the game."

"Anyhow," broke in Allan from the rear, "no matter how it comes out, the rest of us stand to have

a free feast later on. It's 'heads I win, tails you lose,' for the balance of the Silver Fox Patrol. And in advance, we hand our united thanks to Bumpus; or will it be Giraffe?"

"And," Bumpus went on, calmly; "while Giraffe is worrying his poor old head over that puzzle every time we get settled in camp, I'll be improving each shining hour like the busy little bee, trying out my new gun. Told you fellows, I was going to invest the first chance I got; and here's my brand new double barrel; that's guaranteed, the man said, to knock the spots out of any big game that I hold it on."

"Huh!" grunted Giraffe, who seemed a trifle grumpy on account of having his fire-making abilities made fun of, for he was quite touchy on that score; "chances are, it'll knock spots out of you, first of all, or give you a few to remember it by, if you go and get excited, and pull both triggers at once, as you're likely to do, if I know you at all, Bumpus."

"What in the wide world did you go and get a big ten bore for, when you're such a short fellow?" asked Thad, who had often wanted to find out about this particular subject.

Bumpus, who was fondling his new possession, grinned rather sheepishly.

"Well," he remarked, "you see, Thad's Marlin, and Davy's gun are both twelve gauge, and I thought we ought to have variety in the crowd, so I got a ducking gun. Besides, I knew it would be better when I came to shoot buckshot in it, just like I've got in the chambers right now, ready for any old moose bull that chooses to show up. And in fact, fellows, it was the only sort of shotgun I could buy, unless I took one of them pump guns; and I just couldn't think of working all that machinery when I get so rattled, you know."

"Please keep that blunderbuss pointed the other way, Bumpus," said Step Hen.

"Yes, for goodness' sake don't you turn it around here!" called out Giraffe. "If ever you blew a hole in the bottom of this canvas canoe, we'd go down like a stone."

"I'd be sorry for that," remarked Bumpus, still fondling his new purchase lovingly, although he kept it pointed ahead, as directed; "because, you see, we've got a lot of good grub aboard this canoe, and it might get soaked."

"Huh! thinking of the grub before you take me into consideration, are you?" grunted Giraffe; and perhaps he might have said more, only just at that instant Eli turned his head and made a remark to him which caused the long-necked boy to lift his head, and then shout out excitedly:

"A bear! A bear! over there on the bank ahead!"

"Oh! where did I put my gun?" almost shrieked Step Hen, who was forever misplacing things, and then finding them again in the most unexpected places.

"Bumpus, knock him over! There's the best chance to try your new gun you ever saw! Let him have it, you silly!" roared Giraffe.

The fat boy heard all the clamor. He also sighted the lumbering bear, which, after taking one good look at the approaching canoes, turned to shuffle back again into the shelter of the protecting brush, as though he did not much fancy any closer acquaintance with the two-legged occupants.

Bumpus scrambled to his knees. He was trembling like a leaf shaken in the gale; but nevertheless managed to clumsily throw the double-barrel to his shoulder, after pulling back both hammers.

They saw him bend his chubby neck, as though to sight along the barrels. Then a tremendous explosion occurred, as though a young cannon had been fired; and the next instant Bumpus went over flat on his back, among the duffle with which the canoe was loaded, his feet coming into view as he landed among the blankets, and the packages of food, secured in the rubber ponchos to keep them from getting wet.

CHAPTER II.

A WARNING FROM A GAME POACHER.

"Did I g-g-get him?"

Bumpus, as he spoke these eager words, managed to gain a sitting position, though his first act was to rub his shoulder as though it pained him.

There was a roar from all the boys at this remark, and indeed, even the two Maine guides grinned more or less.

"Listen to the innocent, would you?" shouted Giraffe; "when his buckshot tore up the water half way between the boat and the shore, till it looked just like one of those spouting geysers we read about, out in Yellowstone Park. Did he get him, boys?"

Step Hen put his hands to his mouth, megaphone fashion, and bawled out:

"Hey, answer that, Mr. Bear, please; let the poor boy know whether he tickled your tough old hide with one of his buckshot. Because, who knows, fellows, but what it might a glanced off the top of the water, and landed," and he winked at Allan, who was in the canoe with Jim Hasty close

by.

"I don't hear any answer floating back," remarked Thad; "and so we'll have to believe that either the bear is lying there, stone dead, or else has skipped out to safe quarters. Bears never can stand being fired at by cannon, they tell me."

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"Cannon!" burst out Giraffe at this moment, for he had managed to possess himself of the new gun by pointing to it, and having Eli Crooks pass it along. "Cannon! well, I should smile! What d'ye think he did, fellers? Just exactly what I warned him to beware of, when he saw game, and got excited; pulled both triggers at the same time! Gee! no wonder it knocked him over! I'd hate to have been behind that charge myself; and I've stood a good many heavy ones."

"Ain't we going ashore to see if I did just happen to bowl that old bear over?" whined Bumpus, looking appealingly at Thad. "I'd never forgive myself, you see, if I found out that he *had* died, and no one even got a steak off him. A scout never wants to waste the good things of life like that, does he, Thad?"

But the scoutmaster shook his head.

"I guess there's no chance of that happening, Bumpus," he remarked. "By now your bear is a quarter of a mile away from here, and running yet."

"Don't blame him," said Step Hen. "That new gun makes enough noise to burst your ear drums, Bumpus. And let's hope you won't ever pull both triggers again. Just practice putting one finger at a time in action. After you've shot the first barrel, let it just slip back to catch the second trigger. It's as easy as tumbling off a log."

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"Or going over backward, when you do bang away with both barrels at once," added Davy Jones, wisely.

As they were descending the river the work was comparatively easy for the two guides. They would have their business cut out for them later on, when their plan of campaign, looking toward reaching the Eagle chain of lakes, was more fully developed.

In the beginning there had been three of the paddlers in the party; but a telegram had caught them as they left the train, calling the Oldtown Indian, Sebattis, home, on account of the serious sickness of his wife.

Thad was capable of assuming charge of one canoe, with the assistance of Step Hen and Davy, both lusty fellows. And so they had not bothered trying to fill the gap at the last hour. The chances were that they might have had to take some fellow along who would turn out to be sullen, or else a shirk; thus spoiling much of their pleasure on the trip.

These members of the Silver Fox Patrol had reason to feel proud, because each one of them was at that time wearing a trifling little badge that proved their right to call themselves assistant fire wardens, employed by the great State of Maine to forever keep an eye out for dangerous conflagrations, and labor to extinguish the same before they could do much damage.

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It had come about in this manner:

On the train they had formed the acquaintance of a gentleman, who turned out to be the chief fire warden, on his way right then to patrol a certain district that nearly every year boasted of one or more severe fires.

He was greatly interested in Thad's account of the numerous things a Boy Scout aspired to do each day; and as it was his privilege to take on as many unpaid assistants as he chose, just as a sheriff may do in an emergency, the gentleman had with his own hands pinned a little badge on the lapel of each boy's coat.

They were very proud of the honor, and expressed their intention of serving as fire-wardens to the best of their ability—all but Giraffe. He used to shake his head every time he glanced down at his badge, and look solemn. The fact of the matter was, Giraffe had all his life been so wrapped up in *starting* fires, that the very idea of spending his precious time in helping to *put one out* did not appeal to him very strongly.

"Jim is telling me that we can expect to see the mouth of the Little Machias River any old time from now on," remarked Allan; "and while I haven't come up this way exactly, to the Eagle waters, I guess he's about right."

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"Sure he is," ventured Giraffe, "for we passed the place where the Big Machias joins forces with the Aroostook some time back; and unless my eagle eye fails me, away up ahead I can see the junction right now, where we turn to the left, and leave this dandy old stream. Then the fun begins with the paddles."

"What was that the fire-warden was saying to you, Thad, about some sort of bad man up in this region, that gave the game wardens more trouble than all the rest of the poachers combined?" Step Hen asked.

Jim Hasty was seen to squirm a little; and Thad noticed this as he answered the question.

"Oh! yes, he was warning me to steer clear of one Caleb Martin, a strapping big fellow who used to be, first a logger, and then one of those men who get boats' knees out of the swamps and marshes up here; but who for some years has made up his mind to loaf, and take toll of other peoples' traps, or shoot game out of season."

"Caleb Martin, eh?" Step Hen went on; "seems to me it was another name from that?"

"Well," Thad continued, "he did mention two others who were said to be cronies of the big poacher. Let's see, I believe their names were Si Kedge and Ed Harkness; wasn't that it, Jim?" and he turned suddenly on the smaller guide.

"That's right," answered the other, promptly; "though to be fair and squar' with you, I didn't hear him speakin' o' 'em atall. But I lived up hyar, yuh knows, an' Cale, he's been akeepin' the hull kentry kinder riled a long time now. I'm hopin' we won't run a crost him any, an' that's a fact."

"Sounds like there wasn't much love lost between you and this same Cale Martin?" ventured Thad.

"They hain't," was the only thing Jim would say; and Thad knew there must be a story back of it, which he hoped later on to hear.

"But why should the wardens be afraid of just three men, when they have the law on their side; that's what I'd like to know?" Bumpus demanded.

Giraffe gave a scornful laugh.

"The law don't count for a great deal away up in the wilderness, Bumpus," he remarked, in a condescending way. "All sorts of things are done when men get away off in the Maine woods. They laugh at the law, till they feel its hand on their shoulder, and see the face of a warden close to theirs. Then p'raps they wilt. But this bully of the big woods has had a free hand up yonder so long, that he just thinks he's the boss of all creation. He needs takin' down, I reckon. And p'raps, if we happen to run across him, it might be the mission of the Silver Fox Patrol to teach him a lesson. Queerer things have happened, as we all know, looking back a little at our own experiences."

"We don't want to brag," remarked Thad. "Perhaps the shoe would be on the other foot, and he might kick the lot of us out of his territory. But all the same, let's hope our trail won't cross that of Cale Martin."

They were presently turning in to the left, and starting to ascend the Little Machias; a pretty stream, which some years back used to fairly teem with game-fish, but which, like many another river in Maine, has felt the effect of the continual work of thousands of fishermen, and worse than that, the sly netting at the hands of lawless poachers.

Step Hen was interested in many things that opened to their view as they went on, and his two companions did the paddling; for he had been working quite some time himself, and was entitled to a resting spell.

This was a new trait in Step Hen. Time had been when he would hardly notice a single thing when out in the woods, unless his attention was especially directed to it by a comrade. But it was so no longer; and the way his awakening came about, as mentioned in a previous story, is worthy of being recorded again, as showing what a trifling thing may start a boy to thinking, and observing the myriad of interesting events that are constantly occurring around him, no matter where he may happen to be at the time, in a crowded city, or alone in a vast solitude.

Step Hen had once come upon a humble little tumble-bug, striving to push a ball four times as big as himself up a forlorn road, at a point where there was a "thank-you-mum," intended to throw the water aside during a heavy rain, and save the road from being guttered.

He had grown so deeply interested in seeing the little creature try again and again to overcome the stupendous difficulties that faced it, that he lay there for half an hour, watching; clapping his hands when he thought success had come, and feeling deeply sorry when a slip caused the ball to roll back again, often upsetting the bug, and passing over its body.

The astonishing pluck of the humble little bug had aroused the admiration of the boy; and in the end he had picked up both ball and bug, and placed them safely above the baffling ascent in the road. And after that hour Step Hen awoke to the fact that an observing boy need never lack for something intensely interesting to chain his attention, no matter where he might be. All he had to do was to keep his eyes open, and look. Nature had ten thousand deeply interesting and curious things that appeal to the one who knows how to enjoy them.

And so from that day Step Hen was noticed to be eagerly on the watch for new sights. He asked many questions that proved his mind had awakened; and Thad knew that that half hour when the scout had lain alongside the mountain road down in North Carolina, had possibly been the turning point in his career; for he would never again be the same old careless, indifferent Step Hen of the past.

"There comes another canoe down the river!" suddenly cried Bumpus, who was still squatting in the bow of the leading canoe, industriously rubbing his right shoulder as though it pained him considerably; a fact Thad noticed, and which had caused him to promise that he would take a look at the lame part when they stopped for their midday meal, very soon now.

There was only one man in the canoe that was approaching, and presently Jim Hasty remarked that he knew him.

"It's sure Hen Parry, from up where I used to hold out," he went on to say; and then called out to the approaching Maine guide, as his make-up pronounced the other to be; "hullo, Hen, howd'ye? Glad tuh see yuh. Come closer, and shake hands. How's everybody up to the old place?"

The other dark-faced fellow seemed pleased to his old friend, and immediately gripped the extended hand.

"Guess ther putty well up thar, Jim; an' no need o' my askin' how ye be'n, 'cause yer lookin' prime," he remarked; and then suddenly an expression akin to dismay flashed across his weather-beaten face, as he continued: "By the same token I got er message fur ye, Jim, in case I run up agin ye on my way down to Squawpan, where I gatter meet a party that's bound up huntin'. Ye won't like to hear it, neither, I kinder guess, 'cause it's from a feller ye got no use for."

"Cale Martin?" burst involuntarily from the lips of Jim Hasty, while his face turned a shade whiter under its coat of tan.

"Ther same critter," Hen went on. "He's still runnin' things to suit hisself up thar around the Eagle chain, an' larfin' at all ther game wardens in Aroostook county ter stop him ahavin' his way."

"Why should he tell yuh anything tuh say tuh me; an' how'd he know I was acomin' up this aways?" asked Jim, firmly.

"He sez as how he heerd that you was agoin' to bring a pack o' boys along up to the Eagles; p'raps it kim in a letter he hed from somebody, I don't know jest how thet mout be; but he seemed to know it, all right, Jim. Sez he to me, 'Hen, ef ye happens to run acrost thet thar measly little skunk what sails by the name o' Jim Hasty, jest you tell him fur me thet if he dares to put his foot up hyar in *my* deestrick, I'm bound to pin his ears to a tree, and leave 'em thar to give him a lesson.' An' Jim, I guess from the look he had on thet black face ob his'n when he says thet, Cale meant it, every blessed word. And if 'twas me, I'd feel like turnin' back, to take my people another way."

Thad fixed his eyes on Jim's face to see how the shorter guide took it. He realized that Jim was at least no coward, even though he might fear the wrath of such a forest bully as the ex-logger, and present lawless poacher Cale Martin; for he had shut his teeth hard together, and there was a grim expression on his face, as if he did not mean to knuckle under to any such base threat as that.

CHAPTER III. THE MAKER OF FIRES.

"How about that, Jim; must we turn around, and go back, just because this feller that thinks he owns the whole north of Maine, says so?" asked Giraffe; who was really a fearless sort of lad, and could not bear to be ordered around by a bully.

Jim was looking a little "peaked," nor could Thad blame him, after hearing what a terror this Caleb Martin had been in the community for years; and how even the officers of the law had never as yet dared arrest him, even though there were rewards out for each one of the three men.

"Naw, we don't turn back, if I knows it," said Jim, doggedly.

"Bully for you, Jim!" exclaimed Step Hen, eagerly. "There's eight of us, all told, in the party, and I think for my part that it's a pretty howd'yedo now if we can't stand up for our rights against just three cowards. I call them that because all bullies are, when you come right down to it. My father says so; and I've seen it among the boys in school."

"Yes, Jim," remarked Bumpus, with a grand air, though he immediately made a grimace, as a quick movement gave his sore shoulder a wrench; "we're going to stand by you, through thick and thin, ain't we, fellers?"

"Eight guns in the crowd!" remarked Davy Jones with an air of confidence. "Sure we ought to hold the fort, and then some, if deadly weapons count for anything up here, and I'm told they do. P'raps, instead of pinning your ears to a tree, Jim, this same Mister Cale'll consent to walk back with us, and give himself up to a game warden of the great and glorious State of Maine. We mustn't forget that we're all sworn-in officers of the said State, and bound to assist any game warden who is trying to do his duty, and earn his salary."

Presently the other guide said good-bye, and turning his canoe down-stream, shot away with the current; while the scouts headed up further toward the wilderness that lay around the country of the Eagle chain of lakes, close to the northern border of the State.

They landed presently to have a bite at noon. Thad took advantage of the opportunity to look at Bumpus' shoulder. As he anticipated, he found that there was quite an ugly black-and-blue bruise there, which would cause the boy considerable pain for several days; though he declared that nothing was going to keep him from practicing with his new gun, which seemed like a toy in the hands of a child.

"I'm sure you could not have held the butt close against your shoulder when you fired," Thad ventured, as his opinion.

"That's just what," admitted the other, with a sigh. "Know better next time, though, Thad; and thank you for making it feel easier. But I wish I'd got that bear. How fine it would be to eat steak from a big bear I'd killed with the first shot from my new gun."

"Make that plural, Bumpus, for you fired *both* barrels, remember," laughed Thad.

They were soon on the move again, and pushing steadily up against the current of the Little Machias. An hour or two passed. The air was not nipping cold at this time of the day; but as the season was now considerably advanced they expected to meet with considerable frost, and even some ice, before coming back once more to the home town.

Lest the reader who has not made the acquaintance of the Boy Scouts in the previous volume, should think it strange that these six lads were able to be away from their school duties for such a length of time at this season of the year, it may be best to enter a little explanation right here.

An unfortunate epidemic of contagious sickness had broken out in Cranford, and as a number of the scholars of the school were affected, the trustees had reluctantly decided that the session between early Fall and New Years must be abandoned. If all were well at the later date, after the usual holidays, school would be resumed. But the health of the community demanded that the boys and girls be separated for the time being.

Just then Thad's guardian, a genial old man who was known far and wide as "Daddy," Brewster, found that he had urgent need of communicating with a gentleman by the name of Carson, who had recently gone up into Maine on his annual moose hunt in the big game country. As he might not come out before January, and the necessity of giving him certain documents was great, Thad had been asked to make the trip.

They had long been counting on a chance to visit the home country of their Maine fellow scout, Allan Hollister; and most of the scouts eagerly seized on this opportunity to carry out the project, though two of the patrol were unable to be along.

And so they were now in a condition to thoroughly enjoy the outing, since Thad had carried out his mission, and given the papers into the keeping of Mr. Carson; receiving a message in return which he had wired to the old gentleman when in touch with a telegraph station.

Thad himself had believed that there was not the slightest cloud along the horizon; and now that this Cale Martin business had cropped up, he began to realize that after all it might not be such clear sailing as they had figured on.

Still, Thad was not the one to borrow trouble, though ready to grapple with it in any shape or manner, once it found them out.

They camped early on that night, because all of them were a little tired; and the location on the shore looked especially fine.

"Hey, look at what Giraffe's going to do!" exclaimed Bumpus, after they had carried part of their things ashore, and were busily engaged in putting up the two big tents supplied by Jim Hasty from his camp stores, such as all Maine guides delight to possess.

"Why, ain't it a part of my business to start the fire every time?" demanded the party in question, who was on his knees; "didn't Thad promise me that job if I'd keep on being careful about startin' fires every-which-way? I ain't had a blessed match on my person since I gave that promise, have I, Thad? And what's wrong about my getting the blaze in my own way, tell me that, Bumpus?"

"But we want supper, and we don't mean to sit around here an hour or two, just watchin' you tinker with that silly old bow and stick, twirling away like you had to saw through to China. How about that, Thad?" and Bumpus turned appealingly toward the patrol leader, well knowing that whatever he said would go.

"Bumpus is right, Giraffe," the other said, kindly but firmly. "You're welcome to spend all the time you want with that contraption, after you've started our cooking fire; but it wouldn't be fair to hold up the whole bunch just to please yourself. Your own good sense tells you that, Giraffe."

Giraffe, of course, had to appear to be convinced.

"Just when I had a new scheme in my head, too, that I just know would have made the fire come," he grumbled, as he hung the little bow on a twig of a tree near by, and produced flint and steel, and a little bag in which he kept tinder, in the shape of tiny shavings which he was always preparing at odd moments; "and before I get another chance to try it, I'll have forgotten the combination, sure. But that's always the way it goes; though don't you dare think Bumpus Hawtree, that I'm going to give up so easy. I'll fight it out this way if it takes all winter."

Being an adept with the flint and steel, Giraffe quickly had his fire started.

"And that's the way it'll be after I've just got that one little snag passed," he took occasion to remark, for the benefit of the fat scout, who was hovering near by. "Everything's easy as tumbling off a log, once you know how. P'raps you remember what a time you had learnin' to ride a bike; and yet now you can cut around corners, and even stand on the saddle while she's going. Well, you wait and see my smoke."

"Huh! that's all I ever will see, I'm afraid," chuckled Bumpus.

But presently Giraffe managed to drift into a more amiable humor. That was when the coffee pot was bubbling on the fire, sending out its cheery aroma; and the last of the eggs they had managed to buy from a potato grower on the bank of the Aroostook were sizzling in the two large frying-pans.

Most boys possess hearty appetites, and Giraffe was no exception to the rule. Indeed, like most lean fellows, he had an enormous stowage capacity somewhere about him, and could dispose of

more food on occasion than any two of his mates. Bumpus always declared he had hollow legs, and used them for receptacles, when other places were filled to overflowing. But not one of the scouts could remember the time when Giraffe complained of having eaten too much. Like the crowded street car, there was always room for more.

"Wish we'd struck this section of country an hour or two before dark," Bumpus ventured to remark, complacently, as he sat there with his fat legs doubled under him, tailor-fashion and munching at the crackers and cheese he had made a sandwich out of.

"For why?" asked Giraffe, looking up.

"Oh! a feller might have just taken a little turn around here, and knocked over a deer, or something of the sort," Bumpus replied, with the utmost assurance in the world; just as though such a thing were of common occurrence in his life. "Looks right gamey around here; how's that, Thad?"

"Oh! Jim Hasty told us that much!" declared Step Hen, before the scoutmaster could find a chance to say anything. "Didn't you hear him tell how every season there's been a moose or two killed within ten miles of where we've got our camp right now. But we can't hold up yet to do any hunting; so you'll just have to put a crimp in that sporting spirit you've developed so suddenly, Bumpus."

"Listen to him talk, would you?" exclaimed Giraffe; "and only a little while back you couldn't get Bumpus to even touch a gun. Say, you're a marvel, all right, Bumpus. They'll have you set up as the eighth wonder of the world soon, ahead of the telephone, wireless, moving pictures, and even the talking machine. Edison and all the rest of those old wizards had better take a back seat when you come around."

Joking and chatting, they made the time pass very happily. If Jim Hasty were in reality much concerned over the prospect of his meeting with the ugly poacher who had a bone to pick with him, he at least did not show it outwardly any longer. But then Jim was a man of few words as a rule; and it was hardly to be expected that so hardy a fellow would tremble, just at the mention of a name.

There was room for them all under the shelter of the tents, though as a rule, so long as the weather kept on being fairly pleasant, the two hardy guides declared that they much preferred to wrap up in their blankets and sleep under the stars. Such men become used to what would seem hardships to the city bred person, and in truth think very little of enduring them. And it was by no means cold enough as yet, to drive them into taking shelter under the canvas.

Giraffe had been working away at his fire-making business pretty much all of the evening, and Bumpus had watched him for a while; but growing tired of seeing the other sawing away as if for dear life, he had finally laughed, and turned away.

If Giraffe came near making things "go" that evening, at least once more the glory of a full success slipped away from his eager hands, outstretched to clutch it; for when it came time for them to "shut up shop," as Thad said, and crawl into the two tents, he had not brought about his expected blaze, though his face looked more determined than ever.

Bumpus, Giraffe and Allan occupied one tent; while the other three scouts were assigned to the second. The guides promised to share their shelter only in case of a storm, or very severe weather.

The fire was allowed to die down. If any strong wind came up in the night it would be the duty of the guides to see that burning brands were not carried into the adjacent woods, to set fire to the brown pine needles that covered the ground; and were so full of resinous matter that once ignited they would send a wall of flame down the wind that would do incalculable damage.

Soon quiet rested over the camp. The frosty night breeze sighed among the branches overhead; the owl hooted to its mate deep in the wood; and the hour of midnight, when Thad peeped forth, (and which he knew to have arrived from the position of certain stars overhead), saw the last of the fire vanishing in dead embers.

Thad sought the warmth of his blanket again in a hurry, for the air was now nipping cold, especially after the snug nest had been temporarily abandoned. And he must have gone right to sleep, for he did not seem to remember anything after again creeping under the double folds of the warm woolen covering.

Now, when one sleeps like most boys do, soundly, it is impossible to figure how time passes when awakened in a hurry. So that Thad could not tell what the hour might be when he found himself starting up hurriedly, under the conviction that strange as it might seem at that season of the year, and with the air frosty, there was a storm bearing down upon them, for he thought it was thunder he heard.

Then came a tremendous crash, and the tent swayed, but did not fall; though from the wild shouts that arose close at hand the young patrol leader reckoned the same good fortune could not have befallen the other shelter, because he could plainly catch the howls of Step Hen, Bumpus and Giraffe.

Quick as thought Thad whirled over to the exit, and crawled out. And what his eyes beheld was enough to startle anybody, let alone a boy. If a genuine cyclone had not struck the camp on the Little Machias, then something almost as bad must have dropped down upon them, Thad thought, as he stared, hardly able to believe his eyes, or understand what it all meant.

CHAPTER IV.
A TERROR THAT CAME IN THE NIGHT.

35

Why, the second tent had utterly left the place where Thad remembered they had erected it. He had just a fleeting glimpse of something dingy white careering along over the ground among the trees, and then it vanished.

But there was a high time going on near by, where the contents of the interior of the late tent were scattered around. Blankets heaved, and legs were thrust out, while the owners of the same were screaming at the top of their voices.

"Oh! what is this?" bellowed Bumpus, who seemed to be almost smothered under the folds of his blanket, which he must have had up over his head at the time the catastrophe came upon them.

"It's a hurricane, that's what, and our bally old tent has been carried away!" shouted Giraffe. "Hang on to anything you can grab, fellers, or you may be taken next! Whoop! let her come! I've got hold of a tree now!"

"Not much you have," remarked Thad, "that's my leg you're hanging on to. Let go, and we'll soon find out what happened."

"Ain't it a storm after all then?" demanded Step Hen, as he came creeping out under the canvas of the back of the one tent that had been left standing, with most of his clothes hugged tightly in his grip, as though he did not mean to be utterly left without something to keep him warm, if the worst had befallen them.

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Thad had by now gleaned an inkling of the truth. And it was so utterly ridiculous that he felt as though he must soon burst into peals of laughter.

"First tell me if anybody was hurt?" he demanded, feeling that it would be wrong to show any merriment if such should prove to be the case.

"I don't know," remarked Giraffe; "seemed to me something heavy came squash down on top of me like a thousand of bricks. Mebbe it was only the tent pole falling. Guess I ain't hurt much."

"How about you, Allan?" asked Thad, hardly thinking it worth while to ask Bumpus, who seemed to be all right; though he was already beginning to dance around, as the nipping fingers of Jack Frost got busy with his thinly covered shanks, about which he had only his flimsy pajamas over his underclothes.

"Never happened to step on me, though he came within three inches of my back!" replied the Maine boy; and there was something about his words to tell that Allan must already have guessed what had been the cause for all this commotion, and the stealing of their tent.

Bumpus caught at the words.

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"What's all that?" he demanded quickly; "was it the work of some mean feller, after all? Hey, is that the way your old Cale Martin gets in his work, sneakin' up in the dead of night, when we're all sleepin' as innocent as the babes in the woods, and snatchin' off our covers before you could wink an eye, or say Jack Robinson? Well, I like his nerve, that's what; and he'd better look out how he keeps on tryin' tricks on travelers. Say, he switched our tent, too!" and Bumpus gave a whistle, as well as his trembling lips would allow, to emphasize his disgust.

"You can thank your lucky stars old fellow," said Allan, "that he didn't plant one of his hoofs square on your stomach."

"Hoofs!" echoed Bumpus, aghast; "say, then it wasn't that old poacher after all, was it? Hoofs? That must mean it was an animal. Looky here, somebody get the fire started again, so we won't shake to pieces while we're hunting our clothes, and listening to the explanation of this latest outrage."

"Oh! let Davy do it," said Giraffe; "I'm nearly frozen stiff myself right now; and besides," he added as a brilliant after-thought, "you know I don't carry matches with me any more. And of course you wouldn't want to wait while I swung my little bow."

"Where's my left shoe?" shouted Step Hen just then; for there never was a time when he could find *all* his belongings; and in a case of excitement like this it was a certainty that his customary complaint would soon be heard in the land. "Who's gone and took my left shoe? I'm dead certain I had both of 'em when I started to crawl under the canvas. Somebody thinks it smart to keep playin' jokes on *me* all the time. Why can't they let *my* things be, Thad?"

38

"What's that sticking out of the pocket of your coat?" asked Allan, as Davy managed to strike a match, and apply the fire to the only lantern they carried with them on the trip.

"Why, whoever stuck that in there?" Step Hen went on, unblushingly. "Thinks it smart to do such silly things, and have me guessing all the time. Just switch off, and try it on one of the others, won't you?"

Knowing that he must have undoubtedly placed the shoe in that pocket himself in the haste of his departure from the tent that remained, Step Hen did not dare accuse any one in particular; but glared around at vacancy when thus addressing his supposed-to-be enemy.

But they were so accustomed to his failings by now that no one paid much attention to what he was saying. In fact, it would have been a cause for astonishment if twenty-four hours ever slipped past without an outburst from Step Hen in connection with some of his personal belongings, that seemed to have taken wings in the most mysterious fashion, and vanished, although they always turned up again.

"But what sort of an animal was it, Thad?" asked Bumpus, still dancing about, and slapping himself in every conceivable place in order to keep his blood in circulation.

"Ask Jim, or Eli," replied the patrol leader, who was really too busy just then getting some of his own clothes, to bother answering.

So the others turned to the two guides, who, not having removed any of their ordinary garments, did not feel the chilly night air as much as the lads.

"What was it banged us over, Eli?" asked Bumpus.

"Moose bull on the rampage!" replied the Maine woodsman, readily enough.

"A great big moose like that one we shot a while ago!" echoed Bumpus, showing great excitement. "Just my luck. Why, if he'd heard that I had a new gun, and was waiting to see what it could do, he couldn't have been kinder. Just knocked at our door; and when nobody answered him he went away again, and by jinks! carried the door and the rest of the house with him. However in the wide world do you suppose that happened, Eli? I guess you ought to know, because you're acquainted with the queer ways of these woods' critters."

"Never knew such a thing before in all my experience in woods," asserted the older guide, shaking his head. "Fire was out, wind blowing wrong way for moose to smell human critters; and he must a thought he heard 'nother bull on the edge o' ther water, wantin' to fight him. Anyhow he jest natchrally tore right through that tent. It got fast to his horns, and he's been an' kerried it off."

"Oh! what tough luck. If I'd only been on the watch I'd have the honor of shooting the first moose that took to wearin' clothes human way," groaned Bumpus.

"D'ye suppose, then, he's keepin' our bally tent; and won't we ever set eyes on the same again?" asked Giraffe, holding his chilled hands out toward the fire that in Davy's charge had been revived again until it sent out a genial warmth.

"Soon know," remarked Jim, who had a personal interest in the matter, seeing that the purloined canvas belonged to him; though of course he knew that his employers would stand for any loss he incurred while working in their service.

He took the lantern, and started away. Thad had managed to get some of his clothes on by this time, and he hurried after the shorter guide, who seemed to know exactly in which direction to pursue his investigations.

"I can see something ahead there," Thad remarked, presently.

"That's the tent, all right," remarked Jim. "I only hopes as how she ain't too bad cut up now. 'Twas nearly new, and good, and stout; so I guess the ole chap he had some trouble gettin' loose from the same."

They found the tent where it had caught on a sprout, and torn free from the branching antlers of the moose, commonly called his horns.

"Not so bad after all," remarked Jim, when he had examined the extent of the damage made by the tent's being so forcibly carried off. "I kin patch it up easy, when I gits a chance in the boat, to-morry. Guess as haow we gut off right smart, all things considerin', Thad."

And the young scoutmaster was ready to echo these words, when he got to thinking how one of a dozen things might have accompanied the mad rush of the moose through the camp.

They never did know what had really caused his charge; whether some vindictive spirit of rage provoked the huge beast; or that he fancied a rival bull were challenging him to mortal combat, just as in the case of the fellow, whom Sebattis had previously lured within gunshot, with his seductive moose call.

The balance of the night gave them only broken sleep; because of the sudden and rude shock of this awakening. Bumpus hugged his new gun close to his side; and raised his head so often to listen, that both Giraffe and Allan vowed they would be compelled to chase him outside if he didn't get busy, and capture some sleep right away.

Morning came in due time, and they found that little damage had been done by the rush of the moose, beyond some rents in the canvas of the tent.

Once more they started forth, and all that day plodded on, making many miles, and by evening reaching the spot where Jim said they could have their canoes and luggage carried over to Portage Lake by a man he knew, who owned a team and a wagon.

"How far is it across from here?" asked Thad, seeking information.

"Depends on what way yuh go thar," replied Jim, "but I guesses as Nick he likes the three mile carry best. Start fresh in the mornin' sure."

After they had partaken of an early supper Jim went off to find his friend who owned the team, while the others busied themselves getting their belongings in as small a compass as possible,

looking forward to what was expected to happen on the following morning.

Later, when Jim came back, he reported that he had interviewed Nick, and made all necessary arrangements with him to take the three canoes, and the stuff that went with them, across the carry in the morning. The boys were expected to walk and if necessary push at the wheels of the wagon, should it get stuck in a creek bed of soft quicksand. 43

The night passed quietly, and all hands managed to put in plenty of time sleeping, to make up for the loss of the previous one. In the morning the loud "whoa" of a stentorian voice announced the arrival of the expected team. They proved to be oxen instead of horses, and once the canoes, and other stuff, had been loaded on the big low wagon, the journey commenced.

Slow progress was the order of the day. Giraffe grumbled, but it did no good. And it was really noon when they finally came in sight of the lake.

The canoes were gladly launched, a light lunch eaten, the teamster paid off, and then again the voyage was resumed under a favoring sky; for the air was bracing, and so far not a sign of the first snow storm had made its appearance, though the guides warned their charges to be prepared for the worst, as a downfall was nearly due.

A cold wind was blowing from the northwest so that the wise guides hugged the sheltered shore of Portage Lake, since the waves were of pretty good size, and the flying spray would be far from pleasant in such weather.

Finally they reached the place where the lake had its outlet into a small stream, that, after flowing for a number of miles, emptied into the Lower Lake of the great and famous Eagle chain.

On the shore of this lake then, they made their next camp. From the grave manner of Jim, the scoutmaster easily guessed that they must by now have entered the territory where Cale Martin, the slippery old poacher, held forth. Jim seemed to look about him more than before. He also started at the least unusual sound, showing that while he might try to disguise the fact, he was really nervous. Still, he did not give the slightest indication of showing the white feather, or backing down, before a dozen like Cale Martin. 44

Davy had purchased a little snapshot camera at the town below, and also some flashlight cartridges with which he wished to get some views of the group around the camp-fire at night. No one had made any effort to perpetuate such scenes which Davy declared were the very best part of the whole trip. And now that they had become fairly launched upon the journey he was aching to start into business with his new outfit.

Davy knew a little about taking pictures, although far from being an expert. He had never used flashlight powders, or cartridges before; and after reading all the directions carefully, he declared he felt prepared to take a picture that would be viewed with the greatest satisfaction in the world by all his chums, when this great Maine vacation were only a memory of the past.

So Davy warned his campmates not to be alarmed if there suddenly flashed upon them a great light. 45

"I'd like to get you all in characteristic attitudes, if I could—that was the way the feller who sold me the camera called it; and he said the best pictures were the natural ones. What I mean is, that if I could grab Step Hen here, for instance, with that silly look of his on his face, saying: 'Anybody seen my camp hatchet around? Funny how it's always *my* things that get carried off! The jinx never hides anything belonging to *you* fellers!' I'd have something worth while."

"Oh! come off, will you, Davy; if I thought I looked like you say, I'd let all my traps disappear every day but what I'd kick up a row," and Step Hen assumed an air of indignation with these words that caused a general laugh to go around.

Of course it had to be explained to the two guides, for they were to be in the picture, smoking their pipes contentedly; and apparently Eli telling a story, to which the rest of the scouts were listening eagerly, possibly laughing.

Having fixed things to his satisfaction, Davy disappeared, slipping away from the camp-fire on the side he had decided upon as offering the best natural advantages for a flashlight view.

They could not see him, but guessed that he was working his way toward them as slyly as he could; since he had announced that he meant to play the part of an enemy, stealing up to spy upon the camp. 46

Presently they did manage to get Eli started telling a story; for Thad knew it would be better for the picture if the guides seemed natural, and not on parade.

Meanwhile Davy was creeping forward, intent on reaching the place he had picked out beforehand, and where, without exposing himself, he could set his camera, and then fire the cartridge.

When to his uneducated mind—in the line of photography—Davy had things just about to his liking, he held himself in readiness for what he deemed an extra fine view, when the boys were laughing heartily at the climax of Eli's queer story of a scrape he once found himself in that was really humorous, though at the time it may have appeared anything but that to the actor.

"Now!" said Davy, partly to himself, as he fired his cartridge.

There was a sudden brilliant and dazzling flash, that must have been as fierce as the display of lightning when the bolt hits close at hand. And while those at the fire were schooled to repress

their natural alarm, evidently the same could not be said of a looker-on not counted in the bill; for there was a hoarse cry of alarm from the bushes across the way, and the sound of crashing seemed to tell of a precipitate flight.

CHAPTER V. JIM'S SECRET.

47

"What was that?" exclaimed Bumpus.

"Oh! Davy just had to let out a whoop!" commented Step Hen.

"Think again, would you," spoke up Giraffe, who sat there twisting his long neck this way and that, in a comical way, as though seeking to discover the object of the strange outcry; "it came from the other side of the camp from where Davy is."

"Well," said the indifferent Step Hen, as if not wanting to be bothered, "then it must have been some animal that was curious enough to prowl around our camp, and got a good scare, free, gratis, for nothing."

"It was no animal that made that sound, and I leave it to Thad or Allan here," Bumpus insisted.

Indeed, even the sleepy Step Hen sat up and took notice that the two mentioned, as well as Jim and Eli, were already on their feet, exchanging significant looks. Words were hardly needed to proclaim that they deemed the circumstance as one worthy of investigation.

48

Just then Davy came in, bearing his little camera, and with a grin on his face.

"Got a fine picture that time, I reckon, fellers," he announced, after the manner of satisfied camera fiends the world over.

"Did you give a shout, Davy?" asked Thad, thinking it best to settle that point in the start, before going any further.

"Not that I know of, I didn't," immediately replied the other.

"Did you hear one?" continued the patrol leader.

"Sure I did, and took it for granted that Step Hen or Giraffe had been scared by the fireworks display, in spite of my warning, and squealed," Davy replied.

"That settles it, then," Thad went on, turning to Eli and Jim; "get a torch, or the lantern, and we'll see what it was."

"Wow! this looks some interesting!" exclaimed Giraffe, beginning to show signs of excitement himself.

Eli picked up the lantern, and lighted it. Then he led the way into the bushes at the exact spot where, according to his educated ear, the snort and the crash had come from.

"Keep back, the rest of you," said Thad, "and let Eli do the looking. If he finds anything worth while, be sure you'll all know about it."

49

A minute later the old guide called to them to come on.

"Bully for Eli; he's lost no time in making good!" exclaimed Giraffe.

The whole party crowded around the old guide, who was on his knees on the ground, apparently examining some tracks he had found. He waved a hand to keep them from crowding too close to him, so as to interfere with his work.

Bending low, Thad could easily see the marks. Some one had been crouching there in the bushes, and spying on the camp. That he could not be an honest woodsman it was easy to guess, for as such he would have stalked straight into camp, sure of the warm welcome that is always extended to a stranger who looks good.

Eli pointed to the impression close to the footprints.

"Thar's whar he rested the butt o' his rifle," he said, positively, and Thad knew it was exactly as Eli declared, just as though he could himself see the actions of the hidden man. "Got on his knees and crawled up to whar he c'ud poke his nose outen the scrub hyar, an' watch us. And hyar's whar he was arestin' on jest wun knee; cause ye kin see the mark o' his foot beyond."

"What was he doing that for?" asked Thad, though deep down in his heart he seemed to instinctively know.

50

"Wall, I kinder guess naow thet he mout a be'n a tryin' to see how he cud kiver wun o' us with his *gun!*" replied Eli.

He beckoned to Jim, and that worthy approached. There was a troubled look on the face of the younger guide that Thad could not but notice; and he realized that the affair might not be so great a mystery to Jim as it seemed to the rest of them.

"Take a squint at them hood tracks hyar, Jim; p'raps ye mout sorter reckernize the same," Eli

remarked drily.

Jim only needed that one glance, and then he gritted his teeth as he observed:

"Oh! twar *him*, all right, Eli; I knowed it."

"Wow! and again I say, wow! this here is sure getting mighty interesting!" muttered Giraffe, shuffling uneasily from one foot to the other; while Bumpus, filled with a sudden alarm, started back into the camp, to arm himself with his new gun.

"Do you mean Old Cale Martin?" demanded Thad.

"None other," answered Jim, moodily.

"Then he must have seen you, Jim, sitting here?" the patrol leader went on.

"He shore did," replied the short guide.

"And amused himself covering you with his gun, just as if to say that he could put a bullet in you, if so be he wanted; but he didn't want to, did he Jim?"

"Reckon he didn't, sir," the other ventured. "Yuh see, he ain't jest *thet* mad at me, so's tuh wanter kill me; jest sez as haow I gotter keep away from whar he camps, yuh know."

"Sill, he said he meant to pin your ears to a tree, if he caught you up here; those were about the words your guide friend, Hen Parry, used, weren't they, Jim?"

"Thet's what they was; an' he meant it, too," Jim replied. "Thet's one o' his good points, thet he allers keeps his word. If them game wardens cud ever git Ole Dad Martin tuh say as he never wud kill game outen season agin, they'd know nawthin' under the sun'd tempt him tuh do hit, not even if he was a dyin' fuh a bite o' meat. He ain't all bad, this here Cale Martin."

"But what about you, Jim; seems to me this is taking big chances in your coming up here, when such a lawless character has a grudge against you, and is waiting to put his stamp on you that way. And strikes me, Jim, that you must have had a motive in coming, that was more than just bluff. How about that?"

The young guide glanced at Thad when he said this, and evidently realized that the patrol leader could read his mind better than most people; he looked a little confused; then gave a short nervous laugh, and said:

"Wall, naow, sense yuh sized me up thet away, I'll jest hev tuh admit thet I did hev a notion in comin' up here, 'sides takin' ye through the Eagle Lakes. I hed my orders tuh come, an' from one as I hes tuh mind."

He turned away while speaking, as though not inclined to say more just then in the presence of so many; but Thad made up his mind there was a story back of the strange actions of Jim; and that a few point-blank questions might bring it out. Before he slept he hoped he would find a chance to get Jim to one side and ask him about it; for he had reason to believe the other was ready to confide in him.

"Do you think he'll come back again to-night?" asked Davy Jones.

"Who cares?" remarked a voice at the elbow of the speaker; and turning, they beheld Bumpus flourishing his new double-barrel gun, as though only too anxious for a chance to hold somebody up at its muzzle.

"Here, you keep that cannon aimed the other way, if you please!" cried Giraffe, dodging behind a convenient tree. "You ought to be marked with a red flag 'dangerous-dynamite!' that's what I think!"

"Come, let's get back to camp," remarked Thad. "There's little chance of Old Cale coming back here to-night. He got the scare of his life when that flashlight burst on him so sudden like. I wouldn't be surprised if he thought a rapid-fire machine gun was opening on him; or else that lightning had taken to camping on his trail."

"Anyhow," remarked Allan, "he just couldn't help turning and running as if the Old Nick were after him. And from that we can guess that Cale never heard tell of flashlight pictures."

"Well, can you blame him?" asked Thad. "Makes me think of the old fable, when the lion and the donkey went hunting together. The lion took up his station at the mouth of the cave where some goats had hidden, while the donkey went in; and made all sorts of terrible noises, braying. So the goats ran out, and the lion killed as many as he wanted. When the donkey came out he asked his partner if he had done the job in good shape. 'Fine,' said the lion, 'and you would have frightened me too, if I hadn't known that you were only a donkey.' And that's the way with us, fellows; we were on to the game in advance, or some of us might have taken to our heels too."

"Here, that sounds mighty much like you were calling me a donkey," remarked Davy, trying to display a certain amount of offended dignity.

"Oh! not in the least," laughed Thad.

"If the shoe fits, put it on," jeered Giraffe. "You know they say that wherever you see smoke, there's sure to be fire."

"Not much there ain't," burst out Bumpus, with a grin. "I've seen *heaps* of smoke started, without a sign of a blaze," and Giraffe subsided into silence knowing what was meant.

"Did you get a good picture, Davy?" asked Thad, as they once more settled down around the fire.

"Seemed like it to me," was the reply. "It was just when you were all laughing at what Eli here was saying. He had his hand up, like he was going to smack it down in the palm of the other, to emphasize a telling point in his story. Say, wouldn't it be a great stunt now, if, when I developed that plate, I found a face sticking out of the bushes across yonder; and Jim here recognized it as belonging to that big terror of the pine woods, Cale Martin!"

"Say, that would be just great!" ejaculated Step Hen; and all eyes were turned toward Jim; but that worthy made no remark, though he must have surely heard what was said.

As the evening grew on apace Thad was watching for the chance he wanted, to get a few words in private with the younger guide. Jim somehow had interested Thad from the start. He never said anything about himself or his folks; but somehow the young patrol leader had been drawn toward Jim. He believed the fellow to be a sturdy chap, clean and honest as any guide ever employed by big game hunters in the Maine woods. And now that it began to appear that there was a little mystery attached to his past, of course Thad felt a deeper interest in Jim than ever.

55

Perhaps it was accident that took Jim off after a while; he may have just wanted to smoke his pipe alone, and ponder on the strange fate that seemed to throw him once more in contact with the man who had crossed his life trail in the past, and apparently not in a pleasant way either. But somehow Thad conceived an idea that Jim just knew he wanted to have a quiet little chat with him; and was thus making an opening.

Just as he had expected he found the guide leaning against a tree near by. The light from the flickering blaze of the camp-fire reached the spot, but faintly; and Jim did not even show any signs of nervousness when Thad drew near, which was one indication that he had half expected his coming.

Perhaps Jim even invited a chance to bestow his confidence on the young scoutmaster. He must have seen before now that Thad Brewster was no ordinary boy; and when a man has been brooding over *something* a long time, he often feels like having a friend to whom he may pour out the troubles of his soul, and from whom perhaps he may look for advice.

56

"Not thinking of changing your mind, are you Jim?" asked Thad, as he joined the other by the tree.

"If yuh mean 'bout goin' back, an' feelin' like a whipped houn' dog, sir, 'taint in Jim Hasty tuh do thet aways. Fact is," the guide went on, with a stubborn ring in his voice, "meetin' up with Ole Cale jest kinder makes me more sot in my mind than ever. I stays with yuh right through, yuh kin bank on thet."

"Well, I only hope he'll conclude to give us a wide berth, and make up his mind that he'd better keep his hands off," Thad went on. "Seems like he doesn't fancy you any too much, Jim?"

This was a plain invitation, and the other so regarded it, for he immediately answered:

"I kinder guess Ole Cale does hate me wuss nor pizen, sir. P'raps he's gut reason fut hit; an' agin, mebbe he hain't. 'Tall depends on the way yuh look at hit. I on'y done what any man o' speerit'd adone, if so be he found himself up agin a stone wall like Cale Martin's 'no, not on yuh life!' meant."

"Then you asked him for something, did you, Jim?"

"Jest what I done, sir; which something war what he happened to keer more fur than anything else on the yarth," Jim replied; and Thad could detect something soft and tender underneath the words, that gave him a clue.

57

"And that something, Jim?" he went on, invitingly.

"War his darter, Little Lina, ther purtiest an' sweetest gal in all the Maine woods," the guide made answer. "When he sez as haow I never cud hev her with all her carin' fur me so much, I jest up an' run away with her; an' thet's why Ole Cale, he hates me wuss nor cold pizen!"

CHAPTER VI.

58

TAKING A RISK FOR THE SAKE OF LITTLE LINA.

Thad understood it all now, and the knowledge gave him a thrill. He thrust out his hand to the young guide, with boyish enthusiasm.

"Shake, Jim!" he exclaimed. "I just know you did what any decent man would have done. And so you managed to run away with the old man's daughter, did you? Was she all he had?"

"On'y Little Lina; an' he believed the sun rose an' set in her, like. They cud all say as Cale Martin war a bad man, an' he *war* rough as they make 'em, sumtimes; but he'd a laid down his life fur thet gal, any day. I was dead sorry tuh hev tuh do hit; but I knowed he'd never give in, an' I jest cudn't live without her. We gut outen this deestrect while Cale war off on a hunt, an' I hain't never seen hide nor hair o' him sense. But he sent me word thet ef so be I ever kim back tuh the old stampin' grounds, he hed it in fuh me, all right."

"How long ago was that, Jim?"

"Nigh a yeah an' er half now," the other replied.

"And of course your wife has often wished she could see her father again, Jim?"

59

The guide groaned.

"Cried her putty eyes out, awantin' tuh see her dad," he admitted; "but what cud a man do 'bout hit, if Cale, he wudn't forgive me? He sent word as haow Lina cud kim back, but me, never; an' in course she wudn't quit me."

"But now, Jim; tell me about who gave you the orders you were saying something about a while ago?" pursued Thad.

"She done hit, in course," answered the other, heaving a sigh. "I knowed the risk I war takin', but I'd do a right smart more fur my Lina."

"Then as I take it, Jim, you don't really want to avoid Old Cale, this fiery father-in-law of yours; in fact, you mean to see him face to face?"

"Got ter," replied the other, laconically; "'cause she sez so. Hit may be I kin do hit on the way up to the lakes; but if not then I'm acomin' back with Eli an' the canoes thisaways, arter yuh gits aboard ther train; an' I'll hang around this deestrect till we meets. Never'd dar' show myself tuh her, 'less I done everything agoin' tuh kerry it out."

"And don't you feel a little uneasy about your ears, Jim?"

"Wall, it wudn't be jest the nicest thing agoin' tuh lose 'em; but she sez as haow Ole Cale, he's bound tuh cave when he hears what I gotter tuh tell him."

60

Evidently Jim had said all he meant to, and Thad took the hint.

"Well, all I want to say is that I admire your nerve, Jim; and the lot of us will stand back of you if you get in any trouble," he remarked, earnestly.

"Hit's right nice in yuh tuh say thet, sir, an' sure I 'predate hit," the guide went on to say, with a tremor in his voice; "but arter all, I guess thar hain't goin' tuh be any row, if me'n Cale, we kims tergether. I'm willin' tuh resk it. But I must say as haow I don't like the ijee o' him asetting' thar in them bushes, aimin' his gun at me. But Cale Martin's a squar man, as wudn't shoot daown another without givin' him a show. An' I guess he jest done it fur fun."

So Thad went back to the fire, and sat down. But he did not join in the merry talk that was going around. His thoughts were wholly given up to Jim and his story. He liked the short guide more than ever; and in the same proportion detested the big Maine backwoodsman whose daughter Jim had run away with.

Presently some of the boys complained of feeling sleepy, and arrangements were made for passing the night.

Both Jim and Eli declared that it would be only the part of wisdom to keep watch. There could be no telling what deviltry Cale Martin, assisted by his two congenial spirits, Si Kedge and Ed Harkness, might attempt to do. Perhaps, thinking that it would reflect on the guides if they annoyed the party whom Eli and Jim were convoying into the Maine woods, they might even try to set fire to the camp, and thus spoil the entire trip.

61

When morning came Thad and Allan had taken their turn at standing sentry; but none of the other scouts were called upon, because the leader did not have the greatest of confidence in their ability to remain awake, not to mention hearing, and comprehending, any sounds that might arise, and which spelled danger.

A consultation in the morning showed that only once had there been heard suspicious sounds. It was while Allan held the fort; and he declared that to the best of his knowledge they were far distant voices on the river. But although he listened carefully, and was prepared to give the alarm if necessary, nothing further developed that might be considered a peril to the camp.

The boys were feeling pretty good that morning. They had most of them enjoyed a fine sleep, and were as active as young colts.

Davy in particular seemed to be full of animal spirits; and when he felt like it, there was no end of the capers the athletic gymnast could do. One minute he was hanging from his toes from a high limb, looking like a monkey; and the next he had let go, whirled over three times in the air, and landed lightly on his feet on the soft ground; after which he would make his little bow, just like the celebrated performer in the great and only Barnum's Circus, after he has thrilled the audience with one of his marvelous acts.

62

Bumpus sat and watched all these performances with open mouth. Secretly the fat boy aspired to imitate Davy in some of his antics; though Giraffe always scoffed loudly at the absurd idea of a heavy weight like Bumpus trying to play the part of a nimble ape.

Several times had the ambition of Bumpus got the better of his judgment, and he had endeavored to follow in the wake of the active member of the party; but always with disastrous results; so that for some time now he had taken it out in gaping, and wishing, and longing for the time to come when he could get rid of his surplus fat, so that he might be nimble like Davy.

Giraffe during breakfast was unusually silent and sober. Thad guessed where his thoughts were straying, and consequently it did not surprise him in the least to overhear the tall boy muttering

to himself, while he shook his head stubbornly:

"I c'n do it all right; I just *know* I can!"

Step Hen amused himself watching a sharp-eyed little striped chipmunk stealing some bits thrown aside from the camp meal. Time was when Step Hen might have been guilty of trying to hit such a fair mark with a club or a stone; but that was in the past. He would not have lifted a finger now to injure that innocent little creature for worlds; but sat there, deeply interested in observing every movement it made, just as if it were a pet.

63

Jim seemed to be himself again; at least when Thad looked toward him inquiringly, the guide nodded his head, and smiled. Evidently Jim had slept over his trouble, and decided that he was doing the right thing. For the sake of Little Lina he was ready to go right along, taking big chances of losing his precious ears; for only too well did he know that Old Cale was a man of his word; and that he must have meant everything he said to the messenger who bore the threat to Jim.

Davy was wild to develop the film upon which he had taken that snapshot picture on the preceding night; but there were a number of obstacles in the way of doing that. First of all, there were five other exposures on that roll, as yet untouched; and as a clinching argument, Davy had not bothered bringing a developing tank, or printing outfit along with him, fearing that they would take up too much room.

And so he would have to be content to wait until they reached some place where a photographer held forth, who would undertake to do the job, for a consideration.

Of course the picture of that breakfast would hardly be complete without Step Hen suddenly breaking forth in his customary strain:

64

"Where's my-oh, here it is, on my head, of course! How queer that I should forget I put it there," and he had to actually take his hat off, and look at it, as if hardly able to believe his eyes, and that for once his anticipated difficulty had been smoothed over so easily.

Davy joined in the general laugh that greeted this outbreak; then he walked gravely over, and insisted on feeling of Step Hen's neck.

"Hey! what you up to, now, you Jones boy? Keep your paws off me!" exclaimed the object of this solicitude, suspiciously dodging.

"I only wanted to make sure that the connection was sound still," retorted the other; "because some fine day, all of us expect you to lose your head."

"Well, I've seen you lose yours more'n a few times, when you got frustrated and excited; and it didn't seem to hurt much," Step Hen retorted.

"There's a big difference in heads," remarked Davy.

"I should say there was," replied the other, meaningly; "and the gray stuff that's in 'em, too. Some are hollow, like a punkin; while others, mine for instance, are just crammed full of thinks."

"Well, I'd advise you to use a few of the thinks trying to remember where you put your belongings; and quit accusing the rest of us of playing tricks on you; or a silly little jinx of stealing things." Davy went on, shaking his finger at the careless scout.

65

"If all you fellows are done eating, perhaps we'd better get a move on us," suggested the scoutmaster; of course Thad was really only the assistant, for according to the regulations governing all troops of Boy Scouts connected with the parent organization, there had to be a grown-up acting in the capacity of scoutmaster; though Thad had passed an examination that entitled him to receive his commission as assistant, from the headquarters in New York City.

As this gentleman, a Dr. Philander Hobbs, had been unable to get away with them on this trip to Maine, he had relegated his authority to the shoulders of Thad; a proceeding that was greatly relished by the other five scouts, because they liked to feel that they were depending on themselves, with no grown-up along.

Accordingly there was a movement among the campers. Tents had to come down, and be stowed away; and all the material connected with the cooking department made into as small a compass as possible.

All of them worked but Giraffe, who was on his knees near by, doing something that Thad could easily guess the nature of. Knowing the stubborn qualities in the angular scout Thad felt sure that none of them would know any peace until Giraffe had finally managed to strike a clue, and effect the end he had in view, of making an actual boni-fide fire after the way known to the South Sea Islanders, with his little bow, his sharp-pointed stick set in a hole made in a block of wood, and his inflammable tinder, backed by indomitable energy, and "get there" spirit.

66

And for the sake of harmony in the camp, Thad really wished Giraffe would hurry up, and solve the knotty problem.

Inside of half an hour they were all packed, and ready to make another start in the direction of the Eagle chain of lakes to the north.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LONG-DRAWN HOWL OF A CANADA WOLF.

"All ready!" sang out Thad.

Some of them were already settled in the canoes; but Giraffe still remained, kneeling on the shore.

"Come, we've waited long enough for you, old Slow-poke!" called out Bumpus, who was the partner of the tall scout in the canoe paddled by Eli.

Very slowly did Giraffe approach, his eyes turned beseechingly on Thad.

"Say, that's the way it always goes," he declared. "I was just getting on to it the best ever, and if I only had half an hour more, I'd made my fire as sure as I'm Conrad Stedman. I've got her all figured out; and by noon I'll be twisted in my mind again, and the whole combination lost."

But Thad only shook his head.

"Couldn't think of it, Number Six," he declared. "It was one part of the agreement made with you that on no occasion were you to delay the balance of the party. All ready; Bumpus, give the signal."

Bumpus was a natural musician. He could play "any old instrument," and extract very good music from banjo, guitar, violin, or even an accordion; he also had a fine voice that often aroused the enthusiastic acclaim of his comrades while sitting around the fire of evenings.

68

Of course, then, he had been made the bugler of the troop as soon as the organization was commenced. It had not been deemed just the right thing for him to fetch his musical instrument along while the Silver Fox Patrol chanced to be in the Maine woods on a hunt; but then that was no bar to Bumpus, who could put his hands to his mouth, and give a splendid imitation of the reveille, assembly, taps, or any other military call.

So Giraffe had to climb into Eli's canoe, looking very much discouraged. Really, it did seem as though an evil spirit took especial delight in baffling him, just when he seemed in a fair way to reach the goal of his present ambition. As he had once before complained, he had even had his tinder soaked by a sudden shower, and just at the critical moment when he felt sure it was about to burst into a successful blaze.

But one thing was sure, these successive defeats only served to make him shut his teeth harder together, and resolve that nothing would ever prevent him from getting that fire, if it took him a year. He might be beaten once, twice, or fifty times; but there would come a day to the patient plodder when the door of opportunity would open for him. And surely success would stand for a great deal more if he had to work like this for it, than if easily attained.

69

Before noon came they had arrived at the place where the stream ran into the Lower Lake of the Eagle Chain; and when they stopped for lunch, it was upon the shore of this beautiful sheet of water.

Thad had been secretly keeping an eye on Jim. He knew that the guide must feel more or less anxiety, despite his brave outward showing. And when Jim thought no one was observing he would look out of the tail of his eye at every clump of bushes that seemed any way suspicious, as long as they were upon the river.

And hence, it was doubtless a positive relief when they started out on the broader water of the lake; for after that he would only have to watch one shore.

About one o'clock they again started. The air continued cold, but bracing, and this made paddling a pleasure, up to a certain point.

All of the scouts took a hand at it, even Bumpus, and received more or less valuable instruction from the two guides, as to how the paddle should be worked in order to have as little "lost motion" as possible; and at the same time secure the greatest amount of benefit. But when after half an hour of labor, they found their muscles beginning to tire from the unaccustomed motion, the boys considered themselves lucky to be able to turn the paddles over once more to the canoe men, who were used to the job, and could keep it up steadily all day, if need be.

70

When they drew near the outlet where the waters of the Lower Lake flowed into Lake Winthrop, Thad, happening to look back, managed to discover a canoe skirting the shore some miles distant. From the actions of those in it, they seemed desirous of remaining unnoticed; for they took advantage of every headland that jutted out; and when they had to make across the open, it was done with all possible speed.

Thad did not need to be told who was in that craft. And glancing toward Jim, he understood that the Maine guide had doubtless been aware of the pursuing canoe for some time; because he nodded at the scoutmaster when he caught his eye.

"It's him, is it, Jim?" called out Thad; for the canoes were some thirty feet apart at the time.

"Yep," came the answer, accompanied by an affirmative nod of Jim's head.

"You know him, even at that distance, then?" continued the patrol leader.

"He's workin' the paddle right now," replied the other. "Yuh cain't mistake his way o' swingin' ther spruce blade. Ole Cale hain't gut his ekal at thet in all the State o' Maine."

71

It was plain to be seen, then, that the giant poacher was on the trail of his detested son-in-law, possibly bent on carrying out his terrible threat; though Thad hoped such might not prove to be the case.

He knew that often these rough men of the woods could appreciate true bravery; and that there *might* be a chance, however slight, that Old Cale was lost in admiration for the recklessness that could induce Jim to brave his wrath. What if he had been consumed by a sudden deep curiosity to know what really caused the other to take the risk and come up here? Could he suspect that Little Lina had sent a message to him?

All these things gave Thad occasion for considerable thinking. At the same time he did not mean to lose sight of the main reason for their having come so far from their homes, in order to get some hunting, and camping experience, that would prove valuable to his fellow scouts, anxious to learn all that they could at first hands, of wood-craft.

"I'm glad we were as particular as we were about putting out the very last spark of fire this morning," Thad remarked, as the canoes moved along close to one another.

"Why?" demanded Giraffe, a little suspiciously; for every time that magical word was used he chose to think all eyes must be turned in his direction; just as though he should be placed in the same class with fire. 72

"Oh! because the wind came up like great guns shortly after we left camp," Thad went on, always ready to point a lesson to those under him; "and from the river, too. Now, if we'd left any fire there, the chances are it would have been picked up, and thrown into the woods. As there was a lot of dry stuff around, you can see how easy a fire starts up here. And when it once gets going, I reckon it can burn some, eh, Allan?"

"If you ever have the good or bad luck to run across a forest afire, while we're up in this section, you'll see a sight that none of you'll soon forget," and he had to cast a meaning glance as he spoke in the direction of the fire worshipper.

But Giraffe only smiled in a satisfied way.

"Talk all you want," he remarked; "but I think I've got that business down fine, now; and to-night, *to-night* I'm just bound to prove to Bumpus here that the cream is on him. I knew I'd get it sometime."

"Well, don't crow till you're out of the woods," remarked Bumpus, from the bow end of the canoe. "I'm willing to be convinced; and it'll be worth all it costs me just to see you work that puzzle out."

"But you just know I c'n do it, don't you?" persisted Giraffe. 73

"Won't say," answered the fat boy, obstinately.

"Well, you might as well be counting up your spare cash, because I'm bound to show you at the first chance. It just *can't* slip away from me much longer; and I reckon I've got it clinched this time," and after that Giraffe would not talk, but seemed to be muttering to himself from time to time, as though he might be repeating a certain formula that he believed to be the winning combination.

They were not trying to make fast time now, because there was really no necessity for doing so. Having arrived on the chain of lakes that, with the St. Johns river, almost makes a great island of the northern portion of Maine, they were bent on enjoying themselves. That meant going into camp at some point where the guides were agreed they might have the best hunting; and from that time on taking toll of the woods' folks as their larder required, wasting nothing, and refraining from hunting when food was not needed.

They were true scouts, and believed in following the uplifting principles that govern the actions of the better class of sportsmen. As Step Hen so often declared, they did not want to be called "game hogs," a term often used to describe the man who flings his catch of bass or trout up on the shore to die, no matter if he is taking ten times what he can use; or who shoots his deer in or out of season, and allows it to lie there, wasted, on the ground, food for the foxes or wolves. 74

"This country seems to be rather sparsely settled up here?" remarked Thad, after they had been moving along the shore of Lake Winthrop for some time, looking up a desirable camp site.

"In the summer you kin see a tent now an' then, it bein' sum party as wants ter enjoy the fishin', which is prime," Eli replied; "but they ain't many folks as keer 'bout stickin' out ther winters hyar. Ye'll admit they must be sum cold, this far up, nigh the Canady border."

"But there must be plenty of game hereabouts, I should guess," Thad went on. "Because, in the first place it has a gamey look to me; and then again, you wouldn't have agreed to come along with Jim here, unless you'd heard good accounts of the region around the Eagle Lakes."

"Jest what I has, though I hain't never be'n all over 'em myself," returned Eli. "But Jim hyar, he was bawn an' fetched up in this kentry; so what he doan't know 'baout hit hain't wuth knowin', I guess, sir."

It was about the middle of the afternoon that Jim declared they had reached the point where their tents should be pitched. Thad noticed that the guide made not the least attempt at trying to hide the camp; indeed, the tents could surely be seen in any direction out on the lake. 75

This gave him to understand that Jim was not "taking water;" he had come here to this danger

ground with the main idea of meeting his irate father-in-law face to face, be the consequences what they might, because his wife had begged him to; and there was as yet no sign of Jim turning out to be what Giraffe called a "quitter."

Everybody soon found plenty to do. The rest had enough pity for Giraffe not to enter any complaint because he seemed to shirk his share of the ordinary labor attending the starting of the camp. They knew he had his hands full in solving what promised to be one of the greatest puzzles he had ever tackled.

And so he was allowed to go off himself, and work his little saw monotonously right along. Now it was the cord that failed to hold; again something else went back on poor Giraffe. But he kept patiently at it, grimly determined; and even the most interested of the lot, Bumpus, with whom the fire builder had laid his little wager, could not but feel a touch of admiration and sympathy when he saw how the tall scout kept at his task as the afternoon slipped away.

When supper was announced Giraffe came in smiling.

"Got it?" demanded Bumpus, eagerly.

"Well, just as good as done," was the cautious reply. "I've mastered a heap of little irritating troubles; and just now the coast seems to be clear. Next time, now, and you'll see something doing."

"One more ribber to cross!" cooed Step Hen. "It's always 'next time,' with Giraffe, you notice, fellows."

But Giraffe was either too tired to argue, or else so confident of a speedy success that he felt he could afford to bide his time. Revenge would be very sweet, after all the chaff the fellows had poured upon his head. He would wait.

The supper tasted unusually fine that night, they all declared. Several of the scouts assisted in its preparation, wishing to show the guides just what knowledge of camp cookery they had picked up in their numerous outings. Even Bumpus superintended the heating of the "canoeist's delight," which turned out to be a hodge-podge, consisting of some left-over corned beef taken from a tin, some corn, and beans with several cold potatoes sliced in the same. And the hungry boys declared the only fault they could find with it was that it disappeared too soon.

But they had an abundance for all hands, even Giraffe admitting that he was satisfied when the meal was over. Then came the several delightful hours of lying around, as close to the cheery blaze as they dared, and having a "good old fashioned powwow," as Step Hen called it.

Jim was quiet; but then he had never been a noisy fellow; and knowing what was on his mind right then, Thad felt that he had plenty of excuse for deep thought.

During a lull in the conversation later on, Bumpus sat upright, and exclaimed:

"There, did any of you hear it again; sure as you live it was the same long-drawn howl we caught on our other trip up the Penobscot region; and Sebattis, as well as all the rest, told us it was a wolf come down across the border from Canada. How about it Eli; was that one just then giving tongue?"

The old guide had not moved an inch; indeed, he seemed to be very little concerned over the strange sound; but he nodded his shaggy head, and made reply:

"Yep, thet war a Canady wolf all right; an' as they hunt in packs thar must be more on 'em raound these diggin's I spect."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UPLIFT OF A BOY SCOUT.

They all listened, and heard the far-away howl several more times. Eli even declared that it was not the same beast that gave tongue, but a different one; and this seemed to bear out his statement that the animals usually hunted in packs. If a bunch of them had crossed the St. Johns river, and taken to chasing deer in the forbidden territory of Maine, the tidings would soon spread, and every guide be on the lookout.

"If so be ye run acrost ary wolves, knock 'em over like vermin," Eli remarked, during the discussion of the subject that followed.

"I guess everybody's got his hand raised against the poor old wolf, ain't they?" asked Bumpus; who often felt sorry for the underdog in a fight, no matter if it happened to be a strange cur he had never set eyes on before.

"Why not?" asked Thad, immediately; "when the wolf is no respecter of persons, and will pull down anything that can be used for food? The world over, they are hunted, because they do so much harm. It has always been so from the time the shepherds of Bible times tended their flocks on the hills of Galilee. And as long as living things stay on this old globe, man and wolf will never agree."

"And in every State where they used to run, there has always been declared a fat bounty on

wolves," Allan observed. "Why, right now, Maine is paying large sums of money to get rid of her vermin, such as wolves, wildcats, panthers and snakes. I've read that as much as four hundred thousand dollars has been paid out in bounties since nineteen-three."

"Yes," laughed Thad, "and that's where the joke comes in. I read that same article, which was mighty interesting too. It went on to state that some smarties are not content with getting the regular bounty. They grow a gray cat that looks on the order of the wild article—shorten the tail, draw out the claws, and then send in the skin, claiming the six dollars that is paid for each bobcat actually slain within the borders of the State."

It was the turn of old Eli to laugh now.

"I heard tell o' a sharper as cut off the rattles from a lot o' tame snakes he kept shut up, and send 'em in for the bounties each rattle brings; and then he expects his pets ter grow new rattles, which howsumever, I don't guess they kin; but thet air story goes ter show what some men will try an' do ter beat the pore old government people."

"Whew! and I just can't stand for snakes at all," remarked Step Hen. "If ever I felt one touch me, I believe I'd nearly take a fit."

"Ha! let Davy do that!" cried Giraffe, quickly; at which there was a shout that must have made the two guides stare, until the joke was explained to them.

It seemed that once upon a time Davy had been subject to sudden severe cramps in his stomach, that used to double him up like a hinge, and render him incapable of action. His teachers at school had been duly warned, and many an afternoon had Davy been granted leave to go home because of a sudden attack; though it must have departed as suddenly as it came; since he was generally seen flying his kite on that same afternoon. And the cramps never attacked him on a dull, rainy day.

When he joined the scouts Davy, wishing to shirk hard work, had commenced to have these queer cramps; but wise Thad, believing that the other must long ago have outgrown the disorder, and was only shamming, laid down a course of treatment so severe that, singular to relate, Davy had ever since been utterly free from the infliction; which the rest of the boys considered simply wonderful.

And that was why there was a shout, with all eyes turned toward Davy Jones, when by mere accident Step Hen mentioned the word "fit."

But Davy only colored up a bit, and grinned amiably.

"That's a dead issue, fellers, so you needn't stare at me that way," he remarked, composedly. "Never again. Thad cured me right off the reel. 'Nothing like heroic treatment, when all else fails,' he said; and it did the job, clean as a whistle. I never can have a fit again, if I tried."

"You'd better not," remarked Bumpus, solemnly winking his left eye at Step Hen, and significantly touching a good-sized club he had at his side.

But that howling of the wolves, hunting their supper far away, did not keep the boys from enjoying a good night's sleep. Of course there was some sort of watch kept; but those who were not entrusted with the vigil had no reason to bother their heads over it. All night long they slept in absolute safety. If Eli, Jim, Allan and the scoutmaster took turns being on deck, to make sure the camp was not raided, that fact did not keep the other four from slumbering as peacefully as though tucked in their beds at home, and under the parental roof.

Another dawn found them awake, and only too anxious to get a good warm fire started; for the frost was surely around them, and at that early hour it bit severely, too. But they could always depend on Giraffe to coax the wood to do its best in dispelling the cold atmosphere; and soon they were no longer shivering, but fully dressed, and assisted in getting breakfast.

Thad cast his eye upward several times during the progress of the meal.

"You seem to be anxious about something Mr. Scout Master?" remarked Step Hen, who had been highly favored that morning, being chosen to accompany the leader on a hunt for fresh meat; and Step Hen was therefore more interested than the others in what seemed to have aroused the attention of Thad.

"I was wondering whether we mightn't get our first snow-storm before another sundown, that's all," replied the other, with a smile.

"Now, however could you tell that, when everything looks bright, and oh-be-joyful to me up yonder?" burst out the wondering Bumpus.

"Well, there are some things one can know, partly by instinct, and find it pretty hard to explain," Thad went on to say. "I seem to feel a something in the air that says 'snow' as plain as words. It may be just a sort of dampness; but that's the way about it. Then I notice the direction of the wind, which is northwest; and the cut of those few cirrus clouds lying low near the horizon. I can't exactly explain so that you could understand, but if I was asked my opinion, I'd say we'll see the snow flakes flying before many hours."

"How about that?" demanded Step Hen, turning on Eli and Jim.

"He's right, 'cause thar's agoin' ter be summat o' a fall. P'raps 'twon't amount ter much, nobody kin tell that; but it sez snow, all right," the first guide observed, after taking a look all around.

"Me tew," was all Jim said; but he accompanied the words with a vigorous nod in the affirmative,

that stood for a lot.

"That settles it," Step Hen declared. "I'm going out prepared for business. Never did like to be snowed under, any way you take it."

"Too bad we ain't got a snow shovel along," remarked Giraffe, sarcastically.

"Oh! you can joke all you want to," snapped back the other; "you're so lofty you needn't mind an ordinary snowfall. If it got up to your chin, you could still manage to stretch that rubber neck of yours around, and feel comfortable. But I ain't in the same class, you see, with my ordinary figure, and short neck. But all I meant to say was, that I'd keep my sweater on under my coat, and stick my woolen gloves in my pockets."

"Loan you my earmuffs if you say the word, Step Hen," spoke up Bumpus.

"Well, now, that's decent of you, Bumpus," the other scout remarked; "but you see, this old corduroy cap of mine has earflaps that can be turned down. It's just a bully thing for a cold, windy day. But after such a generous offer, Bumpus, why, I give you my full permission to turn over your badge. You've begun the day bright and early, by trying to do a generous deed for a comrade."

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Of course, what Step Hen referred to was the well-known rule by which the great body of members composing the Boy Scouts' organization of America has been governed, in order to teach the units of each patrol and troop the benefits to be derived from making themselves useful to others.

In the morning every scout is supposed to pin his badge upside-down, on the lapel of his coat; and is not allowed to change its position until he has found an opportunity for helping some one, either by act, or advice that is really useful. It may only be a very simple thing; but it teaches the lad, first of all, the useful attribute of observation; and after that the still more precious one of service. Even though he but assist an old man across a street where vehicles are numerous; or take a market basket from the hands of a housewife, who is staggering homeward under the heavy burden, the effect is the same.

It makes his boyish heart thrill with a satisfaction that develops the trait of generosity; and gives every lad a more manly sensation; for he realizes that small though he may seem, he is of some value to the world.

"Oh!" said Bumpus, blushing, "I guess I hadn't ought to take advantage of such a little thing as that, so's to get my badge turned. I'll find a chance to do something that's more worth while, before the morning's an hour old. And Step Hen, if you bring home the bacon in the shape of a noble six-pronged buck, you must let me take your picture, with your foot on the prize. Why, it will be the most valuable heirloom in your family, years from now. Your great grandchildren will point to it in pride, and tell how you slew the Jabberwock in the woods of Maine."

85

"Well," grinned Step Hen, "wait till I get the buck. I don't count my chickens before they're hatched. And I hope for one thing—that when we do come back, there's going to be a little peace in the camp; and that our friend Giraffe here, will have solved the riddle that's been worrying him so long. Them's my sentiments."

Giraffe made a mock bow, as he remarked in his most amiable way:

"Much obliged for making that wish, Step Hen; and from present indications I've got a sort of hunch that something is going to happen along them lines. Woke up in the night after having a dream, and it all came to me like a flash, where I'd been making a mistake. And as soon as I get through eating, I'm going to work trying to start things just like I saw in my dream. Oh! I'll get there, sooner or later, by hook or by crook. You never saw me give a thing up yet."

"Hey! what's that?" remarked Davy Jones, quickly. "How about that time you got in old farmer Collins' watermelon patch one night, and hooked a nice big melon he had doctored, so as to teach the boys a lesson. Oh! I know, because I was along with the crowd; and seems to me you gave up everything you owned, during that never-to-be-forgotten hour. I know I did; and I've never eaten a melon since without shivering."

86

"Say, quit that melancholy subject, won't you?" demanded Bumpus. "I don't like to be reminded of my wicked past, because I've turned over a new leaf since I joined the scouts. Why, you couldn't tempt me now with the biggest grandfather watermelon ever grown. B-r-r! It makes me shake, just to remember some things that happened in those old days, when I went with Giraffe, and Davy Jones, and the rest of that lark-loving crowd."

Half an hour afterwards Thad and Step Hen started out, guns in hand. Knowing that the patrol leader was perfectly at home in the woods, no one bothered about giving them advice; or predicting all manner of direful calamities ahead. Let it snow and blow as it pleased, Thad was enough of a woodsman to know how to make himself comfortable, and get back to the camp on the lake shore in due season.

Of course Bumpus had been more or less disappointed because he did not have an early chance to prove the merits of his new gun, since he had been taking private lessons from one of the guides in the way of handling firearms. But Thad had promised that the fat boy and Giraffe should have the next chance for a hunt; they were canoemates, and seemed often thrown together, perhaps because they represented the "fat and the lean of it," and as Bumpus was fond of saying, "extremes meet."

87

Half an hour later, and the two young Nimrods had managed to get a couple of miles from the

camp. But as yet they had not sighted that wonderful six-pronged buck which Step Hen was to lay low. They walked along about fifty feet apart, Thad generously allowing his companion to be a little in advance of him. This he did really because he wished Step Hen to have the advantage of the first shot; being confident that if the other failed to bring down the game he would still have some show before the deer could vanish from sight.

Then again, it was just as well to have Step Hen in front. He was inclined to be nervous; and some sudden whirr of wings, as a partridge flew out of a nearby thicket, might cause his finger to press on the trigger of his gun a little harder than he intended. Thad believed in being on the safe side, every time.

Step Hen carried a lovely little repeating rifle of the thirty-thirty type; and his ammunition was of the soft-nosed kind, which, as it "mushrooms" on striking, is just as serviceable as a ball three times as large; while Thad had his double-barrel Marlin shotgun, a twelve bore, with buckshot shells meant for big game.

As they were passing through what seemed to be a tangle such as is seldom met with in the pine woods of Maine, where they had to dodge trailing vines, Step Hen, in trying to avoid one that threatened to catch him by the neck, managed to stumble over a log, and go sprawling forward, his gun flying from his grip, but fortunately not going off. But immediately Step Hen commenced to thresh around, as he shouted out:

"Thad! Oh! Thad, hurry up, and help me out of this! My legs are twisted in the vine; and something bit me! I know it must a been a rattlesnake, and I'm a goner!"

CHAPTER IX.

STEP HEN'S GREAT LUCK.

"Snakes! well, Step Hen, you're away off, if you think they're ever found out, with the weather as biting as it is right now!" laughed Thad; who sized up the situation instantly, and knew full well there was nothing of the sort the matter with his hunting companion.

"Well, anyway, *something* gave me a bite, and you can see the blood on my hand right now, Thad," whined Step Hen, crawling once more into view, and looking as though he could not be convinced to the contrary of his statement, just because of a little frost.

He held up his left hand as he spoke. Thad took hold of it, and with those keen eyes of his, managed to grapple with the facts immediately.

"You only managed to strike up against a sliver of wood, and got a splinter in your hand," he declared; "see here, I can show you," saying which he used the nails of his finger and thumb for a forceps, and drew out a little splinter that had pushed under the skin, just far enough to bring a drop or two of blood, and give Step Hen a sharp pain.

"Oh! thank you, Thad!" exclaimed the other, as though vastly relieved. "You see, I just detest all kinds of crawlers the worst kind; and that talk about rattlers, and the bounty paid for their tails, must have been hanging on my mind. When I felt that sudden sharp jab, of course the first thing that flashed into my brain was that I'd tumbled on the nest of a rattlesnake, and he took me for one of the bounty jumpers. But only a sliver of wood-huh, I can stand that easy enough."

"Suck it good and plenty," advised the far seeing Thad. "I always do as soon as I get a cut of any kind, and especially if it's a splinter. Sometimes it keeps you from getting poison in your system, that makes a bad sore."

Step Hen obediently did as he was told. At least he had implicit confidence in the patrol leader, and was ready to follow his advice under the slightest provocation. That was a feather in the cap of Thad Brewster, in that he possessed the full confidence of his comrades. They believed in him, and were never in a state of mutiny concerning the orders he gave, as leader of the Silver Fox Patrol.

Once more the two boys tramped on. Thad thought it might be as well to impart a little useful information concerning the dormant condition of all snakes during winter time; and how many a bunch of the wrigglers he had found, while the cold season was on, looking as though they were frozen stiff.

This information he imparted in almost a whisper as they moved along. When out looking for deer, a muffler on speech is of paramount importance; and knowing all about this, Thad soon relapsed into silence.

"Tell you more some other time, Step Hen," he remarked as a wind-up; "that is, if you care to hear more about snakes. No matter how you dislike the breed, you really ought to know more than you seem to, about their habits. It might be the means of saving you from trouble some fine day, when, by accident, you happen to run across some reptile in the woods. And now we'll forget all that. I'm not going to say another word, unless I have to."

They kept pushing on; and Step Hen began to believe they must be many miles from their starting point; at any rate he began to feel a little heavy-footed, though too proud to mention the fact to Thad. Besides, Step Hen had walked pretty good distances before, and believed that he

must soon get what he called his "second wind." After that he would be good for hours, he fancied.

It must have been well on to eleven o'clock when Thad felt his companion nudge him in the back. As he turned to look, Step Hen made a suggestive gesture with his head, and pointed upwards.

There was a dead gray sky above them, and already a few scattered flakes of snow, really the first of the season, were drifting downward, looking like tiny feathers plucked from the downy breast of a snow goose. 92

Thad simply nodded his head to indicate that he too had observed them; and at the same time he shook his finger toward Step Hen, afraid lest the other might be itching to start a conversation. In fact, this was just what the other scout was hoping to do. This grim silence had begun to work upon his nerves—just walking on and on, with not a blessed sign of the fine buck they expected to get, commenced to pall upon Step Hen, in whom the instincts of a hunter had never been born; although of late he had begun to develop a taste for roaming the woods with a gun over his shoulder. But he had much to learn concerning the secrets that Nature hides from most eyes, but which are as the page of an open book to the favored few.

Step Hen began to twist his head around frequently. At first Thad thought he was developing a new eagerness to discover signs of game; but then he soon saw that the wistful expression on the other's face was brought about by quite a different cause.

To tell the honest truth about it, Step Hen was trying to figure out in his benighted brain just what the cardinal points of the compass might be. It was not that he possessed any alarming interest in proving certain facts Thad and Allan had explained, concerning the fascinating game of learning where the north lay by marks on the trees; the general direction in which they slanted; signs of moss on the north or northwest side of the tree, and various other well proven methods of locating one's self. Oh! nothing of the kind. Step Hen wanted to find out one particular fact. They had started *north* when leaving camp; and now, if he could only learn that they were heading due south, it would tell him that Thad had swung around, and was facing back home again; and thus he would not be under the painful necessity of informing his companion that he was tired of the useless hunt, when nothing worth while showed up. 93

And then it happened!

Step Hen happened to have his eyes in the right quarter when suddenly a fine big buck sprang to its feet, and stared at them a second or two, before starting to spring away. They had been heading up into the wind all the time, which was a part of Thad's principle as a true still hunter; and the deer had not known of their presence until the greenhorn happened to step on a small branch, which snapped under his weight.

Possibly Step Hen never really knew just how he did it. Indeed, he afterwards confessed to himself that his ready little rifle just seemed to swing upward to his shoulder by some instinct, which was probably the exact truth; for hunters seldom have time to do any thinking. 94

He saw that splendid deer standing there before him. Now, Step Hen had often fired a target rifle at just such a picture of a deer as this in the shooting gallery in Cranford. And when he took a hasty aim just behind the shoulder of the startled buck, he was really following out his usual custom of covering the bull's-eye on the artificial deer, so familiar to his boyish eyes.

Bang! went the rifle, as he pressed the trigger.

Thad had his double-barreled gun in readiness, and could have supplemented the shot of Step Hen by pouring in a broadside of small bullets that must have dropped the animal in his tracks. But he refrained, for his instinct seemed to tell him that the missile from Step Hen's little rifle had struck home, as the buck gave a convulsive leap, and pitched over; and Thad knew how much a new beginner in the game delights in the knowledge that he has accomplished the work of bringing down a deer unassisted.

True, the buck managed to scramble to its feet again, and run; but even then the patrol leader held his fire, for he knew that the animal could not go more than a hundred or two feet before it must drop.

"I rung the bell then, Thad; didn't you hear me?" almost shrieked Step Hen, so excited that he never once thought of pumping the exploded cartridge from the firing chamber of his repeating rifle, and sending a fresh one in after it; and then, as the stricken buck scrambled to his feet again, and went off at a wobbling gait the astonished and dismayed Step Hen, who should have been prepared to send in another shot on his own account, actually forgot that he held a rifle calculated to repeat, and wildly besought his chum to fire. 95

"Oh! there he's going to get away after all, Thad!" he cried, jumping up and down in his excitement; "why don't you blaze away, and knock my buck over? Thad, oh, do let him have it good and hard! There, now he's gone, and we've lost him! It's a shame, that's what it is, when I so nearly got him. And he had six prongs too! Oh, me! oh, my! what tough luck!"

"Don't worry, Step Hen," said Thad, quickly; "that deer can't get away. You shot him to pieces, and he's just bound to drop before five minutes. We'll just follow him up, and find him lying as dead as—"

Just what Thad had in mind as a comparison Step Hen never knew. Perhaps he was going to say "as dead as a door nail," that being a favorite expression among the scouts; or it might be Thad meant to take a little flight into ancient history, and compare the condition of that buck inside of □

five minutes with the Julius Caesar of olden Roman times. It did not matter.

He was interrupted by a sudden loud explosion. The sound came from the quarter in which the buck had just gone, and could not have been far distant. And even the tenderfoot understood what it meant.

"Oh! listen to that, would you, Thad?" he burst forth with. "There's somebody else hunting up in this neck of the woods, and they've got my fine buck! Now, ain't that the worst thing ever; and just when it began to look as if he ought to belong to me, too; for you said he was hard hit; and I just know I rung the bell with that bullet. And now I reckon it's all off. Oh! why *didn't* you knock him over when you had the chance, Thad?"

"I sure would if I'd had the least suspicion that there was any other hunter around these diggings," declared Thad, with a frown on his usually smooth brow; for he instantly began to scent trouble. "But come on, let's start along, and see what it all means. Perhaps now old Eli, or Jim may have wandered out to take a little side hunt."

"But anyway, it's *my* buck, Thad; you said I got him!" grumbled Step Hen, as he started after his leader.

They had no trouble in following in the direction taken by the stricken deer; even Step Hen, upon having his attention directed to the ground by Thad, could readily discern the trail of blood spots that told how the buck had been badly hurt by the shot back of the shoulder.

And less than three minutes later the two scouts came upon a scene that caused Thad to frown; while Step Hen's mouth opened with surprise, even as his eyes were unduly dilated in his intense excitement.

CHAPTER X.

BARE-FACED ROBBERY IN THE MAINE WOODS.

Three men were bending over the dead deer, and all of them carried rifles. They were a rough-looking set, all told; and any one would know at a glance that they could not be city sportsmen, up here in the Maine woods on a hunt; but must belong to the native class of guides, loggers, or possibly something worse.

One of them was in truth a giant; and as soon as Thad set eyes on this individual he knew that his worst fears were about to be realized. This could be no other than the big poacher, Old Cale Martin, the man whom the game wardens seemed to dread like poison, and had never yet dared arrest, though his breaking of the laws had become notorious all through that section where he roamed.

Despite his sensation of acute alarm, Thad surveyed the man with more or less interest and curiosity. He had heard so much about his doings that he would have actually felt a certain degree of disappointment had he gone away from Maine and never met Cale Martin.

Then, what Jim Hasty had told him, added to his desire to look upon the face of Little Lina's awful father.

No doubt Step Hen must also have jumped at some sort of right conclusion with regard to the identity of the three men. The unusual size of the leader was quite enough in itself to tell who they must be.

Thad did not halt long upon sighting the others, but walked forward. Even though poachers, this did not mean that the three men were desperate outlaws by any means. No doubt they walked in and out of the villages in this extreme northern section of the State, and were greeted by those who knew them as fellow guides, though seldom were any of them employed in such a capacity nowadays.

Step Hen tagged at the heels of his chum. He did not know what Thad might be going to do; but although white of face just then, with a sudden fear of trouble, at least Step Hen showed no sign of running away.

The three men looked up as the boys approached. All of them seemed to be grinning, as though amused. But while the big man really looked somewhat as a mastiff might appear to a little terrier, his two companions had a sneer on their dark, evil faces that gave Thad more or less uneasiness.

He knew that while Step Hen was entitled to that fine buck, the chances were his claim would never be considered for a single minute. Might made right in the Maine woods, with men of this stamp.

"Hullo! younkers, lookin' arter yer deer, hey?" remarked the giant, as the boys boldly approached. "Wall, they hain't any, d'ye see? We got a fine leetle buck here as Si fetched down with his big bore cannon; only fur him the deer's been in ther next county afore now, eh, Si?" and the giant as he said this, turned on the man who wore the greasy suit of buckskin, and sported a coonskin cap, after the style of the old-time hunters, now so nearly extinct.

"That's right, Cale, he'd a ben agoin' like two-forty yet, on'y for the ounce of lead I throwed into

him on the jump. I guess as haow that leettle pepper box jest tickled him a mite, an' made him feel frisky. Step right up, an' take a look at *my* buck, ef so be yeou want'er, strangers; I hain't begrudgin' yeou that much conserlation; but doan't yeou be sayin' yeou had any hand in knockin' him over, 'cause I don't stand fur any foolishness, see?"

He looked particularly ugly when saying this last, and Thad knew there was not the slightest shadow of a chance that they would get justice from these fellows. Seeing the sadly wounded deer plunging blindly toward them, Si had fired at the animal, and now they claimed to own the prize!

Well, there was no use trying to make a fuss over it; two boys could hardly expect to overawe three such hardened woods' rangers as these. Nevertheless, for his own satisfaction Thad accepted the rude invitation of Si Kedge to advance closer, so that he could stand over the deer. 101

Something caught his eye as he looked, and bending down he deftly took the object from the motionless body of the deer, just back of the shoulder, where a patch of blood appeared.

Thad held the object up so that all could see. Even Step Hen recognized it as the mushroomed bullet that had been fired from his rifle. The evidence was as positive and clear as noonday; for that bullet, after spreading out, had bored completely through the body of the buck, and was ready to drop from the other side when it caught the sharp eye of Thad. And that other wound in the neck must have been where the boasted large calibre bullet from Si's big gun had gone, producing only a superficial hurt that would not have seriously inconvenienced the sturdy buck.

"Oh! that's my bullet!" exclaimed Step Hen, hardly comprehending what a storm his words might bring about their ears; "and just as you said, Thad, I hit him in the side where his heart lies. That would have killed him in a short time, I just guess, don't you, Thad?"

But Thad did not make any answer. He was keeping his eyes on the three men, even while dropping the spread-out bullet into his pocket to show it to Eli and Jim and Allan when they returned to camp, as proof that the glory of killing the fine six-pronged buck really belonged to Step Hen. 102

The giant actually gave a little chuckle. Evidently he admired the nerve shown by this half-grown lad; for like most big men Cale Martin could on occasion, exhibit a sense of generosity toward those smaller than himself.

With just that brief chance to see what the three poachers looked like, Thad was able to size them up along different lines. He believed that Si and Ed were both shallow brained bullies, with revengeful natures; but that Cale Martin, while known as a desperate man, was really more so through his association with such rascals as these, than for any other cause. And Thad chanced to know just why he had doubly earned this reputation for ugliness during the last year or so; Jim Hasty's running away with his little girl, Lina, had been the last straw that broke the camel's back; since it had made Old Cale feel reckless, and as though he cared no longer for anything in this world.

"What d'ye think of that, Si," burst out the other fellow, who had not spoken, up to now; "the pesky critter is aclaimin' as how his friend sent that bullet through ther buck's ribs, w'en we all know 'twar from yer gun."

The shorter poacher gritted his teeth, and looked daggers at Thad. He even made a significant movement with his heavy rifle, which the boy saw was of the repeating pattern, and had the hammer raised at that moment. 103

"I doan't stand for any sech talk ez that," he declared, with savage energy; "an' ef ther cubs knows what is good fur 'em, they'll turn tail, an' mosey outen this here region some quick. Scat naow! an' be mighty keerful haow yeou start tew claimin' a deer agin, what another man shot. It's sumpin that ain't goin' ter be allowed up here in the woods. I gives yeou fair warnin' tew change base, an' clar out."

"Come on, Thad, let's move along!" exclaimed Step Hen, who was white in the face, and trembling more or less.

Of course, the patrol leader was far too smart to think of trying to defy that ugly lot. At the same time Thad showed no sign of fear as he turned and gave the bully of the woods one sneering look, as though plainly telling him what he thought. Indeed, it seemed to stir the ire of the man who claimed to have killed the deer, for with a snort, he started to throw up his gun, as if bent on threatening mischief, unless the boys ran in a hurry.

But it was the hand of the giant that grasped the gun, and turned it aside.

"Don't ye try it, Si," roared Old Cale. "We done enuff as 'tis, atakin' ther game away from 'em, without layin' a hand on ther hides. But ye'd better skip out, as Si sez, younkers. An' say, wile I think o' it, jest tell thet sneak, Jim Hasty, fur me, thet I'm agoin' ter keep my word 'bout them ears o' his'n. I'll larn him what it means ter defy Old Cale Martin." 104

For the life of him Thad could not help making some sort of reply to this.

"I'll carry your message, just as you say," he went on; "but let me tell you right here and now, you never made a bigger mistake in your life when you call Jim Hasty a sneak or a coward. Would a coward dare come up here, when he knew how you hated him, and had it in for him? I guess not much. Fact is, Jim's got a message for you; somebody's sent him up here! And he meant to hunt you up, and see you face to face. A coward! Well, I guess not."

And without giving the giant a chance to say another word Thad wheeled, striding away, with the nervous Step Hen at his side, casting many an anxious glance back over his shoulder, as though not quite convinced that the warlike Si might not think it best after all to shoot after them.

But ten minutes later, and the two boys were well away from the spot which had come very near looking upon a tragedy.

"How do you feel about it now?" asked Thad.

"What do you mean?" inquired the other. "I'm as sore as can be about losing my lovely six-pronged buck, and knocked over all by myself, too. Wouldn't I just like to give it to that low-down liar of a Si Kedge, though, for saying that was his bullet, when anybody could see that it came from my rifle? Why, he only pinked the deer in the neck, because I could see the mark. Oh! the thieves, the miserable skunks, to cheat me out of my prize! I'll never, never get over this, Thad!"

"Oh! yes you will, Step Hen," remarked the other, soothingly, for he felt that the bare-faced robbery had been a terrible shock to his companion. "But what I meant when I asked that, was, do you want to head toward camp now; have you had enough hunting for to-day?"

"Now, I know you're saying that, Thad, just to let me down easy," declared the other. "I acknowledge that I was beginning to get tired, up to the time I killed that deer; but it's all passed away now. The excitement did it for me; and I've got my second wind."

"Then you want to keep on hunting?" asked the scoutmaster, feeling that Step Hen was exhibiting considerable grit under the circumstances, and delighted to see this same brought out by the ill turn fortune had given him.

"Sure I do," instantly replied the other. "I'm just wild to get another chance to knock over a six-pronged buck; and now that I know the ropes, it's easy as falling off a log. Looks like this snow ain't agoing to amount to much, after all; and we've got pretty nearly half a day ahead of us yet. So let's keep on for a while. When I get a little tired, we'll stop to eat our snack of grub, when I can rest up, and be ready for another hour or two. But I'm afraid my luck has turned, and we won't sight another deer this blessed day; do you, Thad?"

"We'll hope to, at any rate," replied the other, as he started off again; "and it's that constant expectation of starting up game that makes hunting all it's cracked up to be. So come along, Step Hen; and if we fail to bring in our share of venison it won't be because we lay down too easy. Now for quiet again, remember, and keep a constant lookout ahead."

CHAPTER XI.

OVERTAKEN BY DARKNESS.

It must have been a long time after the noon hour when Step Hen did as he had promised, called a halt in order that they might eat their lunch, and take a rest.

As the cold was still with them, though the snow had thus far amounted to but little, Step Hen insisted on starting a small fire, at which they could sit, and be comfortable, while they devoured the food provided for the midday meal.

"You make a fire as quick as the next one, Step Hen," admitted Thad, really meaning what he said, and at the same time wishing to raise the drooping spirits of his hunting mate, who was feeling very sore over the loss of his game.

"Oh! I don't pretend to know much about starting a blaze in half a dozen styles, the way Giraffe's got it down pat," observed the other, smiling a little; "but if you pin me down to going at it the easiest way, with matches, and dead pine cones, why I'm there every time. And say, it does feel some handy, don't it, Thad?"

They sat there, and chatted for quite a long time after they had consumed the last morsel of food. And during that resting spell Step Hen picked up many a crumb of useful knowledge concerning the ways of the woods. Thad did not know all that Allan Hollister had learned through practical experience; but he had made the most of his opportunities when belonging to that other troop of scouts; and never forgot what he learned.

"Let's be agoin' on again," remarked Step Hen, finally, scrambling to his feet, and picking up his little rifle with a new eagerness.

"Feel like another spell of it, eh?" asked the patrol leader, following suit.

"That's what I do," replied the other. "Nothing like a rest, and a bite, when you're pretty near played out. I'm feeling fine and dandy again, and ready for several hours' hard tramping. But something just seems to tell me we'll never again have such a chance to get a six-pronged buck as that. And to think how it should a been just what the boys were telling me to knock over. I wonder now—"

"What?" asked Thad, as his chum came to a sudden stop.

"P'raps you'll say I'm silly if I tell you; but anyhow, here goes, Thad. It just struck me all of a sudden that we might go back to where we lost our deer, and do a little trailing on our own

account. Them three fellers wouldn't bother trying to hide their tracks, and chances are they've gone into camp to eat some of that venison by this time, if not sooner."

Thad smiled; he could not help it, upon hearing Step Hen talk in this strain; for only too plainly did he remember how white the other had been, and how even his voice trembled when he spoke, while facing those three poachers.

"And after we've managed to track them to their camp, what then?" he demanded.

Step Hen looked wonderfully brave as he instantly replied:

"Why, we might catch 'em off their guard, and hold 'em up. That deer belongs to *me*, and I'd just like to have it the worst kind, especially that head, with the six-pronged antlers on it. But if you thought that proposition a little too risky, Thad, why we might conclude to wait around, keeping under cover, till it got plumb dark. Then we could carry off as much of the buck as we could tote, including the head; and them fellers not be any the wiser for it, till it was too late to follow us! How's that?"

Thad nearly had his breath taken away by the boldness of Step Hen's astonishing proposals. He looked at the other, and a smile spread completely across his face. Then he puckered up his lips, and gave a little whistle, that somehow caused Step Hen to turn a bit red in the face.

"Whew!" ejaculated Thad, "I never before suspected what a fire-eater you could be, Step Hen. Why, nothing fazes you, nowadays. I believe you'd be ready to snap your fingers in the faces of a dozen of the worst rascals that ever hid up here in the piney woods of Maine. But I'm afraid that's too risky a job for me to back up, as the leader of the patrol. I feel the burden of responsibility too much to allow it. What could I say to your father and mother if there was no Step Hen to answer to the roll-call, when we mustered out after this Maine hunt? So, on the whole, Step Hen, much as I hate to disappoint you, I'm afraid I'll have to put a damper on your scheme."

"Oh! all right, Thad," quickly remarked the other, with an evident vein of relief in his voice; "I was only telling you what came into my head. You see, that's the way with me; I'm always having these brilliant plans, though my own good sense won't let me try to carry them out. So we'll just continue our old hunt; and hope another buck may heave in sight. But if one does, please let fly the same time I shoot, Thad; because we hadn't ought to take any chances of his getting away. You will, won't you, Thad?"

"Why, yes, I think I'm entitled to a shot by now, Step Hen," replied the other; "seeing that I held back purposely, so as to let you have all the glory of getting that first prize. But as you say, we need venison; and the next time we'll shoot together so's to make sure."

"Good! Then let's be moving, Thad."

Since Step Hen was so set upon doing everything in their power to retrieve the misfortune that had come upon them earlier in the day, by means of which they had lost the first deer, Thad meant to try his level best in order to run across another like prize.

Whenever he saw a piece of ground that looked more than ordinarily promising he would head that way, regardless of distance or direction. Little Thad cared as to whether they were able to return to camp that night or not. He had spent too many nights in the open, not to feel certain that he could manage to be at least fairly comfortable. And then, too, Thad had the hunter's instinct pretty fully developed, and thought little of fatigue when pursuing his favorite sport.

They kept moving in this way until the afternoon began to be pretty well spent. Thad would not think of offering again to head toward the camp on the shore of the lake, so long as Step Hen made no complaint. He could not afford to be outdone by a tenderfoot, and he the patrol leader at that.

Indeed, the gray of evening had commenced to spread around them when, with no more warning than before, they came upon a second buck that had possibly been lying down in the bushes.

The deer sprang away like lightning, and perhaps it was just as well that Step Hen had asked his companion to shoot with him; for the flitting buck made rather a difficult target to hit in that poor light.

So close together did the two lads fire that the reports blended, though the louder bang of the smooth-bore partly drowned the sharper report of the little repeating rifle.

Thad started to run forward, holding his gun in readiness for a second discharge, if such were needed. Step Hen trailed along after him, working desperately with his pump-gun; and like most excitable greenhorns, trying every which way to work the simple mechanism but the right way, in his eagerness to get the weapon in serviceable condition again.

"Oh! *did* we get him, Thad?" he cried; for possibly the smoke of the double discharge had interfered with his vision, and he did not know whether the deer had dropped, or sped unharmed out of sight, even before the alert Thad could give him the contents of his second barrel.

"Looks like we'll have venison for supper to-night, anyway," laughed Thad.

And then, Step Hen, looking more closely ahead, saw a slight movement on the ground, which he realized must be the last expiring kick of their quarry.

His spirits arose at once, and he gave a wild whoop of joy.

"Bully! bully!" he exclaimed, as he still ran forward after his chum; "we did get him all right,

didn't we, Thad? And I'd just like to see any woods' thief try to hook *this* deer away from us. Don't you let 'em do it, Thad, will you, even if we have to fight for it?"

"Don't worry," said Thad, as they came to a halt over the fallen buck; "we're not going to have any trouble—not from that source, anyway."

If Step Hen had been less excited he might have noticed that the words of his companion seemed to admit of their having trouble of another kind; but just then the tenderfoot was too much wrapped up in other things.

"Oh! that's too bad, Thad!" he remarked.

"What is?" asked the other; "both of us hit him, all right; for there's the place your bullet went in; and these smaller holes show where my buckshot struck."

"But look at his antlers, would you, Thad?" the other went on; "why, this is only a two-year-old, I sure reckon, because he's got only two prongs on his horns."

"Well so much the better for us, when we start to eat him," chuckled Thad; "because the meat'll be just that much more tender, you see."

"Then let's get busy, and cut him up, Thad," Step Hen went on. "Seems to me night's coming right along down on us; and the chances are we'll be awful late getting back to camp."

What Thad really thought he did not take the trouble to mention; but no doubt he had long before then made up his mind that they would never make camp that evening, for he felt that Step Hen must be nearly all in.

He did start to work, however, and with the other to assist in various ways, managed to get the deer cut up, after a fashion. The meat they expected to carry with them, together with the head, which Step Hen would not think of leaving behind, was made up into two packs, so that each of them might carry a fair portion.

By that time it was pitch dark. Indeed, Step Hen had to kindle another little fire of dry pine cones in order that the operation of getting the meat secured might be brought to a finish.

"Wow! just look how dark it is!" exclaimed Step Hen, when finally Thad announced that he was ready to go on, after getting his bearings, which he did easily by sighting the North star, the clouds having very conveniently disappeared, and all present danger of a heavy snowfall vanishing with their going.

Step Hen was rather slow and clumsy about getting his load fastened, and Thad had to assist him. He knew full well what was the matter. The other was really dead tired, and could hardly put one foot before the other without a great effort. He had been artificially kept up by the excitement until the game was secured, and now the reaction was setting in.

They had been slowly moving along for about ten minutes, when from a little distance away there broke out a strange sound that, heard under those peculiar conditions, struck Step Hen as more blood-curdling than he had ever thought it before, when sitting safely in a camp beside a cozy fire, and surrounded by comrades.

It was that same long-drawn howl of the Canada gray wolf; and as he listened to a second answering cry from another quarter, somehow Step Hen found himself shuddering.

CHAPTER XII. BROUGHT TO BAY BY WOLVES.

"Ooh! how awfully queer them howls seem, Thad!" remarked Step Hen, presently, just as the patrol leader expected he would; for he had a pretty good idea as to what was just passing in the mind of the tenderfoot.

"Well, they do sound different somehow, from what they did when we were sitting around the cheery camp-fire, listening to stories told by the guides," Thad admitted. "But then, wolves as a rule are cowardly brutes. They may do a heap of howling, but they seldom show any bravery. Only when in packs are they feared by hunters, away up in the frozen-up parts of Canada, I'm told."

"But, say, don't you think there's a pack around here, right now?" demanded Step Hen, apprehensively.

"What makes you ask that?" the other questioned.

"Why, in the first place, old Eli told us they never came away down here unless in numbers; and then again, Thad, didn't you notice that when one gave tongue over yonder to the right, a second answered him back from the left; and by jinks! listen to that, would you, a third and a fourth, as sure as you live! Say, they're all around us, Thad; they've got us surrounded!"

"Let 'em surround, if it does 'em any good," laughed the other; and if he felt the slightest bit of uneasiness himself on account of those wolfish howls, Thad at least managed to conceal it; because he knew Step Hen was feeling "creepy" enough as it was, without having his alarm

augmented by seeing his companion concerned.

"But don't you think they might be able to pull us down just by force of numbers, Thad?" the other went on.

"Oh! there can't be any such bunch of the cowardly brutes around, as all that, I guess, Step Hen. And don't forget, please, that we're armed with weapons calculated to knock the spots out of any gray sneak that ever tried to steal venison won by two husky hunters. Think how you have six bullets in that little gun of yours; and each one ought to count for a wolf, if it came to the worst."

"Oh! there's where I was a fool!" said Step Hen, in a disgusted tone.

"What's that?" demanded his chum, stopping short.

"Why, I never stuck a blessed cartridge in my pocket, you see. Thought the six I had in the magazine of the gun would be good and plenty for all the needs I'd run up against. Now I wish I had the whole hundred along. Just my luck. I'm always losing things, and if it ain't anything else, it must be chances. Think of a hundred dead wolves, and all killed with this great little gun while I sat perched up in the crotch of a nice tree! It makes me sick to think of it, that's what, Thad."

"Are you sure you did put six cartridges in the magazine before we left?" asked the other.

"Well, that's what I meant to do, and I reckon I did, all right; though Giraffe was joking me at the time, and he might have upset my calculations," Step Hen admitted.

"Well, then, suppose you drop your bundle of meat, and take a look," advised Thad. "If it gets to warm quarters it's just as well that you know how many wolves you can account for. Throw them out in one, two, three order, now."

So Step Hen began working the mechanism of his little gun. Not being excited, he was able to do this excellently. With the first cast a cartridge flew out of the rejecting opening; but when he tried to repeat, nothing happened. He looked at the gun blankly, and tried twice more; but with the same result.

"No use," remarked Thad, grimly; "nothing doing, it seems. When you *thought* you put six cartridges in the magazine, you stopped at three. And just such little mistakes have cost many a hunter his life before now, let me tell you, Step Hen."

"Oh! mercy, what do you mean, Thad?" asked the other, alarmed.

"Why, suppose now, several wolves were rushing at you with open mouths; and when you stood there, feeling able to take care of them all, your gun missed fire, not because it went back on you, but through your silly fault in not making sure it was fed to the limit when you started; things would look kind of gloomy just then, wouldn't they?"

"I'll never go out without being dead sure my magazine is plumb full; and a handful in my pocket besides, catch me again," said Step Hen, solemnly.

"That's a good resolution to make, and see to it that you remember it. But all the same, my boy, it isn't helping us any just now. You've got one bullet, and I advise you to hang on to that to the bitter end. Let me do most of the shooting, if it ever comes to it, which I hope it won't; because I've got a belt full of all sorts of shells, from buckshot to Number Sevens. Now, shall we go on again?"

"Sure," replied Step Hen, cheerfully.

But when he had managed to get his arms through the loops of his bundle, and began to heave it up on his back, he groaned audibly, so that Thad knew full well they would hardly make camp that night, at least not without several rests by the way.

"How far d'ye think it is, Thad?" asked Step Hen a few minutes later, as he dragged along behind the other.

"Well, I can't just tell," replied Thad. "It may be only three miles, and then again perhaps it would tally up twice that. We're going to strike the lake shore by keeping on as we are; but just how far away from camp, gets me. Like as not we can sight their fire, and give the boys a hail that will fetch a canoe for us."

"Whee! wish that blessed canoe was here right now," murmured poor Step Hen.

"You're pretty near at the end of your rope, ain't you?" asked Thad.

"That's right, I acknowledge the corn, Thad. I never was so dead tired in all my life. But I've still got the grit to keep along as far as I c'n put one foot in front of the other."

"Good for you; we'll try it a little further, and see," Thad went on.

He was chuckling to himself even while he spoke; for he knew full well that, although it pleased the tenderfoot to call it "grit," in truth it was fear of those lurking, howling wolves that was driving Step Hen to making these astonishing efforts. After all there is absolutely nothing like fear to make a laggard run like a Marathon sprinter. It has even effected cures in people supposed to be paralyzed, as Thad remembered reading not a great while before.

They continued on for some time longer; but from the increasing puffing and grunting that came from the region where Step Hen was staggering along, it was evident that he was about ready to give up.

"Thad!" he gasped, presently.

"Yes, what is it, Step Hen?"

"Here's a tree," remarked the other; "I mean one that's got limbs near the ground, and not like these other tall ghostly pines that I'd need a lineman's spurs to shin up."

Thad stopped for a minute.

"Well, if you can't walk on any further, Step Hen, say so, and I'll get up something that ought to keep the wolves away; but of course, if you're ready to call quits, why I suppose we'll have to climb up here, and squat like a couple of owls all night."

The prospect evidently did not please Step Hen any too well; besides, he still retained a shred of his former pride. So he bristled up as he made answer, saying:

"Why, of course I c'n go on for quite a distance yet, if you think there's any use of it, Thad. Now, what was you agoin' to do, you said?"

"Under this pine tree, you see, that's been badly used in some storm, there are a lot of branches lying. We can knock off a couple of the ones that look like they might burn pretty well, and use 'em for torches. Let's get busy and see if it'll work."

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At any rate it gave Step Hen another chance to rest up, and get his breath. He still clung to that heavy deer's head with its antlers. Step Hen could be a most obstinate fellow when he chose; and having once made up his mind, it was like trying to move the rock of Gibraltar to change it.

After considerable effort, and the wasting of many matches, so as to get the pine cones and needles started into a blaze, on account of the night wind that kept blowing them out as fast as Step Hen lighted them, the torches were finally made an accomplished fact.

"Wave it around some more, and the wind is going to keep it going," advised Thad; "besides, the swinging motion will warn the wolves to keep away, if they don't want to get their old hides singed. Now, if you're feeling fit, we'll make another stab at getting over the ground."

Still Thad knew they would not go far before something else would happen; and he really expected that sooner or later they would have to do battle with the hungry four-footed denizens of the pine woods that had scented their fresh meat, and gave signs of meaning to possess some of it, no matter at what cost.

So Thad bent his mind on figuring out what they had better do if it came down to a halt. He knew that once they went into camp they could build several fires, so as to virtually surround themselves with a circle of flames, across which no wolf that ever lived would have the daring to jump. And consequently Thad did not feel so deeply concerned about how things would come out as his comrade did.

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"Did you hear that and wasn't it a nasty snarl, though?" demanded Step Hen after possibly five minutes more had passed.

"Yes, I heard it, and I suppose the beasts are closing in now," Thad replied.

"Closing in! Oh! my gracious! Thad, we had ought to be finding a good tree like that Jim dandy one I wanted to climb, when you said no. These torches ain't agoin' to last much longer; and I don't believe the critters care about 'em anyway. Hadn't we better change the programme, Thad?"

"Well, one thing I object to," the other answered; "after going to all this trouble to get venison, and losing our first deer to those woods' pirates, I don't feel like letting these measly wolves share in this second lot."

"Them's my sentiments exactly, Thad; but tell me how we're agoin' to prevent 'em, won't you? If it comes right down to brass tacks we've just got to think of saving our own lives, first of all, and let the precious meat go. But then, if we found a tree, we might hang it up before climbing among the branches ourselves. Then, while they were jumping, and trying to snatch it down, we could be peppering the bunch like fun."

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"Leave it to me, Step Hen; I've got a plan worth two of that; though we might as well stop under this tree to try out; and if it comes to the worst we can climb up. But I don't think it's going to be necessary. Throw down your bundle, now, and get busy. We're going to have a fire, two, three of 'em; and squatting in the middle of the string, we'll just cook us some of this tender young buck, and snap our fingers at Mr. Wolf. If he gets too brash, why, we'll give him a card with our compliments. Hurry up, and get a fire going, while I stand guard over you, Step Hen."

CHAPTER XIII. THE FIRE CIRCLE.

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"That's me, all right, Thad; I'll have a spark going the quickest ever, if that old wind only holds up a bit. Here's aplenty of loose stuff, to begin with, that I can kick together. Wait till I stick my torch in this crotch of the tree. Just as well to have some light to work by," and as he kept up this running fire of talk, Step Hen was busying himself right swiftly.

For the moment he forgot all his aches and pains, and worked like a Trojan; indeed, no defender

of ancient Troy ever had more urgent reason for getting things going than Step Hen thought he did just at that minute.

He used his feet and hands to gather the loose pine needles in a heap; and when he thought he had things fixed to suit him, the next business that engaged his attention was getting the pile to take fire. After that Step Hen said he would be "on Easy Street."

All this while the night wind had been moaning and whistling through the tops of the tall pines, making a mournful kind of music, calculated to add to the uneasiness caused by the savage howls of the hungry wolves from the north. But Step Hen had learned a lesson while lighting his torch, and knew that the wind came in gusts, with short intervals between. By waiting a few seconds after it had started to blow at quite a lively rate, he was able to find a lull; and making the most of his opportunity, he hastily struck his match, and applied it to the dry stuff he had made sure to keep underneath.

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But after all he came very near spoiling it; for just at that very second there was a loud howl, so close at hand that Step Hen was impelled to look over his shoulder, under the impression that the wolf pack was even then about to overwhelm him while he bent down, almost defenseless, above the pile of dry stuff.

"It's all right; don't worry!" exclaimed Thad, who was standing guard, with his faithful Marlin gripped tight in his hands; and any wolf that attempted to try conclusions with that reliable little gun would surely regret his temerity.

The flame managed to catch before the wind could come back again to blow it out; and once the connection had been made, the draught only served to make the fire burn the better.

"There, that's done; and now what?" asked Step Hen, whirling around to pick up his own weapon, under the belief that he would feel easier in his mind if in a position to defend himself.

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"We've got to extend the fire belt, and make several more like the one you've got going," replied Thad, laying his gun down, so that he might busy himself. "Here are plenty of branches, and all sorts of good burning stuff. If only Giraffe were with us now, wouldn't he be in his glory, though?"

"Well," said Step Hen, slowly; "he might; and again, perhaps Giraffe don't like wolves any better than I do. And he gets so rattled too, whenever he's nervous. I try to take things as cool as anything. What's the use getting excited, when it ain't agoin' to help a single bit. And I know you'll say the same, eh, Thad?"

"You never spoke truer words, Step Hen," replied the scoutmaster, gravely; and yet secretly he was shaking with laughter, because everybody knew that Step Hen was the worst offender in that line the patrol boasted; so that it seemed almost as "good as a circus," Thad afterwards declared, to hear him talk in this way.

They worked diligently, and soon managed to not only extend the fire so as to take in three more points, and thus completely surround the spot where they had dumped the packs of venison; but to secure quite a supply of fuel besides, with which to feed the flames from time to time.

"Now what?" again demanded Step Hen, when he saw that his companion meant to call a halt upon these proceedings.

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"Supper is the next thing on the programme," observed Thad. "I feel just like enjoying some of that same venison. It will not only make us feel stronger, but considerably lighten our loads when we take a notion to go on again."

"Count me in on that deal; because, honest Injun now, I'm that empty my stomach feels like it wanted to shake hands with my backbone. Say, this must be a real hunter's feast, Thad. I never went through such an experience as this before. And just listen to the nerve of them rascals, ahowlin' themselves hoarse, just because we object to sharing our grub pile with 'em. D'ye suppose, now, we'll have to knock over a few of the pesky varmints, as old Eli calls 'em."

"I wouldn't be one bit surprised," replied Thad; and the other noticed that he did not move in the least without making sure that his gun was within reach; from which it was evident that Thad had no intention of being caught unprepared, should the hungry wolves make a sudden dash.

Of course Step Hen was next to totally ignorant as to how to cook meat without the frying-pan to which he had been accustomed. And he watched just how Thad did it, closely imitating him.

Taking a stout and fairly long sliver of wood, a small piece of the meat was secured to one end, after which the other point was thrust into the ground in such a position that the meat came pretty near a place where the embers burned red, and glowed invitingly. Presently the heat began to make the meat sizzle, and then it slowly cooked, turning a delightful brown color, and sending out odors that made the boys fairly shiver with eagerness to start eating.

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When one piece was considered done, it was quickly eaten by a hungry hunter, and its place taken with a fresh supply.

So the good work went on. Both boys were ravenously hungry, and only small bits could be cooked this way at a time, so that it was pretty much a whole hour before they had fully satisfied their clamorous appetites. And although the meal had been eaten under the strangest conditions of any which he could remember, Step Hen was ready to declare he had enjoyed it immensely.

"But they're gettin' madder and madder all the while, just because we didn't send 'em an invite to our little feast!" declared Step Hen. "Just listen to the critters yawp, would you, Thad? They're

buttin' in closer and closer, a foot at a time. And honest now, I reckon there must be all the way from half a dozen to ten thousand of 'em around us."

"That's a pretty good and safe range," laughed the patrol leader; "and I guess you've covered the ground, all right. There are surely half a dozen of 'em, and how many more I wouldn't like to say, because I don't know just how much noise one old wolf can kick up. But don't they sing sweetly, though? Shall we be generous, and throw them out the balance of the venison, to show them how we like their song?"

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"Well, I should say, not any," returned Step Hen, after giving his companion a quick glance, as if to see whether he really meant it, or was only joking. "We had too much hard work getting our supply to throw it to the dogs. Let the lazy curs run along, and find some for themselves. Besides, it's too good to think of wasting it. I want the rest of the fellers to taste *our* venison. Mine went glimmering, and I hope it half choked that villainous crowd. Anyway you vowed it was a whole lot tougher than this haunch; and there's that comfort."

But it was evident that if the hungry animals around heard this decision they refused to pay any attention to it; for instead of decreasing, the howls actually became louder and more insistent, until finally Thad picked up his gun.

"I begin to see that we're going to have a little target practice after all, Step Hen," he remarked, quietly. "When things get so bad that you can see the skulking beasts creeping about your camp, and even catch the glitter of their yellow eyes, it's nearly time to begin to bowl a few of them over, so as to inform the rest that we've got a dead line marked around here."

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"You don't say?" answered Step Hen, in an awed tone; "show me one, Thad, please. I'd just like to say I'd seen a wolf, really and truly, for once in my life, outside of a menagerie or a circus."

"All right, then," replied the other; "just follow the line of my finger, and I give you my word that skulking thing in the shadows is a real genuine, Canada wolf. I'm going to prove it to you in a minute or two, by taking a crack at him."

"Oh! now there's two of 'em, Thad, crossing each other's trail. And see there, if that ain't a third, and even a fourth. Why, I believe the woods are full of 'em!"

"You're about right," replied the patrol leader, more seriously than before, the alarmed Step Hen thought. "Here, let's throw a few blazing brands around, to scare 'em off some, while we lift the bundles up among the branches of this tree. Then, if anything should force us to take refuge there, at any rate we wouldn't have to listen to the plaguey things chewing at our grub."

This was accordingly done. When the burning bits of wood were hurled out toward them, the wolves temporarily retreated; but Thad knew full well they would soon crowd back, drawn by the scent of the fresh meat; and besides, he did not like to take the chances of setting the woods afire; just after he, and the balance of the Silver Fox Patrol, had accepted this new test of their abilities in the line of doing a good act as fire wardens.

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The two packages of venison were easily hoisted into the tree, Step Hen readily climbing up himself in order to lift them still higher; so that by no possibility could a leaping wolf manage to get his teeth in either bundle.

Step Hen came down again a little unwillingly, Thad saw. It must have seemed good and safe up there, so far removed from the fangs of the encircling wolves; but after the fires had burned completely out, it would prove a pretty cold perch; and for one the young scoutmaster did not yearn to try it, unless every other resort failed them.

"Now watch what happens!" remarked Thad, as the other joined him again, gun in hand; "and remember, only shoot if you have to. I'll hold one barrel in reserve all the time. After I shoot you'll see me get a new shell in the chamber as quick as I can work it. Be ready, now; and watch sharp!"

No need to tell Step Hen that. He was already keyed up to top-notch condition by the excitement that caused his nerves to quiver, and his breath to come in gasps. And yet, if any one had accused the boy of being afraid, he would have at once indignantly denied the imputation. Perhaps he was holding himself sternly in hand; Thad hoped as much; but then some persons have a queer way of showing that they are cool and collected. Step Hen was one, for instance; but if all of us could realize just how we look to our neighbors, we might not feel quite so proud.

133

Thad had his gun ready for quick work. He only waited until he could glimpse one of those skulking, shadowy forms on the outside border of the light cast by the fire circle. Then he glanced along the barrels of his gun, though instinct enabled him to cover the target better than all this aiming; after which his finger pressed the trigger.

The boom of the gun was instantly succeeded by a series of alarming howls; and then Step Hen was heard shouting exultantly:

"You got him then, Thad! I saw him turn a back somersault. He's a dead one, all right, I tell you, whoop!"

Thad was already hastily inserting a fresh shell in the left chamber of his little shotgun. He felt fully satisfied that he had done just what Step Hen so vociferously proclaimed, knocked over one of the skulking wolves; but there were more of the same breed around, and presently they would get over the temporary fright caused by the flash of fire, together with the heavy crash, when possibly they might show themselves bolder than ever.

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And like a true Boy Scout, Thad Brewster believed in always being prepared. He had really taken that for his motto long before he thought of joining a troop of the scouts; so that much of what he agreed to do when signing the muster roll, lay directly in a line with his own ideas of what a wide-awake boy should be.

"They backed off after that hot reception, Thad," Step Hen went on. "Oh! I hope I'll get a chance to pop over just one of the sneaky beasts. I'd like to say I'd shot a real wolf. Think of me, Step Hen Bingham, who up to a year ago had never gone off camping or hunting, with a bear to my credit, a buck actually knocked over, even if it was stole away from me; and now, as the crowning event of all, I want to get a savage wolf, a real Canada wolf."

"Oh!" said Thad, laughingly; "I don't know that they're different from any other kind they have out on the plains; though perhaps they may be a little larger, and ready to attack a man quicker. But perhaps you'd better take the next good chance then, Step Hen."

"May I, Thad? That's kind of you. Suppose you give me pointers, then, and tell me just when to blaze away. I want to make a dead sure thing of it."

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"Of the wolf, you mean, I guess," Thad went on, keeping a bright lookout while he talked. "Well, watch that place where I got my fellow, and I think you'll soon see something moving."

"You must mean the rest will be wanting to make a supper off the critter you killed; is that it, Thad? Are they such cannibals as all that?" asked Step Hen.

"Always said to be," the patrol leader returned, and then quickly added. "Keep on the lookout, and if you see anything moving, tell me. Above all don't waste ammunition by firing recklessly. We're not trying to scare 'em off by noise; every shot ought to count for a wolf."

They lapsed into silence for some little time, during which both boys used their eyes to the best advantage. Several times Step Hen's eagerness caused him to imagine he had caught a glimpse of a moving object; but upon calling the attention of his more experienced comrade to the spot, in every instance Thad had pronounced it a false alarm.

But in the end there came a time when Thad himself saw something move, and as he watched more closely he made positive that it was another wolf creeping up in the direction of the spot where his first victim probably lay.

"Are you all ready, Step Hen?" he asked, quietly.

"Just try me, that's all," came the whispered reply, as the other scout clutched his rifle nervously, and strained his eyes to see what had caught the attention of his chum.

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"Then watch that spot where my game kicked the bucket; one of his mates is right now coming to drag the body away, to give it a wolf burial. See him, Step Hen?"

"Yes, yes, and be sure and tell me just when to let him have it, Thad," replied the other, beginning to cover the indistinct moving figure with his ready gun.

"Now, hold on for a bit," Thad cautioned. "I'm going to give the fire here a kick that will make it spring up. Then, when you can be sure you're getting a bead on the slinker, give him Hail Columbia. Watch out, now, old fellow. It's going to be your only chance to bag a genuine wolf from the Canada bush."

Just as Thad had said, the fire burned briskly after he had used the toe of his boot to give it new life; and sure enough, Step Hen could see the outlines of a long, dim figure that seemed to be hugging the ground. He could even catch the odd gleam of the wicked yellow eyes that were doubtless watching their every movement.

With the sharp report of his rifle there was another howl, this time of pain.

"Did I get him, Thad?" cried the marksman, eagerly.

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"You hit him, that's certain, because I saw him flop over," replied the other; "and that yelp meant sudden pain, as sure as it stood for anything. But he managed to get off, though possibly he will fall within twenty feet."

"Oh! that's too bad, because his chums'll chew him all up, and I'll never have my nice wolf-skin to get a coat made out of for winter," exclaimed Step Hen; and then, as he was seized by a new thought, he went on: "But Thad, suppose I took a torch and went out there, d'ye think I'd be apt to find him lying on his back? I'd like the worst kind to get hold of him before the rest of the bunch muster up courage enough to come back."

"Well, since you haven't even a load in your gun, that would be too risky a game for you to play, Step Hen, and just for an old wolf-skin at that. Perhaps we've given 'em such a bad scare now that the rest of the pack may skip out, and leave us in peace. Then in the morning you'd find your chap, all right."

"Listen! there's something crashing through the bushes right back of us, Thad!" exclaimed Step Hen, a minute later, though his companion knew it before he spoke. "Sounds like an elephant might be coming down on us; but they don't have such animals up here in the Maine woods, do they? Just hear the racket he keeps making Thad; whatever do you suppose we're up against now?"

Thad laughed.

"That's a two-legged elephant, then, Step Hen," he remarked. "Fact is, we're going to have company, for that's a man pushing through the brush, and making all the noise he can, so as to scare the wolves away, and at the same time keep us from firing on him." Then raising his voice, Thad called out: "Hello, there!"

"Thet you, Thad?" came an answering call.

"Hurrah! it's Old Eli!" exclaimed Step Hen, readily recognizing the voice of the guide. "This way, Eli; we're having a healthy old time knocking over some of your Canada wolves. Each got one so far, but I reckon the rest of the pack must a lit out when they heard you coming. I see you now, Eli; and mighty glad you dropped in on us. Where did you spring from anyway; don't tell me we're as near the camp as that."

Eli came up, with a wide grin on his face.

"Oh! camp about mile and a half down lake," he remarked, as he gravely shook hands with each hunter in turn. "We saw light of fire over point, and think it might be you boys; so I paddled canoe across here. It ain't jest five minits walk 'cross this strip ter the lake. So ye got sum o' the critters, did ye?"

"Thad, can't we look up that one I shot now; I'd just hate to lose him, you know?" begged Step Hen. 139

"Why, I suppose it would be safe for all of us to go out," returned the patrol leader. "Here, pick up something that will burn, and come along."

They found Thad's victim without any trouble, but the second one was not within range of the light from their torches. But poor anxious Step Hen begged so piteously to be allowed to extend the search "just a little further," that Thad did not have the heart to say no. And a minute later, after they had gone forward twice as far as Thad had at first intended, Step Hen gave a gurgling cry.

"Looky there, Thad, what's that thing lying over yonder? Seems to me mighty like a dead one. Yes, sir, that's what it is, as sure as I'm Step Hen Bingham. Oh! how terrible he looks, even when stretched out there, and gone up the flue. *My* wolf, too. What a fine coat he's got, and as gray as they make 'em. Say, won't I just cut a swell when I wear that out in a sleigh with Sue Baker; and every time she rubs the sleeve she'll say: 'And just to think that *you* shot this savage old wolf all by yourself, Step Hen; oh! what a brave fellow you are!'"

It was a second dead wolf, sure enough. The little repeating rifle had, as usual, given a good account of itself, and the stricken beast had only been able to drag himself a little distance away, before giving up. 140

Both animals were dragged over to the fires, and then Eli set to work taking off the skins with a rapidity that told of long experience along the trapping line.

"No use aluggin' these critters over ter the canoe, and then ter camp," Eli had announced. "Ther two skins'll make a purty good coat, I guess naow. An' so ye gut a pack o' prime venison to tote home as well, hev ye? Thet's good. My mouth's jes' made up fur a steak; an' the boys'll feel tickled ter death when they sees yer."

Step Hen was a little nervous at leaving the fire zone, especially since Eli and Thad insisted on putting out every spark before departing, according to the law of the State; but then he managed to carry one torch, and with that to serve them, they took up their line of march.

It was not so very far to the edge of the lake. Thad laughed, and said the joke was on him; because, when they halted he really believed they were a couple of miles away from water. If he had known the shore was so near by he would have managed to coax the tired Step Hen to trudge on just a little further, so as to camp with the water covering one side, and bringing that much security; not to speak of the chances for signaling to the home camp by means of the code which he and Allan, as Boy Scouts, understood. 141

But it was all right now, and Step Hen felt quite merry over the chance of being taken comfortably to the camp by means of the canoe.

Eli did the paddling, and the two weary lads just snuggled down in the boat, feeling that they had had a great day of it, all told. The presence of the venison, as well as the wolf-skins, would be positive proof as to the reliability of their astonishing story; should there be any skeptic around. And then Thad had the wonderful mushroomed bullet that had killed that six-pronged buck; so that as they narrated the first adventure that had come their way, they could produce evidence to back up the story.

Their coming was greeted by more or less enthusiasm, although the boys had evidently been coached by Allan not to be too vociferous, as they were in a country where timid game abounded, and it was poor policy to frighten away the quarry they had come so far to secure.

Step Hen forgot all his weariness as he found himself being shaken by the hand again and again,

while he and Thad told the tale of their day's outing. It was nice to play the hero part once in a while, and more than ever did Step Hen feel that life had become more worth living than ever, since he joined the Cranford troop of Boy Scouts. But for that he would never have discovered what splendid things there were to be met with in the great forests; and the spirit of the hunter and the fisherman, which had lain dormant in his nature, might never have been awakened.

And while the hour was rather late, all of the boys insisted on tasting a small piece of the deer meat brought in by the two successful Nimrods.

CHAPTER XV. THE FOX FARMER.

"Say, this is the greatest venison I ever tasted!" declared Bumpus, after he had disposed of his share, and sighed to think that the rules of the game debarred him from having a second piece; because they had had a bumper supper only a few hours before.

"Just dandy!" added Giraffe, who was in the same class as his fat campmate, and would have been only too glad for an invitation to "cut, and come again."

"Oh!" exclaimed Step Hen, suddenly, "I reckon we've got to congratulate you, Giraffe."

"Me? Er, what d'ye mean, Step Hen?" replied the tall scout, at the same time beginning to look a trifle confused.

"Why, you know you told us we'd be *surprised* when we got back," the other went on to say, a little maliciously; "and I reckon you've gone and done it at last; and now you're ready to show us just how easy it works."

Bumpus could not refrain for the life of him from giving a sarcastic chuckle, which of course added to the evident embarrassment of Giraffe; who, however assumed a serious air upon making his reply.

"Well,—er—not exactly, Step Hen. I've got her figgered out all right, in my mind, so that in the morning I c'n go ahead, and work out the details. I calculate a short half hour ought to see me wind up in just a blaze of glory. But just yet it's a toss-up who the ice-cream's going to be on, Bumpus or me."

"Oh! I ain't worrying even a little mite," asserted the confident Bumpus.

"Well, you wait and see!" declared Giraffe, defiantly. "You don't all know what I've got up my sleeve. The feller that laughs last laughs loudest, they say. And I give you all fair warning that's going to be me."

Meanwhile Thad managed to get in close touch with Jim Hasty. When the others were joking, and having a merry time, he was wondering how the guide's little affair had been working out.

Many hours had passed since he had seen Jim, and he wondered whether the latter could have had any further communication from Old Cale, or even run across the father of his wife in the pine woods.

Jim was looking a little more serious than ever; but so far as Thad could discover there was nothing about him to indicate that he had been in violent collision with an enemy. And there were both his ears in their proper places; which fact might be taken as positive proof that the giant poacher had at least so far not attempted to carry out his terrible threat.

Jim seemed to know what was passing through the boy's mind; for he smiled faintly, and shook his head in the negative.

"Nothing new happened, then, Jim?" questioned the patrol leader.

"Naw. I hain't been far from camp the hull blessed day; an' consequently never had no chanct tew run up against Pa Martin," replied the other. "But I'm more sot than ever tew see him face tew face, afore I quits this here region. It's jest *gut* tew be done, else I wudn't hev ther nerve tew face Little Lina agin. She made me promise; an' by thunder! nawthin' hain't agoin' tew skeer me off. If he doan't hunt me out, by ding! I'll take a turn at hit, an' find Cale Martin myself, ef so be I gotter tramp all the way tew his shack, wich I knows on'y tew well."

"Good for you, Jim!" said Thad, admiringly; "but I suppose you understand what risk you're taking in trying that game? From all I've heard about Cale Martin, he's surely a terror; and then the threat he made about your ears would be enough to scare most men away."

Jim drew a long breath as he answered this.

"Lot's o' people doan't know Ole Cale like I does. He hain't so black nor they jes' paints him. Them game wardens is afeerd o' him, and they piles all kinds o' things on his shoulders thet he hain't no business to kerry."

"Yes, I've heard before about giving a dog a bad name, and then he has to bear the sins of the whole neighborhood," remarked Thad. "There is never a sheep killed but that Dog Tray is the guilty one. And so you think Cale isn't altogether so bad as we've heard?"

"He's a big man, and he's got an' *orful* temper; but it's them tew critters he goes with thet's the wust cases. They jest draw him inter slick games, Cale, he'd never think o' tryin', left by hisself. But we heerd as haow he's struck a new thing, if so be he on'y knows enuff ter keep it agoin', an' shakes them other fellers. An' if anybody kin make a success o' fox raisin', I jest guess Cale is ther man, 'cause he knows all erbout the slick little varmints from A ter Z."

"Fox raising?" exclaimed Thad, at once deeply interested. "Tell me about that, Jim. Seems like it ought to be worth while listening to."

"Why," said Jim, apparently only too well pleased to say something in favor of the big and reckless parent of his little wife; "yer see, thar's a company as hes been formed away daown in Bosting, tew raise foxes o' all kinds, jest tew git the pelts. I s'pose yew knows as haow them skins air agittin' more valerable every blessed year. More people tew wear furs, an' less animals tew give 'em. Why, thar was twelve hundred dollars paid fur a black fox pelt jest last Spring; an' I seen the check with my own eyes."

"Yes," Thad went on, deeply interested. "I've understood that tremendous prices were being paid out for that scarce skin; but is Cale meaning to try and raise black or silver foxes for the market? I was told by several people that they considered the silver fox only a freak, and that they would never breed true to species. How about that, Jim?"

"I've allers hed an ijee thet way myself," returned the short guide, scratching his head in a reflective manner; "but Cale, he thinks the other way; an' Cale, he sure knows more about foxes in a day than I wud in a year. Wall, we done heard as haow he hed made a contrack with this company fur a number o' years, tew act as manager o' ther farm. It's in another part o' ther State; an' when Cale, he leaves here arter a leetle while, he never 'spects tew come back again. Wouldn't be surprised naow if he hed a few foxes over tew ther old shack as he means tew kerry away with him when he quits up here."

"But do you suppose he'll stick to those two tough characters, and keep them with him in his new job? Won' they queer his game with the company, Jim?"

"Wall, I doan't know, of course, what his plans be, but Cale, he's a great feller tew keep his word; an' if so be he's told this company as he'll run things straight jest believe me they ain't agoin' tew be no place for them two poachers around *his* fox farm. He'd run 'em off with his gun mighty quick. Yes, Cale keeps his word; an' thet's what makes me a leetle bit shy 'bout bein' able tew convince him tew leave my ears whar they belongs. But Lina, bless her, sez as haow he jest cain't hold aout, when he hears what I gotter tell him; an' Lina, she orter know."

Thad admired the man more than ever. Just because of his faith in Lina, here was Jim ready to put his head in the lion's mouth, so to speak. Thad suspected that he might be carrying some very important intelligence to the bearded giant of the pine woods; but whatever it was, Jim did not take the trouble to enlighten him; and Thad did not really think he had any business to ask.

After that Jim seemed to lapse into silence, and seeing that he did not appear anxious to continue the talk along lines that concerned his personal matters, the scoutmaster turned to the others again.

The hour was now getting rather late, and while those who had remained in camp during much of the day might not be unusually tired, Step Hen gave signs of falling asleep by the fire. Several times his head gave a lurch to one side, so that presently Giraffe caught him roughly by the arm.

"See here, d'ye want to take a header square into the blaze, Step Hen?" he demanded, as the other opened his eyes, and looked sleepily at him. "I like fires as well as anybody, but excuse me from getting roasted in one. Don't you think he ought to be sent to bed, Mr. Scoutmaster? He's so loby right now, that the chances are ten to one he'll climb in, and wrap the blanket around his head instead of his feet. Seems like you'll have to appoint a dry-nurse to look after the poor baby, or else he may freeze to death in the night."

But Step Hen did not wait for any permission to retire. He just crept away, and vanished under the folds of the second tent, which he shared with Thad and Davy Jones.

Indeed, the others were that sleepy they declared they would not be long in following his example. Thad himself was the first to get up and stretch.

"It's late, fellows, and we ought to be turning in, if we want to be good for anything to-morrow. And remember, that if this sort of thing keeps up, we're going to change the programme, and let every scout have a share in keeping sentry duty, working in couples. It doesn't seem exactly fair that when Eli and Jim have to work all day with the paddles, or in any other way, they ought to spend half the night standing guard. Hello! there's Eli right now, coming in on the trot, as if he had some news for us. What's up, Eli?"

The old guide had been down to the shore of the lake to take a look at the canoes; and he was plainly bringing some sort of news, if they could judge from his hasty steps; and the look of concern on his dark face.

"Canoe comin' along daown yonder; mout be Cale's agoin' ter pay us a visit," he remarked; and his words aroused the sleepy boys as thoroughly as though they had been ducked with a bucket of ice-water.

They all hastened to step off toward the shore. Bumpus even picked up his gun, possibly under the belief that there might be a speck of war on the horizon. Jim looked a trifle uneasy, but there was a grimness in the way he shut his jaws together that told of his set purpose to face the music

somehow or other, before leaving this country of the Eagle Lakes.

"There it comes!" announced Giraffe, in a half whisper, as he pointed to the left.

They could soon all make out the dim, shadowy canoe that was stealing along, some little distance from the shore, and evidently bent on passing the camp.

"I kin jest make out two fellers in her," said Eli, who had sharp eyes.

"I reckon one of them must be Old Cale, then; he seems to be shadin' his eyes with his hand, alookin' toward our fire, and us astandin' here," Giraffe went on to say, though no one could be really positive, because the light was so poor.

The canoe passed by in this spectral fashion. There was no hail from those who sat in the boat, one using the paddle with the usual dexterity of a Maine guide; and of course none of the scouts thought of calling out, knowing who and what the voyagers were.

"I suppose that was Old Cale in the bow?" remarked Thad, after the canoe had faded away.

"An' he was alookin' fur me, I kinder guess," said Jim, mournfully; at the same time, as if mechanically raising a hand to feel of his ears.

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CHAPTER XVI. A STARTLING AWAKENING.

It was about four o'clock on the following afternoon when the three canoes containing the boys of the Silver Fox Patrol, accompanied by their two guides, drew up once more on the lake shore, and preparations for going into camp were hastily commenced, since night would soon be upon them.

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Jim had selected this site for their last camp on this lake. When they left it, they intended going through the rest of the chain, and then seeking the railroad, with the idea of starting homeward again.

And Thad wondered whether, in picking out this camp, Jim might not have had an eye to his own affairs. Perhaps it was not many miles away from the shack of Cale Martin, the man who had been logger, trapper, guide, and was now about to turn his superior knowledge concerning foxes into a profitable channel, and raise them for their valuable furs.

Thad hoped that for the sake of Jim's peace of mind he might carry out his plan before they broke camp here. And secretly he was determined that, should the guide decide to take a chance at finding Old Cale at home, he would not be averse to accompanying Jim across country to the place where Little Lina used to live, before she ran away with Jim.

Despite his positive conviction that he was really on the eve of succeeding with his fire-making, by the aid of his little bow, and the twirling stick, Giraffe had failed to accomplish what he expected that morning. Why, he hardly ate any breakfast, so engrossed had he been in his "fiddling" as Bumpus contemptuously called it, whenever he saw the tall scout working that clumsy little bow. But as usual, some little thing went wrong that spoiled the whole combination; and of course fire did not reward the hard labor Giraffe put in.

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He looked so bitterly disappointed that even Bumpus did not have the heart to taunt him; though as a rule the fat boy could be depended on to do his share of such.

But then, it had been arranged that Giraffe and Bumpus were to go out on a hunt on the following day, all by themselves, and without even a guide along. Giraffe had boasted so often now, that he felt himself fully competent to look after himself when adrift in the woods, that Thad thought it might be a good thing to give him the chance. And there was Bumpus, eager to make use of his new gun; nothing would please him better than to accompany the tall scout.

Of course neither Thad, nor any one else for that matter, ever suspected that they would bag any game, unless it might be a few half-tame partridges, that would sit on a limb, and wait to be knocked over. Indeed, Thad was of the opinion that in the end the two bold Nimrods might even get lost, and have to be searched for.

But then, they would unquestionably leave a plain trail that the guides could pick up without great trouble; and the experience would be worth much to both Giraffe and Bumpus. They were really getting too "scrappy" in their dealings with each other; and a little spice, such as must accompany losing themselves in the woods, and being dependent on each other entirely, might draw them together, Thad thought, and make them appreciate each other more.

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As they sat around the blaze that night, after they had partaken of a generous supper, Thad purposely led the conversation to the subject of fires in the woods. Allan had told of some experiences he met with some years back, and of course both guides were able to supplement this with stirring yarns that thrilled the blood of the young listeners.

"And I reckon, now, Eli?" Thad went on, after the guide had finished what he had to tell; "that you never saw the pine woods in better condition for a fire than they are right now?"

"Thet air a fact," replied the other, emphatically. "Dry as tinder, an' ef we doan't git sum snow

mighty soon, I guess as haow ther'll be thousands o' acres o' vallerable land burned over afore Thanksgivin' time."

"Yeou must a seen sum lands thet hed be'n burned, on ther way up on ther train," interjected Jim, breaking his long silence; "an' yeou kin understan' jest how lonesum they 'pears like, with ther tall pines astandin' thar like flagpoles, black, and withaout ary limb; er else alayin' in windrows on ther ground. Allers makes me feel bad tew see sech things."

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"And the game deserts a burned tract, too," declared Allan.

"It sure dew," Jim went on, with a shake of the head. "Yew never seen a more desolate region than sech a burned territory. Everybody moves aout quick as they can; fact is, most on 'em hes gut ther houses burned, an' doan't hev ter kerry much away with 'em. I hopes as haow it'll snow er rain right soon, so's tew save miles an' miles o' woodland."

"And the fire wardens have their work cut out for them at this season of the year, you can easily believe," observed Allan.

"Wonder now if we'll see a real genuine forest fire while we're up here," remarked Giraffe, with considerable interest. "My! but she must look great to see them pines aflamin' up like big torches. Now, you needn't give me that look, Thad, because I haven't forgot my promise, an' I ain't acarryin' a single match along with me day after day. But if *somebody else* sets fire to the woods, I have as good a right to look as the next one, ain't I?"

"Of course you have, Giraffe," replied the scoutmaster, relieved, because this overpowering passion on the part of the tall boy had given him many anxious minutes since coming into Maine.

"Lots of these fires come after the loggers have done their work," Allan volunteered. "You see, they leave a tremendous amount of stuff behind; all the limbs and branches of the trees they have cut down, as they are only after the main stem; so when this gets nice and dry, after a year or so, and a fire starts, with a brisk wind to whip it, what follows is more than I can describe. I saw one such fire, and we only escaped with our lives by the quick wit of a logger along with the party."

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"What did you do, Allan?" asked Bumpus, eagerly. "You know, I'm goin' out with Giraffe tomorrow, and if we did meet up with a forest on fire, I couldn't run like he can, with his long legs; so I'd like to know another way to give the old fire the go-by. Please explain how you cheated it. Why, Allan, it might save my life too, for all you know."

"Glad to hear that you're interested, Bumpus," answered the other readily. "And I think every one of you ought to know about it. When you're out hunting, try and keep the location of any stream you happen to pass, in your mind. Then in case of being beset by fire, make your way there, and get in, up to your neck. You're going to be safe there, every time. If it gets hot, duck under, and cool off. I'll sure never forget the time I had; but then I hope none of you will ever have to hunt for a stream, or that you'll even see a forest fire when up here, no matter how much Giraffe wants to look on one."

Giraffe had dropped out of the circle, and apparently some idea had just flashed into his mind connected with his pursuit of that slippery contract, whereby he expected sooner or later to make fire come, after the fashion of the far away islanders of the Pacific.

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No one paid much attention, for they were heartily sick of seeing him sawing away with his little bow, wasting so much time, most of them thought; though Thad for his part was secretly pleased to see that the tall scout stuck at his apparently hopeless job; with a persistence that must win out in the end.

Thad had been explaining just what the new system of standing sentry was to be. Each of the scouts would have his turn, even Bumpus being called on, though his partner was to be old Eli. There being eight of them, their fixed posts would not run much over an hour and a half each; and it was to be expected that the boys might receive more or less benefit from having to assume some of the responsibility of the camp's security.

Bumpus had been yawning for some time; and presently, taking advantage of a lull in the conversation the fat boy clumsily gained his feet, and made a lunge for the nearest tent, in which he was supposed to sleep.

No one was really surprised to see Bumpus trip, and go floundering to the earth, for he frequently got his legs twisted, and did that; but when there was a shout of consternation, and the tall form of Giraffe bounded erect they realized that Bumpus had actually fallen over his chum, not noticing him, because his eyes were so heavy with sleep.

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"Oh! Giraffe, excuse me, please!" he remarked, as he rolled over, and sat up. "I give you my word I didn't know you were there. I was rubbing my eyes, because they felt so hot and tired, lookin' into the fire so long. Hope I didn't hurt you any?"

"Hurt me," grumbled Giraffe; "I wouldn't care for that so much, even if you'd broken a rib or two in my side; but to think that you'd upset me just when I was agoin' to make it burst out into a nice little flame! Why, she was smokin' to beat the band when you knocked it all into a cocked hat by bustin' my bow; an' now I'll have to sit up another hour makin' a new one. It's always the way. I'm havin' the toughest luck ever was, about that business; but I can hang on, like a bulldog to the seat of your trousers when you're gettin' over the fence. I'm game, all right. I'm agoin' to get that, if it takes a leg."

But his bow, he found, could be easily repaired, as it was only the cord that had been broken. And half an hour later everybody in camp was sound asleep, saving Thad and Allan, who had taken

the first watch, so as to sit there, and talk in whispers; for the patrol leader wanted to tell his chum all about Jim's case, because he felt so great an admiration for the short guide.

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When their turn had expired, according to the little nickel watch Thad carried, they woke up Eli, who, with Bumpus was to take the next spell; in turn they were expected to arouse Step Hen and Davy Jones, to be followed by Jim and Giraffe; and this would finish the night, as daylight must arrive while the last named were on duty.

Thad was a good sleeper, although as a rule the slightest thing of an unusual nature aroused him. He believed that the camp would be well watched, and when he lay down did not allow himself to get to thinking of anything to the contrary, for fear that if his brain once got to working, he might lie awake for a long time.

He had a dim recollection of the two boys who occupied the tent with him, Step Hen and Davy, creeping out, when Eli summoned them. Then came an uncertain length of time, which Thad could never measure; for he was sound asleep when it seemed to him some one was shouting something in his dreams. He sat up, and bumped his head on some object that had fallen out of place; but he was now fully awake, and felt a thrill when he heard real shouts outside, in the voices of Step Hen and Davy Jones:

"Hey, everybody get busy here! The whole camp's on fire, and the wind driving it into the woods like hot-cakes! Hurry up! Hurry up, everybody!"

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CHAPTER XVII. FIGHTING THE FLAMES.

Out of the tent crawled Thad, utterly regardless of the fact that he was not altogether warmly clad for a cold night. And what met his eyes when he reached the open was enough to excite him still further.

The wind was blowing pretty stiffly, and the fire had already jumped into the brush surrounding the camp. If given its head for even a short time it seemed bound to get started in the dead pine needles; and once it spread there, all the desperate efforts of a dozen fire-fighters would be wasted.

Several figures could be seen, bounding here and there, and slashing at the red flames with anything they could get hold of that would answer to bring about a halt in their spread.

Of course these must be the late guardians of the sleeping camp, who were now shouting so strenuously, and begging the rest of the campers to come to their aid—Step Hen and Davy Jones; besides, there were the guides, hard at work, having been aroused with the first cries; for they still persisted in sleeping under a rude shelter they had made out of branches and weeds.

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Thad rushed into the fray, and began to do his very utmost to keep the dreaded fire in check. He saw that the others were also crawling forth, Bumpus, Giraffe and Allan, all occupants of the first tent. And realizing the importance of concerted action, they lost not a second in getting busy.

Bumpus, in particular, was a sight to behold, and had he been less busy Thad felt that he must have doubled up with laughter to see him. He persisted in donning a most stunning red-checked suit of pajamas; for being so stout he did not suffer from the cold as much as some of the others. And as his simple heart was wrapped up in the business that just then engaged his full attention, Bumpus was prancing around, looking more like a clown from the circus than anything Thad could think of. But all the same the fat boy fought, tooth and nail, at the spreading fire. He had on his shoes, as had the others, so that he could jump on the creeping flames when all else failed; and using an extra piece of canvas that sometimes had done duty as a tent floor, Bumpus sailed into the fray like a hurricane.

Indeed, they were all as busy as beavers for a short time. Every scout seemed to feel that it would be a lasting disgrace on the name of the Silver Fox Patrol if that fire got away into the woods. They had assumed the responsibilities of assistant fire wardens; and it would be a sorry joke indeed if, instead of putting out a conflagration they themselves were the cause of one that swept the whole adjacent territory.

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"Give it thunder!" shouted Giraffe, as he threshed wildly at every head of fire he could see near his boundary of action.

"Hit him again, boys!" shrilled Bumpus, as he continued to do his great act of working with both hands and feet at the same time, all serving to quench the threatening flames.

But Step Hen and Davy were strangely silent, though they worked as hard as any one. They knew that they were to blame for all the trouble; for they had slept on their post, and with this sad result.

Finally success came to the hard working scouts, and their allies, the two guides. The fire was completely routed, bag and baggage, before it managed to get a good foothold in the dry woods. And perspiring as though it were the good old summer time, the boys hastened to get more clothes on them, for fear of catching cold.

The fire was resurrected, and they sat down to have a powwow.

"Oh! you needn't all look at us that way," grunted Step Hen. "We're guilty, all right. Knock us all you want to, because I just guess now we deserve it. But we never meant to go to sleep there by the fire, did we, Davy?"

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"Well, I should say not," replied the other culprit, looking quite dejected. "We kept atellin' each other that we mustn't sleep right along; and then to think that after all we did drop off, and both together."

"First thing I remember," said Step Hen, as if resolved, after pleading guilty, to open up, and throw himself on the mercy of the court; "I heard a queer crackling noise, and openin' my eyes, my stars! the whole world seemed like it was afire. I gave Davy a punch in the side, and then jumped for it. We thought at first we could get her under control; then I saw it was no go, for the old fire kept extendin' all the while. So I started to wake you all, and Davy, he joined in. After that Eli and Jim joined us, and then the rest of you came. And believe me, fellers, Davy and me'll never forget it. You did handsome by us, and we've been saved from disgrace that would have sent us into an early grave, hey, Davy?"

"Just so," grunted the other, who was licking several burns he had received on his bare hands during the fierce little engagement just ended, though he made no complaint, seeming to think he had gotten off pretty easily, considering the serious offense of which he had been guilty, that of sleeping on his post, and which might have cost him his life in war times, had he been a soldier.

Thad noticed this fact, and quietly getting out some salve he carried for just such occasions forced Davy to let him attend to his hurts, though the other insisted that they "did not amount to much, anyway."

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"How do you think it started?" Giraffe asked, and in so doing he really voiced the thoughts of everybody.

"Huh! I reckon that's an easy one to answer," replied Step Hen, promptly. "Anybody c'n see at just a single look that the wind must have picked up a live coal from the fire, and carried it into a bunch of stuff to leeward. After that it was fanned, till it spread wider and wider. That was going on while Davy and me snoozed away like a pair of sillies. No use talking, boys, I'm ashamed of myself; and let me tell you, it'll be a long time before I ever go to sleep on duty again-not if I have to keep jabbing a pin into my leg every minute or so, to make me jump."

"Does that explanation go, Thad?" asked Bumpus, still breathing hard after his recent violent exertions.

"Well, it looks that way, for the fire was actually to leeward of the camp when I first saw it," answered the patrol leader; but there must have been something in his manner rather than his speech that caught the attention of Giraffe.

"But you ain't *quite* satisfied, are you, Thad?" he remarked, pointedly. "You just keep athinkin' that perhaps it *wasn't* an accident after all? Am I right, now?"

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"Wow! what does that kind of talk stand for?" burst out Bumpus. "Are you hinting that it was all a part of a dark scheme to burn us out of camp?"

"Wait till Eli and Jim come back," Thad went on. "You've noticed that they're not with us right now. Fact is, they took the lantern, and went off about the time we were finishing our dressing. But before they went, Jim gave me to understand what they had some reason to suspect."

"The work of big Cale Martin and his crowd? Is that what you're aiming to tell us, Thad?" demanded Giraffe.

"Here they come!" was all Thad said.

"Oh! my, I thought you meant the game poachers!" exclaimed Bumpus, who had made a half movement in the direction of his gun, standing conveniently near.

The two guides joined the circle around the fire. Eli held his hands out to the blaze, as though they felt cold in that nipping night air. Jim simply caught the inquiring eye of the scoutmaster, and immediately nodded his head in the affirmative. And Thad knew from that they had surely made some sort of important discovery.

"What is it, Jim?" he asked.

"They've been around here; we found ther tracks lots o' places," came the reply.

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"Do you mean Cale and Si and Ed?" asked the other.

"On'y Si and Ed," answered Jim. "Cale he wa'n't thar 'tall. We'd sized up his big tracks ef he'd be'n. They was two men in thet canoe larst night, ye seen; wall them must a be'n ther lot as fired the brush. I guess as haow Cale, he muster gone back tew his shack by naow."

"But what on earth could they expect to get by burning us out?" demanded Bumpus.

"Fust place they never opected tew burn ther camp," observed Jim; "ef they hed, doan't yew believe they'd agone tew windward tew start thet blaze? Wall, they hed a game wuth tew o' thet up ther sleeve."

"Tell us what it was, Jim," urged Thad, though he himself had already jumped to a conclusion in the matter.

"I guess as haow they thort we'd hev tew make off a long distance away from the camp tew fight the fire; an' then they'd hev plenty o' time tew clean her aout; but yeou see, we didn't get fur away 'tall, so they hed all ther work fur nawthin'. But them tracks was as plain as anything, wa'n't they, Eli?" Jim went on.

"They be," was the conclusive testimony of the older guide; and every one of the scouts understood that Eli had set the seal of his approval on all that Jim had said. 166

It was certainly very unpleasant to realize that they were objects of desire on the part of even a pair of unscrupulous scamps, granting that big Cale Martin had retired from the combination. The boys seemed to get more indignant the longer they discussed the situation.

There was Bumpus, usually so mild and peaceful, fairly palpitating with a desire to draw a bead upon those two unprincipled rascals.

"We don't stand for much nonsense from outsiders, do we fellers?" he appealed to the other five. "Once before on this trip some bad men thought to get fresh with the Silver Fox Patrol. You all know what happened to Charley Barnes, the leader of that bunch of yeggs that broke into the bank. Didn't we make the capture though, and astonish Sheriff Green? And ain't we going to get ever so much money for recovering the stolen stuff? Well, that's what's going to happen to those husky chaps if they get too gay with us. They'd better go slow. If they can read, they'll see we're marked 'dangerous, handle with care!'"

"Yes," said Giraffe, "we'll just have to get busy, and hand these sillies over to the head game warden. They're trying to interfere with our having the time of our lives up here in Maine; and we don't stand for anything like that."

None of them felt like getting back to their blankets in a hurry, after all that scare; so they just sat there around the fire, some of them with the blankets thrown over their shoulders, and compared notes all along the line; for what the guides had just told concerning the scheme of the unprincipled poachers filled the scouts with both indignation and anger. 167

And more than one of them resolved that when his time came to watch, he would make sure to keep a loaded gun close to his hand, to be used to give the prowlers the fright of their lives.

CHAPTER XVIII. WHEN EVEN A COMPASS FAILED THEM.

"What would you do, Bumpus," said Step Hen, after a while, "if you couldn't find a creek to wade in, with the fire all around you?"

"Well, d'ye know, I was just athinkin' about that same thing," replied the fat scout, who had thrown a blanket around him, and not bothered dressing; and as he sat there on a log he looked somewhat like a lazy Indian.

"I hope you came to some conclusion," observed Giraffe; "because, if we happen to run across a conflagration to-morrow, when we're out hunting, it'll be some comfort to me to know, when I'm spinning along, that you're snug and safe behind, and not being devoured by the flames." 168

"Well, the only thing I could think of," Bumpus went on, soberly; "seeing that a feller can't sprout wings right away when he needs the same; nor hatch up an aeroplane to carry him out of the danger zone—the only thing for me to do would be to hunt around for a woodchuck's hole, and push in, feet first."

There was a laugh at that remark, which seemed to surprise Bumpus, for he looked with elevated eyebrows at each of the others in turn.

"You seem to think I'm joking," he remarked, as if offended by the levity.

"Well," continued Giraffe, "in the first place you'd possibly find a heap of trouble discovering a woodchuck's hole in these Maine woods, especially when you were in a big hurry; and then again, fancy the kind of woodchuck that had a hole of a size to accommodate *you*, Bumpus Hawtree!"

The fat boy sighed.

"That's what I get all along the line," he declared. "There ain't no place in all this world for a feller that's nearly as round as he is tall. I tell you I'm goin' to find *some* way of getting rid of all this superabundance of flesh, if I have to walk it off by taking tremendous tramps. Some people tell me it c'n be done by going hungry a week or two at a time; but what's the use of living if you can't eat, that's what? So I'm in a peck of trouble. Won't somebody tell me what to do?" 169

Of course, with such an open invitation, they hastened to accomodate him; and if poor Bumpus tried even a part of the numerous joking plans offered for his consideration, he would soon have no need for either food or energy, since they would, as he declared, be "putting his wooden overcoat on him."

Finally, however, the boys began to slip back once more into the tents, all but Giraffe, who was to finish the night with Jim; although there was hardly another hour now before daylight.

"Just suits me, boys!" declared the tall scout, as he prepared to sit out his turn as sentry; "you

see, I can be thinking over that knotty problem I've just *got* to figure out before we leave this part of the country. And I've an idea that I'm getting mighty warm on that proposition now. Would sure had it dead to rights, only for clumsy Bumpus tumbling over me."

But no one paid much attention to what Giraffe was saying; they had by now grown so accustomed to hearing him always promising great things by "to-morrow" that it "went in one ear, and came out of the other," Davy Jones said.

When the morning came, the camp became a scene of activity. While some of the party were busily engaged cooking a good breakfast—and it needed a lot to satisfy the healthy appetites of six growing boys, not to mention two husky guides,—others were examining the tracks that had been found after the fire. 170

And it was the universal opinion that two prowlers had indeed started the fire with the idea that the inmates of the camp, rushing out to fight its spread, might get so far away that it would leave the way open for the thieves to make a sweep of any valuables left unguarded in that exciting hour.

Bumpus and Giraffe were making all their preparations looking to their "sallying forth," as the latter termed it, "like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of old, determined to do wonderful things." Thad saw that they felt as if they knew it all; and he realized that in such a case advice was not desired, so he said nothing about what they ought to take. If they forgot anything, they must do without, and next time think again.

Presently the two waved their hands merrily to their chums, and started forth. Bumpus looked like a well-laden, led animal as he trotted along at the heels of the tall scout, who was to do the piloting of the expedition.

"Don't keep supper for us if we're late," airily called back Bumpus. "We may get further away than we can manage in one day, and have to camp alone, like Thad and Step Hen did. And if some of them old wolves pay us a visit, they'll wish they hadn't. Giraffe is toting his old heavy weight rifle; and here I am with my new double-barreled gun, and fifty shells. Ketch me gettin' caught like Step Hen did, with a few charges for my trusty weapon. Good-bye, fellers! See you later!" 171

"Good-bye, and good luck!" called out Davy Jones, waving his cap three times to represent his idea as to the right kind of a send-off.

The hunters got along very well for several miles, though Giraffe was forever forging protests from Bumpus.

"What d'ye take me for, Giraffe?" he would exclaim, as he caught up with the waiting leader, and wiped the perspiration from his brow, despite the fact that the day was pretty cold. "You know I ain't built on the same lines as you; and in a case of this kind, the one that c'n go faster just has to accommodate himself to the pace of the slow one. You're the hare, and I'm like the poor old tortoise; but please remember that the turtle came in winner after all in the race. Not always to the swift, you know, does the race go. I may beat you out in the long run, with the endurance test. If I've got anything at all, it's grit."

"Yes, you will," sneered Giraffe; but after the third stop he did moderate his speed considerably; perhaps he was beginning to get a little tired himself, and did not feel unwilling to draw in a peg or two. 172

At noon they ate a cold lunch, for they had come upon certain tracks that told Giraffe there had been an animal of some kind there—he wished he knew how to tell what species it belonged to, and just how long ago the tracks had been made.

"And mark me, Bumpus," he said impressively, "I'm going to learn all those kind of things right away, as soon as I can take my mind off this pesky fire puzzle. I c'n see how handy it is to be able to read signs when you're off huntin'. Why, when we start to follerin' these here tracks, after we've eaten our grub, how on earth do we know whether they were made a week ago; or if some cow broke loose from a backwoods home up here, and wandered this way. A nice pair of chumps we'd be, wouldn't we, if we went and shot up a pet cow, and had to pay damages? I reckon the boys'd never got over the joke."

"That's just what I was thinking myself, Giraffe," agreed the other, as he sat down beside the tall scout on a fallen tree, and took out the lunch from his haversack, for he had carried it all morning, and Giraffe had let him, too; "if we're going in for this scouting business, we ought to swallow the whole business. Now, as for learning things connected with the woods, where could you find any fellers better qualified to put us straight than we've got in Thad and Allan? What one don't know, the other sure does. I'm bound to learn the game. Owning this dandy gun has given me a new idea. I used to say 'oh! what's the use of bothering, when you've got somebody else to do your thinking for you?' But now I begin to see that you can't always depend on others. Right here is a case in point." 173

As their minds ran about in the same channel the two boys managed to get along splendidly. Their little differences of the past were, for the time being at least, quite forgotten; and they seemed drawn toward each other as two comrades should be.

But both began to complain because thus far neither of them had had occasion to make use of their gun. If this was a game country, why was it two such industrious hunters did not get a crack at something, whether a deer, a moose, or even a fox—anything would have been welcome as a change from the monotony.

Perhaps Giraffe would have been surprised if told that he and the puffing Bumpus made quite too much noise to prevent any wary and timid deer from staying within a quarter of a mile of them. And also that often they were doing their hunting "down the wind," so that their scent at such times was carried to the nostrils of the suspicious game long before the hunters came in sight.

Finally they came across some partridges, and Bumpus managed to bag a couple with two shots from his new gun. He was greatly elated by the success attending his efforts, even though Giraffe did mention something about the birds insisting on remaining on the branch of that tree so long that they must either have been frozen there, or else wanted to commit suicide.

"Well, they came to the right place, then," said Bumpus, sturdily, as he crammed new shells in his gun; "I'm the feller to help every partridge and deer pass over the divide, that feels like going. Bring on your game; now we're going some!"

But as the afternoon began to wane they had a shot at nothing else, though once Giraffe became excited, and declared he had caught a glimpse of a deer making off in the distance.

"Now, ain't it a shame," he went on to say, "how that deer just knew we were coming? Seems like somebody went ahead with a trumpet, and announced that two hunters were on the trail. After that they all hike out. But seems to me it's getting some cold right now, Bumpus. My fingers begin to tingle."

"Told you to wear the old mitts Step Hen offered you, but you sneered at the idea. I'm feeling pretty cold myself, considerin' that I'm on the move all the time. Say, where are we anyhow, and how far from the camp?"

Giraffe looked blankly at Bumpus.

"Here's the compass, and we c'n see which way is north, all right. Then east is off that way on the right, south around yonder, and west here. But where in the dickens is that camp, south, north or east? Honest, Bumpus, I don't know!"

"No more do I, Giraffe," replied the other. "And d'ye know, this makes me think of that Injun that got lost, and was found, half starved, by some white men; but he was too proud to admit his little shortcoming; so when they asked him if he hadn't kinder managed to get twisted in his bearings, he slaps his breast with his hand, take a pose like this, and says he: 'Injun not lost; wigwam lost; Injun *here!*' And we're like that Injun, Giraffe; oh! no, we're not lost one little bit, because we know we're here. But I just can't amble on any longer. Suppose we stop and camp. These partridges will taste prime. Yum! yum, can't get at 'em too soon to please me. Get busy, and light a fire, Giraffe; that's your part of the contract always."

"I sure will, if you give me a few matches, Bumpus," replied the other, wearily dropping his heavy rifle, that began to feel like a ton of lead.

"Matches! Why, you're the fire-maker; and I thought you'd take care of that part of the business!" exclaimed Bumpus, looking a little alarmed.

"Why, what a silly you can be, Bumpus; don't you know I promised Thad never to carry a single match around with me? And now, look what a fix we're in, lost in the Maine woods, with night coming on, and gettin' colder every minute; and not a single match to start a fire with. I see our finish all right. When they find us some days from now, we'll be just frozen stiff, that's what!"

The two tenderfeet looked at each other, but there was no smile on either face now; for affairs had assumed too serious a phase to admit of merriment.

CHAPTER XIX.

GIRAFFE TRIES FOR THE FOURTEENTH TIME.

"Whatever can we do, Giraffe?" asked Bumpus, presently, after he had sighed several times, in a most forlorn way.

"Oh!" remarked the other, making out to be little concerned about the matter, although his manner did not deceive the fat boy in the least, for he knew Giraffe was worried greatly; "there are lots of things we can do, all right; but you see the trouble is, Bumpus, they ain't agoin' to help out much."

"We're in a tough hole, all right," grunted the other, disconsolately.

"Talk about Thad and Step Hen camping out;" Giraffe went on to say, "why their troubles couldn't be mentioned in the same breath with ours, and you know it. They had aplenty of matches along, and could get all the blaze they wanted."

"And say, think of having the best part of a fine young buck to cook!" burst out Bumpus, with another groan. "As for us, we've got the game all right; but however can we get down to eating partridges that ain't ever even been near a fire."

"Quit talkin' of eating, Bumpus; you fairly set me wild," declared the tall boy, rubbing his empty stomach, as though its calls were growing more insistent with a knowledge that they must pass unheeded now.

"Then you must be hungry?" suggested Bumpus.

"Hungry ain't no name for it," Giraffe replied. "That's always the way, I've been told. When there ain't no water, a feller feels as if his tongue was stickin' to the roof of his mouth. And Bumpus, bein' hungry ain't the very worst of it, either!"

The fat boy sat up, and looked at his companion in misery as though startled.

"What you mean, Giraffe, by slingin' that scare into me; I'd like to know what's worse than starvin' to death in a single night?" he demanded.

"Oh! shucks! don't you worry about that," the other went on, with a sneer. "Not so much chance of our comin' to such an end in so short a time. But there is real danger around us, Bumpus."

"Say, do you mean about them wolves?" exclaimed Bumpus, with a tremble in his voice.

"That's just what I do mean," came the reply "When they tackled our comrades, why they were bold as anything, even if the boys did have a fire burning all the time. Think of how we're up against it, without a single match to start a blaze."

"Then there's only one thing for us to do, Giraffe."

"Suppose you tell me what that is?" demanded the tall scout.

"Climb a tree," replied Bumpus, promptly.

Giraffe made an impatient gesture.

"Of course we could do that, as a last resort, Bumpus; but the chances are, if we did, we'd freeze before morning!" he declared. "I've heard old hunters say that of all the agony they ever endured, being kept in a tree all night was the worst. Feel in your pockets again, Bumpus; try everywhere, and see if you can only scare up *one* single match. If you did, we'd be mighty careful not to waste it, I tell you. This is a case of 'my kingdom for a match!'"

So the fat scout commenced a systematic search, Every single pocket did he feel in with trembling fingers, while his comrade watched his face anxiously, knowing that it was likely to indicate the success or failure of the search.

When he saw a sudden grin come upon that broad countenance Giraffe felt like bursting out into a yell of joy.

"Got one, haven't you Bumpus?" he exclaimed, eagerly. "That was a bully good idea of mine after all, you see, having you look again. Say, won't we be careful of that one precious match, though? And won't we have the fine dry stuff all ready to kindle, as soon as I strike it. You must let me handle things, Bumpus, because, you know, I'm more used to-what's the matter with you? Don't tell me it *ain't* a match after all? Oh! thunder!"

Bumpus had slowly drawn his hand out of his pocket, and held some object up between his forefinger and his thumb. It was about the length of a match, but had a sharpened point, instead of a blunt head.

"A-a miserable toothpick that I just dropped into my pocket when we ate that dinner at the restaurant!" groaned the wretched Bumpus, staring first at the offending object, and then turning a piteous face toward his comrade.

Giraffe managed to rise to the occasion. Perhaps he remembered that Thad had really committed the other into his charge; and that it was to him the scoutmaster would look to give a good account of the expedition. And then again, Bumpus was so shocked by the series of calamities which had befallen them that he looked almost ready to collapse.

So Giraffe drew himself up, and assumed a confidence that he was far from feeling.

"Don't take on so, Bumpus," he went on to say, almost cheerily. "It may not be so very bad, after all. Don't let's forget that we're scouts; and must keep a stiff upper lip whenever things turn out wrong. We'll just do the best we can; and I reckon it'll all come out right in the end. It nearly always does, you know."

At least his words and manner had some effect on the almost exhausted fat boy, who brightened up more or less.

"Now, that's nice of you talking that way, Giraffe," he said. "You're the right kind of a chum to have in time of trouble. But say, ain't it gettin' cold though? Is that why you're slapping your arms around so?"

"Try it, and see how quick you feel warmer, Bumpus," replied the other, with the patronizing air of one who is superior in knowledge, and willing to impart all he knows; "you see, the violent action starts the heart to beating nearly twice as fast as it does ordinarily; and that pumps the blood harder, so it gets to the very end of your extremities. That's what Thad says, anyhow; and it sure enough works."

So, for a minute or two both lads kept up a strenuous exercise, though it was too much for poor Bumpus, who presently stopped.

"Feel better, don't you?" demanded Giraffe imperiously.

"A whole lot; but doin' that has one bad point, I find," said Bumpus.

"As how?" asked his companion.

"Why, it keeps on making you all the hungrier; exercise always has that effect on me. Why, Giraffe, I feel like I could eat a whole ham right now."

"Didn't I tell you to let up on that style of talk; you're just making me groan inside every time you speak of eatin'. We ought to be tryin' our level best to better our condition."

"But I don't know anything that would help us, Giraffe; so it's up to you to get us out of this ugly hole. Perhaps we might use a shell from my gun, and by taking out most of the powder, snap it off, and start a fire going."

Strange to say, Giraffe did not seem to take to the idea, simple though it was; and later on commended by Thad and Allan, when they heard about the trouble. The fact was, Giraffe had suddenly remembered something.

"You leave it to me, and see if I don't pull out a trick worth while," he remarked mysteriously; and Bumpus saw him turn aside to get down on his knees.

For some time the fat boy sat there, apparently lost in bitter reflections. Now and then he would give a start, and look around him hastily, after which he would heave a great sigh, or else groan dismally. From this it might be assumed that Bumpus was allowing himself to dwell upon many a glorious supper he had devoured in the company of his Boy Scout chums; and just then he was enjoying things the best he knew how, he would remember the desolation that confronted himself and Giraffe. 182

Then he would pick up one of the two partridges that had fallen to his new Marlin ten bore, look critically at it, feel the meat on the plump breast; and then shake his head, as though the idea of having to turn cannibal, and devour the game raw did not appeal at all to him.

On one occasion, when he aroused himself from this abstraction he became conscious of a strange humming sound.

"What you doin' there, Giraffe?" he demanded, as the noise certainly proceeded from the spot where his chum was down on his hands and knees.

"Why, you see," replied the other, slowly, "I fetched my little bow and fire-makin' outfit along with me, thinkin' I might have a chance to try a scheme I got in my head. I'm gettin' right into it now, because I want to start business before it's real plumb dark!"

But far from reassuring the dejected Bumpus, these words only made him grunt. Had he not watched Giraffe working away for dear life with that miserable little outfit a dozen times, and always with the same result-getting perilously near success, but always missing it by a hair's breadth? 183

What chance did they have of securing the much desired fire, if all depended on Giraffe succeeding in inducing that twirling stick to generate enough heat to throw off a spark that would catch in the dry tinder? None at all. It was only a hollow mockery. Some smart scouts might be able to do the little trick; but up to now it had baffled the skill of Giraffe. Why, even Thad had lost pretty much all hope of his ever succeeding, Bumpus suspected; and believed that the only good thing about the tall scout's labors was his persistence.

So, shaking his head again dolefully, Bumpus allowed himself to once more figure out a bill of fare that he would like to commence on, if he only had the good fortune to sit down at a table in a first-class restaurant. It seemed to give him untold satisfaction just to imagine the heaping platters that were being brought before him in rapid succession. Why, in his vivid imagination he could almost get the delicious odors of the various dishes that had long been favorites with him; particularly the liver and bacon and fried onions. Oh! how tantalizing to suddenly arouse himself with a start, to look around at the rapidly darkening scene of those lonely pine woods, and hear, instead of the waiter's cheery voice, only that continual grinding sound, as the boy with the never-give-up nature kept sawing away with his miserable little bow; and the poor stick kept whirling back and forwards with a violent motion, in the socket that held one end. 184

In the estimation of Bumpus, that was coming down from the sublime to the ridiculous. He had little confidence in all this labor of Giraffe; though goodness knows, that if ever success would prove a boon to a couple of stranded hunters caught in the darkness of a wintry night, with not a match in their possession, it was then.

CHAPTER XX. THE LONG VIGIL OF A SCOUT.

It really looked to Bumpus as though sooner or later they must come to climbing a tree, no matter how cold they found it on such a perch. And as it would presently be dark, since night was rapidly coming on, he wondered whether he would not be showing good judgment in selecting the proper kind of a tree, while there was enough light to see by.

But before he started to look around him, he thought it worth while to ascertain how his companion was doing; although to tell the truth Bumpus did not have the slightest hope of any good news.

"Ain't you gettin' anywhere yet, Giraffe?" he asked, as he rose clumsily, and wearily to his feet; for his short legs felt very stiff after resting so long.

The other gave a grunt as he replied:

"Oh! don't bother me with such silly questions, Bumpus. You make me think of that story of Blue Beard, where the old feller's a waitin' for his last wife to come down, and get her head taken off; and she keeps callin' to her sister, who's in the lookout tower: 'Sister Ann, Sister Ann, don't you see anything comin'?'"

"But I want to know before I—" began Bumpus, when the other interrupted him.

"You *will* know all right, if I get it. But you keep away from me, Bumpus. Once before, you fell all over me, just when I was on the point of grabbing a spark. If you know what's good for you, keep clear of me now. I'm desperately in earnest, I tell you. So be warned, Bumpus!"

The fat scout realized that if he knew what was good for him he had better give Giraffe a wide berth while he was strumming away with his "old fiddle," as some of the boys sneeringly described the fire outfit that continually refused to "fire" even a little bit.

"I'm going to look for a good tree," he said.

"All right, go, and climb up in it, good and hard," Giraffe answered pettishly; "but unless you want to get lost, don't you dare go out of sight of this place. Call if you lose sight of me, Bumpus, d'ye hear? I don't want Thad to say I didn't keep an eye on you; but this is a business that must be attended to."

All the while he was sawing away as if his very life depended upon bringing the ordeal to a successful termination; and possibly Giraffe thought it did.

So Bumpus began to look around him.

He realized that the tall pines were rather out of the question so far as affording them a chance to climb up; and that he must find some tree of a different type, with low branches.

It was not hard to find such a retreat in the shape of a thick hemlock, with its glossy green foliage that had such a delightful scent. Bumpus knew it well, because on numerous occasions the scouts had plucked masses of similar "browse," to make the ground feel easier where they slept.

If they had to climb a tree as a last resort, this hemlock would offer all the advantages they wished. Why, Bumpus could even remember how Eli had told of an adventure that had befallen him along somewhat similar lines; and how in order not to fall from his perch in the crotch of a tree, he tied himself there by means of some stout cord he happened to have along.

Bumpus felt all through his pockets again, and was grievously disappointed not to discover a hank of fishing cord.

"Seems like I'm just out of everything that a feller's apt to want when he gets in a bad pickle like this," he grumbled. "Ketch me bein' in such a hole again. Why, I'm goin' to make it the point of my life to always carry a plenty of matches along; and a line that would be strong enough to hold a feller, if I had to use it. How would Jim fished up his gun, and shot them wolves, like he told us, if so be he didn't tear his shirt into strips, an' made a rope, with a loop at the end, to slip over the end of his rifle lyin' on the ground. Next time I get the chance I'm goin' to fix a nice clothes line, and wrap it around me every time I go out in the woods. Never know how handy such things might come in. Wonder how Giraffe's gettin' along with his sawin'? But I don't dare say another word, or he'll be so mad he might break his silly old bow on my back."

He walked toward the spot where he could see the dim figure of the industrious fire worshipper bending low over at his labor.

Again Bumpus sank down to the ground; although he was shivering with the cold, he did not dare swing his arms around as before, lest it make him remember how hungry he was.

Sitting there, he listened to the breeze sighing among the branches of the pines; and to his excited mind it was actually laughing at the predicament of the wretched chums.

Something else came stealing to his hearing, something that made Bumpus suddenly sit up, hold his breath, and strain his senses trying to locate the direction from which it seemed to spring, and at the same time guess the nature of the sound.

"I wonder now, was that a wildcat growling?" he asked himself.

The thought was so disquieting, owing to the gathering gloom, that he could not help reaching out his hand toward the heavy Marlin that he had temporarily laid on the ground near by.

While the sound, whatever it may have been, was not repeated, so far as Bumpus could tell, still he felt far from satisfied about it. What if the sly old cat was at that very moment creeping up on them? For all they knew, it might be close by just then, "inching" its way along, just as he had watched a tame Tabby do at home, when trying to steal upon a sparrow it wanted for its dinner.

Bumpus became quite nervous over the thought. He drew back the hammers of his double-barrel, and began to look around him. All sorts of stories that he had heard told from time to time about these bobtailed cats of the pine woods, with their cousin, the lynx, that had tassels on its ears, now floated before his mind. Naturally they did not tend to ease the strain under which he was laboring; for where he had before only imagined he could see one pair of yellow eyes staring at him from out the gloom, he now began to see them everywhere.

Why, the woods must be full of the creatures, and they were going to set upon the unfortunate scouts, to make a meal for that cold night. And another thing gave Bumpus great uneasiness; there was no use of trying to get away from this army of "yellow-eyes" by climbing that hemlock; since cats were as much at home in any kind of tree as on the ground.

No wonder Bumpus shivered now, with something more than the cold air. They were certainly up against it, good and hard; and if ever they saw Thad and the rest of the scouts again, how happy they should be.

Why didn't Giraffe quit his fooling with that silly old bow, and take to thinking up some scheme that was worth while? It seemed the height of foolishness for him to be wasting all his time with that ridiculous fire-making dodge, that never could be done anyway. Bumpus was almost tempted to stumble forward, and pretend to fall over his kneeling figure, just to upset things, and make Giraffe come to his proper senses. He would, only he was a little afraid that the tall scout might be so furious that he would do something violent; for he was getting "awful touchy" on the subject of making a fire in that way.

"If I could only make dead sure of one of them yellow eyes, I'd like to knock the beast over," Bumpus was muttering to himself; and then he rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, as if trying to see better, after which he said disconsolately: "It ain't no use, they just keep dancin' all around me. P'raps there ain't any cats there at all. P'raps I'm just imaginin' things, like my dad used to say I did, when they put me to bed in the dark, tellin' me the angels was all around me, an' wouldn't let anything hurt me; but pretty soon, when the skeeters got busy, I let out a whoop, and told 'em the angels was bitin' me something awful. P'raps if I shut my eyes I'd feel better."

But when he started to try this, Bumpus found that it would not work. The agony of not being able to see created new fancies in his mind, much more dreadful than those that had gone before.

And so the anxious scout crouched there, not far from his industrious chum, gripping his gun tightly in both hands, and breathing stertorously as he twisted his fat neck around from side to side. He was trying to figure out a line of action to be followed in case the worst came to pass; and be it said to his credit that Bumpus was resolved to die game, as became a true scout.

At any rate, Giraffe could not keep up that silly business much longer. Either he would just have to give over through complete exhaustion; or else his "bally bow," as Bumpus liked to call it, would break, as it had a faculty for doing when the cord became weakened from constant friction.

Bumpus only wished that time would hurry along, for he wanted Giraffe to forget about his fad, and turn his attention to a more sensible way of getting fire. Now, there must be a way of snapping an emptied shell into a little pile of tinder, and catching the spark in some manner.

He tried to figure out how it could be done; but Bumpus never was very bright with regard to details, for they confused him; so that he was soon floundering about like a fish out of water; or a boy who did not know how to swim, when he gets beyond his depth.

Why, it was real dark, and he could just barely make out the crouching figure of Giraffe; but that everlasting humming sound still kept up, until Bumpus thought it would set him crazy.

Now Bumpus started on a new tack. He tried to imagine the delight of his companion if only he could suddenly remember having thrust a little box of safety matches into his haversack before starting out; but he knew it was useless to look, for he had certainly done nothing of the sort.

Then, all of a sudden, Bumpus was given an electric shock, when Giraffe let out a shrill whoop; for with his mind so filled by visions of armies of wildcats all ready to pounce upon them by and by, Bumpus was in a condition to be startled.

He scrambled to his knees, and half raised his gun to his shoulder, under the full belief that the crisis so long dreaded was at last upon them, and they would have to fight desperately for their very lives.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LITTLE FIRE BOW DOES ITS WORK AT LAST.

"Oh! what is it, Giraffe?" exclaimed Bumpus, in a quavering voice.

"I *told* you I c'd do it! On'y gimme time, and I'll figger the old thing out, I said; *and I have!*" cried the exultant Giraffe.

"Why, it's burnin'!" gasped the other, staring at the tiny flame that was playing hide-and-seek in the midst of the dry tinder that had so long awaited its coming.

"Sure it is; anybody with one eye could see that!" Giraffe sent back, about as happy a fellow as the sun ever shone on, because his long endurance test had in the end met with such grand success. "Hey! what's the matter, Bumpus? Get a move on, and collect some stuff to add to this, before the thing goes out on me. Lively, boy, lively with you, while I shield it with my hands!"

He hugged the little blaze with his body and hands while Bumpus, dropping the now useless gun, eagerly gathered a lot of dry pine needles, and made a pile of them close to his chum.

"Oh! glory! Bully for you, Giraffe! You're the scout who can stick to a thing like a plaster. Don't it look good, though?" cried the shorter lad; but the fire-maker would not let him loiter.

Presently there was no longer any dread of the fire burning out; and both of the scouts could get busy collecting fuel. Dead branches were in demand, and fortunately enough, there happened to be plenty of the same close by, so that without much effort they were able to get quite a heap near the fire.

"Now let's sit down, and warm up a bit," suggested Bumpus; although truth to tell, he was at that moment perspiring from his recent exertions.

"And if you want to talk about eating *now*, Bumpus, you're quite welcome," the taller scout went on to say, with a grin; "because there's something to it. We've got the birds, and we've got the fire to cook 'em by. Who said I couldn't start a fire by sawin' at my fiddle till I burst a blood vessel? Wasn't it Davy Jones? Well, you c'n just tell him for me, next time you see him, Bumpus, that he was all wrong. Why, it's just as easy as fallin' off a log; er, that is, after you know how."

"Shall we start in plucking the feathers off these birds, Giraffe?"

"Might as well, if we mean to eat 'em; and speakin' for my own feelings I want to say that a partridge'd go mighty well about now. Yum! yum! get busy with one, and I'll tackle the other." 194

Both boys knew how to do the job of plucking the birds, and soon had the feathers flying.

Both of them were feeling a thousand per cent better than before; and Bumpus even hummed as he worked. Giraffe's thoughts very naturally kept along the line of his recent triumph. He had labored so long, and against such a handicap, that he might well be excused for feeling proud of his success.

"Good little bow!" he muttered; "you did the business, all right, didn't you? The trouble was, I didn't just know how to handle you; but I've got it down pat now, and I'll never forget again, never. Wonder what the boys'll say when they hear about it? And Bumpus, it came in right pat, didn't it?"

"I should say it did, Giraffe," replied the other, enthusiastically; "when we didn't have a single match, night here, cold as the dickens, wolves howling pretty soon, and no way of cooking these plump partridges. Why, if you'd gone and arranged all the particulars, I don't believe you could a had it hit us at a better time. It's just great, that's what."

"And the cream is on you, Bumpus."

"Shucks! who cares for that? Why, a little while ago I'd given all the spending money I expect to get as my share of the rewards for returnin' those lost bank papers, for just one little penny box of matches. Why, I'll be only too happy to treat the whole crowd six times over, after this. There, my bird's done, Giraffe." 195

"Same here; and now how are we agoin' to cook 'em?" the other scout remarked.

Bumpus looked at him rather blankly.

"That's so," he observed, "we ain't got a sign of a frying-pan, have we?"

"But there must be a way of cooking 'em by keeping the birds close to the fire. All old hunters cook their game that way. And don't you remember, Bumpus, Thad and Step Hen took sticks, and stuck 'em in the ground, with chunks of venison on the other end. Step said it was just prime. Well, what's to hinder our trying that same old game?"

"But the partridges are too big and heavy; they won't ever cook through?" objected the fat scout, doubtfully.

"All right; I guess now we can manage to slice the same in half," Giraffe continued, hopefully. "I've done the job for my folks at home, more'n a few times, when they wanted to broil a Spring chicken for some sick person. We'll have our game broiled, Bumpus, see?"

"Sure we will; and while you're about it, with that big-bladed knife of yours, Giraffe, give mine a rip down the back, so I c'n split it open. It's easy to see you know how. Thad and Allan ain't got so very much on you, when it comes to doin' things." 196

By this artful flattery did Bumpus manage to get his bird divided. He spread it out carefully, and then started a hunt for the long sticks, by means of which the bird was to be held in a proper position before the hot fire.

After considerable waste of energy, they finally managed, after a fashion, to get the birds placed so that they received a fair portion of the heat that came out of the fire. Several times the sticks either broke, or else failed to hold properly, so that the game fell into the ashes, to be hastily rescued, and wiped off before again being put over the fire.

The minutes dragged, and to the hungry scouts it seemed as though the two partridges had tantalized them long enough. They gave forth an odor that was positively appetizing; and finally Giraffe just could not stand it another minute.

"Say, they must be done by now," he remarked, eying his bird ravenously.

"They look pretty brown," remarked Bumpus, "though that may come from the scorching they got each time they dipped in the red-hot ashes. But I feel just like you do, Giraffe; and if you say the word, it's a go." 197

At that the tall scout started to savagely tear at one-half of his bird; and not to be outdone the other boy copied his example. Perhaps at home they would have complained long and loudly because the cook had sent food to the table only half done; but then circumstances alter cases; and sitting there by their lonely camp-fire under the pines and hemlocks, those two boys munched away, and nodded toward each other in a suggestive way, that told how much they were enjoying it.

What if the meat was far from being well cooked, did not those who knew say that game should never be browned; and as for the gray ash that still clung to the outside of each bird, why, the wood was sweet and clean that it came from; and every fellow has to eat his peck of dirt sometime or other, they understood.

And so they kept persistently at it until nothing but the bones remained of the two partridges; and each boy was sighing because, like Alexander of old, there were no more worlds to conquer.

"That was just prime!" declared Bumpus; "and to think that I shot the dandy birds too; so you owe your fine supper to me, Giraffe."

"I do, eh?" chuckled the other. "How about the fire, tell me that? How'd them same birds tasted raw? You wouldn't have liked 'em as much, I reckon. So, you see, after all, Bumpus, honors are about even; you supplied the game, and I fixed up the fire. Better call it a drawn battle, and end it."

"All right, just as you say; but the only trouble I can see is they wasn't near big enough to fit in with my capacity. There's a vacuum still under my belt; even if I don't feel faint any longer."

"Oh! I guess we can hold out now till morning," said Giraffe. "Then we'll take our bearings again, and make another start for the camp. And p'raps some of them might just be out looking for us right now; and seeing this bright fire, they'll head this way. So we'll act like we're havin' the time of our lives; and don't you ever go and let on that we felt scared even a little bit, hear now?"

Bumpus, having a little pride of his own, readily promised. Besides, now that they had partaken of a very good supper, and had that bright and cheery fire to keep them company during the remainder of the cold night, things looked vastly different; so that it was hard to believe he had ever shivered and groaned as he contemplated their forlorn condition.

They sat there, talking about various things, for quite a little time. Once or twice Bumpus fancied he heard some sort of sound in the woods that caused him to send a quick glance toward where he had laid his "trusty Marlin" down; but then, as Giraffe did not seem to pay any attention to the noise, he soon forgot it.

But there came a time when both of them plainly heard a cough.

Giraffe grinned, and nodded his head.

"The boys are comin' all right," he said, as if pleased; "just like I said they'd be apt to do. Now, just sit where you are, Bumpus, and make out to be as happy as a king. We'll make 'em believe we're quite at home at this sort of thing; and the only thing we're sorry for is that we can't offer 'em a nice hot bird apiece. Look pleasant, now."

Presently they caught what sounded like the low murmur of voices, and they seemed to be approaching too. It did not occur to the two scouts that the parties were coming from a direction opposite to the camp where their chums had been left; partly because they had not the remotest idea where that same camp lay.

Now they could hear the swishing of bushes, as though the newcomers were not very particular about how they walked. Then it must be Step Hen or Davy Jones who made all the noise, because they were greenhorns, and did not know how to walk noiselessly.

"I c'n see 'em comin'," remarked Bumpus, who happened to be sitting in a position that allowed of his using his eyes.

"Remember, now, what I told you; just be feelin' as fine as silk, as if this camp business was an old story with us," and to further the deception Giraffe started to stretch his arms, and yawn at a tremendous rate.

Bumpus did not answer; and thinking this a little strange the tall scout turned his eyes that way. He discovered that Bumpus was staring as though his eyes would almost pop out of his head. That, of course, made Giraffe twist his long neck half way around, so that he might share in what had aroused his companion to such a state of excitement.

And Giraffe also experienced a decided thrill when he saw two men come half staggering into camp, who from their looks he knew must be Si Kedge and Ed Harkness, the rough and lawless game poachers and bullies of the pine woods.

CHAPTER XXII.

"BE PREPARED!"

The two poachers were undoubtedly partly under the influence of liquor; for the boys could see

that they did not walk as straight as they should have done. Besides, their eyes looked red, and there were other evidences of drunkenness, familiar to Giraffe and Bumpus, who had often seen drunken men.

This made the situation the more critical, because in this condition men often do things that they might hesitate to attempt if not under the influence of strong drink.

They halted not far from the fire, and looked at the two scouts sitting there.

"On'y two boys arter all, Si," remarked the one they supposed was Ed Harkness, as he swayed slightly to and fro, while coming to a halt. "I guessed as haow yuh must a be'n mistook w'en yuh said it mout be ther hull outfit. Les sit down, Si, an' make us tuh hum."

Fitting the action with his words he dropped on the ground, and held out a pair of red and trembling hands to the fire. His companion still stood there, glaring at the two boys, just as though they had done something to offend him. Plainly Si Kedge was something of a pine wood's bully; and he thought it good policy to cow Giraffe and Bumpus right at the start, so as to take the spirit out of them.

Indeed, Bumpus looked so white and frightened that it encouraged the man to follow up his half-conceived idea.

"Say, whaz yuh doin' here? Where's the rest o' the bunch? Know me? I'm Si Kedge, an' I'm a bad man to rile; so don't get gay now. Got anythin' to eat 'raound here?"

Bumpus cast a quick, apprehensive glance toward his companion. His one prevailing idea just then was that they ought to get up, and skip out as lively as they could, leaving their nice fire for the two rough woodmen to enjoy. As far as he could see, neither of the men seemed to possess any firearm; at least they certainly did not carry guns, as might be expected.

But Bumpus saw something in the face of his chum that told him Giraffe was not thinking of giving up that hard earned fire. He had worked too long to get it, to desert the comfortable camp, just because two half drunken fellows chanced to wander that way.

Bumpus saw more than that. Giraffe had his big old rifle across his knees. He must have reached out his hand and secured it, while his chum was still staring at the unpleasant couple who had invaded their camp.

That gave the fat boy an idea, following which he too reached for his gun, though not making any show of it, for fear of arousing a storm.

"We've been hunting, and got twisted in our bearings; so we thought it best to go into camp," Giraffe started to say, trying to keep his voice from wabbling, as it seemed to be trying its best to do. "And as for grub, we haven't got a single bite along with us."

"They lies, Si!" burst out the second man; "'case I kin see a heap o' bones clost ter whar they is settin', like they'd be'n eatin' some game."

"We have," replied Giraffe; "we knocked over a couple of birds, but they wasn't half enough to satisfy us."

"Huh! got any licker?" went on Si, still eying the boys steadily with that half threat in his bloodshot eyes, that Giraffe knew meant trouble, sooner or later, so that he almost instinctively allowed his thumb to draw back the hammer of his big bore rifle.

"We never use it; and on that account don't carry a drop along with us," he answered.

"I guess naow, ther foolin' yuh, Si!" broke in the fellow who was sitting down. "And looky thar, d'ye see they gut guns? Them's w'at we needs ther wust kind, sense Cale Martin took ours away, w'en he sez as haow we're that drunk we'd git inter trouble with 'em. Bring me thet double-barrel. Allers did say as haow I'd like tuh own a scattergun, tuh use on pa'tridge. D'ye hear me?"

Bumpus looked to Giraffe. He was unable to grapple with the situation himself; but perfectly willing to do whatever his chum directed. Had the tall boy told him to step over, and present the poacher with his nice new Marlin ten-bore, Bumpus no doubt would have done it without a murmur.

"Get the hammers raised," was what Giraffe said instead.

"Gee! are you agoin' to fight?" muttered Bumpus; but obeying instantly.

The poacher who had made the demand made a move as though half tempted to get up and enforce his words; but seemed to think better of it.

"I'll step over, an' tackle yuh arter I got my hands warm, see ef I don't," he remarked.

Bumpus breathed again, for he had thought that the crisis was upon them. He saw that Si Kedge had also stepped closer to the fire, and thrust out his hands, as if not averse to taking some of the cold tingle out of them by the application of warmth.

"What we goin' to do, Giraffe?" whispered Bumpus.

"Stand up for our rights, that's what," replied the other, in about the same style of voice. "They ain't going to chase me out of this camp, not if I know it."

"But they're ugly, and mean to give us trouble," urged the alarmed Bumpus.

"You mean they think they are," returned Giraffe, grinding his teeth, as if by that method he

could infuse his soul with more of the fighting spirit that was required to grapple with the situation. "When they start to making a rough house here somebody's liable to get hurt. And as we hold guns, and they ain't got any, you c'n easy see who it's apt to be."

"All right, Giraffe; tell me what to do, that's all; because you see, I'm that rattled I just can't think for myself."

"Keep as cool as you can, Bumpus, and it'll all come out right. If we can't handle a pair of fellers as unsteady as they are, it'll be some queer."

"But if they keep right along comin' at us?" queried the other, anxiously.

"Then shoot!" replied Giraffe, savagely, between his teeth.

"Right at 'em?" gasped the shorter scout.

"Oh! aim at their legs, like I'll do," returned Giraffe. "We'd hadn't ought to do anything worse than that. But mark me, Bumpus, when they see we mean business, they won't dare come far."

Giraffe was still very white, but his eyes shone with resolution. He had made up his mind just how he ought to act under the circumstances; and being exceedingly stubborn by nature it would require something little short of an earthquake to make him change now.

Meanwhile the two men had been muttering between themselves on the other side of the fire. What they were talking about the boys did not know; but doubtless it must have had something to do with the nice guns which they expected were so soon to fall into their possession; for neither of them could imagine that these two city boys, as they deemed the scouts, would dare defy them, once they ordered them to lay the guns on the ground.

"Be ready!" whispered Giraffe again, and thus unconsciously repeating the motto of the organization to which both of them belonged, for preparedness is the cardinal virtue in every Boy Scout.

The two poachers had evidently managed to map out some scheme by means of which they expected to overawe the lads, and secure everything they chanced to have about them, which was worth taking.

Bumpus could see that they were about to get upon their feet, and this must mean they intended to force conclusions. He shot one last look at Giraffe, to imbibe some artificial courage, if such a thing were possible; and he saw that while the thin face of his chum looked ghastly white, it at the same time showed a pair of set jaws, and back of it gleaming eyes that told of a resolute spirit. And somehow the very realization that Giraffe could be brave gave the fat scout the consolation he sought.

He had followed out the injunction of the other, and both hammers of his Marlin ducking gun were drawn back, while his forefinger toyed with the trigger of the right barrel.

Yes, the two men were about to start trouble, for already had the one they knew to be Si Kedge gained his feet, as he seemed a little more spry than his partner in wickedness.

Bumpus saw that he was starting to go around the fire in such a way that it must be Giraffe who would have to look after him; while the second scoundrel, Ed Harkness, fell to his lot.

He elevated his gun a little, so that he could throw it to his shoulder in the wink of an eyelid, if necessary. Then he waited for the turn of events.

"We're acomin' 'raound tuh see yuh, kids," called out Si Kedge, in a thick and meant to be threatening tone; "an' see tuh it yuh don't give us any trouble; er it'll be the wuss fur ye. Stand up, an' make us a present o' them fine traps yer holdin'. It ain't right thet boys shud be kerryin' guns, w'ile men goes without. Go on, Ed; what yuh standin' back fur?"

Ed knew. He did not like the way that double-barreled gun was aiming in his direction. The two boys had hastily climbed to their feet at the proper instant; and both of them were now standing there, presenting their guns, but not in the fashion Si had intended when he gave the order, for they were "muzzle to the front."

"Just stand where you are, both of you!" said Giraffe, in a low but threatening voice. "I've got a bead on you, Si Kedge, and if you want to see how well I can shoot this big-bore gun, just take two more steps forward. Bumpus, got that other coward covered, have you?"

"You're right, I have!" sang out the fat scout, trying to appear as bold as if the whole thing might be only a little comedy that he was enjoying immensely; when, to tell the honest truth, Bumpus could feel his fat knees striking each other just like he had seen the telegraph operator pound the key of his instrument; but if his gun wobbled, the fact was hardly apparent to the man he was trying to keep covered.

It was certainly a fine tableau, that would often come back to the memories of those two lads in future days. But while they seemed to be holding the fort, so to speak, Giraffe knew only too well that they were up against two desperate characters, and that if they slipped just one cog, it might have a different ending than the one they wished to see.

What to do with the two men, now that they had thrown down the gage of battle, and virtually made them prisoner, was a puzzle that Giraffe had to solve. But his success thus far gave him courage to go at the new difficulty with resolution. And Bumpus, content to bask in the glory of his chum's more aggressive nature, gave promise of proving himself a good scout, obedient to the one in authority over him and capable of doing his little part in the game.

CHAPTER XXIII. CAPTURING THE GAME POACHERS.

"Don't yuh shoot, younker!" called out Si Kedge, when, on advancing just one more step, he found himself confronted by the rifle held by Giraffe, who had his cheek laid down on the stock, as though he were taking aim.

"I won't, if you do just what I tell you!" said the scout, growing bolder when he saw that a sudden spasm of alarm had taken possession of the poacher, as he realized the conditions confronting him.

"Wat yuh want us tuh do?" asked Si.

"Throw up your hands, in the first place, and be quick about it!" commanded the scout, thinking that was the proper thing to demand; because, in every account he had ever read of such events, the one who held the gun always gave that order.

Si Kedge did as he was told, but only after a vast amount of hard language.

"You too!" Bumpus managed to call out; for since his comrade had shown the way, he did not find it quite so difficult to follow.

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"Ther up, doan't yuh see, ez far ez I kin git 'em!" complained Ed Harkness; and then seeing the fat boy elevating his gun, he made out to duck, under the evident impression that Bumpus might be tempted to pull trigger, and fill him full of bird shot. "Keep thet gun daown thar, kid; I don't like ther way yuh handles ther same. Yuh got us fur keeps; an' we ain't squealin', is we, Si?"

Giraffe thought fast. If they allowed these two men to go free, the chances were they would hang around, and try to give them all the trouble they could during the night that was now well upon them. And the idea of letting them remain there by the fire without being put under bonds, never occurred to the boy. He knew neither of them could be trusted further than they could be seen; that was stamped on their ugly faces, and the shifty look in their evil eyes.

There was really only one thing to do, and that was to make them prisoners. Once that had been accomplished, at least they might pass a peaceful night; and then in the morning, if the humor seized them, it would be just as easy to let the men go as to keep them.

But how on earth were they to tie the two men up? It looked like a hard proposition, and Giraffe had to cudgel his brains with considerable gusto before he was able to produce any result. But it dawned upon him finally that if the men were compelled to lie flat on their faces on the ground, and place their hands behind them, Bumpus might straddle each in turn, and fasten their wrists, while he, Giraffe threatened with the guns.

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"Listen to me," he said, with the air of a commander giving his final orders on the field of battle; "Both of you have got to lie down on your faces, and put your hands behind your back; do you understand?"

"Be yuh agoin' tuh tie us up?" asked Si, his face as black as a thundercloud.

"Just that, and nothing more," replied Giraffe, resolutely. "You think that because we're only two boys that we'll stand for a heap; but that's where you're away off your base. Get busy now, and down on your marrowbones, both of you!"

"Air yuh agoin' tuh let us go free in the mornin'?" asked Ed Harkness, already on his knees, for he wished to placate that uneasy fat boy, who kept raising his gun again and again, as though anxious to press the trigger just a little harder all the time.

"If you don't give us any trouble, we might; because so far as we're concerned we're not up here to help the game warden arrest you fellows. Lie down now, or else we'll have to help you!"

This was a ferocious threat for Giraffe to make; and doubtless he would have been exceedingly loth to put it into operation; but then the case was a desperate one, and required a remedy of like nature.

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Even such a fire-eater as Si Kedge "threw up the sponge," as Bumpus put it, and knuckled down to the half grown tyrant. Perhaps he realized that in his half boozy condition he was in no shape to grapple with the dilemma by which he and his companion found themselves faced. What with their hands tied by the fact of their guns having been taken by Cale Martin, they were perfectly helpless. And two firearms held in the hands of a couple of determined boys can be just as dangerous as if grown men had them.

So, still uttering more or less protestations, coupled with hard language, both Si and Ed sprawled out flat on their faces.

"Now, Bumpus, it's going to be your job to secure them both, while I cover you with the guns; and if either of them tries any funny business, he'll wish he hadn't right speedy, believe me," said Giraffe, loud enough for the others to hear, for he wished them to wholly understand the situation.

Bumpus placed his shotgun close to the feet of his chum. Then he looked blankly around.

"That's easy to say, Giraffe," he remarked in a stage whisper; "I'm willing enough to do it, tell you that; but where in Sam Hill am I agoin' to get the rope? We didn't bring any with us, you know; though I'm resolved never to go off again without a whole clothes line along. How c'n a feller tie 'em up when he ain't got even a top string with him?"

If Bumpus thought to get his chum in a corner with that question, he figured too soon, for the other had discounted it already.

"Here, take this," he said, throwing his red bandana handkerchief on the ground; "and I reckon you've got the mate to it in your pocket. Use one to wrap around the wrists of each feller. And see to it that you tie it in half a dozen of the hardest knots you know how. Understand, Bumpus?"

"That's right, and I c'n do it too. You watch me."

As the fat boy spoke he picked up the large bandana handkerchief, and stepped gingerly forward, Giraffe accompanying him part way. Evidently Bumpus had recovered somewhat from his fright. Possibly this new boldness sprang from confidence in the ability of his comrade to handle the situation.

At any rate, he threw a leg over the prostrate figure of Ed Harkness, and seizing both his wrists, jerked them together. The man might have raised some protest, or even attempted to show resistance; but once that plump form of Bumpus came down on him he had the breath partly pressed out of his body, and must have experienced a sudden weakness.

At any rate, he lay still, while the other wound the crude rope around his wrists, and knotted it good and hard.

"Fine!" declared Giraffe, who had been watching the operation with one eye, all the while he kept the other on Si Kedge; "now take your own handkerchief, and use it on Si. And put in three extra knots, Bumpus, because he's that much more a slick one than the other feller. Lie still, now, I warn you, Si; we ain't going to stand for any fooling, I tell you!"

Si also relapsed into silence as soon as Bumpus dropped on his back; he was pinned to the ground almost as effectually as though secured there by ropes.

Bumpus finished his part of the job, and arose, perspiring, but triumphant.

"She's done, Giraffe, and as good as I know how," he said, exultantly. "I just warrant you that neither of them game stealers is agoin' to break loose in a hurry now. What's next on the little programme? This is sure turning out to be a warm night for us, Giraffe. Tell me, won't the fellers stare when we walk into camp drivin' these jail birds before us? Oh! my! Oh! me, I can see Davy and Step Hen give us the royal salute. And I'll whistle 'Lo, the Conquering Heroes Come,' see if I don't."

"Well, we ain't in camp yet awhile," retorted Giraffe; "and give me a hand to assist old Si here over to that there tree. We c'n lean him up against the trunk, so he can keep warm, and look around him. Then Ed, he might have a place against this other pine, here. But Bumpus, there ain't going to be any sleep much for us this blessed night, with two toughs to watch like these fellers."

Bumpus sighed, for he was very tired after a whole day's tramp.

"I suppose not, Giraffe;" he remarked, but stiffening up to add; "you'll find me ready to back you up in anything you start goin'. I'm game for it, I reckon; and if you see me agoin' to sleep in spite of everything, why, Giraffe, just give me a kick or a punch in the ribs. I want to do my duty every time."

"Good for you, Bumpus; I ain't goin' to make fun of you any more, because of your size. Even fat fellers c'n come in mighty handy sometimes, especially when you've got a game poacher to hold down."

They managed to get the two men against the trees, and as they still had their legs free this was not so difficult a task. Then the watch began. Giraffe kept his gun close to his hand. He spoke to his chum occasionally, more to see if Bumpus were awake, than because of any desire to engage in conversation.

The two men mumbled for a while, but finally their heads dropped on their chest and they seemed to slumber, though Giraffe was suspicious, and would never slacken in his watchfulness on this account.

He had made up his mind, however, that if Bumpus did fall asleep, he would not arouse him, when there was no necessity for more than one guard at a time.

An hour passed thus. Then Bumpus, who was just losing himself, in spite of his determination to remain on duty, felt his chum give him a shake.

"Oh! I'm awake, all right, Giraffe; no need to scare me that way!" grumbled the fat scout, stirring himself, and looking around.

"They're coming, just like I said," said Giraffe. "Looky over yonder, and you c'n see the lantern; and I reckon now, it's old Eli that's followerin' our trail. But we don't want to be fooled a second time, Bumpus, so get your gun ready for boarders."

"Boarders!" muttered the fat boy; "now I like that, when they ain't a blessed bit of grub in the pantry. Better skip this boarding-house, and go on further. But Giraffe, that sure *is* Eli; I c'n tell the way he swings along from here. Whoever is it with him, d'ye think; why, see, there are two of

'em, and men, not boys of the Silver Fox Patrol?"

Three minutes later, and Old Eli, grinning his pleasure, stalked into camp, to say:

"Huh! glad tuh find ye so well taken keer of, boys. An' so yeou hed a wisit frum Si an' Ed, did yeou; an' wall, what d'ye think o' thet, gents, here's yer birds all triced up, ready tew be transported to jail. This here is the game warden o' this deestrect, boys, lookin' for them critters. Say as heow he don't calkerlate ter bother with Old Cale yet awhile; but hearin' as he's be'n an' contracted with a fox breedin' company, they'll wait an' see heow it pans eout. Kinder guess they will. An' we'll jest stay by this fire till mornin', when we kin start back tew camp. Thad knowed as heow yeou'd come out all right, Giraffe; but he thort along about noon I'd better take up the trail; and I met these gents a few miles back, wonderin' if ther birds had made this here fire, so we stalked it!"

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And Bumpus felt like venting his delight in one long loud yell of thanksgiving as he realized that their troubles were now at an end.

CHAPTER XXIV. TO BEARD THE TIGER IN HIS DEN.

"Sure you can go, Jim; and what's more, I'd like to take the tramp with you, if it's agreeable to you!"

Jim Hasty, the guide, swallowed something in his throat, when he heard Thad say these words, for he was plainly much affected.

He had come in a hesitating way to ask as a favor that, since the scouts were now settled for a few days in camp on the lake shore, could he be spared to make the run through the pine forests to where the well remembered cabin of Old Cale Martin stood, from which he had carried Little Lina away, after her father had positively refused to even hear of their marriage.

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"It's mighty kind o' yeou tew say thet, an' I feel it, I swan," he finally stammered, as he managed to thrust out his brown hand, and take that of the boy which had been so impulsively offered to him.

"Why," Thad went on, heartily, "you know, Jim, I'm as much interested in this matter between you and Cale Martin as can be. And I'm just bound to see you through. I heard what one of those men told you about Cale going off to his cabin, so's to try and keep away from temptation, while Jim Hasty was around the neighborhood. He'd sworn to pin your ears to a tree, and feared that he'd up and do it, if he had the chance. Something better inside Old Cale was a tuggin' away at his hard old heart; and Jim; you and I know what it is."

The short guide nodded his head violently, while his eyes glittered.

"Pore ole dad, he wants tew see his leetle gal ther wust kind, an' it's jest his consarned pride as keeps him frum knucklin' right down, an' ownin' he war wrong. Thet's what I sez in ther fust place. I jest knowed he dassen't raise a hand tew hurt me, as he threatened, 'cause Lina keers fur even ther leetle finger o' my hand; an' she war ther apple o' his eye. An' shore I feels as it's agoin' tew be awl right, ef so be I kin on'y git a few words wid ther ole man, face tew face."

"And you shall, if I can help you out, Jim," declared the boy, with emphasis. "Perhaps some day, I might even see the Little Lina that all this fuss has been about. I'd sure like to, the worst kind. But about when do you think we'd better hike out across country for the Martin cabin, Jim?"

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"I'd like tew start inside o' an hour," returned the other, quickly, as his eye instinctively turned upwards toward the heavens, with the idea of gauging what the weather might have in store for the State of Maine during the next twenty-four hours.

"I see, you're afraid of a heavy snowfall, that would make the going and coming a hard job; is that it, Jim?"

"It shore is, Thad," replied the guide, promptly. "Yew see, it's long past due. The woods is as dry as tinder, and we need a big fall o' snow er rain ther wust kind. D'ye think we mout git away by thet time?"

"I don't see why not," answered the young scoutmaster "I'm feeling in apple pie condition this morning, myself; and you're just wild to make the venture. So we'll call it a go in an hour, Jim. By that time breakfast will be done with, and the boys have their plans arranged for the day. Eli will take charge with Allan; and there ought to be no trouble. Both Bumpus and Giraffe are too tired after what they went through with the day before yesterday, to want to wander; the game warden is well on his way with his two prisoners; and everything looks just fixed to carry out your little plan."

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"It does thet," returned the other, eagerly. "Seems like things happened jest tew suit me. I calls it 'Little Lina luck,' fur they nigh allers turn thetaways when I'm tryin' tew please her. I worried a heap over them tew critters, Si Kedge an' Ed Harkness; thinkin' thet w'ile I mout convince dad, they was apt tew give me a lot o' trouble. An' see haow they was kerried off tew jail tew clar ther field fur me! Oh! sumpin' tells me hit's goin' tew be awl rite yit."

"Is there anything we ought to take along with us besides our guns, and some grub, enough for several meals, because we won't have any time for hunting?" asked Thad.

"Nawthin' as I knows on; I'm makin' sure to kerry ther life preserver," and as he said these mysterious words, Jim pressed his hand against his breast, where in an inner pocket *something* undoubtedly snuggled unseen; but somehow Thad never once dreamed that the guide could refer to a pocket flask, because he happened to know Jim did not drink.

However, Thad did not bother about trying to fathom Jim's little secret. He fancied that it would all be made plain shortly; certainly when they happened upon the stern old man who was day after day cheating himself out of happiness, by refusing to let bygones be bygones, and accept things as they were.

Of course the balance of the Silver Fox Patrol showed great interest when they heard what was the plan. Thad could read a trace of disappointment on more faces than one when he announced that he meant to go alone with Jim. A larger detachment would do more harm than good, since Old Cale might be angry at having his solitude invaded by a party that Jim was piloting through the piney woods. And besides, Allan was needed to take charge of the camp while the leader was away, Step Hen had had his outing in the company of Thad, himself; Bumpus and Giraffe were fairly saturated with adventure, and still feeling the effects of their experience; while Davy was needed in camp, and complaining of a lame foot besides.

So within the hour that had been set for the start, Thad and Jim left camp, with many hearty wishes for their success.

"Be sure and tell us all about it when you get back!" called Bumpus; for some of the boys scented a little romance back of Jim's queer actions, and knew more or less about his relations with the giant father of his little wife.

"And look sharp for forest fires, because, seems to me I smelled smoke in the air a little while ago!" were the last words from Allan, who, being a Maine boy, knew what such a thing meant.

Thad glanced sharply at Jim.

"Do you imagine we'll stack up against anything like that, Jim?" he asked.

"Thet's hard tew say," replied the guide. "At this time o' year, an' with ther woods as dry as they be, anything is possible, I'd say. I don't smell smoke right naow, but then ther wind mout a changed sense Allan sez he did."

"Well, I hardly know whether I want to run up against a real woods' fire, or not," Thad declared. "Of course, I've always wanted to see what one looked like, because I've heard so much about them; we're on a new test now, for the Silver Fox Patrol; being assistant fire wardens of the state of Maine; and as such none of us should wish a fire to occur. So I'll just forget all about it. If one happens to come along, I guess there's no harm in my looking at it."

Jim laughed at this quaint philosophy.

"I jest reckons naow, yeou'll be doin' a heap more'n jest lookin' at hit," he took occasion to remark, with a sage shake of his head.

Thad laughed outright.

"I can guess what you mean, Jim," he remarked. "You think that about that time the fire will take to chasing after me, and I'll have all I want to do in skipping out. Well, let's forget all about that, now, and talk of something else. For one thing, this is a splendid crisp fall morning. I saw pretty good ice on the edge of the lake. And say, I'd like to be up here a month or two from now. I warrant you there's some mighty fine skating on that sheet of water."

"Thet they be, sumtimes," replied the other, with a nod. "I've seen hit jest as slick as a big pane o' glass fur miles an' miles. With ther wind ablowin' great guns I've jest opened my coat, an' been blown like a thistle-down from one end tew t'other, in less time than yew cud think. My dad, which is long gone, onct had an adventure with a pack o' wolves on thet same smooth ice, I kin remember him tellin' 'bout."

"I'd like to hear it, Jim," said the scout, eagerly.

"Wall, I'm a pore hand at tellin' a story," the guide admitted. "Seems like he war askatin' home, arter killin' a deer, an' hed sum o' ther meat on his back, when ther wolves took arter him. They chased him right fast, and ther on'y way dad he cud 'scape ther fangs war by making a sharp turn every time they gut too clost. Yer see ther critters cudn't swerve fast enuff, an'd slide a long ways on ther ice 'cause it war so smooth. An' in that way he kept goin' till he gut nigh home; when sum o' ther neighbors, they kim out, an' knocked spots outen ther wolves."

"Whew! I can just imagine it," declared Thad, "and I wager, now, it must have been some exciting while it lasted."

Chatting in this way they tramped on through the pine woods, heading in a direct line for the distant cabin of Cale Martin, whose wife had long since been dead, so that with Little Lina also gone, the old woodsman had lived alone for more than a year, always nursing his grievance against Jim Hasty.

When noon came, and they stopped a little while to refresh themselves with some of the food carried along in Thad's haversack, Jim announced that they must be more than half way to their destination.

Thad looked into the face of the guide frequently, wondering if Jim's heart was beginning to fail him the closer he drew to the implacable giant who had uttered such ferocious threats against his new son-in-law; but the only thing he did notice was a smile of supreme confidence whenever Jim happened to put up his hand to touch the breast of his coat, about the place where an inner pocket would be. And from this Thad understood that the other had the fullest confidence that the message he was bearing to Lina's father, the olive branch he meant to extend to Old Cale, was sure to work as she had intended it should.

It was about an hour and more, possibly two, after the noon halt, that Thad saw Jim come to a stop, and start to sniff the air suspiciously.

"What it it, Jim?" he asked, though he could give a pretty good guess even before the woods' pilot uttered a word.

"I smells smoke, sure enuff, naow," replied Jim.

"Then the wind's changed, hasn't it?" inquired Thad, bristling up, as a vision of more or less excitement to vary the monotony of this rather dreary tramp through the piney forest flashed before his mind.

"It sure hes, Thad; and I kinder guess afore a great while yeou might be havin' thet wish o' yeourn kim true; 'cause ther's a fire sumwhar not far away right naow; which, with ther change o' wind, is liable tew sweep daown on us like a whirlwind. Mebbe so be yeou mout see more'n yeou bargained fur, Thad!"

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CHAPTER XXV. CAUGHT IN THE FOREST FIRE.

"What's to be done about it, Jim?" demanded the scoutmaster.

"Nawthin' as I kin see," came the guide's philosophical reply. "We hain't knowin' which way ther ole wind'll turn next, so it's as safe fur us tew keep right along like we was aheadin', as tew turn back fur camp."

"Then let's go on; an' perhaps after all, the fire'll give us the go-by," and as he said this Thad put his best foot forward.

"Anyway," Jim pursued, presently, "we cudn't know haow tew shape our plans till we cotched sight o' ther fire, an' knowed jest what she be. By naow p'raps ther hull woods ahind us mout be aflame; so by turnin' back, we'd jest be puttin' aour noses tew ther grindstone."

They walked on a little faster than before. The talk was of course all about forest fires now, since it began to seem likely that Thad was about to witness the first real big one of his experience.

Thad had a way of asking leading questions, and Jim was no way averse to giving all the information in his power; so that before long the Boy Scout had learned a great many interesting facts connected with these terrors of the piney woods, by means of which thousands of acres of valuable timber used to be wiped out of existence every year, and often many lives lost as well.

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Things are not the same as they used to be. The State of Maine has a well equipped fire warden department; and during the fall season when the danger is greatest, extreme care is taken to call out these seasoned fire-fighters whenever their services are needed. Besides, every licensed guide is expected to work in conjunction with the authorities in seeing that no party which he pilots into the woods becomes reckless about leaving fires burning after breaking camp.

When another half hour had passed Thad could no longer doubt that there was a fire burning somewhere not far away, and that they were now much closer than before to the scene of the conflagration.

The smoke had become a thing that could be easily seen as well as smelled, and felt in the way of burning eyes and tickled nostrils.

Jim was on the alert. Well did he know that it was no child's play, matching one's wits against a forest fire that was apt to encircle the unwary woodsman, and cut off his retreat, finally roasting him in a trap.

"Do you think it's already swept down on the Martin cabin?" Thad asked, somewhat anxiously.

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"Thet I kain't tell," replied Jim, as he looked up at the smoke that was sweeping above the tops of the tallest pines. "Time was when it wudn't amattered any, 'cause yer see, Dad Martin, he kept a good clearin' all 'raound his shack; but I guess as haow he's been an' neglected it sense I took Lina away, an' it's all growed up with brush, thet'd burn like tinder."

"How far away are we now from the cabin?" continued Thad, presently.

"It mout be a matter o' two mile er so," grunted Jim; for they were pushing on at a lively pace, and there was not much breath to waste in long sentences.

"That smoke keeps on getting heavier all the while," remarked Thad.

"She dew thet," admitted Jim.

"And my stars, how it stings a fellow's eyes," continued the scoutmaster, who from time to time felt the tears running down his cheeks.

Jim shook his head as he answered:

"'Tain't a circumstance tew what we'll run up against right soon, ef things keeps on a gettin' wusser all ther while."

"Look! there goes a moose, upon my word; and he's making tracks as if he didn't fear human beings one half as much as he did that crackling fire he left behind!" Thad cried out, about five minutes later.

Shortly afterwards he discovered a huge lumbering animal rushing through the woods to one side of them.

"Why, isn't that a black bear, Jim?" he asked, pointing as he spoke.

"It sure is," replied the guide, grinning; "an' 'baout as skeered a black as ye cud see in a week o' Sundays. Like as not he smelled ther smoke while he was boxed up in sum holler tree, whar he 'spected tew stay till Spring kim along. But say, he knowed what'd happen tew him; an' forgettin' as haow he orter be sleepin' ther winter aout, alivin' on his fat, he jest climbs aout, an' scoots fur sum hole in ther ground he knows is awaitin' fur him. He'll git thar, awl rite, too; 'cause I never seed a bar cort in a forest fire, an' burned tew a crisp."

"The deer can easily escape, I suppose, being so fleet of foot?" Thad went on.

"Gin'rally speakin' they kin," Jim replied; "an' thar goes wun rite naow. Look at ther way he jumps over that fallen tree like it was nawthin'. Ef yeou an' me hed ther gift o' leapin' like thet, Thad, we cud larf at forest fires tew."

They lapsed into silence again. The smoke began to enter their lungs when they talked too much, and half choked them. It was getting darker, Thad saw; and looking up, he realized that clouds had covered the heavens; though at first he rather fancied this might be another strata of smoke further up.

"Oh! if that snow-storm Jim believes is due would only hurry, and come along," he was saying to himself, "it might do some good in putting out this fire. While I'd like right well to see what it all looks like, still, as a fire warden, I ought to want it to be smothered as quick as possible. And between the two why, I'll just have to take what comes, and be thankful it's no worse."

Then he thought of the other scouts. Were any of them in danger from the fire? He did not believe this could be the case, for, so far as he knew, there had been no plan on foot for a hunt that day, the boys being satisfied to hang around camp, and do things they had in mind.

And as they were right on the edge of the lake, if the worst came, and fire happened to sweep down upon them, the tents could be thrown into the canoes, and all hands put out upon the surface of the lake where they would be safe.

So Thad, as the one in charge of the patrol in the absence of Dr. Philander Hobbs, the regular authorized scoutmaster, made up his mind that he need not worry about his chums any more. Indeed, as the situation grew worse and worse around himself and Jim, it began to look as though he had need of all his anxiety in connection with his own condition.

Of course he relied entirely on Jim. The guide had had long experience with the fires in the pines. He had served as one of the fire wardens, and so long as he was in charge of the expedition there was no need of Thad trying to figure out any plan of campaign. Had he been alone, or with some of his companions, Thad would have striven to meet the necessities of the situation manfully, and done all in his power to outwit the flames. Now he was in Jim's charge, and depended on the astute Maine guide to pilot him through.

"I can hear the flames roaring, I think, Jim!" the scout remarked, presently.

"Thet's rite," returned the other; and from his manner Thad knew Jim had known of the circumstance longer than he dreamed possible.

"It lies over there on our right, don't it?" Thad persisted in asking.

"Yep," the guide answered, shortly.

Gauging the direction of the wind, Thad saw that they would in a measure be running a race with the fire, to see which could get to the cabin of Old Cale first. He knew Jim was figuring things out closely. A mistake in calculations might cost them dear. Even a change in wind, which was liable to occur at any time now, would bring them face to face with new difficulties, and make them grapple with problems of a serious character.

Thad asked no more questions, for he saw that Jim did not want to have his mind distracted from his duty. He would do the right thing, of that the boy felt assured.

One thing was plain enough, and this seemed apt to have more or less bearing on the final outcome of their race to the cabin.

The wind was gradually increasing in force all the while. It had been gentle at first, but was now blowing at the rate of ten miles an hour, and Thad could notice how rapidly even this was changing.

Should it reach hurricane force ere long, the fire must be driven ahead at a speed that would be simply frightful. Thad already began to experience some of the thrill he had been told was

connected with one of these woods' fires; even though as yet he had to see the first flash of flame. What must it be when surrounded on all sides by the leaping tongues that, they said, looked like great red snakes coiling up the pine trees, licking the resinous foliage with greedy breath, so that it seemed as though the whole world must be ablaze?

Well, the boy had wanted to look upon just such a sight, so that he could say he had been caught in a forest fire; and from the way things were turning out, his wish was in a fair way to be gratified.

They must surely have come about a mile since he last asked Jim how far away the cabin might be; that would indicate half of the distance had been passed over. He wondered why Jim did not start running, so as to beat the fire, that was apparently aiming for the same place; but on second thought Thad believed he could guess the reason for this. Jim was saving their wind for an emergency. If that came upon them, they might have to change their own course, and head for the pond Jim had spoken of as offering a fair haven of refuge in a case of this kind.

The roaring sound had grown more audible. It sounded now very much like a freight train on the railroad, Thad thought; and drawing closer all the while! This would seem to indicate that the fire was catching up with them, and shortening the gap between at the same time.

Thad began to cast curious glances in the direction of the ominous sound; nor could it be said that anxiety was not unmixed with his other feelings. He was but a boy, after all; and even by now the dark masses of smoke that were sweeping over the pine tops, as well as the other indications of a great conflagration around him, had begun to affect Thad.

And as they pushed along it chanced that they came to a little break in the wall of pines that rose around them. For the first time the Boy Scout saw, when he turned his head toward the right, and the rear, something that seemed to leap madly upwards, as though endeavoring to lick the overhanging clouds.

There was no need of Thad to ask the guide what that was, for he knew only too well. Those leaping, tossing billows were flames; and they sealed the death warrant of many a noble pine that for years and years had seen the lovely summer come and go, to give place to the furious gales of the Maine winter season.

And Thad Brewster experienced a real genuine thrill, that might be tinged with alarm, as he viewed this fiery panorama over the tops of the trees.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRUSTING TO THE WOODS' PILOT.

It was by this time getting about as exciting as anything Thad had ever dreamed of. The noise made by the sweeping flames began to din in his ears as he had never expected to hear the roar of fire.

Still, he noticed that Jim had not changed his course much. Plainly then, he was heading for the cabin of Cale Martin, and had not yet given up hopes of being able to make it.

Only for the intense desire of the guide to please his Lina, doubtless he would ere now have changed his flight, and headed for that pond, where they could be certain of finding security. Thad only hoped Jim would not be tempted to take too many chances, in his endeavor to accomplish the reconciliation.

So the boy began to strain his eyes, looking ahead, hoping that any minute they would sight the lonely home of the late poacher, who had turned fox farmer.

The fire could now be seen more plainly than ever, and Thad noted how the wind seemed to carry all manner of whirling sparks far ahead, to set the dead pine needles ablaze in turn; so that there was an ever marching procession, as fresh patches of woods fell into the grip of the flames.

Something went squealing past them, almost upsetting Thad.

"Good gracious, wasn't that a pig?" he exclaimed, startled by the sight.

Jim nodded his head, as he replied:

"Cale's pig. Let's 'em hev ther run o' ther woods sumtimes. But he'll never see that porker agin. It'll sure be roasted ter a turn, I guess naow."

"What next, I wonder?" thought Thad, as he heard, rather than saw, several frightened partridges go sweeping past.

All these things served to add a certain element of spice to the situation, although Thad really believed it hardly needed anything to make it seem the most exciting in all his experience.

Well, at any rate, Jim had certainly thought it wise to increase his speed now, so that he was running fairly fast, considering the difficulties that lay in the way of making good time.

When Thad came upon a broken-down rail fence, he knew they must be close in the neighborhood of the cabin; and at the same time he thought that it was well this was the case,

because contact with the fire could not long have been delayed.

A minute later, and he sighted the side of the cabin. As Jim had said, it stood in comparatively open ground; but the brush had grown up again, owing to lack of care when the owner lost interest in the home that no longer knew the presence of Little Lina. 235

A couple of low sheds could also be seen near by; but even to Thad's uneducated eye it was plainly apparent that if the fire worked this way, everything was bound to go. Cale Martin may have escaped by reason of his energy before, on other occasions, but this would wind his place up.

There was no sign of any human being around. Jim seemed to look to the right and to the left with more or less eagerness. Plainly he was disappointed because he did not see the giant poacher somewhere. He hurried over to one of the low sheds, and as Thad followed close after him, he saw that there was an enclosure made of chicken wire, in which several red foxes were running furiously back and forth, as though conscious of their peril, and wild to get out and escape.

"He cain't be here!" Jim called out, for the fire was really so noisy now that it required more or less of an effort to make one's self heard.

"Why not?" asked Thad.

"'Cause he'd never let them foxes stay in thar. Cale, he's human, ef he used ter be a hard case; an' knowin' ther fire'd like as not git 'em if they stayed cooped up, he'd sure broke the wire fence daown so's ter let 'em run."

Saying which Jim deliberately did this himself, tearing up a stake, and in almost the twinkling of an eye making a big hole, through which the four red foxes shot like lightning. The last seen of them, the shrewd little animals were flying away into the woods that as yet had not felt the scorching breath of the fire. 236

"Will they escape, Jim?" asked Thad, unable to repress his desire for knowledge, even while facing such a scene of havoc as this.

"Sure they will," grunted the guide, who was already turning hastily in the direction of the cabin.

The thought struck Thad just then that perhaps something had happened to the big owner of the place. He might be found there, sick, and unable to move hand or foot. In that case a new problem would have to be faced, and a solution worked out.

But no matter what happened, they could not remain here long. The fire was edging around, and working in toward Cale's cabin. In ten minutes, perhaps not so long a time as that, it would have swept over this territory, and gone roaring and leaping into the woods beyond.

Now they were at the door of the cabin. It was shut, and there was no evidence that Cale was within. Jim did not hesitate a second. He knew this was a time for action rather than thinking; and so he immediately started to push open the door.

Fortunately this did not seem to be fastened in any way, so the guide had no trouble to speak of in doing what he desired.

Then Jim rushed inside, and Thad followed closely after him.

One glance around seemed to tell them that the cabin was empty. It was a cheerless looking place, according to the mind of the boy, accustomed as he was to the comforts of a good home in a civilized community. But no doubt it had been "home" to Cale Martin, up to the time the light of it was taken away by young Jim Hasty. 237

The guide pointed to a small photograph that was fastened to the wall. It was not a work of art by any means, and evidently represented the labor of some aspiring village photographer; but as Thad bent hastily over to examine it, in a couple of seconds, he saw that it was the face of a very sweet looking girl.

And he did not need to be told that he was looking on the face of Little Lina, Jim's wife, and the only child of the lonely poacher, Old Cale Martin.

"He isn't here, Jim. What will we do now? Do you have any idea where he's gone?" the boy demanded, in his excitement clutching at the sleeve of the guide's coat.

"I kin give a guess, 'baout it," replied Jim. "Seems like he keeps a litter o' foxes sumwhar off in ther woods; an' chances air the ole man, he's risked his life tew git out thar, an' set 'em free so's they cud 'scape. 'Twud be jest like him tew dew thet same thing."

"Hark! I thought I heard a shout!" exclaimed Thad.

Both of them listened anxiously; Jim even hurrying toward the open door; but before he could reach it, a huge form darkened the opening, and a man came staggering in. 238

Thad knew that he was looking upon Cale Martin, long feared by every man in the pine woods of Northern Maine. But to tell the truth he did not look very formidable now; for his beard was singed, his face blackened, and his clothes smouldering in patches, as though he might have been compelled to run the gauntlet of fire in returning from his self-imposed errand of mercy in connection with the impounded fox whelps.

He stared hard at them as though he could not just believe his senses. Thad saw he was very nearly overcome with the smoke that had entered his lungs, as well as the burns he must have

received. And just then the boy realized something of the real horror of a terrible forest fire. At a distance it might seem a glorious spectacle; but close at hand its dreadful nature was revealed.

Jim knew that this was neither the time nor place to waste a second in trying to enter into explanations. Those could all keep until a more convenient season. Cale Martin was all but played out. He swayed as he stood there, and Thad could see that the wonderful strength that had many years before made him the marvel of the lumbering camps, as Jim had told him, was very nearly utterly exhausted.

And yet so great a hold had his dislike for Jim Hasty taken upon his nature, that at sight of the man in his home he frowned blackly.

"We gotter mosey outen this right smart, Cale," said Jim, boldly. "Keep ther talkin' till we is safe from ther fire. Plenty o' time then tew tell me what yew wants tew say. I kim hyar tew see yew 'cause Lina, she made me. Naow, let's be headin' fur ther pond, 'less we wants tew be roasted an' stewed an' b'iled."

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The giant did not seem inclined to make the first move to save himself; and it burst upon Thad's mind that he was really in some sort of a daze. Perhaps the heat of the fire had affected his head, and he could not gather his wits. He may have headed straight back to the cabin, through the border of the fire, simply because of that intuition which will carry a man, walking in his sleep, past dangers and difficulties.

Jim must have guessed something of the same thing. That would account for his daring to leap forward, and catch hold of Cale's sleeve, though he had to beat out a small conflagration at the same time.

"Help me get him away!"

Jim did not say this, but his look did, as he turned toward Thad; and the boy instantly sprang forward to take hold of Cale's other arm. The giant, strangely enough, did not seem to offer any objection. Perhaps he realized that he was in a bad way, and that if left to his own devices must surely perish there. And life may even have been sweet enough to accept it at the hands of the man whom he believed had so terribly wronged him in stealing away his girl.

The instant they stepped out of the cabin Thad was appalled at the change that had taken place. Surely they could not have been inside for more than three minutes at the most; and yet so rapidly had the smoke and fire headed in toward the cabin of Old Cale that it was a fearful spectacle which burst upon their vision now.

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The crackling of the flames, the crash of falling trees, the howl of the wind,—all these made a combination that was deafening. Added to it was the fierce glow of the fire itself, rising and falling as new patches of woods fell into its never satisfied maw.

Thad began to wonder how it would all end, and whether that wish of his to look on a real forest fire was not going to end in a tragedy. But he shut his teeth hard together, and determined to play his part, as a true scout should.

Jim was still there, and Jim would know what to do. The fire warden of the past had learned many ways of outwitting the red-tongued enemy; and there was hope of escape so long as he could remain on deck.

And so Thad drew in a long breath, half choked as he was, and waited to see what course the woods' pilot would take.

CHAPTER XXVII.

JIM DELIVERS HIS MESSAGE.

241

"Can we make the pond, Jim?" asked Thad.

He knew from what little the guide had said before, that it was a considerable distance to the body of water to which Jim had intended heading; and with the almost exhausted giant on their hands, it did not seem likely they could get there before being overtaken by the flames.

"Not ther big pond," Jim called back; "it's tew late naow fur thet; but they's a littler un 'baout half way. Thet'll hev tew dew fur us, I guess."

Cale seemed able to walk, after being thus supported, and they started off. One thing Thad noticed; and this gave him more or less satisfaction. They were heading now directly away from the fire, and not keeping alongside, as before.

This gave them a new chance to escape, unless that change of wind came, which was liable to occur at any moment.

Hardly had they been moving for a minute than Thad thought he felt something wet fall on his nose. He could hardly believe it, but when a second and a third followed, he became positive.

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"It's raining, Jim!" he shouted, partly because of his new excitement, and also on account of the racket the fire caused.

"The snow storm's gut 'raound et larst," called back Jim; and Thad knew from that the heat of the atmosphere had melted the flakes ere they fell, causing them to turn back into water.

It was all the same though, since both were bitter enemies to fire; and presently the merry war of the elements, that has gone on since the world began, would be in full play.

He wished that it would come down as never before; indeed, it would need to be a record fall, to extinguish those monster flames that were rising like a red wall over the treetops now. But since the woods beyond would be undergoing a gradual soaking, possibly the fire might find it more and more difficult to get a foothold, and finally die out from lack of fuel.

Thad was astonished at the meekness of the giant. Why, he seemed to have lost his grip on things, and let them carry him along just as though he were a big baby. That would seem to indicate he must have been severely hurt while escaping from the burning forest. For aught they knew he may have been struck on the head by a falling limb from a tree, which would account for his dazed condition.

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At any rate, it was fortunate for the entire party that this proved to be so; because any delay at this stage of the game must have proven fatal.

All of them were panting, but it was more from the intense heat than weariness. Thad hoped the pond would show up soon. He was half choked with the smoke, and coughed with nearly every breath. A drink of cool refreshing water, he believed, would make him feel a thousand per cent better.

There could no longer be any doubt about the anticipated change in the wind having taken place; for the fire was certainly coming after them, full tilt. Jim, too, was beginning to cast glances over his shoulder; and when a runner does this Thad knew it was a good sign that he is anxious about something. It may be the presence of a rival sprinter back of him; in this case that racer was the fire.

"Will we make it, Jim?" Thad found himself just forced to ask, in order to relieve the terrible sensation of suspense that gripped him.

"Dead sartin!" came the reassuring reply; "thar she be, right naow!"

And looking ahead Thad saw the sheen of a body of water in the dull glow of the forest fire. It was not a large pond, but would offer them an asylum, where in all possibility they might laugh at the efforts of the fire to get them.

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When they gained the shore Jim kept pushing on until a point had been reached that was opposite to the course over which they had just come. This threw the water of the little pond between them and the source of danger.

Thad drew a long breath of relief as he realized that their race with the flames was over, and safety assured. The giant sank down upon the ground, and scooping up the water in the cup of his hand, drank savagely, showing that he must be almost parched with thirst.

Feeling a little the same way himself, Thad followed suit; and never in all his life had water tasted as refreshing as then. After that, he just stood and watched the terrible panorama that was being gradually unfolded before his eyes; listening to the roar of the devouring element as it seized whole rows of pines in its grip, and enveloped them with a mantle of flames.

Thad was fairly awed by the sight. He had never dreamed it could be so terrible, even when his imagination played at its liveliest clip. He saw the leaping billows toss higher and higher; he watched them play tag with one another; and all the while realized what havoc was being made with that splendid forest. When the fire had passed on, or been finally extinguished by the downpour from above, it would leave blackened and smouldering trunks where just a brief while before the glorious pines stood in all their robes of green.

245

The heat was rather fierce, too, and often they would bend forward to lave their faces in the cooling waters of the pond. Long since had the rim of ice around the edge of the pool vanished, as though by magic; this was on account of the warmth that had taken possession of the atmosphere while the conflagration lasted.

But Thad was satisfied that they were going to escape, for the main body of fire had already gone rushing away before the wind. Only straggling trailers worked in behind the pond, and they were already feeling the effect of the rain that was now falling heavily, though at other places it must have taken the form of snow.

Jim was apparently more or less anxious about Cale. He feared the old man might have received serious injuries that needed attention; and taking advantage of the first opportunity that presented itself, he confided his fears to Thad, knowing full well that the boy was something of a doctor, in his way.

So the scoutmaster sat down beside Cale. He saw that the other was getting back to something like his normal self, now that he had in a measure recovered from the exhaustion resulting from his fight for life with the flames.

"Did you get badly hurt anywhere, in the fire?" Thad asked, trying to put on a professional look, so as to inspire some confidence in the old man.

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The giant for the first time, seemed to wake up. He felt of his head, and winced a little as though it pained him.

"Ther burns they don't amount ter much," he said, in his heavy voice; "but thar be a bad bump on my head as hurts sum."

"Let me look at it," asked the boy. "I've picked up some knowledge of medicine, and perhaps I can do something to make it seem better; if nothing else, cold water may reduce the feverish feeling some."

And Cale allowed him to examine his big head, with its mass of hair that was like a lion's mane in thickness, having been protected from the fire by the skin cap he wore. Perhaps it was the presence of that same cap, as also the shock of hair, that had saved Cale from having a broken skull; he certainly did have a lump there as large as an egg, that must have been very painful; and it was no wonder he had seemed dazed at the time he rushed into his cabin, hardly knowing why he came there, unless he had been laboring under the impression that Little Lina was still waiting to be saved from the fire.

Fortunately Thad happened to be carrying a little bottle of witch hazel in his haversack, which he often found exceedingly useful. This he got out, and after warning the other that it might sting a little at first, he poured some of the extract on the lump; and then wetting a piece of rag with it, he laid this over the wound, Cale's cap holding it in place.

"That's all I can do for you," Thad said. "But it's not a serious thing, and in a few days you'll be all over it. But you must have had a fearful knock. Was it a limb that fell on you?"

"Just what it war, younker," replied Cale; "an' it's a feelin' better some, already."

Thad moved back. He seemed to know that Jim was just itching to have a few words with his father-in-law; and that the opportunity seemed ripe. Besides, Thad was more or less curious to know just what that clinching argument might be, which Jim meant to advance, and which he seemed so positive would bring the determined old man around.

When Jim took his place, Cale gave him one look, and then turned his head away. "I wisht yew wudn't feel like yew does agin me, Dad Martin," Jim started to say.

"Stop right thar!" burst out the other, as his old temper began to sway him again. "I don't want anything ter do wid yer, Jim Hasty. Time was when I vowed ter pin yer ears ter a tree, if ever ye showed up hyar agin; an' I meant it, I shore did. Then sumhow, thinkin' o' that leetle gal, an' how she sot sum store by ye, kinder flabbergasted me, an' I dassent stay around whar ye was, lest I do all I'd threatened, an' it'd break her heart. So I kim hyar ter my lonely home, thet ain't hed a single ray o' sunshine in it sense ye stole her away. But I don't forgit it, Jim Hasty, an' I ain't never agoin' ter forgive ye, er make up. So don't waste yer breath atryin'."

But when Thad saw the grin on Jim's face he knew the guide felt encouraged. His reception had been far less stormy than he had had reason to expect from all he knew of the violent temper of his respected father-in-law. And knowing that Jim was getting ready to spring his surprise, Thad almost held his breath while listening and watching.

"I tole yeou I kim here 'cause she sent me," Jim went on, in a pleading tone. "It grieved her gentle heart all this while 'cause she cudn't see yeou, Dad Martin. She sez as haow it's jest gut tew stop! She wants yeou, and wants yeou bad. An' so be they's another as ort tew see yeou. Here's ther message Little Lina sends tew yeou by me, her husband. Sez she, 'take this tew him, an' when he sees the face o' my baby and knows thet we calls him Leetle Caleb, p'raps then he'll forgive yeou, Jim, fur takin' me away; an' come back tew us all. Tell him we want him the wust kind, Leetle Caleb an' Lina!'"

He had thrust something into the hand of the old poacher as he spoke. Thad felt almost like giving vent into his overwrought feelings in a yell. Why, all the excitement attending the race with the forest fire had not been a circumstance to the thrill that swept over him when he saw that hard-hearted old man staring at the pictured faces of mother and child on that bit of cardboard, and then, filled with a return of the old love, pressing it wildly to his bearded lips.

And Thad knew, just as Jim had said, that the message which Lina had sent in the form of her baby's picture, had broken down the barrier of the old man's pride and obstinacy; for in another moment he was squeezing Jim's hand convulsively.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"HOME, SWEET HOME!"

"Yes, I'll go home with yer, Jim! I shore I'm sick fur a sight o' my leetle gal. Lina's baby too-I'd be ther biggest fool in all Maine, not ter give in, arter yer kim up hyar, riskin' yer ears ter tell me *thet!* We'll jest try an' furgit what's gone by, Jim, an' start fresh. An' yer kin help me raise my foxes fur ther company thet's hired me fur five years ter run ther farm."

That was what Old Cale was saying as he pumped the hand of the delighted and grinning Jim. And Thad was glad he was there to witness this joyous reconciliation.

The fire had passed, and left them safe. Jim, when he could do so, made his way back to the cabin; and on his return announced that it was only a blackened ruin. Whereupon Old Cale sighed, and then seemed to look forward to a new home, in which there would be an abundance

of sunshine, because Little Lina, and Caleb, the boy who was named after him, would reign there.

They managed to spend the night somehow, and in the morning started back to the camp on the border of the lake; though after leaving the region where the fire had swept, they found the snow quite deep, and the going bad. But apparently the coming of the storm had extinguished the last lingering flames, so that the saving to the state of Maine was beyond computation.

251

Arriving at the camp, Thad found the boys getting uneasy about him, and Eli about to start out to see if he could get trace of the absent ones. They understood that the distant fire, which had not come near them, must have been in the neighborhood of Old Cale's cabin, as described by Jim; and it was this that made them worry. But it was all right now, and they received the wanderers with hearty shouts.

The story, upon being told by Thad, evoked renewed cheering, especially for the old poacher who had reformed, and was now going to show what he could do in a line that appealed to him especially, since he knew all about the woods' animals.

Just as Thad had said while Cale was feeling his burns, and the bump on his head, he declared that nothing serious was the matter with him; and that even if there had been, the glorious news that Jim had brought, at such risk to himself, would have cured him effectually.

"Well," said Giraffe, as they gathered around the supper that evening; "This is our last camp in Maine, seems like; for to-morrow Thad says we start for the railroad station at Eagle Lake, through Lake Winthrop; and soon we'll be booming along for home."

"That sounds good to me, fellers," spoke up Bumpus. "Always did like my home pretty well, and it never seems half so nice as when you're away, trying to make out you're having a bunkum time sleeping on the hard ground, with roots diggin' holes in your sides; and all sorts of creepers crawlin' over your face. Home, sweet, sweet home for me, just now!"

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"But just remember that you owe us all a treat, Bumpus," spoke up Davy Jones.

"Yes, we know Giraffe can make a fire that way now, because he showed us yesterday, as easy as anything; but when I tried it, never a spark could I get," and Step Hen looked disgusted because of his lack of knowledge.

"Huh! you needn't feel bad," declared Giraffe. "If it took *me* all that time to get on to the proper wrinkle, and me a regular fire fiend, how could you have the nerve to think you could hit her up the very first thing? But Bumpus ain't never going to question that I won that wager, fair and square. Only because if I hadn't, we'd a gone without a supper that night, and been near frozen in the bargain. Lots of things hinged on that fire, I'm telling you, fellers."

"I should say they did," observed Bumpus, frankly. "Why, on'y for its cheery twinkle them two poachers, Si and Ed, wouldn't have known we were around; and you see how we'd have missed doin' that great stunt which will go down in the history of the Silver Fox Patrol as one of the shining examples—"

"Oh! let up on that stuff, Bumpus, and help me to some more stew," Giraffe broke in, as he passed his platter along.

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"Well," remarked Allan, "we've had a pretty good time of it up here, all told, counting the two separate trips we took. And it'll be a long time before we beat the record for big game we've made in Maine."

But Allan did not know what was before the Silver Fox Patrol before many moons had passed, or he would not have uttered this rash prediction. When the summer holidays came along, they had another long journey in prospect, provided the money was received from the bank, that had been offered for the restoration of the securities carried off by the bold yeggmen captured by the scouts, and as related in the preceding volume of this series. This trip would take them many hundreds of miles from home, into a country toward which a number of the boys had long looked with yearning eyes. And that Thad and his chums were fated to meet with new and thrilling adventures that really exceeded any they had encountered before, the reader will doubtless admit if he but secures the succeeding volume to the present story, and which has been issued under the name of "The Boy Scouts Through the Big Timber; or, The Search for the Lost Tenderfoot."

There is not a great deal more to add. Jim must have managed to send some sort of message home, for at a certain station further down the road, (after the boats had been shipped through as freight, the two guides and Old Cale accompanying the scouts on the regular train,) Jim said they would have to spend half an hour there, and that they might as well get out to stretch. And lo and behold, there came a girlish cry, and they saw a small figure flying straight toward Old Cale, bearing a small bundle, which she immediately pressed into the clumsy arms of the giant, who immediately wrapped mother and baby in a warm embrace.

254

Of course it was Little Lina, and Caleb Jr.; and the boys all had to be introduced to Jim's wife. They parted from them there; but upon arriving home, one of the first things Thad and his chums did was to subscribe a round sum apiece, and send up the nicest baby's crib they could find in Cranford; for somehow they felt a personal interest in Little Caleb.

Giraffe was feeling very proud those days. He had accomplished what looked like the impossible when he finally managed to make his "silly fire bow" work, and saved himself and Bumpus from going hungry and cold that night they were adrift in the Maine pine woods.

Indeed, all of the boys had considerable to be proud of; and from that day until school finally

began, after the trustees had declared the quarantine broken, each member of the Silver Fox Patrol was always the center of an admiring crowd of listeners whenever he went abroad.

And the consequence was that a new patrol was quickly organized, eight fellows subscribing to the rules and regulations of the organization of Boy Scouts, and being mustered in during the winter as the Eagle Patrol of the Cranford Troop.

"That's one of the best things that came out of our Maine trip," said Thad to his chum Allan, as they were on the way home from the meeting when those eight new members had been sworn in, and promised to live up to the rules laid down for the guidance of all scouts by the heads of the organization.

"Well," replied the other, "I was looking back the other day, at the diary I kept while we were gone; and I find that a heap of things came out of that same hunt up among the pines of Maine. All of us felt better for the outing; more than one learned a lesson in perseverance that will follow him all his life; we did a good thing in capturing those hobo thieves, Charley Barnes and his crowd; then we made something of a record in hunting, you with your first moose, and Bumpus with that honey thief of a black bear; after that we helped wind up the poaching careers of Si Kedge and Ed Harkness; and last but not least, had a hand in bringing about that splendid family reunion that we saw on the platform, when we stepped off the train. On the whole, Thad, all of us ought to be mighty well satisfied with the way things have gone. I know I am."

"And you can say the same for me," added the young scoutmaster. "But after all is said, I think the most wonderful thing to happen was how Giraffe, after missing fire a dozen times with his little bow and stick, should strike it *just right* when it meant so much for him and Bumpus. And then Bumpus paid for that treat like a little man, saying it was worth it, ten times over, just to hear Giraffe *yell* when he'd succeeded in making his tinder flame up without using a single match."

And here we will leave the boys of the Silver Fox Patrol, to take up their further adventures in the succeeding volume.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE MAINE WOODS;
OR, THE NEW TEST FOR THE SILVER FOX PATROL ***

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