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CAPTAIN TED

CAPTAIN TED

*A Boy's Adventures Among Hiding
Slackers in the Great Georgia Swamp*

BY

LOUIS PENDLETON

AUTHOR OF "KING TOM AND THE RUNAWAYS,"
"LOST PRINCE ALMON," "IN THE CAMP OF THE CREEKS," ETC.



ILLUSTRATED

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK LONDON
1918

Printed in the United States of America

TO THE FIGHTING YOUTH
OF AMERICA

THIS STORY OF A BRAVE AND DEVOTED
BOY IS CONFIDENTLY INSCRIBED

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CAPTAIN TED

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I

TED and Hubert were proud of the commission and felt that much depended on them. Ted led the way, not merely because he was past fourteen and more than half a year older than his cousin, but because Hubert unconsciously yielded to the captaincy of a more venturesome and resolute spirit. Everything was ready for Christmas at home—mince pies, fruit cake, a fat turkey hanging out in the cold—and no doubt the as yet mysteriously reserved presents would be plentiful and satisfactory. Only a tree was still needed, and Ted and Hubert were to get it.

So now, in the early afternoon of December 24, 1917, they tramped up the long hill at the back of the Ridgway farm toward North Carolina woods of evergreens and leafless maples. The landscape as far as the eye went was white with snow, but its depth, except in drifts, was only about two inches. Ted dragged a sled with rope wherewith to strap the tree thereon. Hubert trudged beside him—always a little behind—carrying a heavy sharp hatchet.

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"Aunt Mary said we must get a good one, small size, and I'm going to hunt till we do," said Ted.

"Papa says it isn't everybody who'll have all we'll have this Christmas," remarked Hubert. "He says it's great to have a farm as well as a town house and perduce your own food in war time."

"'Produce'—not 'perduce,'" corrected Ted.

About two-thirds of the way up the long white stretch of hillside the boys paused on the brink of a pit that had been dug years before by a thick-witted settler in a hopeless quest for the gold that was then profitably mined some ten miles away. The pit was about twenty-five feet deep at its middle and perhaps thirty-five in diameter—an excavation at once too large and too small to pay for the great labor of filling in. So it had been left as it was. The snows of the windy hillside had drifted into it until the bottom was deeply covered.

The boys paused only to take a look into the "big hole" and then went on their way up the

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remaining stretch of open hillside. They explored the woods for a quarter of a mile or more before they found just the sort of slenderly tapering and gracefully branching spruce that they wanted. In no great while this was cut down, the spreading branches were roped in, and the trunk tied on the sled, which was then dragged out into the open.

The long descent toward the distant farm-house was gradual enough to render sledding safe yet steep enough at points to make dragging burdensome. Ted declared that the easiest way to get down with their load was to slide down, and Hubert agreed.

"But we'd better look out for the pit," added Hubert.

"Oh, we'll aim so as to leave that away to one side," said Ted confidently.

And so they did. After a running start, Ted leaped on the sled, straddling the trunk of the Christmas tree, and Hubert flung himself with a shout into the trailing branches, upon which he secured a firm hold.

Away they went, shouting happily, now quite forgetting the pit in their excitement. They only laughed when they bumped into a snow-covered obstruction and were swerved to the left of their intended course. They laughed again when another bump carried them still further to the left. A third mishap of the same kind awoke Ted to the danger, but too late. [Pg 4]

He had hardly begun to kick his heels into the snowy surface whirling past, in an effort to change their course, and to shout, "Look out!" in great alarm, when Hubert, whose view was obstructed by the branches of the spruce, became aware of a sudden silence and felt himself sinking through space. The younger boy scarcely realized that they had gone over the brink of the pit until he found himself floundering at the bottom in the snow, which happily was deep enough to break the force of their fall and save them from injury.

As soon as he found that neither Hubert nor himself had been harmed, Ted laughed over their struggles in snow up to their waists, but Hubert thought it was no laughing matter and accusingly inquired why they had done such a foolish thing.

"We certainly were fools to try it," admitted Ted, sobering. [Pg 5]

He floundered up to a higher level of the pit's bottom where the snow was only about two feet deep, extended a hand to Hubert, and then pulled the tree-laden sled after them.

"Now, how are we going to get out?" he asked excitedly.

"We can't get out," said Hubert, looking around at the pit's steep sides.

"But we *must*, Hu. Anyhow, somebody's sure to come along."

But nobody did. They shouted again and again, as time passed, and listened in vain for an answer. Meanwhile Ted tried every means of escape he could think of. He first proposed to cut steps into the side of the pit, but the hatchet could not be found. Hubert had either lost his grip on it as they were sledding down the hill or it was now somewhere under the deep snow in the bottom of the pit.

Ted next proposed to throw the rope around a sapling that hung over the very brink some fifteen feet above their heads. He therefore unstrapped the Christmas tree from the sled, coiled half the rope, and attempted to throw it over the sapling. Several times he succeeded in throwing the coil as high as the top of the pit, but always failed to throw it around the little tree. [Pg 6]

"Oh, it's no use," groaned Hubert at last. "We'll never get out."

"Now, Hu, you mustn't give up," urged Ted. "Boy Scouts don't give up. We'll get out somehow. Think of the good times coming when we visit Camp Hancock and go hunting with Uncle Walter in the Okefinokee."

"But we'll have to stay here till tomorrow and we'll freeze to death. I'm nearly frozen now."

"Now, Hu, you quit that," rebuked Ted, although profoundly discouraged himself. "Jump up and down and swing your arms if you're cold, but don't do the baby act. Think of the soldiers in the trenches and what they have to stand. Our own American boys are in the trenches now, and do you think one of them would whimper because it was cold or wet, or even if a bomb dropped in on them?"

"But they can get out and we can't," tearfully argued Hubert.

"Yes!—they can go 'over the top' and charge the enemy and meet cannon balls and liquid fire and poison gas and— Oh, Hu, this is *nothing!* Can't we be soldiers enough to stand just a hole in the ground with snow in it?" [Pg 7]

Hubert had his doubts, but he was silenced. He exercised his numb limbs, as advised, and watched Ted as he prepared to make experiment of still another plan. With his pocket-knife Ted picked stones out of the side of the pit until he found one he thought might serve his purpose—an oblong, jagged bit of rock around which the rope could be securely tied. Again and again Ted threw this stone—the rope trailing after it—without succeeding in sending it around the sapling.

The sun had set and Hubert's teeth chattered as he wept, when, almost ready to give up, it occurred to Ted to toss the stone up with both hands and all his strength, aiming half a foot to

the right of the leaning sapling. This carried the stone higher than it had gone before and, at the second trial, it struck the incline above the tree, rolled and came down on the other side, carrying the rope around the trunk and bringing it within reach of Ted's hand, who drew it down and quickly tied the two ends together.

Within five minutes the boy had clambered out of the pit. Then Hubert began his struggle to follow, but Ted stopped him, insisting that both the sled and the Christmas tree be drawn out first. This having been accomplished with considerable difficulty, Hubert, with the rope tied round his waist, was assisted to the upper level after much effort and some strain on the part of both boys.

"I'll never slide down that hill again," vowed Hubert, as they neared the cheerily lighted farm-house, dragging sled and tree.

But Ted only said:

"I'm glad we got out without help. I'm glad we fell in, too, because it was a little bit like being soldiers in the trenches."

Hubert Ridgway was the petted son of the house they were entering, while Theodore Carroll was but a semi-adopted orphan cousin who, though well cared for, had known no pampering. This accounted in part for the latter's greater energy and self-reliance, but perhaps there was something in this lean, dark, keen-eyed handsome boy from inheritance that the fair-haired, plump, ease-loving Hubert lacked. Ted knew little about his parents, and rarely asked questions because he observed a slight note of disapproval when his aunt and his uncles answered, but he had heard more than once that his father was "a poet who nearly died in the poor-house" and that his mother was "high-strung and artistic"—whatever that might mean. His parents had missed life's material prizes and come to early death, but they had lived intensely; and the son of their blood, alert, eager, fully alive in both body and brain, was likewise inclined to look beyond the mere pleasures of the senses toward the higher and more truly substantial values.

The difference between the two boys was indicated not only in their mishap of the afternoon but as they sat and talked in the warm, comfortable sitting-room after supper. Hubert could not spare a thought for anything but the coming Christmas presents which he hoped were many and varied, including heaps of good things to eat. Ted was happily expectant also, but he thought and spoke much more about the promised visit to Camp Hancock and the hunting trip to follow in the Okefinokee Swamp.

Ted usually spent part of the year with his uncle in North Carolina and the other part with his uncle in southern Georgia, attending school in both States. He knew that his Georgia uncle, who was his favorite, wanted him all the time, and he preferred the easy-going life on the big farm near the borders of the Okefinokee; but he traveled back and forth because his North Carolina uncle, though really indifferent, made a virtue of insisting on the arrangement entered into when the widow Carroll promptly followed her poet-husband to another world and her brothers recognized their duty to look after her son. This winter the Georgia uncle had invited both boys, proposing to take them on a hunting trip in the great swamp, and—to the delight of Ted—it was arranged for them to stop at Augusta and visit Camp Hancock on their way down.

"I can't wait till I see my Christmas presents," said Hubert as they were going to bed.

"I can hardly wait till I see Camp Hancock and thousands of soldiers," said Ted. "Camp Hancock and the Okefinokee are *my* two great Christmas presents."

II

BUT it was late in February before they saw Camp Hancock. Meanwhile the boys continued at school and Ted, in his leisure, read everything he could find about the cantonments in Georgia and elsewhere in addition to keeping up with the war news as usual. For more than a year now he had read the papers eagerly every day and in consequence, as Hubert expressed it, could "talk a blue streak" about the war. Hubert, who was no reader and was content to get his news at second hand, thought Ted knew all about the situation in England, France, Italy, Russia and even Germany. Obviously this was a slight exaggeration, but Ted did grip much current information, and he was never unwilling to give Hubert and other boys the benefit of his knowledge.

During the time of waiting Ted received a letter from his Uncle Walter in Georgia which greatly interested him.

Bring your Boy Scout uniform when you come down [it read.] I was glad to hear you had earned the right to wear it by first-rate examinations, and I want to see you in it.

This pleased Ted the more because he did not often wear his khaki in North Carolina. The reason for this was that his sensitive and quick perceptions unerringly informed him that the sight of it was not quite agreeable to his perfectly polite Aunt Mary and Uncle Fred. Having failed to pass the examinations, Hubert had no Boy Scout uniform and Ted's was a reminder that the son and heir had not measured up to the standard of the orphan cousin.

And perhaps [Uncle Walter's letter continued] your soldierly uniform may make an impression on the slackers hiding in the Okefinokee if we should run across any of them when we take that hunting trip. It is reported that some of the backwoods boys of this county evaded registration and are now camping on an island far in the Okefinokee in order to escape being drafted into the war. The sight of your uniform and a tongue-lashing from me, with well-grounded threats of prosecution and punishment, may make them ashamed of themselves and perhaps even scare them into their duty.

The suggested effect of Ted's uniform on fugitives from the draft was little more than jest, but Ted accepted it quite seriously and was at once thrilled with ambition and aspiration. His prospective hunting trip into the Okefinokee took on the character of a mission in his country's service. Was he not actually in the country's service now that the President had made the 370,000 Boy Scouts of America "dispatch bearers" in the matter of the circulation among the people of "bulletins of public information"? Would not the government also be willing and even pleased for him to undertake to show the hiding draft-evaders the error of their way? What if he could really find them and persuade them to renounce their cowardly course, thus contributing more fighters to the armies of Uncle Sam! But when he spoke of his glorious plan, the unimaginative and unaspiring Hubert merely said:

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"If you can get at them, you'll talk a blue streak about the war, all right; but what good will that do such fellows? *They* don't care. Papa says slackers can think only of their own skins."

"There's nothing like trying," insisted Ted, accustomed to discouraging comment and not in the least inclined to abandon his scheme.

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At last the impatiently awaited hour for their departure arrived and the two boys boarded the train for Augusta. They were almost too excited for speech when, early in the morning of a fine day, their train rolled into the Georgia city widely famed for the great war cantonment in its neighborhood, and they looked forth to see groups of young men in khaki tramping its streets. They were met at the station by Lieut. John Markham, a cousin of both boys who was with the Pennsylvanians at Camp Hancock because his mother, another sister of the Ridgway brothers, had married a Philadelphian and lived many years in the city by the Delaware.

Never will Ted forget that day. As he and Hubert took the train that night for southern Georgia he declared that his eyes were "dead tired from so much looking." First they drove out to the camp and over its extensive area, wherein Ted's wish to see thousands of soldiers was abundantly gratified. Later they walked about, saw the quarters of the officers, looked into the tents of the privates, and at many points watched the soldiers drill, drill, drill—infantry drill, physical drill, bayonet exercise and target practice. They even found opportunity in the course of another long drive to witness actual firing of field artillery on a ten-mile range, and, as the sound of the great guns lifted the awed boys to their highest pitch of excitement, they felt that they saw war in the making indeed.

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But the most inspiring sight of all, to Ted, was the infantry drill. The measured, simultaneous movement of so many men, to the beat of drums and the martial airs of the bands, thrilled the boy from head to foot, and it seemed to him that all things centered in this brave and beautiful array which it was his wonderful privilege to see. As he looked and listened, he would not have changed places with a king, and for the moment to have been anywhere else in the world but at Camp Hancock would have been like exile from all that he held dear.

They also looked at the experimental military bridge building of the engineering corps and inspected the practice trenches, learning that the extensive system of the latter had been built under the personal supervision of French and English officers. Both Ted and Hubert asked many questions and much was explained to them—points about the first-line trenches and the great communicating ditches that led off zigzag instead of straight in the rear, "so that they could not be enfiladed" by the enemy's cannon.

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At noon they dined with Lieut. Markham in the officers' quarters of his regiment. This in itself was a great event and Ted could hardly eat for watching and learning the rank of each, his interest heightening when two or three French and English officers were pointed out to him. With the eye of a hawk he noted the manners of the French, the British and the Americans, hoping to achieve a successful imitation. Several of the friends of Cousin John were very attentive to the delighted and flattered boys, being especially polite to Ted who proudly thought they recognized a coming comrade in a Boy Scout in khaki.

"Now let's go to the bayonet run and see the boys spit the Boches," said Lieut. Markham early in the afternoon.

This was one of the forms of bayonet exercise, and both boys watched it absorbed, fascinated, oblivious of everything else in the great camp. Strapping young fellows in khaki sprinted up an incline, leaped over obstructions in their path, and plunged down toward suspended dummies, at which or through which they thrust their bayonets. This was spitting or impaling the Boches in a bayonet charge.

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"Why do they call them 'Boches,' Cousin John?" asked Hubert, quite superfluously in the opinion of Ted, who knew already.

"It's a French nickname for the Germans—not very complimentary," was the answer. "Means something like 'blockhead,' I'm told."

At the railway station in Augusta that night, as they took leave of their kindly kinsman, who had exerted himself both to entertain and instruct, Ted could hardly take his mind off the vivid and crowding recollections of the day, but he did not forget his manners.

"It's been a great day and you've been just lovely to us, Cousin John," he said. "I can never thank you enough."

"I wanted you to see all you could," said Lieut. Markham, smiling and patting Ted on the shoulder, "because you'll take your turn here or in some other camp after a while—if the war lasts long enough."

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This prospect brought thrills and delighted smiles to Ted, but he checked the first words that rushed upon his tongue—reflecting that it might be wrong to hope that the war would last long enough—and only said, with the manner of one already devoted to a cause:

"Yes, I'll be here—if the war lasts."

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III

THE boys had to change cars and "lay over" several hours at an intervening point, and so it was night again when they left the train at their destination, a small town near the eastern borders of the Okefinokee Swamp. Their Uncle Walter met them and they drove with him out to his big farm. At the station they noted that passing acquaintances addressed him respectfully as Judge Ridgway, but there was no overpowering dignity about him that they could see. He seemed almost like an elderly boy who accepted them as comrades in his own class, so jolly and friendly was he.

As they drove the five miles through the dark pine woods, he talked enthusiastically of the coming trip into the Okefinokee and told them hunting stories.

"If you boys should get lost from me," he said once, "and get mixed up with wild animals after your ammunition has run out, fight 'em with fire if you can. I've done it. I did it when I was a boy, too. My father moved to a wild part of Texas when I was about twelve and stayed out there four years. And once a pack of wolves got after me when I happened to be alone in a camp without a gun. I thought my time had come, but I actually whipped that pack of wolves without a thing to shoot with. There was a good fire burning and I hugged it close. I noticed that they seemed afraid of it and that gave me an idea. I threw on more wood and then began to fling blazing chunks among my howling enemies. It did the business. I actually threw a big live coal into the open mouth of the nearest beast, and such a yelping and running you never saw! I flung burning chunks until there was mighty little fire left, but I put the whole pack to flight. Wild animals are all cowards when it comes to fire, so you must never fail to have plenty of matches. But you won't see any wolves in the Okefinokee these days. We may get a bear, though, and bear steak is not bad when you're hungry. I'd consider it mighty good on one of these 'meatless' days."

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Uncle Walter continued to be merry and talkative, with a good story for every occasion, after they reached the big, rambling farm-house and while they ate the bountiful supper served by a young black waiter directed by a fat negress, but he had hardly lighted his pipe by the fireside in the sitting-room later when news came that at once made him serious and regretful. A special messenger brought a telegram and when he had read it his face fell.

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"Boys, this is too bad," he said. "I've got to go to Washington by the first train and our hunting trip will have to be postponed."

"We'll get along all right—till you come back," said Ted, struggling with his disappointment and trying to look cheerful.

"But I don't know how soon I can get back. It's an important matter and may take time. While I'm gone you boys can hunt as much as you please, in the woods around the place and along the edge of the Okefinokee, but don't venture into the swamp itself. You might get lost."

Both boys promised to be careful, and then their uncle rang a bell. When the fat negress who had overseen the serving of the supper entered the room, he said to her:

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"Well, Clarissa, I've got to go to Washington and leave these boys in your care. It's a pity your mis'es is not here." He referred to his sister who was away on a visit. Uncle Walter was a bachelor.

"Dat's all right, Mr. Walter," good-naturedly responded the negress, whom the boys understood that they were to address respectfully as "Aunt Clarissa" in the old-time Southern fashion. "You kin trus' me to feed 'em up all right and keep 'em in clean clothes and clean sheets."

"They are to have the run of the place and go hunting as much as they like," Uncle Walter directed. "And if they get tired of it out here they can go to town and visit Cousin Jim Fraser. I told him about them and he'll be glad to have them."

"All right, suh," the negress assented. "If dey goes off and don't come back, I'll know dey's in town at Mr. Jim's."

"Now go and call Asa; I want to give him some directions," said Uncle Walter, and the negress retired.

The boys were sorry to hear at breakfast next morning that their uncle had gone, but there was much to see and do in his absence and they were pretty sure of an interesting time even without him. It was with no lack of cheerfulness that they shouldered their small bird-guns and started forth in the fine sunny air. [Pg 23]

Though February had not quite gone and it was still winter according to the calendar, already wild violets were peeping through the frost-browned wiregrass and dogwood and honeysuckle blossoms were perfuming the air in the long-leaf pine forests which surrounded the farm and seemed to have no end. To Ted there was nothing novel in these vast stretches of pine woods as level as a floor, but to Hubert, who had known only the North Carolina hills, the south Georgia country was almost like a new world. The boys spent most of the day hunting in the woods about the farm, but came home disappointed, having seen few quail or doves and bagged practically nothing.

"To-morrow we'll take a look at the Okefinokee and hunt along the edge of it," proposed Ted at supper.

Hubert agreed, adding, as "Aunt" Clarissa offered them more hot waffles: "And if we get tired of that, we'll go to town and see Cousin Jim." [Pg 24]

When they were about to start off next morning Hubert critically called attention to the fact that Ted was still dressed in his khaki. "Are you going to wear that all the time?" he asked.

"Why shouldn't I if I like? In a way I am in the government's service and this is my uniform." Ted spoke quite seriously.

"*You* in the government's service!" scoffed Hubert.

"Didn't you know the President has made all the Boy Scouts dispatch bearers? When I get the pamphlets I am to distribute, you'll see me in the service all right."

Hubert soon forgot his skepticism and envy in the interest he found in their expedition. Inquiring the way from a negro encountered on the public road, the boys tramped straight in the direction of the great swamp. For about three miles the path led through open, level, wiregrass-carpeted pine woods; then gradually a downward slope was perceived and soon the straggling pines were succeeded by a dense "hammock" growth, thick with underbrush, reeds and brambles, the ground becoming damp and spongy, and the more open spaces being often little more than sloppy bogs around which the young adventurers picked their way. [Pg 25]

The great Okefinokee Swamp, formerly some forty miles long by twenty-five wide with a vast surrounding acreage of untouched pine barrens, has been to some extent reclaimed by advancing settlement, local drainage, and the invasion at points of the insatiable lumberman; but even when Ted and Hubert entered its borders the greater part of it was still a wild and almost pathless acreage of tangled forest-grown bottom lands, flooded jungles, watery "prairies" or marshes, remote lakes, sluggish streams, and pine-covered islands. More than a hundred years ago a story was current that it had been the last refuge of the ancient Yemassees, an Indian race that disappeared before the march of the conquering Creeks. It is well known to have been a stronghold of the Seminoles during the Florida-Indian wars as well as to have furnished a secure hiding place for deserters from the Confederate army during the Civil War, and even in the year 1917 fugitives from the draft law could have found no more remote and safe retreat than its inner recesses afforded. [Pg 26]

At points the line of demarcation between the surrounding pine woods and the outer reaches of the swamp itself is by no means clear. A considerable acreage of low swampy land is nothing uncommon anywhere in the long-leaf pine section of southern Georgia. Ted had often seen such low areas far from the great swamp, and so now, without realizing what he did, he pushed forward into a section of the Okefinokee itself. The point where the boys entered was thickly grown with cypress and covered in considerable part with shallow water through which they waded. This was nothing alarming, hunting in that section with dry feet being practically out of the question.

After they had eaten some biscuits and rested at noon Hubert urged that they turn back, but Ted declared that he intended to "make a day of it" and pushed on.

"We can go to town to-morrow if we want to," he said.

About mid-afternoon they found themselves on the shore of a little lake, the surface of which, except near the center, was hidden by clumps of brown flags and "bonnets," a species of waterlily. Visions of wild ducks, both alive and slain, now occupied Ted's imagination and urged him on. He skirted more than half the way round the lake, creeping forward stealthily, before he sighted a flock of ducks within range. In his excitement he fired too quickly and the ducks fluttered away unharmed. [Pg 27]

Hubert, who had remained behind, now hurried up to see what Ted had shot. By this time the sun was getting low, and the younger boy insisted that they ought to take the backward trail at once in order to be out of the woods or reach the public road by night. But Ted refused to start back until he had skirted the lake twice, shot three times and finally killed a duck, to secure

which he waded up to his waist in the sedge.

Struggling out of the water with his prize, the boy hurriedly took his bearings and led the way along what appeared to be the trail by which they had come.

Within an hour the sun had set and the short twilight of that latitude was at hand. This would have mattered little if they had been clear of the swamp; but so far from having gained the open pine woods, they now seemed more deeply involved than ever, and were unable to recognize anything about them. Ted halted and looked anxiously around. He now more than suspected that, in skirting the lake, intent on the game only, he had lost his bearings, and that in starting homeward they had taken the wrong direction. [Pg 28]

"Don't be afraid, Hu," he said manfully, after a few moments; "but we are lost, and we've got to stay here all night."

"Stay here all night!" echoed Hubert, gazing around the gloomy swamp-depths through starting tears. "I *said* we ought to turn back. I told you two or three times, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"Yes, it was all my fault," admitted Ted.

"Do you think the panthers will smell us and—and—come?" asked Hubert, his voice lowered.

"Of course not," answered Ted stoutly, although he also was troubled with vague misgivings. He had never spent a night in a swamp; and the prospect of it now, under the existing circumstances, was little less than terrifying.

But for the younger boy's sake as well as because of a certain pride of manliness, he determined not to betray his feelings. So he "got a grip on" himself, as he mentally phrased it, and spoke up resolutely in a steady voice. [Pg 29]

"It's no use to think of finding our way home to-night, and we had better hunt a place to camp right away." [Pg 30]

IV

PROMPTNESS was indeed necessary, for it was fast growing dark. After a hurried search Ted selected a little open spot which was comparatively dry and covered with long grass. Within two or three feet stood a large black-gum tree, which, Ted reflected, could be climbed easily in an emergency; and close at hand was abundance of hemleaf and huckleberry bushes. The tops of these could be broken and piled where the boys chose to sleep, and the couch thus prepared, though not likely to suggest down, would at least protect them from the damp ground.

Ted next began to collect fuel, which he should have done at first. The two boys had scarcely begun this task when it became so dark that no object more than three feet distant could be distinctly seen. Dry wood appeared to be very scarce, and even when they had finally started a small fire the prospect of keeping it burning throughout the night was more than doubtful. However, it gave them light whereby to break brush and gather Spanish moss for their bed, and it enabled Ted to dry his wet trousers. [Pg 31]

To attempt to butcher and broil the duck under present circumstances seemed too great an undertaking and so for supper they had only the sweet and tender roots of young palmetto shoots; after partaking of which unsatisfactory sustenance they found a degree of comfort in vigorously chewing sweetgum scraped from a neighboring tree. And when they lay down to sleep, covering themselves with moss, they were thankful to be warm and dry, even if still hungry.

"I think I understand now," said Ted, before they lay down by the dying fire. "I think we are in the Okefinokee. We came in without knowing it."

"And we'll never get out," groaned Hubert.

"Oh, yes we will. I've noticed that things come out all right after a while if you keep trying," said Ted philosophically. "But before we do get out we may have to tramp around a long time, and, maybe we'll find the slackers' camp. I wish we could. I'd like to talk to them and see if I couldn't persuade them——" [Pg 32]

"They'd only laugh at you," interrupted Hubert, "and they might get mad and cuff you around. Better let them alone."

"Sometimes I think they might," said Ted, "but when I want to do anything very much and feel afraid of getting hurt I say to myself, 'Never mind; they can't do any more to you than to kill you, and there's another world to come after this,' and I go ahead. Sometimes I go ahead when I'm awfully afraid."

"You can put up a big bluff, then, for you never seem afraid," said Hubert. "Maybe they'll start to hunt for us by morning," he added hopefully, abruptly changing the subject.

"Not if Aunt Clarissa thinks we've gone to Cousin Jim's in town, and it might be two weeks before she found out we weren't there," said Ted, regretting his speech the moment it was

uttered.

"Oh, I forgot," groaned Hubert, with starting tears. "We'll never get out of this swamp."

"We'll soon find our way," insisted Ted. "Anyhow, it does no good to fret. It does harm. I've found that it pays to keep hoping. Maybe I'd be different if I'd had a mother to pet me up and make me soft. It's great to have a sweet mother, but if you don't have one you learn a lot of things for yourself."

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Hubert made no response and Ted fell silent. Presently the heavy breathing of the younger boy showed that he was asleep, but Ted lay awake a long while. The fire was now practically out and the darkness was intense, but it was a clear night and an occasional star could be seen through the overhanging foliage. After silently reciting the prayer he had been taught to repeat at night, Ted lay close to Hubert, trying to still anxious thought and sleep, but at every sound made in the brush by some little restless forest dweller, bird or beast, at every freshening of the night breeze in the leaves, he would start up and listen, his active imagination peopling the gloom about them with nameless and sometimes fearful shapes.

Anything definite and distinctly recognizable, permitting no vague and disturbing conjecture, was welcome, and so Ted's strained attention somewhat relaxed when an owl alighted in the black-gum, lifted its eerie voice, and with insistent repetition seemed to demand—"Who-who-who-all?"

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Finally the boy fell into deep slumber. Some hours later he was awakened by feeling Hubert move and hearing his voice close to his ear:

"Ted, Ted, wake up! I heard something."

Ted was wide awake in a moment. Listening intently he heard a stealthy footfall, then another and another, suggesting that an animal of some size was guardedly encircling the camp. The sounds appeared to come from points little more than thirty feet away.

"Let's climb that tree!" proposed Hubert excitedly. "It may be a panther and it may jump on us."

A twig snapped under the foot of the prowling animal and panic seized both boys. Grasping his gun, Ted leaped to his feet and bounded toward the tree, which Hubert was already climbing. After passing up his gun, Ted followed nimbly. Lodged in the branches of the black-gum some twenty-five feet from the ground, the boys listened intently, but now all was still. The marauder appeared to have been frightened in turn, and had either retreated or had squatted and was remaining quiet.

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Ted began to repent of their hasty action, suggesting in a whisper that it would have been better if they had stayed where they were and built up the fire. "You remember what Uncle Walter said about fighting 'em with fire," he reminded Hubert, adding, with a view to comfort the younger boy: "Maybe it was nothing but an old cow anyhow."

But Hubert would not consent to descend from the tree, and so Ted made himself as comfortable as possible among the spreading branches near the tree's main stem.

Waiting thus, wide awake and watchful, he soon noted with great relief that day was breaking. The welcome light that slowly descended and gradually dissipated the darkness of the swamp brought good cheer. With a laugh on his lips Ted climbed down from their perch and was reluctantly followed by Hubert.

"We must go back on our tracks to the lake," proposed Ted, "go all around it carefully, make sure of the right path, and start off toward home. If we have good luck, we may get there by dinner time."

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Hubert now espied the hatchet near the bed of leafy boughs and picked it up. They then observed that the ground was covered with feathers, with here and there a few fragments of small bones, and recollected the duck which Ted had shot. It was plain that the animal that had visited them during the night had enjoyed a feast at their expense.

"You see, that was all it was after," laughed Ted.

The boys started off cheerfully on the backward trail. For the first half mile it led over soft spongy earth, wherein their tracks were easily seen; but by and by they reached a tract of many acres dotted with clumps of palmettos, where the ground was firm and thickly covered with wiregrass. Here the trail was soon lost. After some time spent in a vain attempt to find it, they pushed forward in what appeared to be the right general direction only to lose all sense of even this in consequence of the excitement following an exciting event.

As Ted expressed it afterward, they "ran right up on a bear." The creature was engaged in pulling up young palmetto shoots and eating the sweet and tender part near the root. After each pull it would rear up on its hind legs and look cautiously over the brush in every direction. So when Ted and Hubert stepped into view the bear saw them on the instant and bolted, crashing loudly through the tangle of underbrush. The two boys took one long look and then fled in the opposite direction, not quite sure that the beast was pursuing them, but uncomfortably certain that their bird-guns would be scant protection.

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Their panic over, they came to a halt, Ted laughing nervously and remarking that the bear was "worse scared than we were." As to this Hubert had his doubts, and he was hardly able to force a smile. Looking about him upon totally unfamiliar landscape, he declared, with a catch in his voice, that they were "lost now for sure."

"No, we're not, for there's the lake!" cried Ted, espying a sheet of water some distance ahead of them.

Then they hurried forward hopefully, but only to find that the little sheet of water, though much like it, was not the one wherein the duck had been shot. It was now quite evident that they were lost several miles within the borders of the Okefinokee and ignorant which way to turn. In the full realization of this Hubert had to struggle very hard to keep back his tears. As for Ted, he forgot all about his plan of seeking out the camp of the slackers and thought only of finding their way home. [Pg 38]

He was not too disheartened, however, to neglect a chance which offered for a shot at some ducks, and was highly elated on discovering that he had killed two and that they were within reach. Having had no breakfast and being now ravenously hungry, they halted at a little stream that ran into the marshy lake, built a fire, and butchered one of the ducks. The novel experiment of cutting slices from the fat bird, suspending them from the points of long sticks, and holding them close to the coals, was persisted in until their hunger was satisfied. They were glad enough to feast upon the flesh of the duck thus roasted, although it was rendered unsavory by the lack of salt.

"The thing for us to do, Hu," said Ted, as they rose, more cheerful, to move on, "is to keep pushing ahead where the swamp seems open. In that way we ought to find our way out after a while." [Pg 39]

Following the line of least resistance as proposed, they tramped several miles and then, about mid-afternoon, were confronted by a seemingly impenetrable jungle.

"We'll have to turn back now," said Hubert dolefully.

"No, let's go right ahead," said Ted, pushing on. "We may have to travel more slowly, but we can get through, and maybe when we *do* get through we'll be out of the swamp. I think from what I've heard that the Okefinokee has a thick rim just like this round a great deal of it."

In reluctantly consenting, Hubert urged that they first provide themselves with "some fat lightwood splinters" for kindling. "It's low and wet down in there," he said, "and if we don't get through before night, we'll need them to make a fire."

This prudent suggestion having been acted upon, Ted pushed ahead, carrying his gun and the hatchet, and Hubert followed, his little gun in his right hand and the bundle of kindling under his left arm. [Pg 40]

The jungle evidently covered thousands of acres and was at points so dense as to be penetrable only where wild animals had made their trails. Thorny brambles often an inch thick and running great lengths added to the discomfort and difficulty of forcing a passage. Everywhere the ground was wet, sometimes boggy, and in great part covered with water varying in depth from two inches to two feet. Often the hatchet had to be used before they could move forward a step, and they soon bitterly regretted their decision to force their way through. But the hope of accomplishing the task led Ted on until, as the sun declined, it became evident that they would be unable to retrace their steps before night.

When little more than half an hour of daylight was left the boys halted to make camp at a point where the jungle was less dense. Even here the water rose above their ankles and the prospect was a very gloomy one. Ted had often heard how belated Okefinokee hunters had been compelled to build sleeping platforms whereon to spend the night, and this the boys set about doing without delay. [Pg 41]

Selecting two saplings about eight feet apart, the boys cut into them with the hatchet, at a point about three feet above the water, until they toppled and fell over in the same direction. These saplings, being young and stringy, did not entirely break from their stumps, and, while slanting gradually down to the water, offered a support to the smaller poles and brush which were bridged across from one to the other. Even with the addition of moss for bed and covering, the resting-place thus secured was far from comfortable, but was to be preferred to spending the night in a tree.

With their guns beside them, and their "fat" splinters and matches within reach, the boys lay down, thankful at least that it was as yet too early in spring for moccasins and other reptiles to be abroad.

Lying on an uncomfortable pile of boughs three feet above the stagnant water, in hunger and darkness, with little hope of finding their way home, their distress of body and mind was very severe. Hubert broke down at last and sobbed, refusing to be comforted, although Ted made a manful effort to do so. [Pg 42]

"We'll get out of the swamp to-morrow or find the slackers' camp," he predicted, with pretended cheerfulness.

"We'll starve to death," wailed Hubert.

"You'll see," persisted Ted. "It will be one thing or the other, and either will suit me."

But they spoke little after they lay down, and that little in whispers;—as if fearing to betray their presence to some formidable beast that might lurk in the neighborhood. They were so exhausted that they soon fell into deep sleep.

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V

IF there was any tramping of wild animals about their camp that night, the boys did not hear it. They slept soundly until dawn and were then awakened by the sweet and cheering voice of a wood-thrush. They lost no time in quitting their gloomy camp-site, pushed steadily forward and about nine o'clock, to their great delight, emerged from the jungle.

They now ascended the slope of an open pine ridge, upon which, at a distance of some three or four hundred yards apart, they noted three Indian mounds about fifteen feet in height. Ted reminded Hubert of his prediction, believing that they were out of the swamp at last. But a two-hours' tramp was sufficient to convince him that they were merely on an island about three miles long by about one mile in width, and that they were probably farther away from the Ridgway farm than ever.

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In the course of their tramp a flock of wild turkeys, some eight or ten in number, fluttered out of their path and ran rapidly ahead of them, too little alarmed at first to fly. Both boys fired into them and one turkey remained struggling on the ground when the others rose. Each boy thought he had bagged the game, but they were too hungry to waste time in dispute. They hurried with their prize to the nearest water, built a fire and were soon broiling substantial slices of the great bird on the coals. And after they had eaten their fill, in spite of their misfortunes they became quite cheerful.

"Now, Hu, don't let's worry any more," advised Ted. "We are going to come out all right and we are having a wonderful time. Some of it is pretty tough, I know, but when it's all over we'll be so *proud* of what we've been through! The boys who hang around home and just do the same old things, will wish awfully, when they hear about it, that they had been with us."

The thought of winning renown among his playmates at home as a great and experienced adventurer was distinctly comforting to Hubert, helping him to resolve to resist fear in future and meet discomfort more cheerfully. The boys felt better still when presently they made a discovery which awakened new hope. At the farther end of the island, where a dense "hammock" growth sloped down and joined hands with the swamp, which here took on the form of a deeply flooded forest, they found a boat—a small bateau scarcely capable of floating more than three persons. Evidently it had been lying idle for some time. It was half full of water, but when this was bailed out it showed no serious leaks and carried the two boys safely.

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"That must lead out to a lake," said Ted, indicating the narrow boat-road which could be seen winding away through the flooded forest. "And once on that lake, we may find our way out of the swamp. Anyhow, we may meet some of the slackers. Let's start right off!"

Hubert was loath to leave the dry open pine woods of the island and said so, but Ted convinced him that there was nothing to be done but to push on.

The boat-road had evidently been a good deal traveled and it was not very difficult to make headway, although the two paddles they had picked up were little more than two long sticks. As Ted had surmised, the boat-road led after a few hundred yards into a long and very narrow forest-bordered lake, where feeding fishes of considerable size were "striking" here and there in a way to tempt the most indifferent angler. Hubert wanted to stop to fish, but Ted said that if they were to get through by night they couldn't spare the time.

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They did stop and drift, however, when they caught sight of a large animal swimming across their path about two hundred yards ahead. The boys grabbed their guns, but knew better than to waste bird shot on such big game. They merely watched the swimming creature in some alarm until it disappeared in the flooded forest. Hubert was sure it was a panther, but Ted said it might be only a lynx, perhaps even only the lesser lynx, commonly called the wild-cat. In any case, he thought, it was better to "let it go" and not "try to stir up a fight," armed as they were with mere bird-guns.

While they discussed the matter, drifting, Hubert unwound a fishing line he took out of his pocket. It was provided with a fly which had seen service in North Carolina trout streams, and he threw it as far out as he could. To his astonishment it was taken almost immediately and he found himself pulling a large and game fish toward the boat. When finally lifted over the boat's side, it proved to be a black bass weighing about five pounds. Both boys were now eager for more such sport, but Ted resisted the temptation and dipped his paddle vigorously.

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"We've got to get somewhere before night," he said, looking at the declining sun. "Maybe we can come back here some time and try 'em again."

At the farther end of the lake the boat-road began again and wound on its way as before through seemingly endless flood and forest. At many points they found it more difficult to force the boat forward, but the scenery was the same. Now a long winding reach of black or wine-colored lagoon bordered by trees standing knee-deep in the flood and flying a thousand ragged flags of gray moss; now a tortuous trail among the crowding trunks of both standing and fallen trees, among masses of reeds full of the drift of fallen branches, beneath low-hanging boughs dipping their finger-like leafage into the water, and tangles of vines trailing down to the very surface of dark still pools. Then more and more of the thin-leaved cypresses towering on high with some of their banyan-like "knees" rising from the wine-colored flood a dozen feet from the parent stem, and others lying in wait a few inches below the surface, less perilous to the swamp boat than a sunken reef to the ocean ship, yet the most stubborn of all snags and the source of much labor and delay.

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By the time the boys had laboriously got clear of the third "knee" upon which their boat had stalled, and had paddled, polled and pushed altogether three or four miles, the sun was down and they found it necessary to prepare for the night.

"I *said* we ought to stay on that island," complained Hubert, as he looked around into the darkening aisles of the flooded forest.

"Well, I didn't want to be a prisoner there if you did," retorted Ted.

They bailed out what water had leaked into the bateau, broke brush and gathered moss for their bed, then ate an insufficient portion of broiled turkey which they had the forethought to bring with them. They felt safer in their boat, adrift in a tree-bordered lagoon, even if dark, mysterious foliage did overhang them. Perhaps this was why Hubert, after they had lain down and covered themselves with moss, permitted himself to refer sarcastically to Ted's prediction of the night before.

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"I thought you were to be out of the swamp or get to the slackers' camp by to-night," he observed, with a yawn.

"Oh, give me another day, can't you!" retorted Ted, and, turning over, he fell asleep.

They were still asleep when the dawn came down and, in slow, wondrous miracle, transformed the thick darkness of the swamp into light. The wood-thrush lifted its sweet voice in welcome of the new day, and a lovely calm seemed to rest upon the great Okefinokee.

But the heavenly peace of morning was not everywhere, for directly above the sleeping boys, close upon a limb of the tree under which their drifting boat had come to rest, crouched a beast which looked down upon them with a fixed, dilating stare of hate. The animal was of a grayish brown that went pale along its belly. Its body looked long yet was short in proportion to the length of its powerful legs. It had a round head and face, pointed ears, yellow-green eyes and whitish-brown whiskers. Its tail was a mere thick brown stump that stood up stiffly when it moved an inch or two as if to get a better look, sinking its razor-edged claws deep into the green bark.

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The watching lynx longed fiercely to drop upon Ted's neck, so soft and red and helpless, but was held motionless by its fear of the most terrible of all its enemies—mysterious, wonderful man. Nevertheless, seeing needed food, the beast obeyed an impulse stronger than fear and leaped, alighting, not upon Ted, but upon the black bass at the foot of the couch of broken boughs.

The boat rocked. The boys started up, blinking. The lynx growled fiercely, its teeth fastened in its prey. And then, after another and mightier leap, which rocked the boat still more, it became a mere shadow in the brush on their right, and was gone.

Shouting, questioning, gesticulating, and almost losing their balance, the boys sat down quickly in fear of upsetting the bateau.

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"What is it?" cried Hubert. "It got my fish!"

"A wild-cat maybe," said Ted, "but it seemed bigger than I thought they were and I didn't know they had a stumpy tail."

"It had fierce whiskers just like the Kaiser's," asserted Hubert. "Look here, Ted," he added solemnly, "we've got to get out of this place or something will eat us up."

Then Ted began to laugh. And as there was nothing else to be done, there being no food, they picked up their paddles and started, breakfastless, on their way.

Several hours later they emerged from the flooded forest and saw before them an extensive open marsh filled with long rushes, "bonnets," and open pools, and dotted with small islands, the trees of which were hung with long gray drifts of Spanish moss. As far as the eye could reach, straight ahead, to the right or to the left, nothing else was visible. With increasing weariness and hunger the boys paddled and poled about this marsh until late in the day, imagining that they were pursuing the same general course, but in reality wandering widely in the confusion of rounding the many islets. At last, in the late afternoon, they saw far ahead the green tops of some tall pines and gradually worked their way toward them, surmising that they stood either upon a large island or the mainland. As they approached within half a mile, a shallow marsh, free of the

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confusing islets, opened before them. In the shallower water here the rushes and water-mosses seemed to thicken steadily as they neared the shore, and it became more and more difficult to force the bateau through or over them, although the boys now followed the windings of a clearly-defined boat-trail.

Finally, within some three hundred yards of the shore or the wall of woods indicating an island, they were compelled to step out and drag the boat after them, sinking now to the knee, now to the waist, in slimy moss, mud and water. Entering the border of trees, they pushed forward, still in water knee-deep, for about a hundred yards, before they reached a landing-place where two boats, somewhat larger than their own, were moored.

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"There's somebody here, *sure*," said Ted, looking about hopefully.

A well-beaten path led upward through the dense "hammock" between the swamp proper and the pine ridge composing the island upon which the boys had landed. Under magnolia and bay trees and through tall underbrush of swamp-cane the path led to the top of the slope, where, some two hundred yards from the boats, the boys found themselves in a small clearing, beyond which the open pine land of the island stretched away monotonously.

Near the center of the clearing stood a house, built of rough pine logs, elevated some twelve feet from the ground on stilt-like posts; and over a fire to the right of this structure bent a man's figure. Evidently he was cooking his evening meal, for the boys caught the delicious odor of frying meat.

"Maybe he'll give us something to eat," said Hubert wistfully.

Just then the man stood erect, and they saw that he was a negro in rough soiled clothes. A moment later he turned his face toward them and they recognized a care-free, good-natured type of young black man with which they had had abundant acquaintance.

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The boys hesitated no longer. The negro heard their steps and looked up, the first bewildered expression on his black, sweat-shining face changing to one of pleased astonishment. He came forward to meet them.

"W-huh you boys come fum?" he cried. Then, his eyes fastening upon Ted's muddy uniform, he continued, giggling delightedly: "And one of 'em is a little soldier! Well, if dat don't beat all! *Who* you boys?"

Ted staggered slightly and sat down heavily on the grass.

"Please give us something to eat and then we'll tell you," he said in a weak voice.

The negro showed instant sympathy. "Is you boys perishin' for sump'n to eat?" he asked, regretfully. "Lem me git you sump'n quick!"

He rushed about and within less than two minutes had piled hot meat, fish and bread on palmetto leaves placed before the boys where they sat on the billowy wiregrass.

"You boys sho kin eat," he commented, grinning, as he watched them devour the good food. "I des know you was most starvin'. You kin eat all dat and have plenty mo'."

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After Ted had satisfied his hunger, felt strengthened, and had thanked the negro gratefully and very politely, he asked:

"What camp is this?"

"Eight young white mens been campin' yuh since las' summer and dey brung me in to cook dey vittles. I'm July Martin."

"Oh—this is where those slackers are hiding to keep out of the war?" said Ted, stating a recognized fact in the form of a question.

"Dis is it, but don't tell 'em I tole you. Dey's mighty partic'lar to keep people fum knowin' where dey is."

"How about you?" asked Ted. "Negro men are being drafted for war service, too."

"Who, me?" laughed July, slightly uneasy. "Well, you see, when Mr. Buck Hardy come an' tole me he want me in yuh to cook for 'em, he say if I didn't do it dem draft-bode people would grab me up an' send me to de waw, and I was powerful worried. You see, de waw come so sudden; it bus' right in my face, like; an' it look like I des *had* to take time to git in de notion to stan' up an' let dem Germans shoot at me. So I tuck dis chance to make a honest livin' in a quiet place. I's makin' a livin'. Dey takes up a c'lection and pays me wages for cookin' and doin' dey dirty work. And, 'sides all dat; Mr. Buck Hardy say I des got to come in yuh wid 'em an' he wouldn' lem me say no."

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Both boys smiled broadly, but at the conclusion of this prodigiously amusing speech Ted asked:

"Don't you call yourself a free man? Don't you think it's bad enough to be a slacker without putting the blame on somebody else?"

In ordinary times July would have boasted of his freedom to come and go as he pleased, but now he desired to persist in the persuasion that he was not a free agent.

"But Mr. Buck Hardy tole me," he argued, giggling uneasily,— "he tole me if I did n' come in yuh he and dem yuther young white mens would give me de devil, an' he tole me if dem draft-bode people got me and sont me to de waw dem Germans would cut my head off."

"Oh, confess that you are an out-and-out slacker and be done with it," said Ted. "That's the only honest thing to do, you know."

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"Look yuh, boy," said July, his good-humored face showing irritation, "you better put a bridle on dat tongue o' yours. I like to see a smart boy like you wid plenty o' spunk, and I ain't mad wid you, but lem me give you a piece o' advice: if you go talkin' dat-a way to Mr. Buck Hardy and dem young white mens, you gwine to git into trouble. You sho will."

"Who is Mr. Buck Hardy?" asked Hubert, diplomatically, prudently deciding that it was time to check Ted by changing the subject.

"He's de ring-leader. He's de cock o' de walk in dis camp."

"What is the name of this island?" asked Ted, looking around.

"I hear 'em say, but I disremember," answered July with seeming sincerity.

"A mighty good name for it would be Deserters' Island," remarked Ted, rising to join Hubert, who now stood by the fire drying his wet trousers.

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VI

AS the boys stood steaming by the fire, Ted using his wet handkerchief to clean the mud and slime from his trousers, more questions were asked, and in response to inquiry as to the present whereabouts of the hiding slackers, the negro said:

"Dey ain't come in yet. Some of 'em runnin' a deer and some gone to dey traps." July pointed to the skins hanging from grape-vines and bear-grass ropes under the elevated house of logs and beneath a low shelter of thatched palmetto fans. "Dey in de trappin' business," he added.

At this moment some one was heard coming through the brush, singing in a peculiar childish voice: "Open the gates as high as the sky and let King George's army pass by."

"Dat's Billy," said July. "He ain't got good sense."

A barefoot young white man, roughly clothed, entered the clearing at a trot and ran up to the two boys. Fixing his eye on Ted, he inquired with a giggle, "What's your name?" When Ted had told him, he turned to Hubert with the same question. His hair was light in color and soft as a child's, but his face was wrinkled and wore a meaningless smile. His pale eyes were vacant yet restless.

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"He's Sweet Jackson's nigger same as I'm Mr. Buck Hardy's," explained July, showing his white, even teeth. "I found him in yuh waitin' on Sweet when I come. But Mr. Hardy don't cuff me round de way Sweet do Billy. *He* don't think nothin' o' takin' a stick to dat half-witted boy when he git mad. It's scan'lous."

It appeared from July's remarks to Ted, while Billy still questioned Hubert, that "Sweet"—a curious illustration of the adhesiveness of Cracker nursery nicknames—was second only to Buck in importance and influence among the slackers. Yet Sweet was not liked, being often sullen and ill-tempered, while Buck, the "cock of the walk," a great stalwart fellow with a waste of muscle and a kindly disposition, was generally popular.

The tramp of approaching feet was now heard and July turned hurriedly to the fire, where he had been frying cornbread. A heavy young man advanced out of the darkened woods, a rifle over his arm, followed by two other young men carrying a deer suspended from a stick which ran across their shoulders. Three dogs trotted into the fire-lit circle ahead of the hunting party. The two burdened men threw the deer down on a carpet of palmetto fans and at once began to skin it, merely glancing once or twice at the strange boys. The leading hunter, who, according to July's whisper, was Sweet Jackson, betrayed curiosity.

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"Who-all's this?" he inquired gruffly, approaching the fire. "Billy, git me some water quick. Whur did you boys come from?"

Ted briefly explained, but Sweet Jackson did not appear to be quite satisfied, a gleam of suspicion showing in his eyes as they remained fixed upon Ted's uniform.

"What's them clothes you got on?" he asked, and when the boy had explained he was mysteriously informed in a voice suggestive of menace: "If they sent you in the Oke-fi-noke to find our camp and go back and tell 'em, they played thunder."

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Another party of hunters now came out of the dark woods, exhibiting an otter skin as their single but valuable prize. Among these was Buck Hardy, who stood in the background only long enough to hear the outline of the boys' story and then approached them, his manner quite friendly.

"How you come on, boys?" he asked, extending his hand to Ted. "This one"—as he turned, smiling, to Hubert—"is as rosy as a little gal."

Hubert was highly indignant at this, but both he and Ted felt intuitively that the "cock of the walk" would prove their best friend in the camp. As he questioned them and appeared to be satisfied with their straightforward answers, they observed him narrowly. He was fully six feet tall and evidently an uncommonly muscular and powerful man. But what attracted the boys was his atmosphere of quiet resolution and the kindly expression of his eyes. They wondered that such a man, who looked brave if he was not, should be a hiding slacker.

Meanwhile July had been busy frying thin strips of fresh venison steak, and now announced that supper was ready. The slackers thereupon took their places round the fire, and the boys had abundant opportunity to study the faces of all—an inspection that, except in one or two instances, found little that was reassuring. Ted and Hubert were politely invited by Buck to join in the feast, but, having already eaten their fill, accepted only a cup of coffee. [Pg 62]

The hapless Billy, who had taken the liberty of appeasing his hunger before supper was ready, now lay on the grass, reciting in a sort of sing-song: "Mena, mino, mo; ketch a nigger by the toe, if he hollers let him go." This was followed by: "Quemo, quimo, dilmo, day; rick, stick, pomiddle, dido—Sally broke the paddle over Mingo's head." The childish mind of the young man seemed to delight in nursery rhymes. He was beginning, "One-two, buckle my shoe—three-four, open the door," etc., when Sweet Jackson called his name roughly and sent him on an errand.

"What's the news about the war?" asked Buck Hardy of Ted, as the slackers lighted their pipes and settled into comfortable lounging positions about the fire.

Ted responded eagerly, describing the situation as he understood it and showing that the outlook was not as promising as it had been. He indicated that Russia had dropped out and was "no good any more," that Italy was hard pressed, that France was wearing out, and that England's safety was threatened by Germany's submarines. [Pg 63]

"It depends on the United States," the boy declared. "We've got to end this war. We've got to be in a big hurry to put two million soldiers in the field, and every able-bodied young man is needed." Then, his zeal overcoming his prudence, he excitedly added: "I don't see how you men can stay here in this swamp at such a time. I—I—I'd be *ashamed!*"

Buck Hardy winced. Sweet Jackson sat erect with a threatening look. The other slackers shifted their positions uneasily and frowned, some of them uttering low ejaculations of astonishment. July paused in his noisy scraping of a pot and stood at attention. Hubert nudged Ted warningly and urged him in a whisper to hold his tongue.

"Who's ashamed!" cried Sweet Jackson derisively. "I ain't, for one. 'Tain't none of my quiltin'. What them Germans ever done to *me*? I never heard tell of 'em till lately." [Pg 64]

"You'll hear of 'em a plenty if they ever get this country," said Ted, shaking off Hubert's hand. The boy was too excited and eager to speak his mind to count the costs. "They'll rob you of every dollar, and if you don't walk the line they chalk you'll be shot in your tracks. They haven't had a chance yet to do anything to *you*. The thing to think about is what they've done to other countries and what they intend to do to ours if they can. Do you want them to give Texas and a half dozen more States out that way to Mexico, as the Kaiser promised to do, if Mexico would help him conquer this country?"

"Texas is a fur ways, and big enough to take care of itself, too," said Sweet, serenely indifferent.

"That's a fine way to look at it!" Ted was quick to retort, scorn in his tone. "Will your right hand feel that way if somebody walks up and whacks off your left?"

"They could never do it," spoke up Buck Hardy quietly. "The Germans nor nobody else could ever take this country." [Pg 65]

"That depends on what sort of a fight we put up and how quick we are about it," insisted Ted. "I read the papers a lot, and listen to men talk, too, and sometimes it looks as if even England may have to give in. If the Germans get England and the British fleet, what will happen then? Why, they'll get Canada, of course, and get ready to invade us anywhere across a three-thousand mile border line. *Then* we'll have it!"

"Canada and New York and Ohio and Chicago is a fur ways," remarked Sweet, yawning. "If the Germans do get 'em, what's that to us 'way down h-yuh?"

"What's that to *us* if the richest part of our country falls into the hands of the enemy!" cried Ted, losing his patience and with it all sense of prudence. "You make me sick. As I was about to say just now, it all depends on how many of us go out and fight and how many of us go and hide in a swamp."

Again Buck Hardy winced, and all the lounging slackers sat up, startled, staring at Ted as if scarcely able to believe that they had heard aright. As a general murmuring began, Sweet Jackson leaped to his feet. [Pg 66]

"Billy, go get me a big switch," he ordered. "I've got to give that sassy boy a good frailin'. He's too big for his breeches. I aim to teach him a lesson right now."

"No, you won't," said Buck Hardy, who had also risen to his feet. "I like that boy. I like his spunk. And anybody who lays a hand on him has got me to whip. I put you all on notice," he concluded, turning from the furious but perceptibly checked Jackson and sweeping an eye over the seated slackers.

"Well, Buck Hardy," argued Sweet in a vain attempt to disguise his surrender, "if you're goin' to play the fool in this thing you'll be sorry."

"Aw, set down and let the boy talk," said Buck, resuming his own seat on the grass. "You don't have to agree with him. Let him talk; it's interestin'. Go on, kid."

But Ted seemed to think that he had said enough for the present, and for once he was not ready to speak. Buck Hardy himself broke the silence that followed.

"There's another thing I want to say," he announced. "I ain't in this swamp because I'm a-scared to fight. If they'd a let me alone, it would a' been all right, but when they up and passed a force-law, draftin' everybody whether or no, I got mad." [Pg 67]

Then Ted found his voice, opening his mouth to speak impetuously, but Hubert grabbed him by the arm to check him and this time the younger boy would not be denied.

"Hush!—don't!" Hubert whispered urgently. "Don't tell him he was free to enlist and try to put him in a hole. He's our *friend*."

Ted saw the force of this in time and shut off his coming flood words, saying only:

"I didn't think you were afraid, Mr. Hardy. And it is very good of you to be willing for me to speak out, and I thank you very much."

Then the "cock of the walk" himself seemed to think that it would be better to change the subject, for he began to speak about an interesting incident of the day's hunting. But the conversation soon dragged, the slackers yawning drowsily. One by one they rose and disappeared, until only Buck, Sweet and the two boys were left by the fire. Finally Sweet rose, saying:

"What you aim to do with them boys to-night, Buck? We got to keep our eye on them boys." [Pg 68]

"They'll sleep with me," was the answer.

Shortly afterward Buck Hardy lighted a torch and bade the boys follow him. He led them beneath the curious log house standing so high in the air—a precaution against snakes in summer—and climbed by a ladder through a square opening in the floor. Passing the sleeping men, whose faces even in the case of the least pleasing seemed softened in slumber, Hardy led the way to the extreme end of the room. Giving the torch to Ted, he scattered and broadened his really comfortable bed of leaves and Spanish moss so as to make room for the two boys between himself and the wall. There appeared to be no window in all the structure, but apparently sufficient air entered between the logs of the walls and through the wide door in the floor.

After the light was put out Ted recalled Sweet Jackson's "We got to keep our eye on them boys," with its suggestion of possible captivity at least for a time; but both he and Hubert were too tired to speculate or worry about their situation, and they soon forgot everything in sound sleep. [Pg 69]

VII

WHEN Ted and Hubert awoke next morning they were alone in the sleeping-loft. Descending the ladder, they found July at the fire with breakfast awaiting them; and after they had washed their hands and faces, the negro pouring water for them, they ate heartily. It appeared that all but two or three of the slackers had already gone off to their traps, or hunting, and even these two or three were nowhere to be seen just now.

As the boys breakfasted, it was noticeable that July's manner toward Ted was markedly respectful and that his eye frequently rested upon the Boy Scout uniform. Suddenly the young negro stood still in front of Ted and thus addressed him:

"Hubut tole me las' night de President 'p'int you dispatch carrier. Did de President sen' you in dis swamp to git after dese slackers, too?"

"Of course not."

"Did Guv'nor Dorsey sen' you?"

"No."

"Did Judge Ridgway sen' you?"

"No."

"Den, how come you talk so uppity, like a man wid de law on he side and ain't a-scared o' [Pg 70]

nobody?"

"I don't know, July," replied Ted, amused, smiling, yet serious. "When I get started I'm so interested that I forget to be scared."

"Well, you sho is a *man*, if you is des a boy. You sho is a cap'n. Dey ought to call you 'Cap'n Ted.'" The young negro's wonder and admiration were manifest.

"That's very nice of you, July," stammered Ted, embarrassed and blushing.

"You sho did talk up to dem white mens. You didn't leave 'em a leg to stand on."

"How about *you*?" asked Ted, with a twinkle in his eye. "Have you got any more legs than they have?"

July guffawed loudly, enjoying the joke at his own expense. "Who, me?" he laughed again. "I's ready to go to de waw if dey promus to put me where dem Germans can't p'int a gun at me." [Pg 71]

Ted and Hubert laughed heartily, vastly amused, and the latter said: "Don't you think all slackers are as ready as that?"

"I got sump'n to tell you," said July, hastening to change an embarrassing subject. "Dem young white mens hole a meetin' dis mawnin' and dey voted on what to do about you boys. I couldn't hear much o' dey talk, but I think dey voted Mr. Buck Hardy down."

"But I thought you said he was the 'cock of the walk,' and he certainly stood them all down last night," commented Ted.

"He sho is de cock o' de walk when it come to fightin'," said July, "but when it come to votin' he ain't got but one vote. Hush! H-yuh he is now."

Buck Hardy had come out of the woods, and, pausing at the edge of the clearing, he now called Ted to him.

"Well, what you boys aim to do?" he asked in a friendly way, as Ted joined him.

"I'll tell you what I'd *like* to do," said Ted earnestly, encouraged by his tone, "and that is, persuade you, and as many of the rest as I could, to go out of this swamp and be drafted for the war." [Pg 72]

Buck Hardy laughed outright, but there was no unfriendliness in his merriment. "You've laid out to do a pretty big job of work, kid," he said; "most too big, I reckon. Better give it up. Better jes' stay h-yer a while with us and learn to hunt."

"I wouldn't mind staying a while if—if there was any chance of——"

"But there ain't, son; so you'd better not bother your head about it. And I reckon you'll have to put up with our company a while. We talked it over this mornin' and took a vote. We agreed when we come in h-yer to decide things by vote. I was for takin' you boys out to-day and puttin' you on the trail home, but the fellers wouldn't hear to it. Al Peters was the only one who agreed with me, and *he* wasn't willin' to let you boys go unless you promised on yer honor to say nothin' about us when you got home."

In great excitement Ted was about to declare that nothing could ever induce him to be silent in order to shield fugitive slackers, but Buck went on speaking before the imprudent words were uttered, and after reflection the boy decided that it would be wiser not to make such a declaration until he had to. [Pg 73]

"You see," Buck continued, "the boys is afraid the sheriff will send a posse in h-yer and take us out and prosecute us. So there's nothin' for you and Hubert to do but stay h-yer a while and get all the fun you can. Maybe I can win the boys over to my thinkin' in a week's time. I'll try. The truth is, I don't think there's very much danger in letting you go even if you did tell on us, for there's too much goin' on now for the county to take the trouble to send a posse away in this swamp jes' to get eight men drafted. But the boys has voted and it stands, as I tell you. I want to say another thing, kid," added Buck, after a slight pause: "I want you to feel free, and I like to hear you talk about the war, but you must be careful not to step on the boys' toes too hard. I don't want a fight on my hands."

"I hardly know what to say—I'll have to think," said Ted, lifting his troubled eyes to the big slacker's face; "but I'm very much obliged to *you*, Mr. Hardy. I think you are just splendid, even if you are a——" [Pg 74]

The boy stopped, confused, dropping his eyes.

"That's all right, kid," said Buck, patting Ted's shoulder in a kindly way. "Now you just go and enjoy yourself, and maybe everything will come out all right."

Buck Hardy turned abruptly and swung off into the woods. Ted returned slowly to the fire, where, with a very serious face, he announced to Hubert the fact of their captivity. The younger boy's grip on his lachrymal ducts was never firm and the tears now ran down his cheeks in a steady stream as he sat on the grass by silent Ted.

"I want to go home," he wailed.

"I think dat's a shame," said July, promptly taking the side of the boys.

"Don't cry, Hu," said Ted. "It will come out all right. We'll stay a while, and then if they don't let us go, we'll run away and go anyhow."

"Maybe I kin help you git off," proposed July, standing in front of the seated boys, his black face full of sympathy. "If I kin, I will. But you mustn't tell dem white mens on me."

The half-witted Billy now appeared from the direction of the boat-landing, and, seeing Hubert's tears, he seemed to be much concerned. He had taken a fancy to Hubert. Dropping into a seat by the grieving boy, he put a hand on his knee and asked indignantly:

"Who been whippin' you?"

"Nobody. It isn't that."

"Well, don't cry. If you don't cry, maybe I'll take you to see son."

"You haven't a son!" said Hubert, smiling through his tears.

"Wait till I show him to you, and you'll see."

"Who is he?" asked Hubert, drying his eyes.

"Never you mind," answered Billy, his sudden look of cunning losing itself in an explosion of mirth. "You'll find out when I take you to him. You'll know him when you see him."

After this cryptic announcement Billy would say no more about his "son" and sought to entertain Hubert with recitations of nursery rhymes.

The boys lounged about the camp for an hour, discussing their situation in low asides while intermittently conversing with July and Billy. Then Buck Hardy reappeared and began to talk amicably with Ted and Hubert about hunting, evidently trying to interest them in sport. He told them that he and his associates depended more on their traps than on their guns in their business of securing salable pelts, stating that many traps had been set here and there on the island and in the surrounding swamp. It was while this conversation was in progress that Sweet Jackson entered the clearing and called out:

"You goin' to use July this mornin', Buck?"

"Not partic'lar," was the indifferent response.

"Well, I can use him and I'd like to borry him. I'm goin' to build me a permieter shelter for my own hides, so I kin spread 'em out more."

Buck having consented and turned again to the boys, the "borrowed" July, much disgusted, was led away in company with Billy. The business required of them was the cutting down of one six-inch sapling for posts and several two-inch saplings wherewith to frame the slanting roof which these posts would support. This done, they must gather hundreds of palmetto fans and thatch the roof, all under the direction of an ill-tempered boss.

The three had been thus engaged scarcely half an hour when Buck, Ted and Hubert, at the camp, heard screams and the sound of blows. A few steps toward the spot selected for the palmetto shelter revealed the cause of the uproar. Sweet Jackson was whipping Billy with a long supple stick, and, as he laid on more heavily, in spite of his victim's piteous cries, the boys drew near in horror, followed more slowly by Buck.

"Stop that!" shouted Ted.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Smarty!" said Sweet, pausing to look up. "I won't stop till I git ready, and if you don't keep your mouth shut, I'll wallop you in the bargain."

"You coward!" cried Ted. "You ought to be ashamed to beat that poor half-witted——"

Sweet suddenly let Billy go and turned upon Ted with uplifted stick.

"Hit him if you dare!" said Buck, stepping up to them.

"Tain't none o' your business, Buck Hardy!" cried Sweet, furious.

"It's everybody's business when you jump on that poor boy Billy. You know he ain't accountable."

"I reckon I've got a right to thrash him if he won't work. I kin hardly make him lift his hand to do a thing, and when he does work he works so powerful sorry——"

"I thought you was more of a man, Sweet Jackson."

"I depend I'm man enough to give you all you want!" shouted the infuriated Jackson, with a threatening movement.

Buck caught one end of the uplifted stick; it broke between them and they closed in hand-to-hand combat. Apparently they were well matched physically and the fight promised to be a long one. As Ted and Hubert watched it, absorbed, July stepped between them and whispered:

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They closed in hand-to-hand combat

"If you boys want to try to run away, now de time! Nobody in camp but dem two fightin' mens. If you git dem boats, maybe you kin git away. You kin take two boats and I kin hide t'other one, and den dey can't foller you."

"Yes, let's run down to the boats," agreed Hubert. "Come on! I want to get away from this place!"

Hubert had already moved to follow the negro, but Ted hesitated. He did not like to run away while Buck was fighting in his cause as well as Billy's, and the fight itself drew his eye compellingly. Moreover, he really preferred to stay at least a day or two and look for opportunities to talk further to the slackers about the war and their duty. And when they did run away, he thought they ought to make careful plans beforehand, providing themselves with food for the journey, for one thing.

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But Hubert and July, who were now twenty feet away, beckoned him frantically, and, thus urged, Ted reluctantly followed. The three then raced on their way, pursued by the now smiling Billy who apparently thought that some sort of game was proposed. Passing the camp fire, July caught up a tin bucket of sliced venison, then darted along the winding path through the swamp cane toward the boat landing.

Racing along this same path a few moments later, Ted and Hubert halted suddenly at sight of the negro returning.

"De boats all gone," announced July. "Dem mens must 'a took 'em to go to dey traps in de swamp."

Ted did not share Hubert's deep disappointment and smiled at the giggling Billy in the moment of blank pause.

"Let's hurry back, then," he said, breaking the silence, "so they won't know what we tried to do."

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The run to the boat landing and back, a distance of little more than two hundred yards, had scarcely consumed five minutes, and the four spectators were again on the scene of the fight before the combatants had noticed their absence. They were just in time to see Sweet Jackson strike the ground heavily beneath the weight of his antagonist, who now partly rose, placing his knee upon the breast of the vanquished.

"You got enough?" shouted Buck. "If you ain't, say so, and I'll give you a whole bellyful."

Sweet said nothing, but ceased to struggle, whereupon Buck let go his hold and rose.

"I'll git even with you yet, Buck Hardy," declared the defeated man with black looks after he

had painfully gathered himself up and was limping off into the woods.

The victor disdained a retort, and, turning, walked back to the camp, where he was followed by the boys and the negro. At the noon hour Sweet Jackson had not reappeared and it was evident that the work on his "permeter" shelter would not be resumed that day.

Assured of this by the time dinner had been served and his subsequent work about the camp had been finished, July proposed a job of another kind. [Pg 81]

"Mr. Hardy," he said, "kin I take Cap'n Ted wid me to build dat turkey pen dis evenin' an' lef Hubut yuh to play wid Billy?"

"Sure—if he wants to go," consented Buck. "I think I'll take 'em both on a deer hunt tomorrow."

On their way to the selected site of the turkey pen, about half a mile away in the pine woods near the border of the swamp, July broke a brief silence as follows:

"A colored lady tole me dem Germans eats people. You reckon dat's so?"

"Of course not," said Ted, "but they've done things in this war just as bad."

Having arrived at the chosen spot and cleared a space about six feet square, July dug a trench from its center to a point some four feet without, baited it with shelled corn and bridged it over with sticks. He then cut down a number of pine saplings and employed sections of these in building a pen about four feet high around the cleared space, afterward covering the top with sections of the same and weighting them down with heavy "lightwood knots." Lastly a few grains of corn were dropped at intervals from the mouth of the tunnel to a point several yards distant, so that wild turkeys feeding in that neighborhood would be attracted toward the snare. July explained that when these wild fowl entered by way of the tunnel and ate up the bait they would merely struggle to break through the well-lighted cracks of the trap, forgetting entirely the shadowed path to freedom at their feet. [Pg 82]

As he worked, receiving some assistance from the interested boy, the negro talked and asked questions about other matters.

"When de time come for you boys to run away," he said once, "maybe I'll go wid you."

"That would be fine," said Ted, "because you could show us the way."

"I gittin' tired o' dis job yuh in dis camp," July continued. "Dem white mens don't pay me all dey promus, and I don't like de way some of 'em cusses me aroun', speshly dat Sweet Jackson. Mr. Hardy pay me his part, but he can't collec' a cent o' my money fum some of 'em. If it wasn't for dat waw, I'd go out o' dis swamp wid you tomorrow. Cap'n Ted, if I was to go out wid you, you reckon dem draft-bode people would grab me right up an' sen' me to de waw?" [Pg 83]

"They'd examine you and might send you to a training camp, and you might even go to France," answered Ted, "but I don't think they'd ever put you on the fighting line. You see, in this big war there's a lot to do besides fighting and the thing is to find out what a man can do best. They might just make you a cook behind the lines, and pay you wages, too."

"Gee! dat 'ud suit me grand," cried July joyfully. "I'd love to cross de big water an' see all dere is to see—if only dey don't put me where dem Germans kin shoot me. You think I kin 'pend on dat, Cap'n Ted?"

"I don't know for certain, July, but I think so."

When they turned up at camp toward sundown, it was evident from their faces that both Ted and July were in a hopeful frame of mind. The one was glad because he had made two useful friends in a single day; the other was elated because he indulged in dreams of securing war adventure without incurring the risk of war's penalties. [Pg 84]

VIII

TED hoped that the war would be discussed around the camp fire that night, but he was disappointed. Sweet Jackson turned up only in time to eat his supper and went immediately to bed. The other men appeared to be unusually tired and followed as soon as they had smoked a single pipe. Nevertheless Ted was nearer his heart's desire than he supposed.

About two o'clock in the morning a large animal prowled into or near the camp, doubtless attracted by the refuse of the deer's carcass; and all hands were roused by the furious baying of the dogs. Snatching up their guns, the slackers to the last man sallied out and followed in pursuit. Billy ran after them, and Ted, Hubert and July were left standing over the fire, now stirred to a bright blaze.

The eager hunters were hardly two hundred yards away when Hubert looked across the fire at Ted and said: [Pg 85]

"Now's our chance to get off in the boats. We could do it—if July would go with us. You said he was thinking of it."

"Yes, I been thinkin' 'bout it," admitted July, his manner doubtful and hesitating, "but on account o' dat waw I ain't made up my mind yit."

"And, anyhow, in the middle of the night is a bad time," said Ted. "We're not ready either."

At this moment they heard the sound of footsteps and a voice shouted: "Buck says you boys come, too, and see the fun. And, July, you better bring some vittles."

The young man who had hurriedly returned on this errand had halted as soon as he was within call, and now waited impatiently to be joined by the boys and the negro, evidently afraid that he might miss seeing the game run to earth. His "Hurry up" was so frequent and so insistent that the boys joined him without a moment's delay and July, shaking his head, followed without the "vittles."

The cause of the excitement, which proved to be a bear, had beaten a hasty retreat toward the center of the island, and there, being hard pressed by the dogs, climbed a tall pine. By the time the hunters reached the spot the animal was at rest among the clustering boughs at the very top. Nothing could be done now until daylight, and the men proceeded to make themselves comfortable. Several fires were built, forming a circle around the tree, in order to make sure that the bear would remain where it was in case the watchers should fall asleep.

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Then July and two men were sent back to camp to bring food and corn beer of the slackers' own brewing. The besiegers threw themselves down in comfortable, lounging attitudes around the largest fire and were disposed to have a merry time during the three hours of waiting. Ted and Hubert seated themselves on the grass near Buck Hardy and watched with absorbed attention all that took place. The treeing of a bear in a tall pine at such a time of night was remarked upon as a very unusual occurrence, and several declared that they had never seen the like.

"I tell you the old Oke-fi-noke is the place to run up on curious things," said Buck Hardy musingly, after the men sent to camp had returned with their loads. "I've seen a heap o' strange things in this swamp. I reckon you boys wouldn't believe me if I was to tell you I saw a catfish whip a moccasin in h-yer one time."

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The men laughed incredulously, but demanded the particulars. Buck took a drink of corn beer from a gourd passed him by July, and then asked his nearest neighbor, Al Peters, for "a chaw o' tobacco," before he proceeded to satisfy their curiosity by telling his story. It was, in substance, that he had once seen a moccasin spring upon a catfish in a shallow lagoon of the swamp and promptly get "whipped." That is to say, disastrous consequences resulted from the snake's attempt to swallow its prey. For the fish immediately "popped" its formidable fins through the reptile's throat, and all efforts on the part of the latter to disgorge its victim proved futile.

"That moccasin reared mightily and was as lively a snake as you ever laid eyes on," Buck declared with a laugh, "but it bit off more'n it could chaw that time."

He wound up by saying that the snake crawled off rapidly out of sight; but several hours later, returning past the same neighborhood, he found it lying dead, the tail of the fish still protruding from its mouth and the fins visibly transfixing its neck. Finding that the catfish was still alive, Buck took the trouble of liberating it, then watched it revive in its native element and finally swim away in the lagoon.

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Buck's listeners had expected a jest, but they seemed to accept the story as matter of fact—no one presuming to give expression to doubts, if any were felt. This was the beginning of much spinning of Okefinokee yarns, some of them even more remarkable. Finally Buck turned to Ted and said:

"Well, kid, what's the strangest thing you've seen in the Oke-fi-noke?"

The boy would have liked to reply that the strangest, most unaccountable, most infamous sight he had seen in the great swamp was a party of able-bodied young men who, instead of serving their country by training to fight the Germans, were deliberate and confessed slackers and fugitives from the law of the land. But he hesitated to go so far and only said:

"I haven't seen as much of it as the rest of you, but the strangest story about it I ever heard was the one my Uncle Walter said the Indians used to tell a hundred years ago."

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"Let's hear it," invited several.

So Ted related the old Indian legend which pictured the remote interior of the Okefinokee as a high and dry land, and one of the most blissful spots of earth, where dwelt beautiful women called daughters of the Sun. Some warriors of the Creek nation, lost in the interminable bogs and jungles, and confronted with starvation and despair, were once on a time rescued and lovingly cared for by these radiant creatures. And ere the lost warriors were led out of the confusing labyrinths and sent on their way, they were fed bountifully with dates, oranges, and corn-cake. There may have been other good things to eat, but Ted's memory could vouch only for the dates, oranges, and corn-cake. He remembered that his uncle had spoken skeptically about the dates and disrespectfully of the corn-cake, which latter, though a good and useful thing in its way, was too "common" for celestial ladies who, in all other tales of the same type, were in the habit of feeding on ambrosia. Uncle Walter conceded, however, that the maize was probably regarded by the Creek Indian as one of the most precious gifts of the gods and, therefore, not unworthy of a place in this legend of the daughters of the Sun who dwelt in the great Okefinokee.

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This story, with Judge Ridgway's comment added, was over the heads of the uneducated young backwoodsmen who listened with heavy gravity, but several of them expressed polite appreciation of it and spoke in complimentary terms of Ted's recital.

The fires were now replenished, more corn-beer was imbibed, fresh pipes were lighted, and the yarn-spinners began another series devoted to the "tight scrapes" in which they had found themselves occasionally in the Okefinokee. One young man told of a deadly hand-to-hand conflict with a wounded bear; another of a thrilling unarmed fight with a wild-cat; a third related how he had once sunk down suddenly to his armpits in the great marsh called the "prairie," how he had saved himself by grasping the growth on a small tussock, and how he was confronted there, before he could drag himself out, by an angry moccasin, which luckily he shot. And so on.

When this yarn-spinning began to languish for lack of startling material, Buck Hardy asked Ted if he did not have something interesting to tell about his and Hubert's struggles on their way through the swamp to the island. In relating the Indian legend Ted had kept his seat on the grass, but now, as if accepting this invitation, he rose to his feet, his eye sweeping the faces of the eight assembled young "backwoods Crackers," all evidently more or less ignorant and uneducated, and—as Ted thought—sorely in need of instruction, especially on the subject of the great war. Some of them had read a weekly paper occasionally, but most of them had not even availed themselves of that limited source of information. This Ted knew from inquiries he had made. Did this not account, at least in part, for their indifference, and if they were told more about the war, might it not be possible to wake them up? Thus Ted had reasoned as he sat listening, observing and awaiting his opportunity.

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"Gentlemen," he politely began, "what happened to us coming through the swamp is hardly worth telling about. I'd much rather talk about the greatest and most terrible war in history, and I hope you are willing. For everything—the whole world's future as well as our own country's safety—depends on the way it ends. I don't think you know enough about it. If you did, you wouldn't be here to-night. You would be in the training camps wearing the soldier's uniform."

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"Shut up!"

The voice was Sweet Jackson's, and his demand was echoed by several others.

"No, don't shut him up," shouted Buck Hardy. "Let him talk. *I'm* not afraid to listen to him. I'm man enough to know my business and stick to it even if a boy who can talk fine does come along. Go on, kid."

This quelled the disturbance, and Ted continued:

"This war's got to end in complete victory for the United States and her allies, for if the Germans win, they will ride over us all rough-shod and make us no better than slaves, just as they have done in Belgium and wherever they have marched their armies. We must win, as the President says, so that the world can be made safe for Christian ideals and for democracy."

"Stop a minute, kid," said Buck. "You are handin' out some pretty big words. I reckon we all know what Christian means, but a bunch of us may not be quite so sure about 'de-mocracy.'"

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"Democracy," explained Ted, "is free government by and for the people, instead of high-and-mighty government by one man like the German Kaiser. You will see better what we'll be up against if the Germans get this country," the boy continued, "if I tell you about some of the things they have done and some of the things they want to do. After training for this war fifty years, they jumped on Europe, taking everybody by surprise. They have already conquered Belgium, Servia and Rumania, and they hold northern France, part of Russia and part of Italy. They want to take all the rest of Europe and then conquer the United States. They have said so. Some of 'em even say they ought to force the German language as well as German rule on the world, and they are so crazy with conceit that they say they have a right to do so because they are so much finer people than the people of other countries. Some of them even claim that the Germans have been divinely appointed to rule all nations."

"A little bit stuck on themselves, ain't they?" interjected Buck derisively.

"Why, I read," continued Ted, "of how one of their big preachers told his congregation: 'The German soul is God's soul; it shall and will rule over mankind.' And the Kaiser talks about 'the German God.'"

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"You reckon they're such blame' fools as all that?" questioned Al Peters doubtfully.

"Germany is a fur ways and tales are pretty apt to grow as they travel," remarked a young man known as "Bud" Jones. "I know how a tale can grow in ten miles, let alone all the way across the ocean. It puts me in mind of the time Wash' Johnson was up before court."

Jones then related with humorous exaggerations how the story of a very small offense, on its eventful and roundabout journey "from Possum Trot to Crossways," became almost a murder in the first degree. "And when all the truth came out," he concluded, "there was jes' *nothin'* to it."

Several others recalled amusing anecdotes illustrating the powers of a rumor to expand enormously as it passed from mouth to mouth, and the effect was such that poor Ted saw his opportunity disappear for the time. He was too inexperienced a speaker to find a way to regain command of the situation, but he made an effort. He was further embarrassed as he took note

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that clumps of palmettos and scrub-oak thickets under the tall pines were becoming clearly outlined at a distance from the dying fires, showing that day had dawned and the time left him was short.

"But I haven't told you *anything* yet," he insisted, as soon as he was able to put in a word. "And it's all *true*. Our ambassadors and consuls and big men who have come back from Europe say the Germans have said and done even worse things than have been reported. If you would just let me tell you some of the things I know——"

"Can't be done now, kid; it's daylight," interrupted Buck Hardy, moving to rise and looking around into the woods from which the darkness was rapidly lifting.

All the loungers about the fire now sprang to their feet, turning their eyes toward the top of the pine wherein the bear had taken refuge, and noisily proposing to be the first to bag the game. As soon as there was sufficient light to outline the black bulky form among the high branches, the men opened fire, one at a time, and at the thirteenth shot the big game came tumbling down, striking the ground with great force.

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"I got him!" insisted several voices, but of course there was no means of determining which was the fatal shot.

The bear measured seven inches across the ball of the foot, three inches through the fat on the round, and the total weight was calculated at not less than four hundred pounds. The hide was carefully taken off and some pounds of the choicest meat were sliced to dry, but the bulk of the carcass was left where it was for the buzzards.

"I wish it could be shipped to the starving Belgians," said Ted, as he looked on, sorrowing to think of such waste at a time when economy and careful conservation of all food were urged upon the whole nation.

But nobody paid any attention to him, merriment and care-free indifference being the dominant note of the moment. When the sun was an hour high all hands, in great good humor, returned to camp and, to the accompaniment of boastful hunting stories, partook heartily of the hot breakfast which by this time July had prepared.

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IX

AFTER breakfast had been eaten and the eight slackers had scattered, going about the day's business, Ted sat disconsolately by the camp fire, watching July as he "cleared up" and talking intermittently with Hubert about the incidents of the night.

"I'm afraid I can't do anything with those slackers," said Ted, his tone as well as his words indicating great discouragement. "I thought I might be able to wake them up, but——"

"Well, you put up a good talk anyhow," said Hubert, frankly outspoken, as usual, in his admiration of Ted's oratorical powers, adding, however, with his habitual pessimism: "But I knew it wouldn't do any good. What do *they* care? All they want to do is to look out for number one."

At this moment Billy trotted out of the woods and called Hubert aside. The half-witted young man leaned toward Hubert and said to him in a low voice, with the air of one conferring a priceless favor:

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"Would you like to come now and see son?"

"Who is 'son'?" asked Hubert skeptically yet curiously. "Yes, I'd like to see him."

"Come on, then."

Ted had fallen into troubled reverie and July was engaged in vigorously scraping one of his pots, so neither took note of Hubert's departure in the company of the half-wit.

Billy, who had fished out of his pocket a small wriggling water frog and carried it in his hand, led the way through the woods about a quarter of a mile, halting at last near the clay-covered roots of a large pine that had fallen during a wind storm. At the base of this was a small round hole in the ground, beside which Billy fell on his knees and began repeating in a strange, monotonous, coaxing voice:

"Doodle, doodle, come out your hole! Doodle, doodle, come out your hole!"

As he heard the mystic words supposed to be potent to call forth from ambush the ant-lion, which crafty insect prepares over its nest a kind of pitfall for ants, Hubert stepped back, protesting:

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"You know that's too big for a doodle-hole; that's a snake's hole."

Billy made no reply, continuing his recitation.

"I hear him a-comin'," he said softly, at last. Then, in a gentle, caressing voice, he called down the hole: "Come on, son; come on, son."

In a few moments a large rattlesnake glided out of the hole and seized the frog from Billy's fingers. Hubert backed rapidly away and sprang upon a log, but Billy did not move from his place and betrayed no fear whatever.

"Come away from there!" cried Hubert in amazement. "You Billy—that snake will bite you!"

"Son won't bite me," replied Billy, confidently. "Son knows me. Don't be a-scared, boy; son won't hurt you if I tell him not to."

So this was "son"—the great mystery which poor Billy had seemed so to delight in!

"If you don't come away, I won't stay here," cried Hubert urgently.

He was alarmed for Billy's safety, fearing that as soon as the frog had been swallowed the reckless half-wit would be bitten. He thought he ought to look for a big stick and try to kill the snake, but made no move to do so, fearing the consequences of resistance from Billy. [Pg 100]

After protesting and begging for some time in vain, Hubert jumped down from the log and hurried back to camp. By the time he had told the story to Ted and July, the witless snake-charmer himself appeared unhurt.

"Lem me tell you one thing, Hubert," cautioned July: "you let dat Billy hoe his own row. Play wid him roun' dis camp, but don't go foolin' long wid him in dese woods. He ain't got good sense, and he'll git you in trouble sho's you born."

"He ought to be in a sanitarium," said Ted.

"Look yuh, Billy," cried July, as the half-wit approached, "ain't you got no better sense'n to prodjick wid a rattlesnake dat-a way?"

"What made you tell?" asked Billy reproachfully of Hubert.

"Dat snake goin' to bite you an' kill you," July warned urgently.

"Don't you fret," said Billy, giggling. "Son knows me."

Ted was reminded of the old saying that Providence takes care of fools and drunken men, but he also spoke in rebuke and warning, whereupon the disgusted Billy took himself off. [Pg 101]

"Cap'n Ted, you want to go fishin' wid me dis mawnin'?" asked July, and the boy promptly accepted the invitation.

The negro explained that Buck Hardy was willing for Ted to go if Hubert would stay around the camp and play with Billy. Apparently it was not as yet thought advisable to permit the two boys to go off on an excursion together, but no danger of attempted flight on the part of either was feared while they were separated.

"I don't want to 'play with Billy,'" protested Hubert indignantly. "But you go ahead, Ted, if you want to. I'll stay around camp. I want to look over that old paper and then take a nap. I'm sleepy—after last night."

So July got ready his fishing tackle and bait, and Ted followed him down to the landing. They took the smallest boat and, paddling and poling, slowly made their way against the usual obstructions toward a small lake in the flooded jungle to the right of the great marsh or "prairie."

After nearly an hour of hard work they reached their destination and threw out their lines, baited with wriggling worms, which, according to July, the black bass or "trout" often took "as fas' as you kin throw in." This morning, however, they appeared to be less hungry, and the fishermen waited some time for even a "bite," talking in low voices the while. During the hour that followed Ted caught one three-pounder and July landed two others not quite as large. July considered this very poor luck and complained that the catch was not "half a mess." It was time to return to camp, however, and they reluctantly drew in their lines. [Pg 102]

As they were following the boat-trail back to the island, Ted, who had brought his gun, stood up now and then and looked searchingly around, hoping to see something to shoot. In this way he caught sight of a flock of ducks swimming about in a little open pool to their left. He was quick to fire both barrels, the shock almost causing him to lose his equilibrium and tumble overboard. And when, with a great splashing and fluttering the flock rose, three ducks were left floating on the water. The boy shouted in his delight. [Pg 103]

"We'll have enough duck, if not enough fish," he said.

"If we kin git 'em," said July doubtfully.

A hard struggle resulted in bringing the bateau only within about twenty feet of the spot, and there it stalled, the crowding obstructions being apparently insurmountable. July reluctantly gave up, declaring that they would have to let the ducks "go." But tenacity of purpose was one of Ted's chief characteristics and he would not give up. His hunter's pride demanded the game and, besides, he insisted that it would never do to permit so much good food to be wasted.

It was a warm spring day, and, putting his hand into the water, Ted found it to be only agreeably cool. His decision was instantly made: he would have those ducks if he had to swim for them. Deaf to July's urgent warnings of the danger of alligators, moccasins, and what not, he

stripped to his shoes, and stepped out of the boat, surprised to find the water deeper than he had expected.

In addition to standing trees and shrubs of many sorts and sizes, the flooded swamp at this point was crowded with sunken logs, dead branches and here and there a dense growth of flags. But Ted, wading, slipping, falling, swimming, and battling manfully with the various difficulties, finally reached the goal and held in his grasp a foot of each of the three floating ducks. It was only when he turned to come back with his prizes that he became seriously embarrassed. He then stumbled, fell, and, as if his feet were caught or entangled in the sunken obstructions, failed to regain his upright position. His head even disappeared under the water, and it looked to July as if he had been drawn under by some unseen force.

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Fortunately the bateau, now lightened of a part of its load, drew less water, and could be forced forward with less difficulty. Exerting all his powers, the terrified negro made rapid headway and came to the rescue in time. While the struggling Ted still managed to hold his breath, he was seized, drawn out of the water, and lifted over the side of the boat, laughing as he kicked from him a mass of swamp weeds and mossy rotting branches in which his feet had been entangled. His body showed several red scratches, and he knew he had had a narrow escape, but he had succeeded and was happy.

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"I got 'em!" he shouted triumphantly. Then, sobering, he gratefully thanked the negro for his timely intervention and listened in a becoming manner to the scolding his recklessness invited.

"Git on your clothes quick," urged July. "I was most scared to death, you see me so. I wouldn't 'a' had you drown-ed for a thousand dollars. Mr. Hardy sho would tan my hide if I was to take you back to camp drown-ed. He think a heap o' you, Cap'n Ted. Dem yuther white mens all time complainin' 'bout you, but he shut 'em up an' tell 'em he sho aim to stan' by you."

"I think he's just fine—if he is in with a bad crowd."

"He sho is de bes' man o' de whole bunch."

"Maybe he didn't understand that he could have volunteered freely and enlisted in some branch of the service before he was drafted," suggested Ted. "That's the only way I can explain it."

"Maybe so," assented July, adding with a shrewd shake of the head: "But you better not push him too hard, Cap'n Ted."

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After the noon meal at the camp Buck Hardy kept his promise and took the two boys on a deer hunt. This was a more easy and comfortable expedition that Ted had expected. It was merely a matter of waiting and watching at a "stand" until there was a chance to shoot at a deer running by. The "still hunt" method, with its wearying efforts to sneak watchfully through the woods without making the slightest noise, was not attempted. Buck prepared only for a "deer drive." He first dispatched July with the dogs to the south end of the island, which was about four miles long, instructing him to go quietly with the dogs in leash. At the south end he was to untie them and start them running northward. Meanwhile, after giving the boys shells containing buck-shot, the "cock of the walk" leisurely selected a promising "stand" for each and took one for himself along the backbone of the island at the upper end.

The boys were instructed not to fire too quickly and be careful to take good aim. They at first waited and watched in great excitement, expecting every minute to have their first chance to bag noble game; then they calmed down and began to wonder if anything was really going to happen; and at last they looked wearily down the aisles of the open pine woods, their enthusiasm fast waning.

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In due time the distant baying of the dogs was heard, the sound drew nearer, and after a long while their loud yelping plainly showed that, though unseen by the boys, they were running past the immediate neighborhood. Later July himself was heard coming, his voice lifted in tireless repetition of a brief, chant-like sing-song of barbaric African origin, which rang pleasingly through the woods. But no frightened leaping deer was seen, and not a shot broke upon the air of the balmy afternoon. Then, finally, came Buck himself, to tell the boys, in great disappointment, that no game had been beaten out of the brush, and that it was all over for the time.

"I reckon they are off feedin' in the swamp shallows to-day," he said.

By the time the slackers had lit their pipes around the camp fire that night Ted had recovered from his disappointment and he casually remarked that, after all, he was glad they didn't get a deer.

"Did you hear what that boy said?" asked Al Peters, laughingly drawing general attention to Ted.

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"Of course, I would have enjoyed it," the boy explained, "but we don't need it for food, July says—I asked him—and it's a great pity to waste even an ounce of meat at such a time. The President and Mr. Hoover have asked everybody not to waste a scrap of food and not to eat any more than is actually necessary."

"Well, I'll be dog-on!" exclaimed Bud Jones, and the slackers in general looked their astonishment.

They had grown up to lavish feeding and wasteful methods in the handling of food. They had

never heard of anything else, except perhaps in the case of some "triflin'" white man too lazy to work or some poor negro in rags, and they wondered that such "meanness" could be recommended by the President of the United States. Some of them were even inclined to doubt Ted's word. There was a suggestion of scorn in Al Peters' tone as he asked:

"What for?—for goodness' sake!"

"Why, to stave off famine, or near-famine," explained Ted. "We've got to help feed our allies in Europe as well as ourselves. They are too busy fighting to be able to raise their usual crops and their supplies from other countries are cut very short. I read not long ago that the German submarines had sent three million pounds of bacon and four million pounds of cheese to the bottom of the sea in a single week."

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At this the uneducated young backwoodsmen who had been in hiding since the late spring of 1917 opened their eyes, several of them repeating the figures in astonishment.

"I heard tell of them submarines," one of them remarked. "They sneaks up on ships and shoots 'em from under the water."

"But why don't our people and our friends over the big water get after them sneakin' things and knock 'em out and stop it?" asked Bud Jones.

"We are doing all we can, and we are really doing a lot," said Ted. "Mr. Edison is working night and day on inventions and our destroyers are hunting submarines all the time, and they and the English destroyers bag a lot of them, too. They drop tremendous explosives where they see bubbles and it tears the submarine to pieces. But the Germans keep on building them very fast."

With an oath Buck Hardy expressed the earnest wish that "every one of them devilish water-snakes" might be blown up. Ted assured him that such a wish was very generally shared, remarking further in his own boyish way that German submarines were hated in America all the more because they virtually made war on the United States long before an actual and formal state of war existed. Then, returning to the subject under discussion, he added:

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"You see, there's nothing in history like this thing that has come upon the world. This great war touches everybody and everything, and we've all got to help in some way."

"Now he's got on the war again!" exclaimed Sweet Jackson, rising to his feet. "If you men had sense enough to listen to me, you'd shut him up."

Without waiting for a response the most unpopular member of the camping party spat in his disgust and walked off toward the sleeping loft.

"We've all got to help in some way," repeated Ted, taking no notice of the interruption,— "either by fighting, giving money, making munitions, supplying brains or skilled labor, raising crops, or by saving food. It's got to be done, or there's no telling what may happen."

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The boy was again advancing upon dangerous ground and a disturbed atmosphere was at once perceptible. The slackers were beginning to realize that the war was a bigger thing and much more exacting in its demands than they had supposed. But they had chosen their course and they did not wish to be reminded that duty called them. They shifted their positions uneasily, yawned, spoke of other things, remarked that they were sleepy, and one by one rose to their feet. Within a couple of minutes they had followed Sweet Jackson, only Buck Hardy, July and the two boys remaining by the fire.

The big slacker kept Ted there for an hour longer, asking questions and listening to the boy's replies. He seemed to forget to be ashamed of his ignorance in his eagerness for the latest information. Hubert said little and July said nothing, the eyes of both traveling back and forth from the face of Buck to the face of Ted and often betraying admiration for the latter.

"You certainly put up a good talk," said Hubert, as the boys lay down to sleep, and this time he even forgot to add: "But it won't do any good."

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X

THE slackers scattered about their business early next morning and the two boys were left alone in the camp with July, who had been ordered not to let them get out of his sight. The negro had glibly promised, but his sympathies were divided. He was still averse to being forced to go to the "waw," and to this extent he was still a confederate of the slackers, but he had developed such admiration and affection for "Cap'n Ted" that he was now almost as ready to do the boy's bidding as to respect the wishes of Buck Hardy himself.

So he was not disposed to follow his orders to the letter, and when an errand called him down to the boat-landing he left the boys alone without a word. He was hardly out of sight when Hubert became alert, looked around cautiously, and said to Ted:

"Last night I overheard one of the slackers speak of a jungle trail at the lower end of this island, and I think he meant a trail that leads all the way out of the swamp. Let's go and look for it—now

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that we've got a chance to walk off by ourselves."

Ted promptly agreed to this proposition, but said that he didn't want to run away yet. "Mr. Hardy is getting interested in the war," he explained, "and if we stay a few days longer I may be able to persuade——"

"Oh, shucks!" scoffed Hubert. "All the talking in the world will never do any good, as I've told you and told you."

"We'll see," said Ted hopefully. "In the meantime it will be a mighty good thing to find that trail and know where to make for when we are ready to start—if we do have to run away."

He caught up his gun as he spoke and they started off in a hurry, actually running the first two hundred yards in order to be out of sight before July reappeared.

They first walked about two miles down the backbone of the island, stopping to look into July's turkey-pen as they went and finding it as yet empty of feathered prisoners. They then decided to cut across to the swamp on the right and begin looking for the jungle trail. Their plan was to follow as nearly as possible the line of demarcation between the swamp proper and the higher ground, thus rounding the lower half of the island in the course of some hours and necessarily crossing the looked-for trail. [Pg 114]

To follow the island's rim was obviously the only way to make sure of a thorough search, but they found it easier to propose than to perform. Often a *détour* higher up or lower down the slope was necessary to avoid bogs, marshy tracts, impregnable clumps of fan-palmettos and tangled masses of brambles. And often the way was made difficult enough by reason of the old fallen logs thrown criss-cross or piled high by wind storms, by dense blackjack thickets, and by crowding swamp undergrowth. Once they penetrated a cane-brake through which they could scarcely have forced their way but for passages made by wild animals; for the tall strong reeds, which stood as straight as arrows, were for the most part hardly three inches apart. Even along the borders of the comparatively open pine land which formed the island they were forcibly reminded of what a wild and remote wilderness the interior of the Okefinokee really was. [Pg 115]

Several times they halted and carefully examined faint suggestions of a trail, soon pushing forward again unsatisfied. They had passed the lower end of the island and were returning up the left-hand side, fearing that their effort had been fruitless, when they at last came upon what Ted felt convinced was the object of their search.

Having followed the trail two or three hundred yards into the jungle, they retraced their steps to higher ground, after the wiser Ted had resolutely rejected Hubert's wild proposal that they push on toward freedom, unprepared as they were and at whatever risk. It was now near noon and high time to turn their faces toward camp, for they had already begun to feel sharp hunger. But they were tired after the long and rough tramp, and Hubert insisted on at least a short rest. So they lay down on the soft billowy wiregrass in a high and dry spot inclosed on three sides by tall clumps of palmettos.

Their rest was short indeed, for Hubert had hardly stretched himself out, yawning, when Ted heard a rustle in the grass on their left. One searching glance revealed what appeared to be a wild-cat, crouched within a few feet of them. As the startled boys sprang to their feet, the cat's hair stood on end, its eyes flashed with rage and it displayed its glistening teeth, uttering a low guttural growl. The creature had evidently been surprised close to its lair, as otherwise it would likely have made off without show of fight; plainly its back—of dark brownish gray mottled with black—was up in more than a literal sense. [Pg 116]

Ted caught up his gun and fired, but his hurried aim caused him to miss his mark even at such close quarters. Before he could shoot again the cat leaped upon him. The shock carried him to his knees, the now useless gun slipping from his grasp. As the bounding cat came down, its fore paws struck the boy's chest and clawed through his coat, the creature snarling furiously the while and blowing its hot breath into his face. Ted beheld its fiery eyes only a few inches from his own and his hands flew to its throat.

Exerting all his strength, he held the beast off, but could not prevent the tearing of his clothes and the painful clawing of his arms and body.

Hubert now came out of his first paralysis of surprise and fright. Getting out his pocket-knife and opening it as quickly as possible, he caught the cat by the tail and stabbed it twice in its stomach. Then, with a maddened snarl, the creature let go its hold on Ted, wrested its neck from Ted's grasp, and leaped upon Hubert. [Pg 117]

"Grab him by the throat!" shouted Ted, staggering to his feet and reaching for his gun.

Luckily his eye fell on the bloody pocket-knife just dropped by Hubert and he snatched it up instead of the gun, which he now realized could not be used at such close quarters without risk of killing his cousin. A moment later the wild-cat was stabbed in its side; then again and yet again.

But Hubert was still exposed to the wounded animal's strong sharp claws which did not relax their hold. So Ted seized the cat's left fore-leg and pulled with all his might. The throat of the snarling beast, thus drawn partly away from its victim, was now exposed, and into it Ted drove the knife to the hilt.

It was all over after that. The cat ceased to struggle, became limp and dropped to the ground. The battle had been won, but at no small cost. Both boys were bleeding from several deep scratches and their coats were badly torn. As all this became painfully evident, Hubert found himself unable to keep a firm grip on his lachrymal ducts.

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"I don't want to cry, Ted," he said, as he sat down heavily, drawing shuddering breaths and raining tears, "but I c-can't help it."

"You just cry as much as you want to," said the older boy in a sympathetic voice, adding gratefully: "If it hadn't been for your help that thing might have scratched my eyes out. Have you noticed that it's smaller and has a longer tail than the one that jumped into our boat that morning in the swamp?" he continued. "That one must have been a lynx and this is just an ordinary wild-cat."

Ted now proceeded to cut a long, stout, green stick. He then fished some twine out of his pocket and tied the dead wild-cat's feet together. Thrusting the stick between its legs, he took one end of it and Hubert the other. Chatting and even laughing cheerfully, in spite of the pain of their bleeding scratches, they bore their dearly bought prize between them along the backbone of Deserter's Island.

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As they approached the camp they saw that several slackers were still sitting over their noon meal. July was the first to see the boys and their burden. A few leaps, and he was beside them; a few words, and he knew the outline of their story.

"Look yuh, Cap'n Ted," he cried, laughing and gesticulating, "you mean to say you an' Hubut kill dat wile-cat wid des yo' pocket-knife!"

"That's what we did," declared Hubert, proudly.

"Oh, go 'way!" cried July, gleefully. "Well, well, well, if dat don't beat all!"

Hardly less enthusiastic were the slackers, who expressed admiration of the youngsters' pluck and readiness of resource in no mild terms.

"That's the sort of grit I like to see, boys," said Buck Hardy, showing great pleasure. "Never mind; I'll fix you up," he added, seeing both boys wince on being patted on the shoulder.

He made them strip and washed their wounds, while Al Peters hunted up a box of healing salve made from bear's marrow, and Bud Jones, producing needle and thread, neatly darned their torn coats. Even Sweet Jackson spoke kindly to the boys on hearing the story later. Everybody seemed determined to make heroes of them and their story, in response to eager questions, was told and told again. As long as he talked about the wild-cat adventure and hunting in general, omitting any mention of the war, Ted noted that he secured universal, willing and pleased attention. If these young men so highly valued pluck and victory in a mere struggle with a wild animal, he thought, why could they not thrill in contemplation of the true glory of shedding one's blood for one's country in a war against the foes of the world!

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As the boys were eating their dinner, after the dressing of their wounds, Ted inquired as to the value of wild-cat fur and was told that it was worth "quite a little." Then, after a few whispered words with Hubert, he rose and, with quite a grand manner, said:

"Mr. Hardy, my cousin and I wish to present this pelt to you as a small token of our appreciation of your kindness to us."

Following Ted's lead, Buck also was formal in accepting, walking over awkwardly and shaking hands, as he said: "This sure is nice of you, boys; I'll think more of that skin than any I ever had."

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XI

AS the three slackers, Hardy, Peters and Jones, were getting ready to leave camp and go about their unfinished business of the day, Ted wondered how he could turn his new popularity to account. With the help of the greater friendliness the morning's adventure had brought him, could he not induce the slackers to listen to another appeal as they sat around the fire that night? With his mind full of thoughts of what he hoped to be allowed to say, the boy little dreamed that he was to win even greater renown as a hunter that very afternoon.

His discovery of a bee tree was what led to the second adventure. While he and Hubert were bringing in the dead wild-cat they stopped for a short rest under a tall pine about three quarters of a mile from the camp. As they sat there, Ted looked up and noted a black, quivering line against the bright sky that seemed to stream out from the trunk of the tree just above the lowest branch and about fifty feet from the ground. His curiosity aroused, the boy rose to get a better look, and then made certain that the black, quivering line was composed of flying insects.

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"Hubert, look!" he cried. "Those must be bees and this must be a bee tree."

Ted now suddenly recalled this incident, as the slackers were moving away, and, rising, he called out:

"Oh, Mr. Hardy! I ought to tell you. I think I've found a bee tree."

The three slackers turned, all attention, and Ted described what he had seen. A bee tree it certainly was, they all declared; a "mighty good find, too," for everybody would be "glad of a bait of honey."

"Come and show it to us right away," proposed Buck Hardy. "We can help July cut the tree down before we go to the traps, then leave him to gather and bring in the honey. Do you feel like walking there and back, son?"

Ted cheerfully consented, declaring that he was not tired and that his wounds were no longer very painful. So the whole party, except Hubert who was now asleep by the fire, started off toward the bee tree, carrying axes and even buckets, in confident expectation of a satisfactory yield of honey. [Pg 123]

The distance was not great and Ted soon located the tree, a tall pine near an inwinding arm of the swamp. But after he had seen the tree felled and cut into here and there in the search for the wild hive, he began to feel tired and, turning about quietly, started back toward camp. He had not gone far when an outcry indicated that honey had been found, but he did not turn back, telling himself that he could enjoy his share later. He soon lay down beside Hubert and fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened some two hours later by movements of July, who reported the yield of honey, very small and expressed the conviction that there were further stores somewhere in the same tree. Ted, who was now rested and felt but little annoyed by his wounds, proposed that they go back to the tree and look for more honey. July agreed and the awakened Hubert was invited to accompany them, but declined.

So Ted, carrying a repeating rifle belonging to the camp, and July, carrying an axe and two tin buckets, started off, followed by two dogs. The felled tree lay across a wiregrass-covered space enclosed on three sides by clumps of palmettos and a blackjack thicket. Only a few bees still lingered over the ruins of their hive and there was little danger of being stung, but July took the precaution of setting fire to a section of a discarded undershirt with a view to putting them to rout by means of the thick, stifling smoke. [Pg 124]

Then he cut into the tree at several points and after a half hour of vain effort declared that it was "no use wastin' any more elbow-grease," but Ted urged him to further endeavor. The negro obligingly swung his axe again and very soon cut into a second hollow containing honey, no doubt connected by a narrow passage with the cavity opened earlier in the afternoon. The last blow of the axe penetrated the honey itself, breaking several fine layers of comb and sending the liquid forth in a slow thick stream.

While July filled his buckets, Ted took a large piece of the honey-comb and sat down on a neighboring log to enjoy the feast.

"Hello! what's up?" the boy cried suddenly, noting that both dogs were now snuffing excitedly and that the hair on their backs stood erect. [Pg 125]

As if in answer a large black bear appeared, moving clumsily out of the blackjack thicket and making straight for the bee tree, toward which it had no doubt been attracted by the scent of the much beloved honey. Seeing the negro, the boy, and the now snarling dogs, the surprised animal halted, reared on its hind legs and snorted.

"Where dat rifle?" cried July, as both he and Ted started to their feet and retreated a few steps.

When they reached the bee tree the rifle had been laid aside, Ted thoughtlessly following the example of the negro who put by all that he carried in order to be free to swing his axe. Now they saw in alarm that the rifle lay within a few feet of the bear and could not be reached. At this discovery panic seized them and they raced to the other end of the open space, a distance of some fifty yards the negro even forgetting to snatch up his axe.

There they knew they were safe enough for the present, for the wildly barking dogs were between them and the bear, which showed no desire to advance upon anything but the bee tree, toward which, after getting down upon its all-fours, it glanced hungrily, seemingly wondering whether its further progress thither would be opposed. [Pg 126]

Encouraged by shouts from Ted and July, the two dogs grew bolder. They advanced so close that the bear abandoned the immediate prospect of a feast and showed fight, growling fiercely and chasing its enemies backward. But the dogs ever returned to the attack, urged by the repeated "Sick 'im!" of the negro and the boy, who hoped that the running fight, if kept up, would bring the rifle safely within their reach.

After more than twenty minutes this opportunity was still awaited, for not much ground was covered in the conflict. The dogs repeatedly raced forward as if bent on a furious attack, but skipped away as the enraged animal plunged at them. Having put them to flight, the bear would halt, and so the coveted weapon remained within the danger zone.

But at last, harried continually, the bear began to fag and showed a desire to seek shelter. Having gradually neared the trunk of a pine in the course of its shiftings of position, it was seen to look up as if into a haven of refuge. Another rush of the dogs, encouraged by still louder [Pg 127]

shouting, seemed to decide the issue. As if weary of the struggle, the heavy creature rose on its hind legs, embraced the trunk of the pine, and began to climb, going rapidly upward without rest until it found itself among the spreading branches more than sixty feet from the ground.

Then, with shouts of satisfaction, Ted and July ran forward, the former reaching the rifle first because the latter halted a moment to recover his axe.

"Better gim me dat rifle," said July urgently as he joined the boy.

"Oh, no," objected Ted; "I want to shoot this bear."

July yielded only because it was "Cap'n Ted"; any other mere boy could have retained the weapon only after listening to long and loud protest. The two circled the pine until they found the point whence the dark bulk of the bear could be seen most plainly outlined amid the clustering boughs of the tree's top.

Ted fired once, twice—six times—and the bear did not move.

"He must have a bullet-proof hide," the boy panted, loath to admit that he had missed so often. [Pg 128]

"Better gim me dat rifle, Cap'n Ted. Won't do to waste so much 'munition."

"Well, didn't the men shoot thirteen times before they brought down that bear the other night?"

"I's sho 'fraid you can't hit 'im."

"Well, I can keep on trying," the now irritated boy said sharply. "I'm the hunter—not you. You're the *cook*."

This silenced July, except for continuing expressions of eagerness to see the finish. The persistent boy kept firing and, at last, at the eleventh shot, the big game was seen to sway to one side, as if loosening its grip on the branches. Then the heavy body came crashing down.

"I got him! I got him!" cried Ted, wildly excited.

July fingered the prize, roughly estimating its length and weight, but Ted was chiefly interested in the five bullet holes in the creature's side, proving that his aim was much better than at first appeared.

After they had returned to camp and Hubert had listened appreciatively to the great news, Ted's elation suddenly gave place to misgiving and regret. The boy fell silent and looked troubled, as he recalled that the bear was not needed for food and that the great bulk of its flesh would be wasted. But when the slackers trooped into the fire-lit circle after nightfall the boy sprang to his feet and proudly announced: [Pg 129]

"Mr. Hardy, I've got a bear skin for you, if you want it."

The slackers crowded round and listened in astonishment, most of them commending and praising the boy in the most generous terms. But, as they sat smoking round the fire after supper, Sweet Jackson suddenly began to laugh, sarcastically remarking:

"*He* says we mustn't waste a ounce o' meat, but soon's he gets a chance he shoots a bear, and there's nobody to eat it. Very fine to talk! I've seen preachers that didn't live up to ther preachin' before to-day."

Buck Hardy turned upon the scoffer with a look of disgust and scorn, but Ted was the first to speak.

"You've got me there, Mr. Jackson," he frankly confessed. "I've been sorry ever since I did it. I was so excited I didn't take time to think." [Pg 130]

"How could he help it—with the blood of a man in him?" demanded Buck.

"I won't do it again," Ted solemnly declared.

"You won't get a chance," said Jackson, his tone still sneering. "That was a chance in a thousand."

Ted then spoke of the meatless and wheatless days urgently recommended in the President's proclamation of January 18, in order that we might spare and ship the food sorely needed by our fighting allies in Europe. His listeners looked their astonishment as the boy outlined the Food Administration's program: no wheat on Mondays and Wednesdays and at one meal on the other days of the week; no meat of any kind on Tuesday, no fresh pork or bacon on Saturday; and rigid economy in the use of sugar at all times.

"For goodness' sake," cried Bud Jones, "does he want us to starve so them people in Europe can have plenty?"

"You know better than that," Buck quietly retorted. [Pg 131]

"Of course not," said Ted. "There's plenty to eat without wheat bread and biscuits. What's the matter with corn bread and rye bread and potatoes and rice and oat-meal porridge?"

"But how can anybody get along without meat?" asked Al Peters.

"We don't need it every meal or even every day," said Ted. "We just *think* we do. What's the matter with fish and eggs and oysters and a whole lot of things to take the place of meat?"

"But everybody can't get all that," objected Bud Jones. "The President sure has put us on short commons."

"He wants us all to eat plenty of good food, and we can do it and still save wheat and meat for our allies if we are not wasteful," insisted Ted. "But we ought to be willing even to go on 'short commons' in order to win this war. What we ship to 'them people in Europe,' as you call our allies, is not thrown away. It goes to feed the men who are fighting our battle as well as their own. We are all in the same boat. And they are helping us in other ways. We haven't got enough ships to carry our soldiers across, but England and France will furnish what we lack. I read Secretary Baker's report to the Senate—it was ten columns, but I read it through—and he said we'd have half a million soldiers in France early this year and that another million would go over by next January. Some people say it can't be done because we haven't got the ships, but our allies will give us the ships. Then oughtn't we to save and even deny ourselves in order to send them wheat and meat? Why, it's just as plain! We must work together—Americans, English, French and the rest—to win this war. And here in this country every man must do his part. We've *got* to win this war—or be the Kaiser's cattle. Do you want to cut wood and tote water for the Germans for the rest of your days?"

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Ted looked around the fire-lit circle. Nobody answered. Again the situation had become embarrassing. Again Sweet Jackson rose, with a muttered oath, and went off to bed. Again other uneasy slackers feigned drowsiness, rose yawning, and promptly followed.

"Look at 'em," whispered Hubert. "I told you so. You put up a mighty good talk, but it won't do any good."

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But Ted smiled hopefully, for again Buck Hardy kept his seat. Once more the big slacker kept the boy by the fire an hour longer, asking many questions and listening soberly while he answered as best he could.

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XII

TED'S greatest wild-animal adventure was so unexpected and astonishing that it became the subject of wondering comment in the camp for days. Strange to say, it came within less than twenty-four hours of the bagging of the bear, after which achievement Buck Hardy, with but little opposition, gave the boys the freedom of Deserters' Island.

"From now on," he said at supper, "I want the boys to be free to go where they please on this island. I won't have a boy as smart and lucky with a gun as Ted cooped up in this camp. Let the boys hunt this island. No use hemmin' 'em in too close anyhow. They can't get away, with some of us takin' the boats every day. They'll think twice before they wade off in the swamp, not knowin' which way to go."

So after breakfast next morning Ted and Hubert started off openly, their little guns over their shoulders and a camp dog, which they had petted and become fond of, following gladly at their heels. They first walked down to the lower end of the island and located the jungle trail a second time. Then they slowly hunted up the left hand side to a point nearly opposite and less than a mile and a half from the camp. During all this time they saw practically nothing to shoot, and at last Ted complained that luck had deserted him. Hubert, always the first to be discouraged, proposed that they give up the hunt and "cut across" the island toward camp.

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Still tramping on, loath to surrender, Ted suddenly tripped and fell over a log, striking the side of his head against a sharp snag. He was at first slightly stunned and his wound, though but little more than a scratch, bled freely. What was more serious, he sprained his ankle as he fell and found it impossible to walk without unbearable pain. After trying repeatedly, he became quite faint and was forced to lie down.

"Hubert, you'd better go on to camp," he said breathlessly, "and, if I don't turn up by dinner time, tell 'em what's the matter. Mr. Hardy will know what to do—if this pain keeps me from walking all day."

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Ted raised himself on his arm, pointing, anxious to make sure that Hubert took the right course, and then, as his alarmed cousin started off at a trot, he fell back exhausted, closing his eyes. All was now quiet except for the sighing of the breeze in the high pine tops and the panting of the dog squatting near him. As long as he did not move the pain in his ankle was eased, and, as the bleeding scratch on the side of his head troubled him but little, he grew drowsy and in no great while fell asleep.

Ted was awakened some time later more by a warning sense of danger than by certain slightly disturbing sounds. On opening his eyes, he found the dog standing close to him, the hair on its back erect and its tail between its legs—both signs of fear. The boy's faithful guardian, with low growling that was almost a whine, gazed steadily into the faintly rustling foliage of a water-oak some thirty feet away. The tree stood on the edge of the low, wet area, its boughs interlacing with the branches of other trees behind it, these connecting in turn with myriads of others and

thus forming a leafy bridge for miles through the dense, mysterious, softly whispering swamp.

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While he slept something had come stealthily over this bridge—something keen of scent, with eyes of hate and knife-edged claws, hungry for blood—and now a long lank animal of a tawny hue, its twitching tail uplifted and its small flat head lowered, lay along a limb of the water-oak watching with green, glaring, cruel eyes as he stirred.

At first Ted saw nothing to alarm him, but soon he caught sight of a tail like that of an enormous cat beating back and forth among the leaves in a manner startlingly suggestive of both restlessness and rage. He remembered to have heard one of the slackers say that the tail of a panther twitched in that nervous way when the beast was crouching for a spring. He remembered also the agreement of all the slackers engaged in the conversation that no killing of a panther in the Okefinokee had been reported for years.

"But that must be one," thought Ted, "and it smelt my blood and is after me."

Forgetting his sprained ankle, the boy clutched his gun and started up, but staggered and dropped to his knees in an agony of pain. On seeing his master stir, the dog showed more spirit, putting on a bolder front and barking wildly.

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This seemed to put an end to the suspense. Almost at once the great cat, snarling fiercely, tore through the leafage surrounding her and descended toward her intended prey, striking the earth within a few feet of the dog.

Ted managed to raise his gun and take aim, but before he pulled the trigger the panther had leaped again and engaged the dog at close quarters. To shoot then was to endanger friend as well as foe, and the boy hesitated. Fearing that mere buck-shot would not serve anyhow and that the faithful dog was his only protection, Ted painfully crawled further away, looking back over his shoulder to watch the fierce struggle between the two beasts, with never a moment's let-up in such harsh growling and snarling as he had never heard in all his life.

The contending creatures, fast in each other's grip, rapidly drew nearer, tearing up grass and brush as they came. Apparently the panther's object was to shake off the dog and reach the boy, her real intended prey, and it looked as if she would succeed, for she was larger as well as much stronger than the battling friend of Ted who braved her cruel claws in his defense.

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The contending creatures, fast in each other's grip, rapidly drew nearer

In great concern for the dog as well as for himself, the boy again started to his feet, but again the pain was more than he could bear. He tottered, fell, and this time a black, quivering sea seemed to engulf all his senses. When consciousness returned, which was almost at once, the horrid din bombarded his ears as before, and, as he opened his eyes, the panther accomplished a

resistless rush in his direction, arriving within perhaps five feet of him together with the heroic dog, which still refused to be shaken off.

Ted thought his days were numbered, yet the very thought seemed to steady his nerves and clear his head. Rising to his knees, he lifted his gun and watched his chance. The fiercely struggling and snarling beasts came nearer still, now the panther and now the dog turning a back to the boy.

Suddenly, with a coolness that he afterward wondered at, Ted leaned forward and, seizing the opportunity as it came, put the very muzzle of his gun against the neck of his enemy and pulled the trigger.

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As the report reverberated through the woods, the panther leaped high in the air, wresting herself away at last from the grip of the dog's strong teeth. It looked to Ted as if she would descend directly upon him, and, as he shrank away, giving himself up for lost, his senses failed him once more and oblivion followed.

When he revived and looked around the panther lay still on one side of him and the dog, cruelly wounded, struggled feebly with a low whining on the other. A large section of the mighty cat's neck had been literally torn out by the discharge of the gun at close quarters and there could be no question that life was extinct. Assured of this, and fearing that the dog could not survive, Ted put an arm around his faithful savior's neck and wept.

It was thus that the boy and the dog were found when, after the welcome sounds of the rescuing party's nearing halloo, Buck Hardy rushed upon the scene, followed by Al Peters, Bud Jones, Hubert and July.

"Are you all right, kid?" asked Buck, gathering Ted up tenderly.

"I'm all right, but the dog—poor, faithful Spot! Can't you do something for him, Mr. Hardy?"

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A brush stretcher was hastily constructed and Ted was placed upon it, but he refused to be borne to the camp by the four men until the wounded dog had been laid at his side.

"We'd better hunt around this island tomorrow," remarked Al Peters, as the four men labored across the island with their burden. "That boy bags more game right here than we do on our long trips."

It pleased Ted greatly to overhear this, but his satisfaction was not complete until, after a careful examination of the cruelly clawed dog at camp, he was assured that his devoted friend would recover. His own slight head wound and sprained ankle did not trouble him. After each had received the most expert attention the sympathetic and admiring camp of slackers was capable of, it was merely a matter of keeping still temporarily in order to save himself from pain.

"What's a little scratch on the head and a sprained ankle," he asked of the solicitous men about the camp fire that night, "compared with what our soldiers have to stand—liquid fire and poison gas bombs in the trenches and submarine torpedoes at sea?"

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"I don't reckon anybody in this war has been up against anything worse than you was to-day," remarked Buck Hardy, glancing at the panther skin which had been brought in and hung up in the camp where the lame boy could see it.

"Oh, yes, they have," insisted Ted; "but they were not scared the way I was. Why, our soldiers on the *Tuscania* stood and sang 'The Star-Spangled Banner' while the ship was sinking and they were waiting their turn to get off in the boats. Many of them went to their death like the greatest heroes."

Ted then told what he had read about the sinking of this transport some two weeks before he left his uncle's home in North Carolina to come down to the neighborhood of the Okefinokee. The slackers had not heard of it and all listened with great interest.

"Even women—lots of them—have been up against much worse in this war than I was to-day," the boy continued. "Think of Miss Edith Cavell, that lovely English nurse the Germans shot in Belgium."

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As Ted eloquently told the story of the execution of this innocent and devoted woman, practically all the slackers gave expression to lively indignation.

"I wouldn't 'a believed a bunch o' devils would 'a done such a thing, and *to a lady* at that!" one voice called out.

"What do the Huns care about a lady or anything in the world?" cried Ted. "They treat women as roughly as they treat men. They've carried off thousands of Belgian and French women and made them slaves. They've actually made women work in front of their lines under the fire of French guns. They've herded up women and children in Belgian and French towns and shot them down. They've carried off hundreds of thousands of men and women from conquered countries and made them slave night and day in Germany. The very songs they sing—I've seen translations of some of them—tell proudly of cruel, barbarous outrages and boast that neither women nor children are spared."

"Why, I've seen a list of the atrocities committed by the Germans in this war that would make your blood boil, that would make you sick," the boy continued. "And it's the truth—all taken from

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what they call 'verified official reports,' with as many as ten witnesses for everything. You see, the Germans believed they were going to conquer the world, and so many of them didn't care *what* they did. They massacred prisoners in cold blood at Ypres and other places. They loot, burn and often kill as they go. They've nailed people up alive against doors. They've cut off hands and feet and left the poor creatures alive. They've filled the streets with dead—not only fighting soldiers but old men, women and children. They've burned people up in their houses. They've cut even women to pieces. The way they get all the money in a captured town is to threaten to kill everybody, and to prove that they are going to do it they kill a few hundred to begin with. They drive the helpless people like cattle—drive them out and leave them to starve. They seem to delight in burning or knocking down churches with their cannon. They've stuck bayonets in women and boys and girls and pitched them into the fire of burning houses. The cavalry has tied men and women to their stirrups and galloped around with them dragging. They throw the dead into springs and wells. I can't begin to tell you of their awful doings. They have even stuck their bayonets through little children and held them up as they walked through the streets."

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After twisting nervously in his seat and breathing hard as he listened, Buck Hardy now started to his feet with a cry of rage. And then— as July described the exhibition later—he "gripped his teeth and shook his fist and cursed awful." The negro did not exaggerate. Buck Hardy's rage was as vocal as it was intense. He exhausted all the most picturesque and crushing profanity he could think of, concluding: "I wish to God I could get my hands on one o' them devils!"

It was on the tip of Ted's tongue to say: "Well, then, why don't you go where you can get a chance to do it?" But a warning nudge from Hubert reminded him to be discreet in the case of their best friend in the camp. He also remembered July's advice not to push the big slacker too hard. And perhaps he didn't need any pushing now; for clearly he was awakened. So Ted merely watched Buck's signs of incandescent anger with great joy and said nothing.

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But Buck himself must have seen the thought in the boy's glowing eyes. He must have sensed something in the general atmosphere of the fire-lit circle tending to convey to him the startling warning that he had put himself to the test by his own outburst. At all events he suddenly shut his lips, turned on his heel, and strode off into the dark woods.

"The Huns are beastly," Ted then remarked to nobody in particular, "but after fifty years of training they are fine soldiers and it's no picnic to down them. That's why our country needs every able-bodied young man to go on the job."

An embarrassing moment followed. Ted looked around at the sober-faced slackers and their eyes fell before him. They had been thrilled, horrified, stirred with anger and feelings of outrage; but they were not ready to face the question they feared the persistent and plucky boy would put to them. They shifted their positions uneasily, began to get on their feet, and then in twos and threes went hurriedly off to bed, anxious to escape another direct appeal.

"You put up a great talk and you sort of got hold of some of them this time," whispered Hubert; "but you see—as I've told you before—that it won't do any good."

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"Maybe it will—after a while," said Ted, his eyes still glowing.

Buck Hardy now reappeared and called back two of the retreating slackers. With their help, and without a word, he lifted Ted and carried him up the ladder to his bed in the sleeping-loft.

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XIII

TED heard the slackers leave the sleeping-loft early the next morning, but he did not stir. He knew that he ought to keep quiet, and, after reluctantly resigning himself to the necessity, he turned slightly on his bed of Spanish moss and fell asleep again. When he awoke he was alone in the loft. A few minutes later July appeared with his breakfast, telling him that all the slackers had "done gone" and that Hubert was "frolicin' wid Billy."

"Mr. Buck Hardy say you mus' stay in dat bed all day," the negro informed him, adding: "Mr. Hardy sho is hurted in his mind. He don't say a word hardly. When I woke up late in de night las' night I seen him standin' out dere by de fire thinkin'. I reckon he studyin' 'bout dat waw an' all you tole him."

Buck's reported disturbance of mind was Ted's only comfort during the long, tiresome day, for he felt confident that he knew the cause and was hopeful of the issue. Hubert, Billy and July visited him several times during the day, and at dinner time Buck Hardy, Al Peters and Bud Jones all spent a few minutes at his bedside, doing their best to cheer him up; but the boy spent some lonely hours and the consciousness of his and Hubert's captivity oppressed him as at no time during the previous days of activity and diversion. What was to be the end of it? Did their disappearance cause alarm at Judge Ridgway's farm? Had his uncle returned from Washington, and, if so, what did he think, and what would he do?

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It was very hard to lie quiet and just think, think, think. But the next day Ted was glad he had done so, for he found that the complete rest, aided perhaps by the salve made of bear's marrow, had had a wonderfully healing effect. He could stand on his injured foot without pain and was able to walk with a limp. The two succeeding days, spent very quietly about the camp, were much

less hard to endure, and on the fourth day he was almost himself again.

Meanwhile there had been talk with the slackers at meal times and about the camp fire at night, but the boy found little opportunity to speak of the war. If he introduced the subject the conversation was promptly diverted into other channels. Ted noticed with discouragement that even Buck Hardy seemed to wish to hear no more. And so, fearing that after all he would be able to accomplish nothing, the boy found his thoughts turning toward plans of escape from captivity as soon as he felt assured of his ability to stand the strain of hard travel.

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On the fourth morning both boys gladly accepted an invitation from Buck to make a trip with him in his boat. The big slacker announced at breakfast that he expected to visit Honey Island and, as their last harvest of honey was now exhausted, he would keep an eye open for a bee tree. The island to which they were going had received its name, it appeared, in consequence of several discoveries of bee trees there.

July was ordered to prepare a lunch and the three were soon ready to start. Sweet Jackson observed their preparations narrowly and before they got off he called two young men known as Zack James and Jim Carter, aside and urged them to accompany or follow the party.

"I'm a-scared Buck aims to turn them boys loose," he said. "That biggity little chap worries him a-carryin' on and exhortin' about the war the way he does—I kin see it—and I wouldn't be surprised if he wants to git shed o' them boys. I'd like to git shed of 'em myself, but it won't do—it ain't safe. You fellows better go 'long to Honey Island and keep yer eye on them boys."

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The precaution was one in which they were equally interested, and the two young men readily agreed to go. As he was poling his bateau off from the shore, Buck was surprised to see them coming down the path, each with a gun in one hand and a bucket in the other.

"We aimed to go over that way this mornin', too," Zack James called out. "Mebby we'd better keep together, Buck, till you find a bee tree, so we kin help you cut it down and gether the honey."

"All right," said Buck, after a keen, appraising look at the two men.

It was soon evident to all, however, that the "cock of the walk" was displeased. During the long hard pull of more than two and a half hours over the boat-road winding through flooded swamp and forest he did not once speak to James or Carter, although the distance between the boats was rarely greater than a hundred yards and often not more than a few feet. But he spoke now and then to the boys, pointing out objects likely to interest them, usually at moments when their trail-followers were out of earshot.

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"Honey Island ain't as big as ours," he told them once, casually adding: "On t'other side from where we'll land there's a good trail that leads out of the swamp. It's wet and boggy in places, but you don't need a boat. I reckon I could git out of the swamp in half a day by that trail."

Ted wondered how long it would take him and Hubert to reach the outer world by the same path. They could not attempt it to-day, of course, even if they found opportunity, because his injured ankle was not yet in shape to stand hard travel, and he supposed that this probably accounted for Buck's willingness to mention its existence. He decided that it would be wise to locate it, if possible, as part of the preparation for future attempted escape.

"Hubert," called out Zack James when the island was reached, "pick up that piece o' rope in yer boat and fetch it along; we'll need it, mebbly."

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The boats had run aground several yards from dry land, and all hands were now wading out, Hubert being the last to step into the water, carrying the desired coil of rope.

"I believe I kin go right to one," said Buck, as soon as they had struggled through the dense "hammock" and gained the higher level of the island. "When I was huntin' h-yer week before last I saw lots and cords of bees, and I watched which way they was flyin'. If I'd 'a had time, I could 'a spotted one right then."

No one was surprised, therefore, when little more than an hour later a bee tree was found. Pausing under a tall pine, the big slacker turned to his followers and pointed to an almost continuous stream of bees, a dark line against the bright sky, issuing from an unseen hole in the trunk of the tree a few inches below the lowest branch, but more than fifty feet from the ground.

It was now midday, and before attacking the tree, the party sat down on the wiregrass and ate the lunch which July had prepared. Then James and Carter rose and vigorously plied their axes on opposite sides of the tree. Scarcely had the chips begun to fly when Buck turned to Ted and said:

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"If you boys want to, you kin take your guns and run around for a little hunt while we're cuttin' the tree and getherin' the honey."

"I've seen one bee tree cut already, and I believe I would rather walk around," said Ted.

He turned to go as he spoke and promptly disappeared beyond a blackjack thicket, followed closely by Hubert, who still carried the coil of rope over his arm.

"This looks like as good a chance to get away as we may ever have," said Ted as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Yes, if we can hurry up and find that half-day trail," Hubert eagerly agreed. "Do you think your ankle can stand a rush?"

"No—that's the trouble," answered Ted. "Besides it would be much better to have July with us, and I believe he'll go when the time comes. Let's find the trail, though, so that we won't have to lose any time if we get off by boat and make for this island."

The watchful James had not failed to note the departure of the boys and he at once began to show signs of fatigue, drawing his breath very hard, putting in his strokes more slowly, and finally pausing altogether, with an exclamation indicating that his exhaustion was complete. [Pg 155]

"Tired out a'ready?" asked Buck contemptuously; and, taking the axe, which was willingly resigned to him, he began to swing it with great vigor.

This was precisely what James desired, and he lost no time in quietly withdrawing to a point whence he darted into the bushes on the track of the boys. Half an hour later, as Ted and Hubert hurried forward, leaping over logs and forcing their way through crowding underbrush, the former happened to look in the direction whence they had come and distinctly saw a man leap behind a tree.

"It's no use, Hubert," he said, pausing. "We can't even find the trail this trip. Zack James is following us; I saw him jump behind a tree."

"Then Jim Carter is with him, and they'll stop us before we go far," declared Hubert.

"Maybe it's just as well," said Ted philosophically. "We know about where the trail is, and I was running great risk of spraining my ankle again." [Pg 156]

They sat down, panting on a log, agreeing to go forward more slowly a half mile further, and then return to the bee tree, just as if their trip had been a hunt and nothing more.

They then rose and moved on, picking their way more cautiously. A few minutes later Ted halted and signed to Hubert to be quiet, as a crow suddenly cawed and flew out of a tree two or three hundred yards in their front.

"That crow saw something, I'll bet," he whispered, and when what appeared to be fresh bear tracks were discovered, he added triumphantly: "I told you so."

The tracks soon led them into what was doubtless the path of an aforesaid tornado, the ground being crowded with uprooted trees, which had been thrown across each other at every angle and lay "heaped in confusion dire." Here the trail was lost, but the boys still cautiously advanced.

At the end of another hundred yards, standing on an elevated log and looking forward, Ted became greatly excited at the discovery, not twenty feet away, of a small open space covered with a deep drift of pine needles, in the center of which were two round depressions or beds, some fifteen inches deep and not less than four feet in diameter. In one of these were two young bears, apparently asleep while their mother was away feeding. [Pg 157]

Signing to Hubert to be very quiet but to come quickly, Ted waited until his cousin stood beside him on the log and had seen what neither was likely to have the opportunity of seeing again. For, indeed, as the slackers afterward declared, it was a "find" as remarkable as unexpected.

"Don't shoot 'em," whispered Hubert. "Let's catch one of 'em alive and take it to Billy. We can tie it with this piece of rope."

"We can try," assented Ted, adding: "I wouldn't shoot the cute little things."

Cautiously they stole down the log and stepped upon the soft carpet of pine needles. A twig snapped under Hubert's foot, whereupon one of the little bears lifted its head and looked around. Instantly cub number one got upon its feet with a snort and bolted into the bushes, but before number two had followed Ted was upon him.

Letting his gun fall, the boy plunged forward, alighting astride of the cub's back and grasping its ears with his hands. Uttering a peculiar sound, partaking both of an angry snarl and a terrified whimper, the vigorous little beast tried to jump; but Ted successfully held it down, although the frantic creature tore up the bed of pine needles with its powerful claws and struggled furiously to get at its captor. [Pg 158]

Hubert made a slip-knot, as he was directed, and passed the rope around the animal's neck. Then Ted rose, letting the cub go as he seized firm hold of the other end of the rope.

"We'd better look out for the old one now," he said warningly.

Released, the little bear ran away with great speed, dragging the boy after it along a path which fortunately led out into the more open pine woods and in the direction of the bee tree. Snatching up Ted's gun, Hubert followed, looking about apprehensively for "the old one."

As long as the cub ran in the right direction, no effort was made to check it; but before a great while it turned off abruptly to the right, and then Ted had to exert all his strength to drag it after him. Perhaps even his best efforts would have been unavailing, had not Hubert, who covered their retreat, carrying both guns, frightened the little bear from behind with a frequent shove of his foot. [Pg 159]

Within a few minutes Buck Hardy became aware of the absence of Zack James and suspected its cause, but went on cutting into the bee tree without a word. When James reappeared three-quarters of an hour later his trivial excuses were accepted without comment. By this time the pine had been felled, the hollow was located, and now, protected from the angry bees by the smoke from burning rags, the three men proceeded to cut into the tree and secure the stores of honey, a job that was about complete when Ted and Hubert appeared.

James had followed the boys far enough to become convinced that they were not running away and were really in pursuit of game; but his surprise was as great as that of the other men when the two young hunters came noisily into view, dragging the little bear after them.

"Well, this beats it all!" exclaimed Buck Hardy, dropping a bucket of honey and going to meet them.

As the boys hastily told their story in outline, Zack James walked up, smiling, and congratulated them. [Pg 160]

"I saw you following us," Ted said to him, with a keen glance. "If you had stayed, you could have helped us bring in the cub."

"Who, me? I was jus' lookin' out for another bee tree," was the man's answer, but he dropped his eyes before Buck's haughty stare. "Let's hurry to the boats before the old one comes," urged Ted. "It would be a pity to have to kill the mother after taking the baby—and we don't need the meat."

"But some of us would like to have another bear skin," remarked Jim Carter.

"All right, kid," said Buck, taking no notice of Carter's suggestion. "We're through, and we'll go."

And go they did, carrying the honey and forcing the captive cub along as fast as they could. James and Carter followed reluctantly, looking back and listening as they came; but at the landing place Buck stood aside and waited for them to get afloat first and take the lead on the return trip. Still more reluctantly they did this, not wishing a quarrel with the "cock of the walk." [Pg 161]

The two disappointed men were out of sight around a bend of the boat-road, and Buck and the boys were following with their prize when they heard a crash in the brush on shore and saw a full-grown bear come rapidly along the path, its nose seemingly bent to the scent. Buck started and gripped his gun, the hunter's instinct strongly astir within him.

"Oh, please don't shoot," whispered Ted. "These bears are not dangerous unless attacked; they don't have to be killed on sight like panthers. It would be such a waste."

"All right, kid; it's your bear," assented Buck, and sent the boat gliding round the bend before it was seen by the heavy creature hurrying on their trail. [Pg 162]

XIV

GR^{EAT} was the delight of Billy, and outspoken the admiration and surprise of all, when Ted and Hubert dragged their prize into the camp on Deserters' Island. Everybody seemed pleased except Sweet Jackson. While the latest slackers to arrive were questioning and complimenting Ted around the camp fire after supper, Jackson began to laugh in a sneering sort of way and presently remarked to nobody in particular:

"*He* says if we waste a ounce o' meat we won't be able to whip them Germans. Then he kills a bear when we don't need the meat and right on top o' that he ketches a young cub. Very fine to talk! I've seen preachers that didn't live up to ther preachin' before to-day."

Ted broke the silence that followed.

"I confessed I was wrong the other time," he said, "but I thought this was different. We could have shot the mother, but we didn't. As for the cub, even if we can't tame it it can be kept until it is needed for food. Do you think it can be tamed, Mr. Hardy?" [Pg 163]

"Don't worry, kid; you're all right, whether you can tame it or not," said Buck, after a steady look at Sweet Jackson that produced a noticeably sobering effect. "I saw a bear cub chained to a pole near a shanty on Billy's Island once, but it looked mighty wild and thin and down-in-the-mouth. I don't reckon they can be tamed without the help of one o' them circus men who knows how. This one's pretty apt to die—if it don't get away."

Ted looked very serious and fell silent. He lingered about the fire only until he had asked for news about the war from one "Mitch" Jenkins, a young man who had fled to the Okefinokee to escape the new draft, joining the other slackers at their camp only that afternoon. Finding that the newcomer had no news to impart of any importance, Ted soon confessed that he was tired and went off with Hubert to bed, there to lie awake a long while.

As soon as he was assured by their heavy breathing and snoring that the slackers were all asleep, the boy crept to the door in the floor, quietly put down the ladder and descended. Fifteen [Pg 164]

minutes later he was back in his bed. In the morning there was quite a commotion when it was discovered that the cub had escaped, although supposedly it was altogether secure. Nobody noticed that Ted did not look surprised. The boy kept his secret, regretting his act only at moments in the presence of the hapless Billy's grief.

Ted consoled the quickly forgetful half-wit with the present of a silver quarter, and soon gave all his thought to more important matters. For after breakfast July called him aside and said with a very serious face:

"Come go wid me to de turkey pen; I got sump'n to tell you."

"I haven't seen Mr. Hardy this morning," remarked Ted, as he walked away from the camp with the negro.

"Dat's what I got to tell you. He on his way out de swamp. Dat new man, Mr. Jenkins, brung de news dat Mr. Hardy's ma sick, an' bright an' early dis mawnin' he started out. An' what's mose as bad, Mr. Peters an' Mr. Jones gone wid 'im to fetch in some supplies. Dem three treats me de bes' of all of 'em in dis camp, an' dey's yo' bes' friends, too."

[Pg 165]

A sudden heart-sinking caused Ted's voice to be shaken as he asked when they expected to get back.

"Mr. Peters an' Mr. Jones say dey comin' right back—in two, three days. But how you gwine to calkilate on Mr. Hardy?" July stopped in his tracks and gazed solemnly into Ted's eyes. "Sposen his ma keep sick an' he stay dere till she die or git better? An' while he waitin', sposen dey grab him an' sen' him to do waw? We'd never see him yuh no mo'."

Ted's face brightened momentarily and he said:

"If—if I thought he would go to the war willingly, I—I could give him up."

"You sho is a cap'n," said July, looking down on the boy with admiration, "for I reckon you know it'll be mighty diffunt in dis camp wid Mr. Hardy gone."

"I know," said Ted, very serious. "I've been thinking about it."

"Fum de very fust day he stan' between you boys and dat rough crowd. An' dat puts me in mind o' what I got to tell you."

[Pg 166]

July suddenly fell silent. They were now near the turkey pen or trap, and a fluttering of wings against its bars showed that their trip was not to be without substantial gain. Two wild turkeys were captive in the pen. Having taken these out with much elation, clipped their wings, tied their feet together, and scattered more shelled corn to attract fresh victims, July lifted his fluttering burden, started on the backward track, and resumed:

"De las' words Mr. Hardy say to me was, 'July, tek good care o' dem boys,' and I aim to do my level bes' right now. Cap'n Ted, lem me give you a piece o' advice: don't you go to talkin' to dem t'other mens 'bout dat waw, let 'lone exhortin' and shamin' 'em like de way you done. Hit won't do; hit won't begin to do. You sho must know dat yo'self."

"I understand," said Ted, gloomily.

"If Mr. Peters an' Mr. Jones was dere, you might say a little, but better be careful any time. I kin keep you boys in good vittles, but I can't keep dem mens fum cuffin' you round if dey git mad. So, do please 'member what I tell you."

[Pg 167]

After Ted had gratefully thanked him July went on to express the conviction that if Buck had not gone away in such a great hurry he would have left the boys better protected; he would have insisted that Peters and Jones stay at the camp in his absence and that two other men go out for the supplies.

"But I reckon he was so worried 'bout his ma dat he couldn't think of eve'thing. He didn't forgit you, dough. He tole dem mens he wanted to take you-all out wid 'im. He say you been in dis swamp long enough an' you ought to be home. But dey wouldn't hear to it and dey voted him down. He was too worried an' busy gittin' ready to tussle wid 'em long, so he give up. But he tole 'em if anything happen to you boys while he gone dey'd have to answer to him."

"He's a gentleman," said Ted. "I can't understand why he ever came into this swamp, but I know what he is."

"So dat's de way it stans," said July, as they were approaching the camp. "Now, Cap'n Ted, you tell Hubut all I tole you, an' den you boys mus walk easy an' watch out. If anybody starts sump'n, don't let it be you."

[Pg 168]

Ted soon found opportunity to tell Hubert and was surprised to find that his cousin received the news more or less cheerfully.

"Now we may be able to get away from here," said Hubert. "I've wanted to go all the time, but you had notions in your head and were never ready. I liked your spunk, Ted, and I thought the way you talked to the slackers was fine; but I knew it would never do any good, and I thought it was foolish for us not to run away at the first chance."

"I wanted to try to do a little to help win the war," said Ted, rather pathetically, as if by way of

excuse for error, as if wondering whether, after all, Hubert had been right and he had been wrong.

He sighed deeply, lacking in sufficient experience of life to know that even the greatest souls have moments of depression wherein they are doubtful as to whether the very purest and highest aspiration or endeavor is worth while or even justifiable before the bar of good sense.

"We must get ready and watch for our chance," said Hubert, and Ted, sighing again, uttered no word of dissent. [Pg 169]

That day, devoted in considerable part to the discussion of plans, passed without important incident. The slackers came and went, the boys kept mostly to themselves, discreetly remaining within the borders of the camp, and there was peace. But at supper they noticed a studied coolness toward them, particularly in the larger group of which Sweet Jackson was the center. While the boys spoke and acted with all discretion, Jackson stared at them often, talking in a low voice to those about him. His grudge against Ted was plainly visible and he seemed to be trying to stir up the other men against him. The boys went off to bed early, much troubled in mind. At the camp fire the next night Sweet Jackson deliberately stepped out of his path in order to hook his toe under Ted's outstretched leg and give it a rude and vicious shove.

"Why can't you keep yer feet out o' the road?" he shouted angrily.

"Why don't you do that to a man of your size?" cried Ted in hot indignation. [Pg 170]

"*Size* don't bother me when I get good and mad," declared Jackson menacingly.

"Oh, Billy, don't you want to play a game!" called out Hubert in the most cheerful voice. "Come on, Ted."

Then Hubert jerked Ted to his feet and pulled him away in the direction of the imaginary Billy, who was, in fact, nowhere to be seen. "*Don't* answer him back," whispered the younger boy urgently. "If you do, we'll have trouble. Keep away from him!"

Thus the incident passed and with it any immediate danger, thanks to Hubert's ready and resolute interference.

The next day at breakfast and dinner July served the boys after the slackers had eaten and scattered—at Hubert's suggestion. And at supper he fed them with Billy at the cook-camp fire about forty feet apart from the fire around which the slackers ate and lounged. Sweet Jackson observed the new arrangement with a mocking smile, looking over at the cook-camp often as he talked merrily with those about him.

"That's right," he called out once. "Stay there with the nigger, where you belong." [Pg 171]

Ted started up, furious, but Hubert hung upon him on one side and Billy, giggling and thinking it was a kind of game, hung upon him on the other.

"*Don't!*" warned Hubert.

And then, as several of the slackers spoke up in protest, Jackson made no further hostile demonstration.

Too outraged to speak, or even to think clearly, Ted soon rose and almost literally staggered off to bed.

"We'll have to go—to-day or to-night," were his first words to Hubert next morning, after a sleepless night.

This was at breakfast, after the slackers had scattered. He had purposely stayed in bed late in order to avoid them. He now spoke while the negro noisily cleaned his pots.

"Well, I've pumped July about all the trails leading out he knows of," said Hubert, "and all we've got to do is to make a choice and beat it at the first chance."

Suddenly the negro turned from his pots and planted himself in front of the two boys, his face very serious.

"Cap'n Ted," he began, "you reckon I kin 'pend on what you said 'bout gittin' a cook's job behind de lines in dat waw?" [Pg 172]

"I can't say for certain, July, but I think you can."

"Well, I got to tek de risk anyhow," the negro announced with an air of finality. "I's gwine out o' dis swamp. I's done wid dat gang o' white trash. I got my dose. I gwine out wid you boys."

"That's great," cried Hubert. "But what's happened, July?"

"Dis mawnin' when I was workin' de bes' I knowd how an' givin' dem men good vittles, dey up an' made fun o' my hair. Dat-ere Sweet Jackson 'lowed dat a nigger wasn't a rale human pusson because, stid o' hair, he had wool on his haid. Den dey all looked at me an' laughed till dey shook. I wished I could 'a' tole 'em dey was a liar and a-busted 'em wide open!"

"That was very unkind," said Ted, struggling hard, as did Hubert, not to laugh.

"I reckon you boys done had all you want o' dat gang yo'sef," said July, "an' in as big a hurry to git away fum yuh as I is."

"Yes," agreed Hubert. "This is the fourth day and Mr. Peters and Mr. Jones haven't come back. There's no telling *when* Mr. Hardy will come. Even Ted hasn't anything to stay for now." [Pg 173]

"I wanted so much to try to wake up some of the slackers and make them see," said Ted, "but I'm afraid I can't do anything now. I give up," he concluded, a big tear rolling down one cheek.

"Cap'n Ted, honey, don't you worry," said July, with sympathy. "You done yo' bes' and dat's all a man kin do. It look' to me sometimes like you was gwine to git Mr. Hardy an' maybe Mr. Peters, but you couldn't 'a' done nothin' wid dat white trash left yuh in dis swamp. If dey was *dragged* to de waw dey would des lay down an' let de Germans walk on 'em. I use' to hear a white gen'l'man say, 'you can't mek a silk purse out'n a sow's ear,' an' I putty nigh busted my head tryin' to understan' what he meant, but I knows now he was talkin' 'bout des sich trash as dat. Don't you worry, Cap'n Ted; de President an' de gov'ment'll tek care o' dat waw."

"We haven't any time to waste," spoke up Hubert impatiently, proposing that they at once decide on a plan and begin to get ready. He asked the negro if they could run away that very day. [Pg 174]

July replied promptly that it wouldn't do to attempt to escape in the day time because since Mr. Hardy's departure the camp had been continually under observation from morning till evening. He said the break for freedom would have to be made at night "when dey ain't expectin'." With this much settled, they went on to discuss routes, and decided that a game of hide-and-seek led by Billy should be the form of camouflage masking their start on their road that night after supper.

The boys were still discussing plans when the majority of the slackers came into camp for dinner, and, as the new man, Mitch' Jenkins, passed near where they sat, Ted suddenly got upon his feet and asked eagerly for news from the Russian front.

"Now just look at him," muttered Hubert impatiently. "Will I ever get him away from this place?"

"Oh, Mr. Jenkins," began Ted, in his politest manner, just as if nothing disagreeable had occurred, "I've been wanting to ask you if, before you came in, you heard whether Germany and Russia had made peace or not." [Pg 175]

"I didn't hear no talk of it," said Jenkins, eying the boy curiously.

"They had been about to make peace," said Ted, "but just before I came in here they were on the point of going to war again. It was reported that the Russians had threatened to kill 1,500,000 German prisoners of war if the Kaiser marched his army on Petrograd. That would have been perfectly awful, but it's just the kind of thing the Germans themselves did in Belgium and France. I hope they haven't made peace; it's best for us for them to keep on fighting."

"You take a heap of interest, for just a boy, in that war 'way off yonder," said Jenkins, his manner not unfriendly.

"Everybody ought to take an interest, for we are in the fight, too, you know," said Ted, forgetting and becoming argumentative. "Why, don't you see, if the Germans whip all Europe and get England's fleet, they'll come right over here and attack us, and wherever they land our people will have to stand all the terrible things the Belgians and the French have had to stand." [Pg 176]

"Here you are a-talkin' about that war again!" stormed Sweet Jackson, who had walked up in time to hear a few words.

"Look h-yer, Jackson, I don't see nothin' the matter with this boy," said Jenkins, his tone sharp and his look steady. "Why are you so sot agin him? He jes' asked me if two of them fightin' countries had made peace."

"Oh, well—if that was all," said Jackson more quietly, yielding before unexpected belligerence.

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins," said Ted politely, and turned away.

"That's a nice, polite kid," said Jenkins to one of the slackers a few moments later. "What's all the row about anyhow?"

"But you ain't heard him exhortin' and sham'in' us runaways yet."

"Did he do that? Well, that's a cat of another color. But he sure is a spunky kid."

After supper that night, as the slackers told yarns and joked about the camp fire, Billy, who had been craftily stimulated, seemed unusually wide awake and repeated nursery rhymes and "rigmaroles" by the dozen. Taking Hubert's hand in his, he touched the fingers one after another, repeating, "Little man—ring man—long man—lick pot—thumpkin." Then, tweaking the toes of his own bare feet, he merrily recited: "This little pig wants some corn; this one says, 'Where you goin' to git it?' This one says, 'In master's barn.' This one says he's goin' to tell. This one says, 'Queak!—queak!—can't git over the door-sill!'" [Pg 177]

Touching first Hubert's index finger and then his own as each word was uttered, Billy went on: "William Ma-trimble-toe; he's a good fisherman; catches hens, puts 'em in pens; some lays eggs,

some lays none; wire, briar, limber-lock; sets and sits till twelve o'clock; O-U-T spells 'out'—go!"

Thus was started the camouflage game of hide-and-seek, Ted at once, and July a little later by invitation, joining in the sport. It was a bright moonlight night, and no one seemed sleepy. The slackers stopped telling their yarns and watched the game, the seemingly joyful laughter of the boys and the negro affecting them agreeably. The fun was so contagious that several of the younger slackers, yielding to the fascination of it, joined in the game.

"Ten—ten—double ten—forty-five—fifteen hundred—are you all hid?" shouted Billy in great glee and with an air of vast importance. And such whooping and running and hiding in far dark recesses as followed! [Pg 178]

"Now's de time!" whispered July, when the fun was at its height, and he and Ted and Hubert had run off and squatted together behind the same clump of palmettos.

According to the plan agreed to, the negro was now to run down to the landing-place, step into the water and hide all the boats as far out in the thick growth of the submerged swamp as he dared to go, thus conveying the impression that the fugitives had escaped by way of the great marsh.

The course of the game now compelled the conspirators to separate and return to headquarters; but as soon as the next rush for cover was made the boys saw the negro dart away in the direction of the landing, and until he returned they played more enthusiastically and noisily than ever in order to distract attention from his absence. When he reappeared at last his trousers were wet to the knees, but this did not seem to attract notice. It was understood that the first rush for cover in the game after his return was to begin the dash for freedom. [Pg 179]

So when the boys saw the negro again dart away along the path into the swamp-cane, they followed fast with throbbing hearts, arriving at the boat-landing before Billy had finished the last recitation of his "rigmarole." There Ted and Hubert were given their guns and July snatched up a bucket of food—all of which he had cunningly conveyed thither since the beginning of the game. The negro promptly stepped into the water and bade the boys follow.

"Got to wade round a piece to fool dem dogs," he whispered. [Pg 180]

XV

JULY led the boys about fifty feet from the shore along the open boat-road, then turned to the right into the thick growth and skirted the island for several hundred yards before landing again. This was no trifling undertaking. The water in many places rose over their knees, and was thick with drift and moss; the bottom was often boggy, and the dense swamp growth forced them to a tortuous route. Moreover, little light descended from the moon among those crowding trees.

"Ten—ten—double ten!" they faintly heard Billy still shouting as they landed, glad to know that as yet their absence had not caused alarm.

Flight across the "prairie" had been voted down because they could take only two boats and rapid pursuit would be inevitable. The trail leading out from Honey Island attracted them, but the boat trip thither was difficult and impossible to follow by night. So they had chosen the jungle trail leading from the lower end of Deserters' Island which the boys had located on the day they killed the wild-cat. The boats had been hidden and they had waded some distance in order to convey a wrong impression as to their real design and delay pursuit. [Pg 181]

Halting to listen a few minutes after they landed, they distinctly heard the names of Ted and July called, and knew that at last they were missed. After a few minutes, as they hurried on their way, another shout reached them; and after a brief silence several sharp short yelps from the dogs were heard.

July leaped forward at the sound, urging the boys to haste. The darkness was bewildering until they emerged from the "hammock" and gained the more open pine woods forming the backbone of the island. Here the moonlight filtered through the scattering tops of the tall pines and they could distinguish prominent objects fifty feet away. Even here, however, rapid headway was difficult owing to the blackjack thickets and crowding clumps of the fan-palmetto preventing a straight course. There was a faint trail leading for some three miles toward the lower end of the island, but there was no time to search for it, and they pushed ahead in the general direction as best they could. [Pg 182]

An hour later, descending at last into the dense "hammock" growth joining the swamp and the island's lower end, they halted to listen. All was deathly still, at least in the direction of the slackers' camp; but the quiet of the dark slumbering swamp in their front was suddenly broken by the dismal hoot of an owl.

Ted urged that they search for the jungle trail he and Hubert had located and, having found it, push far into the swamp before break of day; but July's courage now failed him and he objected. He said it was dangerous to push into the swamp at night, as indeed it was; that they might sink

into a bog over their heads, might walk blindly into a nest of moccasins, or might be set upon by a panther.

"The great trouble is that you are both right," said Hubert.

"Dem mens won't start down dis-a way till daylight," said July. "Dey won't find out we ain't in de boats till mawnin' an' we kin git a big start on 'em on de swamp trail. Less stay up dere in dem open pines till daybreak." [Pg 183]

They paused a few moments, undecided. Suddenly from the dark depths of the swamp in their front a strange cry was borne to their ears, an indescribable cry that made their flesh creep.

"What's that?" whispered Hubert.

"Mus' be a pant'er," was July's whispered response.

The cry was heard again, more mysterious and startling than before. Then July bolted up the slope and was followed by the boys into the more open pine woods where the moonlight outlined all objects within their near view. July wanted to build a fire, but Ted would not consent to such imprudence, and finally it was agreed that they sit down with their backs to a large pine and watch until daylight.

All was now quiet and gradually they recovered from their fright. It was balmy spring weather, but they felt the chill of the night air. With a view to their greater comfort, July rose and tore down a couple of armfuls of Spanish moss that thickly wreathed a near-by blackjack thicket. When their legs were covered with this they were warm enough, but now found it increasingly difficult to sit upright and alert. Soon drowsiness overcame July, his head dropped on his breast and he began to snore. Ted roused him several times only to see him relapse into insensibility a few moments later. [Pg 184]

Soon Hubert also was asleep, and, after watching for perhaps an hour longer, Ted himself succumbed. Later, as he struggled to rouse himself and opened his eyes, he saw that the moon was low and concluded that all was well. As he drifted back toward dreamland he thought he heard a yelp or two from distant dogs, but was too benumbed by drowsiness to give heed. Possibly the dogs of the far camp had started on the trail of some animal, but what could this matter to the three sleepers under the pine? This half-thought itself was soon gone and the boy lay still, undisturbed by even a dream.

When Ted awoke it was daylight, and the dogs were leaping about him and barking. Several men were at hand, too; and the one nearest, who looked down at the sleepers with a triumphant grin, was Sweet Jackson.

They were caught! And what else could they have expected? The events of the night leaped forth from the boy's memory to shame him. If only they had not been such cowards and sleepyheads! [Pg 185]

"Don't hurt them boys! You can't blame 'em for tryin' to get away," called Mitch' Jenkins sharply, as Sweet Jackson began kicking July to wake him.

Ted hurriedly wakened Hubert and they both rose to their feet, turning away their indignant eyes from the severe kicking and cuffing bestowed upon July before he was allowed to rise.

"Thought you'd give us the slip along with them boys, did you?" shouted Sweet. "I'll teach you to give notice before you quit yer job."

"He's got a right to go home and so have we," cried Ted indignantly. "And some day you'll pay for this!"

"Shut up," cried Jackson, turning upon Ted—"if you want me to keep my hands off of you!"

"You let that boy alone," said Mitch' Jenkins, a distinct menace in his tone, and the bully subsided.

Then, being ordered to march and to "be quick about it," the prisoners started toward camp, Ted silent and thoughtful, Hubert crying softly, and July with a face of gloom. Their captors followed, laughing and jesting as they came. [Pg 186]

When the camp was reached July proceeded to cook breakfast, as ordered, and the boys stood and watched as the slackers set about building a "prison"—a sort of pen of heavy saplings—in which they announced that the negro would hereafter be locked up at night. What disturbed all of the captives perhaps even more than this was the order given to July, with threats of punishment, to "keep away from them boys" in the day time.

The building of the prison-pen occupied the slackers until near noon, and, while they were waiting about camp for their dinner, Mitch' Jenkins proposed that they "knock off" work that afternoon and "have a little fun out of a gander-pulling." Jenkins had brought a live gander on his march into the swamp because, as he explained when he reached the camp, he had failed to lay hands on a couple of fat chickens.

"But we ain't got no horses nor no race track," objected Zack James.

"Oh, we'll just swing him up and run round and grab him on foot. It's been done that way. [Pg 187]

Anything for a little fun."

This proposal having been adopted, preparations for the sport were begun immediately after dinner. From the stout limbs of two neighboring trees branching out some six or eight feet apart a rope was loosely swung, and to this the gander's feet were securely tied, so that the fowl's neck hung within easy reach of a man of average height. Before the squawking bird was hung up its neck was thoroughly greased, both operations being strenuously objected to and jealously watched by Billy, who had already adopted the gander as one of his pets.

All hands having gathered at the spot, Jenkins, the leading spirit of the festivity, passed round a hat and took up a collection of coins as a prize for the as yet unknown victor. The two boys, Billy and July formed the party of spectators, all the slackers, now only six in number, proposing to enter the contest. Lots having been drawn in order to determine who should have the first trial, the second, the third, and so on, Mitch' Jenkins announced the opening of the sport.

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"Everything is lovely and the goose hangs high," he shouted. "Gentlemen—let 'er go!"

Thereupon Sweet Jackson, who had drawn the first lot, took position about fifty feet away and at a given signal started forward at a rapid run. As he neared the swinging gander, his right hand was thrust upward, and he endeavored to seize the fowl by its neck. But in this he failed, the gander cunningly twisting its head out of reach.

A loud guffaw went up from the on-looking slackers as this signal failure was witnessed. Jim Carter then ran forward and grasped at the neck of the swinging fowl with no better success. The turn of Zack James followed. He succeeded in seizing the gander's neck, and, but for the treacherous grease, its head would have accompanied him in his onward rush. Released, the unhappy bird swung back and forth, hissing and squawking in an extremely ludicrous yet pathetic manner, exciting the laughter of the slackers, the pity of the boys and the angry protest of Billy.

"Quit it! Quit it, I tell you! You-all let my gander alone!" cried the witless young man again and again as the contest continued.

Once he ran forward and tried to take the fowl down, but retired, whimpering, on receiving a resounding box on the ear from Jackson.

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After all hands had made several trials and the gander's greasy neck had received a number of rude wrenches, the poor fowl held its head less high, ceased to hiss, and squawked more plaintively than ever. The game was easier now, and almost every contestant succeeded in grasping the neck as he ran past, but always failed to retain his hold.

At last, after the contest had continued for more than an hour and a half, and the object of the cruel sport had almost ceased to make any outcry whatever, Zack James leaped upward as he ran by and grasped the neck of the fowl near its breast. As his body was carried onward by the force of its momentum, his tightly gripped hand slipped rapidly along the gander's neck, but paused at its head. For one moment the man's body swung from the ground, his whole weight supported by the neck of the still living fowl. It was then that he gave his hand a vigorous twist. The next moment he pitched forward on his feet, carrying the gander's head in his grasp.

At this moment Ted seized the opportunity offered by the universal preoccupation of the slackers to speak earnestly to Hubert. In spite of their disapproval of such cruel sport, both boys had been absorbingly interested in the contest, but now Ted's thoughts returned to the problem of escape from Deserters' Island. Declaring that another attempt should be made that night, he urged Hubert to be watchful and ready. Then, stepping cautiously to the side of the negro, whose eyes were fastened on the now noisily disputing slackers, the boy said:

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"We must try it again to-night, July."

"Don' know 'bout dat," said the negro doubtfully. "Better wait. Dey'll be watchin' us too close."

"That's it; they won't be expecting it to-night, and that's the very reason we ought to have a good chance."

This view of the matter promptly appealed to the negro, who ceased to object and listened attentively to the boy's suggestions.

"Get ready on the sly," urged Ted. "Put a bucket of food where you can lay your hands on it, and late in the night we'll slip out of the loft and let you out of your pen."

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"All right, Cap'n Ted; I'll be ready, an' if I's sleep, des gimme a punch in de ribs."

Then they moved quickly away from each other and gave their attention to the loudly contending slackers.

"And *I* say Mr. James gits the prize," cried Mitch' Jenkins.

He detached himself from a noisy group as he spoke, stepped to the side of the waiting victor and poured the collection of coins into his hand.

"He didn't git it fair," declared Sweet Jackson, in loud, angry tones. "Who *can't* wring off a gander's neck if he swings on to it that-a way?"

"We all had the same chance to do what he did," argued Jenkins, good-humoredly. "The trouble was we couldn't keep our grip."

"I say hit wan't done fair!" repeated Jackson, in great anger.

Flushed with victory, James did not pause to calculate consequences and now gave his accuser the lie, which, in local parlance, was equivalent to the "first lick."

Sweet Jackson's face turned livid, and, whipping out a large pocket-knife, he leaped toward James. Almost at the same instant Jenkins and Carter sprang toward Jackson from opposite sides, but the uplifted blade descended before James had protected himself and ere the interference was made fully effective. Although Jackson's arm was seized, the point of the knife deeply grazed the left cheek of the prize-winner. A moment later the staring spectators noted a rapidly expanding streak of red. The murderous but fortunately arrested blow had done only slight damage, yet the free flow of blood imparted a harsh and startling reality to the forbidding scene, the horror of which was intensified by the effect on Billy. [Pg 192]

"Oh, yes, Zack James, see now what you got for pullin' off my gander's head!" cried the witless young man triumphantly, capering about and giggling. "See what you got now! I wish my gander knowed it. I'll bet he does know, too. Anyhow he'll know by and by and he'll laugh. He'll have a good laugh."

"Stop that!" commanded Jenkins, turning a shocked and stern face toward the untimely merry-maker. [Pg 193]

Then Billy subsided, watching as silently as the other spectators while Jackson was forced away in one direction and James in the other, both cursing with great fury, and each vowing that he would take the life of the other. [Pg 194]

XVI

THE two boys and the negro remained motionless in their places, wondering what would happen next, until Billy cut down the body of the headless gander and was about to bear it away. Then July interfered.

"Gim-me dat gander, boy," he said, laughing. "Quit yer foolin' an' gwine on. We got to hab dat gander for supper."

James now sat with his back to a pine, and Jenkins was bending over him and wiping away the blood with a wet handkerchief. The latter, seeing that the cut was little more than a painful scratch, began to jest and laugh, the atmosphere of tragedy being thus quickly dispersed. Having salved the wound, predicting a speedy healing, Jenkins turned to seek Jackson and "give him a talking to." The "knife-slinger" was pointedly informed that if he wanted to have a single friend left in the camp, he had better keep a grip on himself in future. Listening to this forcible utterance of common sense, Jackson rapidly cooled down, ceasing his profane and threatening speeches. [Pg 195]

And so, in spite of the violent termination of the festive gander-pulling, the slackers soon recovered their wonted spirits. After supper, with the exception of the wounded man who went immediately to bed, they sat about the fire and joked, sang corn-shucking songs, and drank corn-beer, in the greatest possible good humor.

But July smiled covertly and shook his head, as soon as he found opportunity thus forcibly expressing himself:

"Look yuh, Cap'n Ted, I got to git away fum dis place befo' somebody draw a knife on me an' cut my throat."

"We'll get away to-night," said the boy confidently.

"We got a good chance," assented July. "After all dat jollification dem mens'll sleep hard, cep'n it's Mr. James wid dat cut face. You better look out for *him*. You better not move a foot till 'way late 'bout two o'clock."

Hubert fell asleep soon after they had lain down on their bed of moss in the corner of the loft, but Ted lay awake for hours, listening and waiting. He had been rendered the more anxious by a suggestion that was made as the slackers were taking off their shoes and preparing to lie down. [Pg 196]

"Don't you reckon we'd better tie them boys?" proposed Sweet Jackson.

"Oh, no," answered the more humane Jenkins. "They've had their lesson."

Jackson did not seem to think it necessary to insist and the boys were left in freedom of hand and foot, to their great relief. But the restlessness of James was a continuing source of apprehension, his smarting face causing him to turn frequently with a grunt or sigh or muttered exclamation of annoyance.

At last Ted began to fear that there was no hope of stealing out of the loft that night, and in the

midst of his discouragement sleep overtook him.

When he awoke all was quiet, except for the snoring of several of the men. Zack James, who had been restless so long, now lay still and made no sound. Ted did not know why, but he felt convinced that it was near morning. Lifting himself guardedly upon his knees, he bent over his sleeping cousin, shook him and whispered in his ear.

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Hubert stirred sleepily and began a stupid muttering in a voice seemingly so loud that Ted was terrified, allowing the boy to relapse into slumber. After listening intently and hearing no disturbance, Ted tried again and this time roused Hubert to complete wakefulness without noise.

The two then crept along the wall until they stood opposite the hole in the floor. As they did this, Ted, who led the way, stumbled over an outstretched foot and narrowly escaped falling. The disturbed sleeper grunted, muttered a few unintelligible words, turned over, and all was quiet again. Just as the boys were preparing to swing themselves down through the opening, not daring to put down the ladder, one of the sleepers stirred noisily, and they heard the voice of James demanding:

"Who's that?"

Drawing back into the deep shadow, the boys stood silent, holding their very breath. The challenge was repeated. Then, for perhaps a quarter of an hour, Ted and Hubert stood in their tracks, hardly moving a muscle, breathing softly, and fearing that even the beating of their hearts would be heard.

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Convinced at last that the wounded man had relapsed into slumber, they noiselessly swung themselves down through the opening and dropped softly to the ground below. Several dogs, lying asleep beneath the loft, rose and followed the boys with signs of great cheerfulness, evidently anticipating a night hunt.

The first need was to "turn July out," as Hubert put it. This consisted merely in lifting away the heavy section of a log braced against the makeshift door of the prison-pen, and was soon accomplished without noise. July came forth, rubbing his eyes, and whispering:

"I clean give you out an' went to sleep. It's mose daylight," he added, "an' we better be gwine quick."

"Let's take the dogs, so that they can't use 'em to track us," suggested Ted. "We can make 'em come back after we get a good start of five or six miles. I wish I could keep Spot," he added, referring to the dog that had so devotedly battled with the panther.

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July agreed to this, and the dogs were called softly. The whole pack, five in number, followed gladly, as the boys and the negro hurried away from the camp. It had been decided on the evening before to take the jungle trail leading from the lower end of Deserters' Island, and they now moved in that direction. The intervening miles of high pine land were covered with the greatest possible speed. Wherever the ground was sufficiently open they ran, and even in the brush they pushed forward rapidly, careless of scratched hands and faces or torn clothing.

Faint light filtered through the treetops from the whitening sky before they had traversed half the length of the island, and by the time they reached its limit birds on every hand were singing their welcome to the arrival of a new day. The fugitives now observed with considerable concern that the dogs had disappeared, surmising that they had recognized the difference between a flight and a hunt and in consequence had returned to camp.

They soon found the trail and hurried down into the jungle, careless of the mud and water, the thorny brambles, the possible moccasins. They knew that within an hour's time the pursuit would begin and recognized the need of great haste at any cost.

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July, who led the way, paused suddenly; and, opening the tin bucket carried on his arm, urged the boys to take some of the sandwiches therein and stuff them in their pockets.

"May be hard to keep togedder when dey come at' us wid de dawgs," he said,—adding: "But if you boys git lost fum me, you keep gwine on by yo'self till you git out de swamp an' find yo' way home."

Pressing on with the utmost energy for an hour longer, and not as yet hearing any sounds indicating pursuit, they began to feel more secure; and soon, at the urgent suggestion of Hubert, they sat down on a log to refresh themselves with some of the cold food while resting their wearying legs.

"We got to be gwine!" cried July less than fifteen minutes later.

He had sprung to his feet as the distant baying of dogs fell on his ear. All knew at once that the slackers were again on their trail and that there was no time to lose.

Again the negro led the way, taking new precautions and urging the boys to do precisely as he did. As he dashed forward over the difficult ground, he jumped from tussock to tussock, stepped upon roots and masses of dry moss, and avoided every bit of soft exposed earth where a track would remain imprinted. Whenever a fallen log ran parallel with their course, he sprang upon it and walked its full length. Once he made a complete circle, two hundred yards or more in diameter; then, springing upon a fallen log several feet beyond the limits of this circle, and

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directing the boys to do likewise, he pressed forward again over the direct course.

All this was intended to confuse and delay the dogs, if it did not throw them off the scent altogether; but in no great while it appeared to have succeeded only in a small measure. For the baying, instead of gradually fading away in the distance as desired, after ceasing for a time became more vigorous than ever and unmistakably drew nearer. Soon July halted, looked round, and waited for the boys to overtake him.

"Dem dawgs'll be yuh in no time," he said, discouraged.

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"Will they bite us?" asked Hubert apprehensively.

"No; they know us," said Ted. "We could shoot them," he added, facing the negro, a question in his tone. "I'd hate to do it, and I don't think I *could* shoot Spot, but we have a right to do it."

Ted and Hubert carried their small guns. The negro was armed only with a hatchet and a heavy butcher-knife, the blade of which gleamed brightly where it stuck in his belt.

"Better let me go for 'em wid de hatchet or dis knife," said July, shaking his head. "Soon's you shoot dem mens'll know 'zackly where we is."

Further discussion was checked by the warning of a yelp very close in their rear. Bidding the boys conceal themselves, July ran back a few yards over the trail and took his stand behind a large tree trunk.

As the foremost dog was about to trot past, the negro leaned over and dealt it a terrific blow on the head with the butt end of the hatchet, breaking through its skull. With a stifled cry in its throat, the dog rolled over and lay in the struggle of approaching death, whereupon the four others coming up shied away from the unseen danger and took to their heels on the backward track with yelps of affright.

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After Ted had gladly taken note that the slain dog was not Spot, the three fugitives hurried onward as before, and for an hour they heard nothing more from the dogs. Finally a subdued and, as it seemed, muffled yelp began to be heard at intervals. July looked puzzled and several times paused to listen, showing great anxiety when he became convinced that the sounds were drawing nearer. At last he said he believed that the slackers held the dogs in leash, their object being to steal upon the unsuspecting fugitives while they halted to rest in fancied security.

"If we ain't quick dey'll nab us befo' we know it," the negro concluded.

"Can't we put the dogs off the scent in some way?" asked Ted, looking about him.

They were now in a dense growth of water-oaks and other trees, gay with the full green leafage of spring; and some little distance ahead water could be seen.

"I believe we could climb up and swing from limb to limb until we got out yonder over that water," eagerly proposed Ted. "Then we could drop down and wade as far as the water went, then climb up again, and, if the trees keep thick enough, go quite a long way. *That* would break the trail."

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"It sho will," assented July, "if only we kin do it. May be easy for you light boys, but hit won't be so easy for me."

"Let's try it anyhow," urged Ted, and they at once began preparations.

By means of stout twine, much of which they had fortunately stuffed into their pockets, Ted securely strapped his gun on his back. July having disposed of Hubert's gun and his own bucket in the same way, giving Hubert the hatchet in exchange, and all now having arms as well as legs free, they began to climb.

For once, Hubert led the way. Lifting himself among the larger branches of a spreading water-oak, he found it comparatively easy to walk out on a lower limb—while grasping a higher—until he could lay hold of an interlacing branch and swing himself safely among the larger arms of a neighboring tree. Repeating this performance, he passed on from tree to tree.

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Ted followed readily enough, for, though older, he was no heavier than Hubert, and was even more active; but he lingered behind to watch and softly encourage July. Because of his far greater weight and the bending of the branches beneath him, the negro might well hesitate and move cautiously. He soon saw that his only hope was in a bold leap into the branches of the neighboring tree, trusting to his quick, firm grasp to arrest his descent to the ground.

The sound of a muffled yelp from the dogs, unmistakably coming from a point only a short distance away, spurred July on, and he took the dangerous leap, landing among the stout branches of the neighboring tree unharmed save for scratches and bruises which he scarcely felt.

"You can do it," Ted called back softly, by way of encouragement. "Come on as fast as you can."

"Don't wait on me," said July. "I'll git dere bimeby. You boys hurry on."

So Ted followed faster on the track of Hubert. Within a few minutes from the start the boys had transported themselves more than a hundred yards without setting foot on the ground and were soon over the water. They then let themselves down, waded knee-deep some fifty yards among scattering cypress trees, grasped a low limb of another water-oak, swung themselves up and

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were once more traveling, monkey-like, aloft.

"You go ahead, Hubert," said Ted. "I'll wait here till I see July coming."

Hubert went on and Ted waited. But he waited in vain, for July was in trouble. After leaping successfully three or four times, at last—while the boys were wading across the cypress pool—July failed to gain a firm hold of the branches through which his heavy body descended, and, though his fall was broken by the leafy obstructions, he struck the ground with great force and was for a few moments partially stunned.

A sudden yelping of the dogs now very close at hand roused him to action. Struggling to his feet, he laid hold of the tree into which he had attempted to jump, and climbed with some difficulty into its branches. The unfortunate negro saw that it was now too late to jump again, even if he dared to do so, badly shaken as he was, and that his forlorn and only resource was to conceal himself as best he could in the higher foliage of the tree.

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Scarcely had the trembling of the leaves and branches subsided when the pursuers were heard very near at hand, July promptly recognizing the voices of Sweet Jackson, Jim Carter and two other men belonging to the camp. They held the dogs in leash, as the negro had suspected, but were marching with the greatest possible speed. Reaching the point where the trail came to an end, the dogs one and all halted, snuffing the air in a mystified way, and could hardly be forced forward.

"They must be round h-yer some'rs," the harsh voice of Sweet Jackson declared.

"Mebby they tuck a tree," suggested Carter.

A silence followed, and July understood only too well that the members of the party had separated and were scanning the neighboring treetops. Suddenly one of the dogs began to bay immediately beneath him, and a few moments later the triumphant voice of Carter was heard:

"H-yer's one of 'em up this tree!"

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XVII

THE dog had snuffed the spot where he fell to the ground, and poor July was discovered.

"It's the nigger," announced Carter after a few moments.

"Shoot 'im if he don't git down from there quick," cried Jackson, savagely.

Instantly the branches of the water-oak began to tremble, and July descended with all speed.

"Now where's them boys?" demanded his captors.

"I dun-know where dey is."

Curses greeted this denial, and Jackson threatened to "break every bone" in the negro's body if he did not reveal the hiding place of the boys at once.

"I tell you I dun-know," insisted July, determined to prevent the capture of his young confederates if he could possibly do so. "All I know is," he lied boldly, "dey got lost fum me 'way back yonder where we fout de dawgs."

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Abusive exclamations of incredulity were supplemented by Carter with the warning:

"That was Rafe Wheeler's dog you killed, and I reckon he'll make you see sights before he's done with you."

July knew that there was trouble ahead of him in any case, and as he obediently followed his captors while they beat the neighboring bush, endeavoring in vain to start the dogs on the scent, he stuck to his story, unblushingly inventing incidents with a view to impart to it an atmosphere of convincing reality.

As Ted waited and watched for July, he noted that the spreading branches of the water-oak embraced the trunk of an immense old decaying cypress, and that there was a circular opening in its side a foot or two above him and only a few feet away. Plainly there was a large hollow—possibly the result of some past forest fire—for the opening was at least two feet in diameter. He saw also that, by moving a foot or two nearer on the limb supporting his weight, he could grasp the sides of the opening and perhaps enter the hollow.

He now heard the murmur of voices and listened intently, fearing that the pursuers had arrived and put an end to July's chances of escape. The voices grew louder, and then the tramp of feet was heard, but still Ted lingered, owing both to his concern for July's safety and his eagerness to know the definite issue.

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Then, before he realized that they were so near, the slackers appeared with the dogs and July himself on the other side of the cypress pool and began to wade across.

Ted now perceived that he was in peril. It was too late to hurry on the trail of Hubert, for the

noise and leafy commotion inevitably accompanying his passage from tree to tree would at once attract attention. Doubtless Hubert was far enough away to be reasonably safe and could for the time be left to take care of himself. At all events Ted realized that his own safety could be his only immediate concern, and that it was necessary not only to keep quiet but to hide.

Therefore, without a moment's delay, he moved guardedly out on the bending limb, leaned forward and grasped the sides of the cypress's hollow, which fortunately proved to be firm. Drawing himself up quietly, he thrust his feet through the opening and slid into the hollow with but little noise. As he did so, a large squirrel whisked past him with a frightened squeak and scurried wildly up the sides of the cypress.

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"I never saw such a piece of good luck," Ted declared afterward, relating that the hollow was neither too big nor too little, and that his feet landed on a firm bottom just far enough below the opening to permit him to stand comfortably and look out.

But when he looked out he could see little more than the foliage of the water-oak. He listened intently as the slackers waded across the pool. He hoped that they would turn aside, but they seemed to come straight on. A few moments later the dogs made a noisy rush and he heard them barking excitedly immediately beneath the cypress. Convinced that he had been scented and was now "treed," the boy feared that one of the slackers would promptly climb up and drag him from his hiding place.

But he kept quiet and still hoped for some fortunate turn of events. Tempted to lean out and look down, he drew his head back quickly and almost held his breath. He had glimpsed two men tramping around in the shallow water beneath the oak and looking up into its branches. Evidently the opening in the side of the cypress had not yet been discovered, as there was no triumphant outcry, and at this thought Ted felt somewhat encouraged. He now heard the impatient voice of Carter:

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"I don't see nothin'. What's the matter with them dogs anyhow?"

Then came the voice of July, speaking at a greater distance:

"Look at dat fox-squirrel!—skippin' round 'way up in de top o' dat cypress! Dat's what ail de dawgs."

Ted blessed the squirrel for the good service it had evidently performed by changing its position and immediately attracting the eye of those below because of the cypress's characteristically thin leafage.

"I reckon that's it," said Garter.

"It sho is," insisted July, "for dem boys is a fur ways fum yuh des like I tole you."

"Don't care how fur—I'll git 'em 'fore I quit," the angry voice of Sweet Jackson was then heard.

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"Drive them dogs away from there and come on."

The dogs were called off, the voices became only a faint murmur, the noisy tramping through water subsided, and soon the ordinary quiet of the forest reigned. Recovering his wonted spirits, Ted laughed softly, but remained motionless for twenty minutes or more. He would have waited still longer but for his anxiety in regard to the whereabouts and fate of Hubert.

Climbing out of the hollow, he let himself down into the shallow water beneath the oak and whistled softly. He whistled again a little more loudly, and was then immensely gratified to receive a cautious response. Whistling softly, the boys approached each other and soon stood face to face. Then each quickly told his story.

"Yes, I heard 'em," said Hubert, "and I was almost too scared to breathe. I stayed up in my tree as quiet as a mouse. I was awfully afraid they'd get you as well as July."

They hurried on their way as they talked, and soon left the neighborhood far behind. It was now midday and, being no longer in fear of immediate capture, the boys had leisure to discover that they were tired as well as hungry. So they stopped to rest and eat what remained of the cold bread and meat given them by July. But they knew that there was no time to be lost and within less than half an hour they were pushing forward again.

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Soon after they had penetrated the jungle that morning, the trail gradually faded away until July doubted whether they had found the right one in the first place; and, after the dogs were heard on their track, the negro made no further effort to follow it, but pushed ahead in the general direction taken, choosing the most open and passable ground. This was Ted's plan now.

Toward mid-afternoon the ground began slowly to rise before them, and the forest growth to become less dense, until finally they emerged from the jungle region altogether and found themselves on an open pine ridge where the ground was covered with wiregrass and dotted with clumps of fan-palmettoes. They believed they were now, at last, clear of the great swamp, but tramped on without any exchange of congratulatory exclamations, not daring to jubilate too soon.

"This looks like the outside," was all Hubert said, and Ted merely admitted: "It looks good to me."

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"I smell smoke," said Hubert a few minutes later.

They had now tramped out into the open pine woods some half a mile, and the wind blowing into their faces wafted a distinctly smoky odor, suggesting a forest fire. The probability of this was shortly confirmed by the sight of fleeing birds, and here and there an animal, as a deer, a fox or a skunk making rapidly toward the flooded swamp area.

"Somebody must be burnin' off the woods for the cattle," said Ted, elated. "If that's it, we are certainly out of the swamp at last."

He referred to the common practice in the region bordering the Okefinokee of firing the woods in spring in order to destroy the year's crop of tough wiregrass and so give place to a tender green growth on which the cattle might feed to better advantage.

In no great while the boys could see the fire itself here and there, and ere long they were confronted by an unbroken barrier of flame extending across the whole ridge. Their position was becoming dangerous, and Ted looked around in some anxiety. The swamp half a mile behind was a certain refuge, and he believed that they could reach it ahead of the fire, but he was reluctant to turn back. While hesitating, his eye fell upon a small cypress pond some three hundred yards to the left, and, calling on Hubert to follow, he started toward it on a run. [Pg 216]

Ted felt confident that, even if there were no water in the pond, the fire would not burn through it. "Pond" is hardly an accurate description of these little groves of a dozen or two of cypresses so frequently found in the pine barrens, although they are always on low, swampy ground, which in wet weather is likely to be covered with a foot or two of water. A small pool about twenty feet in diameter lingered in the center of this one, but the boys did not wade into it. As soon as they stood among the cypress "knees" and trod upon spongy ground covered with damp pine needles they felt safe.

During a few minutes hot and almost stifling smoke filled the surrounding atmosphere, but the fire itself merely burned round the edges of the pond and then passed on its roaring way, the wind soon carrying off the smoke also. After waiting some little time for the ashes of the burnt grass to cool, the boys came out of their retreat and picked their way across the blackened ground. The wiregrass had entirely disappeared before the flames, but the tall pines, the scrub-oaks and the clumps of fan-palmettos stood for the most part intact. Here and there some fallen and well-seasoned log still burned vigorously, and in a few instances fire had run up on the oozing sap to the tops of the tallest trees. [Pg 217]

Ted and Hubert tramped over the blackened and heated earth about a mile and a half, always hoping soon to see the clearing and log house of some backwoods settler. But when at last they reached a "hammock" growth and descended through it to the borders of a vast "prairie" or marsh, in every respect similar to the one adjoining Deserters' Island, this pleasing hope became a sigh of regret.

It was now quite clear that they were still within the borders of the great Okefinokee, and that they had just traversed one of its islands or areas of elevated land. The origin of the fire puzzled Ted at first, but he concluded that some of the slackers, or hunters from the outside, had recently been there and had neglected to extinguish or clear a space about their camp-fire. [Pg 218]

"It's going to rain," said Ted, looking up at the darkening sky, "and we'd better fix our camp right away."

A favorable spot on the outskirts of the hammock was chosen, and they hurriedly erected a "brush tent," or lean-to, similar to those they had heard the slackers speak of building when too far away to return to camp for the night. When the fugitives began their tree-top retreat that morning, July had relieved Hubert of his gun and given the boy his hatchet in exchange. With the hatchet the boys now cut down a slender sapling which they tied at each end with bear-grass thongs to two small trees about ten feet apart. Against this cross-bar, which was about four feet from the ground, eight or ten other cut saplings were leaned at an angle of about forty-five degrees and less than a foot apart. Over these were then arranged about a hundred palmetto fans cut within a few feet of the spot, thus forming a thatch which was protected against gusts of wind by two or three other saplings laid diagonally across. They thus secured a fairly good shelter and were sure of sleeping dry unless the wind changed and blew into the open front instead of against the thatch at the back. [Pg 219]

It was nearly dark when the work was finished, but it had not yet begun to rain. While Hubert now gathered wood for their camp-fire, Ted took his gun and stole off into the woods, hoping to shoot something for supper. He had not gone very far when a fluttering and dimly outlined forms on a high limb of a tall bay tree indicated a "turkey roost." Taking careful aim, he fired, and then, amid the noisy flap of wings as the wild fowl scattered, he thought he heard a soft thud on the ground beneath the "roost." Running to the foot of the bay tree, he was delighted to find that he had bagged a plump turkey-hen.

Some Spanish moss having been gathered and spread on the ground in the acute angle of the lean-to, and portions of the turkey having been broiled with fair success on glowing coals raked out of the fire, the boys satisfied their hunger and lay down with a feeling of comfort which hardly seemed in keeping with their continuing misfortunes, and which was not lessened by the harmless patter of the rain-drops on the thatch over their heads. [Pg 220]

"I hope a bear won't come along and knock our shelter down," remarked Hubert a few minutes after they lay down.

There was no real apprehension in his tone, the first nervousness inseparable from sleeping in the remote woods of the Okefinokee having by this time disappeared even in his case. Ted stretched his limbs, yawned, and made no reply; but a few minutes later he said:

"You remember Uncle Walter saying the night before he left for Washington that the experts thought the war would last about three years? If it does, we'll be about old enough to go in—if we volunteer, and I will."

"I wouldn't mind an old-fashioned war, with fighting in the open in the old way," said Hubert, after a moment's thought. "But that hard and dirty trench fighting, the terrible big new cannon, the poison gas, and all the devilish doings of the Germans—it sort of gets on my nerves."

"We'd get used to it," said Ted. "And to go in is the only thing to do. You remember the Greek mythology tale about how the new race of gods knocked out and gave the hideous and terrible Cyclops their finish, fastening them down under great rocks? The Germans and their devilry make me think of the Cyclops, and they've got to be put down in something of the same sort of way, or the world won't be safe for anybody. It's like going out after mad dogs. It's dangerous, and you don't like it, but you've got to do it."

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Hubert's thoughtful silence admitted the correctness of Ted's view. After some minutes without speech the younger boy asked:

"Ted, what are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking that even if the slackers did catch us and take us back to Deserters' Island, maybe it would be for the best, after all," said Ted. "You see, I might make a friend of Mr. Jenkins—there's something nice about him—and maybe I might get him interested in the war and persuade him to go out—"

"Well, you are *the limit!*" exclaimed Hubert, in disgust.

Then he turned over, refusing to talk any more, and soon fell asleep.

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XVIII

IN the early morning they were awakened by the rain falling on their faces, and found their once dry and cosy retreat now thoroughly wet and uncomfortable. Not only did water percolate through the hastily constructed palmetto thatch, but, the wind having changed, the rain now beat in from the front. A slow, steady downfall evidently had continued throughout the night.

"It's a set-in rain, and we're goin' to have a hard time," Hubert complained.

It was only with great difficulty and after long effort that they succeeded in building a fire, and by the time the remainder of the turkey, which had been hung out of reach of marauding animals the night before, had been broiled and eaten, it was late in the morning.

What to do next was the puzzling question. Even the night before Ted had been troubled to answer. To turn back might invite an encounter with a pursuing party of slackers, yet the marsh barred further progress, unless the boys were willing to take the risks involved in wading through mud, slime, mosses, rushes, "bonnets," and what not, the water being no doubt over their heads in many places.

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"Let's try it," Ted proposed at last. "We are wet to the skin anyhow, and if we can't do it, we can come back here. If we can get across, I don't think it will take us long to find our way out of the swamp."

Hubert shrank from but agreed to the undertaking, preferring almost anything whatsoever to turning back with the prospect of falling into the hands of a pursuing party of slackers. Both boys were good swimmers, but Ted thought it unwise to venture on a flooded marsh of unknown depth without some safeguard. As they had no boat and probably would be unable to float a raft, even if one could be constructed, he decided to take with them a section of a tree to which they might cling, in case they should advance beyond their depth and be unable to swim on account of the mosses and sedge crowding the marsh water at so many points.

After considerable search Ted found a dead cypress which had broken into parts in its fall before a wind storm. A section of this about twelve feet long and about a foot in diameter, was chosen. Having provided themselves with light slender poles some ten feet long, and tied the gun and hatchet between two short up-reaching branches of the log, the boys succeeded in launching what Ted termed their "life-preserver."

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While they were accomplishing this task Hubert made his first acquaintance with a curiosity of the Okefinokee, more noticeable in times past than now along the shores of islands within or bordering the marshes. Stepping off from the island shore, Hubert walked forward upon a seeming continuation of land—a mass of floating vegetable forms, intermingled with moss, drift and slime, forming a compact floor capable of sustaining his weight, which, although it did not at once break through beneath him, could be seen to sink and rise at every step for several feet

around.

"Why this ground moves!" cried Hubert, astonished.

"You'd better look out," said Ted. "It won't hold you up much longer. It's not ground; it's floating moss and stuff——"

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He paused, smiling, as Hubert broke through and stood in mud and water above his knees.

"I heard one of the slackers speak of that moving stuff as 'floating batteries,'" Ted added. "Uncle Walter said the Indians, in old times, called it 'Okefinokee' or 'trembling earth,' and that was how the swamp got its name."

Once they had dragged their "life preserver" over the "trembling earth," the boys made better progress, although they still had to contend with a submerged slimy moss of a green color and a great variety of crowding rushes. As they staggered along, dragging the log, now only up to their knees in water, now sinking in the yielding ooze until the water rose above their waists, they were for a time much annoyed by a little black fly or bug haunting the sedge which stung like a mosquito.

The clouds still dropped a slow drizzle, and a mist lay upon the great marsh, in which the many little islands, clothed in dun-colored vegetation, loomed up in dim, uncertain outlines. Ted remarked that he had heard the slackers call these islets "houses," but that to him they now rather suggested huge phantom ships. Many cranes, herons and "poor-jobs" had already risen at their approach; and as they advanced farther out on the marsh, where the water deepened, the sedge began to thin and to be succeeded by "bonnets" or water lilies, large flocks of ducks flew up, and occasionally a curlew skimmed across their course.

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Passing not far from one of the little islands, they noted that it was grown up at the edges with low cassina bushes, and that other vegetation sloped gradually up to two or three tall cypresses in the center, the whole being drearily decorated with long trailing drifts of Spanish moss.

"It looks like a big circus tent," said Hubert.

The water still deepened, and soon they were obliged to swim—Ted with his left arm thrown over the forward end of the cypress log, and Hubert with his right resting on the rear end. A couple of hundred yards or so further on they entered an open and perceptible current flowing almost at right angles to their course.

"Let's follow this," proposed Ted. "It will be so much easier to carry the log."

So they swam on, floating their log with the gentle current which flowed narrowly between the bordering "bonnets," little dreaming that they were on the head-waters of the famed Suwanee River.

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How far they traveled, floating on this current, they hardly knew, being unable to see any great distance or keep anything like landmarks in view. As soon as one of the ghostly little islands floated past and disappeared in the mist, another would be outlined in their front, and, all of them being more or less alike, the effect was confusing. They lost count, as it were, of both distance and time.

Finally Hubert protested that he was cold as well as tired and hungry, and demanded that they land on the next "house." Ted thought longingly of a rest, too, and as soon as they were opposite another islet, he struck out toward it through the "bonnets" and sedge, forcing the log along with Hubert's help.

In this way they floated into a round open pool which the mist had concealed from view. Ted had no sooner sighted several dark floating objects a short distance ahead than the water about him became curiously agitated, and, with a cry of alarm, he glanced back at Hubert.

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"Jump on the log!" he shouted. "We're in a 'gator hole."

Neither boy could afterward have told how he did it, but almost in a twinkling both stood upright on the log, maintaining a precarious balance by dipping their long sticks in the water, first on one side and then on the other. Under their combined weight the log sank so low that it was almost entirely submerged, and this added to the alarm of both when they saw that the pool seemed to be alive with alligators large and small, for a hundred feet around. Some of the huge scaly saurians swam about rather lazily, while others lay quiet on the water and gazed at the intruders with their black, lusterless eyes. As yet they exhibited no signs of either fear or anger, and even seemed lacking in curiosity.

But it was Hubert's first experience with the alligator of Florida and southern Georgia, which, in his ignorance, he associated with the crocodile of the far East, and the boy was terrified.

"They are going to eat us up!" he gasped, after he had tottered, swayed, and very nearly lost his balance beyond recovery.

"I don't think they'll do anything to us, if we are careful not to run into them," said Ted, reassuringly, though not without some real apprehension of trouble.

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But this is precisely what happened. Hubert's desperate struggles to regain his balance caused the log to depart from the course Ted was trying to maintain, and, before it could be prevented,

they floated between two motionless alligators, almost touching them, and then the forward end of the log ran aground on the back of a third.

There followed a great stir and splashing. Hubert went overboard with the first shock, and the powerful flirt of a frightened or enraged alligator's tail sent Ted, slightly stunned, into the water three or four feet from the log.

Both boys swam desperately back to their one refuge, conscious of the plunging of the excited amphibians as they did so, and fearing every moment that an arm or a leg would be bitten off. But when they again stood upright on their log, balancing themselves once more with the long sticks to which they had persisted in clinging, they saw with some measure of relief that the nearest of the alligators now visible were some yards distant. In their stupid astonishment or lazy indifference, the creatures had allowed an easy prey to escape them.

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With all possible speed, yet cautiously, the boys paddled their log away from the undesirable neighborhood, breathing more freely only after they were out of the pool and well on their way through the sedge toward the "house."

"Maybe they didn't think we were good to eat," said Hubert, wondering, and then joining nervously in Ted's merry laugh.

"I've heard that they eat animals sometimes, but they live on fish mostly," said Ted. "It was lucky, though, that we had the log to get up on."

"Would they have eaten us if we hadn't had it?"

Ted laughed again before he answered:

"I don't think so, but I shouldn't care to risk it a second time. Hunters say alligators don't attack man except in self-defense."

"But I've heard of their catching pigs and even little niggers," persisted Hubert.

"Well," admitted Ted, still smiling, "you never can tell when such creatures may want a change of diet. That place back there—a breeding place, I think—is like one I heard Mr. Hardy speak of. He called it an 'alligator heaven.'"

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"Deliver me from an 'alligator heaven,' if that's one," said Hubert, so solemnly that Ted was amused and laughed once more.

Entering shallower water, they dared to step into it and wade toward the little island. Leaving their log safely lodged on the "trembling earth" formation, and having struggled through and over this, they landed on firm but damp ground. The island was circular in form and hardly two hundred yards in diameter. Cassina bushes fringed the shores, the vegetation rising thence to a few tall cypress trees in the center. Everywhere the funereal Spanish moss fluttered in the gentle breeze.

It had now ceased raining, but a dense mist still floated upon the great marsh. The raw atmosphere seemed as cold as the water had been and the boys moved about shivering, bitterly regretting their attempt to cross the flooded wilderness. The wildness and desolation of the scene seemed to be intensified by the presence of two small gray eagles, which screamed in a harsh shrill way as they hovered about a large nest in the top of the tallest tree on the island.

Their weariness and sharp hunger were the only certain indications of the flight of time, but as the light began to wane the boys realized that they had been on the marsh for hours and had not landed on the island till late in the afternoon. It was now necessary to make some sort of preparation for the night, and that speedily. An attempt to build a fire had failed, the wet matches refusing even to ignite, and as the gun was also wet and the shells soaked, there appeared to be no hope of obtaining even the raw flesh of a bird for supper, supposing they could have eaten it.

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Tears appeared in shivering Hubert's eyes and rolled slowly down his cheeks, seeing which Ted smiled and tried hard to make merry with a little jest.

"Now, Hu, we've had enough water for one day without pumping up any more," he said, patting his cousin affectionately on the shoulder.

"Well, you know," said Hubert, trying to smile in response, "I never did have a good grip on my what-you-may-call-'em ducts, and this is pretty tough, as you know. I really am trying hard to stand it and not be a baby. I'm glad we didn't have such a dose as this the first day in the swamp—I'd have boo-hooed sure enough. I'm not quite the baby that I was."

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"No, you are not, Hu; you are getting to be quite a man," said Ted gently, and Hubert, struggling hard to sit on the lid of his lachrymal ducts, so to speak, was very grateful.

A few moments later he smilingly announced that he had succeeded in "turning off the water," but he feared that he had spoken too soon when suddenly Ted, moving about, very nearly stepped on a large moccasin and found some difficulty in killing it with his long stick. Hubert suffered from an instinctive horror of snakes and the episode almost upset him.

Ted had heard the slackers describe how they made shift for the night when they had to camp out on a marsh island or on a damp tussock in the flooded forests, and he now proceeded to strip

bark off the cypress trees with the aid of the hatchet. This was spread on the ground under quantities of Spanish moss which was to be used as both bed and covering. The moss was damp, water-soaked, in fact; but even so they would be warmer covered with it than if they lay exposed to the currents of raw air.

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By the time these preparations were completed it was dark. Ted thought they ought to remain awake and keep more or less active all night, in order to stave off severe colds; but they were both too exhausted to persevere in such efforts. Seated on the cushioned cypress bark, and leaning their backs against a tree, the wet moss drawn up over them, they soon subsided into quiet of limb and tongue, and after a long while fell into troubled, dream-haunted slumber.

"We'll never get home," moaned Hubert, breaking down at last, while still they talked, sitting there in the thick darkness.

Ted made no reply at once. He was thinking how different had been the experience of the heroes of romance wrecked on unknown islands or lost in desolate places. None of these, so far as he could remember, had ever suffered such continuing miseries of body and mind as he and Hubert had to endure; there always seemed to be a wreck at hand with plenty of good things on board to eat, and the castaways could at least manage to sleep warm and dry.

"We are going to starve to death in this swamp," moaned Hubert.

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"Not a bit of it," said Ted with forced cheerfulness, cutting off abruptly his own complaining train of thought. "Now, Hu, you are not really giving up, I know; you only think you are," he continued, leaning affectionately against his cousin. "Brace up like the man you really are. Just think how much better off we are than some people. Think of our soldiers in the trenches at night in bad weather. In some ways we are as uncomfortable, but think how much safer we are. There are no Germans to sneak poison-gas over on us in the dark."

"There are no Germans, but there are moccasins," said Hubert dolefully.

"I'll just bet that was the only one on this island," Ted declared stoutly, although he feared there were at least a dozen. "Don't think about them. Think of what we are going to do tomorrow, and we are going to get out of this swamp—or pretty nearly. Things come out all right after a while; I never saw it fail. You know, Hu, I like to think of the grand pluck of old Socrates—I've heard Uncle Walter quote him—when he said: 'No evil can befall a good man, whether he be alive or dead.' That means, if we are truthful and manly, and harm nobody, and do our best, we're all right, or going to be all right, whatever happens. And you and I are goin' to be all right soon, too. You'll see."

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Whether it was the result of this comforting philosophy or sheer physical exhaustion, Hubert became quiet and soon fell asleep. But it was long before poor Ted, sitting alone in the dark, could do for himself what he had so manfully done for his cousin. If a discerning eye had looked down through the night, helplessness, even despair, would have been seen in his face. And then, all at once, somehow help came to Ted, too; his courage returned, and with it a certain restfulness of body which presently brought sleep.

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XIX

AS the first gray light of morning struggled through the mist still enveloping the marsh, Ted started up and looked about him. His attention was at once attracted to a white sand-hill crane fully five feet in height standing on a point of the little island about fifty yards distant.

Seizing his long stick, the boy crept toward the fowl behind the screen offered by the cassina bushes. He hoped to knock it down, thinking that even the fishy flesh of a crane would be found palatable by two half-starved boys. But the wary bird spread wide its wings and flew away in the mist long before Ted was near enough to use his weapon. He smiled faintly as he faced his failure, calling to mind the story told him when a very little boy that he could catch any bird in existence if he could get near enough to put salt on its tail. He remembered at least one unsuccessful attempt to catch a mocking-bird by such means, before he appreciated the joke, and reflected that it would be about as easy to salt a crane's tail as to creep up near enough to knock it down with a stick.

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Both Ted and Hubert found themselves suffering with sore throat and their limbs were numb and cold; but they felt more or less rested and their hunger was less sharp than on the night before. On the whole, they felt better, and were eager to go forward in the hope of improving their condition. Ted said that if they could see the island they had left the day before, he would favor going straight back there; but that if they attempted to return in the fog, there were a thousand chances to one that they would go astray, and he therefore thought that they had better take the risk of pushing forward. Hubert agreed, preferring to leave the decision to his more experienced cousin in any case.

So they struggled through the "trembling" and breaking "earth" surrounding the little island, got their log afloat, pushed it out into the little stream, and swam with the slow current as on the day before. Although their exertions soon began to tell on them, weakened for lack of food as they were, they pushed forward heroically for hours, landing to rest two or three times on the

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dreary and inhospitable "houses."

Toward mid-afternoon, while swimming with one arm over the rear end of the log, Hubert's feet became entangled in the rushes; and, losing his hold on the log, he was drawn beneath the water just as a faint cry escaped him. Ted looked back in time to see him go down, and, swimming to his aid, succeeded in extricating him after he had swallowed several gulps of water and was partially strangled.

Meanwhile the log had floated with the current and lodged among the "bonnets" nearly two hundred yards down stream. This distance Ted was obliged to swim without artificial aid, meanwhile supporting Hubert, who was almost helpless. The last few yards was the scene of a desperate struggle to keep above water until the log could be grasped.

After resting on their log until somewhat revived, they painfully made their way to the nearest "house," realizing that they could travel no further that day. Indeed, Ted secretly feared that they might never be able to leave the island without help, so feverish and exhausted had both he and Hubert become. The first thing he did after landing and resting, therefore, was to tie his handkerchief to one end of his long stick and thrust the other end into the soft ground in an open spot, hoping thus to attract the attention of any boat that might pass the neighborhood.

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That night was even more trying and uncomfortable than the preceding. They were again unable to start a fire, and lay down as before on cypress bark and damp moss, the hunger that gnawed them becoming more and more hard to endure. Though he made a brave effort, Ted found himself unable to appear to be as cheerfully optimistic as on the night before. In his feverishness and misery words often failed him, but he unselfishly maintained an attitude of tenderness and sympathy toward Hubert whose lachrymal ducts knew no restraint and discharged their entire store of tears.

"Never mind, we'll get out of this to-morrow," promised Ted in his gentlest voice, over and over; but, struggle as he might, there was lack of genuine hopefulness in his tone.

The morning of the third day dawned bright and clear. Not a vestige of the fog was to be seen anywhere on the great marsh. Although now really ill, their heads throbbing with fever and pain, the boys felt cheered by this change. In every direction except one they were unable to see anything but an expanse of marsh dotted with "houses"; but in that one direction they clearly discerned, not more than two or three miles away, a wall of green pines, indicating either the mainland or a large island. With great satisfaction they noted also that the intervening marsh, though covered with water at points, was not of a character to necessitate swimming.

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Hopeful once more, they started eagerly toward the green wall of pines, soon finding, however, that it was no easy matter to cross this portion of the marsh, scantily covered with water though it was. Much of it was treacherous quagmire, and the boys sometimes sank down suddenly in the mud to their armpits. Once Hubert sank up to his neck, and nothing but his long stick saved him. They had left their log behind, but fortunately carried their long poles.

It was near noon when they at length reached the high land where the pine trees grew. After plunging into a neighboring pool of comparatively clear water in order to wash the mud and slime from their bodies and clothing, the boys climbed wearily up the slope and lay down in the warm sunshine, shading their faces with palmetto leaves. Here they rested several hours, for the most part in troubled, feverish slumber.

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Rousing himself at last, Ted coaxed Hubert to his feet, and again they pushed forward wearily. The vegetation of the island, if island it were, was found to be unusually dense and wild. After gaining the crest of the slope, where, on the other islands, a comparatively open pine ridge was usually found, they were confronted by the brambles of the jungle and immense thickets of blackjack or scrub-oak. An hour later they emerged upon an open pine barren, where the underbrush consisted chiefly of tyty, hemleaf and fan-palmetto. Here progress was easier, but now Hubert fell rather than sat upon the grass, declaring that he could go no further.

"I feel as if my head would burst," he said, staring about him stupidly.

After trying in vain to encourage him to further effort, Ted, who really felt no better, decided to push on alone.

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"You stay here and rest, Hu," he said, "while I look around for a good place to camp. The matches are dry now and I think we can have a fire to-night."

It was now late in the afternoon and Ted realized that he must exert himself. Pushing forward, he chanced upon something like a trail, followed it for nearly a mile, and, just as the sun sank out of sight, he stole guardedly through an oak thicket, halted on its borders, and looked into an open space where a camp fire burned.

Everywhere in the little clearing there were evidences of a long sojourn. The stumps of several trees showed that the felling had been done months, perhaps a year or more, before. Curing hides hung against the trees; tools and cooking utensils lay about on the grass. A pot swung over the fire from a tripod of three long sticks, and in it there evidently simmered a savory stew. No dog was aroused by Ted's approach, and the boy looked long, without interruption, at everything, including the sole occupant of the clearing, an old man with a long white beard who sat on the ground near the fire, his back to the observer. Ted turned quietly, retraced his steps through the thicket, and hurried back over the trail.

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"Oh, Hubert," he cried, as soon as he was within speaking distance, "I've found a camp and an old man cooking supper!"

But the younger boy merely looked up stupidly and spoke of his aching head. Resolutely employing all his remaining strength, Ted lifted Hubert to his feet, and, with his arm around him, coaxing and dragging, he forced him slowly along the trail toward the stranger's camp. Arrived within the fire-lighted circle just after night had fallen, he allowed Hubert to collapse upon the grass, and then, holding out appealing hands, he cried:

"Help us—please help us!"

The old man started up in amazement and, judging from the expression of his face, even alarm. He appeared not to have heard the approaching footsteps because of deafness, and now seemed to expect a further invasion of the privacy of his camp.

"Who're you?" he asked in a bewildered way. "Whur in the dickance did you boys come from?"

Ted did not answer. His remaining strength failed him, and he dropped upon the grass by Hubert's side, but his eyes still appealed. [Pg 245]

"Are you sick?"

"Starving," answered Ted, hardly above a whisper.

A wave of compassion swept over the old man. He almost leaped to the fire; and, quickly dipping something from the pot into a tin cup, he blew his breath upon it several times in order to cool it, then hurried back to the prostrate boys, knelt beside them, and offered the cup to Ted. But the boy gently pushed it away and motioned toward his cousin, indicating that Hubert was in the greater need and should be attended to first.

Having partaken of the nourishment which presently was offered him in turn, Ted fell asleep, or fainted—he could not afterward tell which—and there followed a blank. When he again opened his eyes and looked about him, he lay on a bed of moss covered with blankets in what was evidently a log cabin of one large room. In a few moments the door, which stood ajar, was thrown wide, and the old man of the long white beard entered the room, a cheerful expression appearing on his kindly face as he met the boy's eye. [Pg 246]

"You feel better now, I reckon," he said, seating himself on a pile of moss near Ted's bed.

"Where am I?" The boy's voice was weak but eager.

"In my house," was the reassuring reply. "You've been pretty bad off—sort o' wanderin' in yer mind. But you're all right now."

"Where's Hubert?" The boy's voice was now stronger, but indicated anxiety.

"He's outside. He got up and went out this mornin'. He's all right. He had fever from cold and exposure, but you was the sickest of the two. You've been on a harder strain, I reckon."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days. I was afraid it was goin' to be typhoid, but it was jes' a nervous fever from starvation and so much exposure. It was mighty high, though, for a while. T'other boy tole me how you-all's been lost and a-wanderin' in the swamp. You boys sure has seen sights."

"Are we out of the swamp at last?" asked Ted eagerly.

"Not by a long jump. You're on Blackjack, one o' the biggest islands." Noting the boy's sigh of disappointment, the old man added: "But don't worry. You lay quiet till to-morrow, and then I'll tell you more about it, and show you the way out o' the swamp." [Pg 247]

"Oh, thank you. You are very kind."

With such a prospect in view, it would be easy to lie quiet until the morrow, it being now late in the afternoon. Ted wanted to ask many questions, but he submitted when his host bade him be quiet and withdrew. A few minutes later Hubert entered, with a smile on his face, and the boys congratulated each other.

"I think we are safe at last," said Ted, relaxing on his bed and beginning really to rest.

"Yes, I think we are," said Hubert. "That Mr. George Smith is very kind, though he is a queer old duck. He looks just like a ram-goat with that long beard running down into a point. He's been camping and trapping here for years. I was afraid to tell him that we had been kept prisoners on Deserters' Island. I haven't said a thing about the slackers."

"Perhaps that was just as well," said Ted, dreamily, and soon fell asleep. [Pg 248]

An hour or more later his eyes filled with tears of gratitude as his elderly host brought in a delicious quail stew for his supper.

"To-morrow," the old man promised, "I'll show you how I shoots them partridges."

Ted knew that he should have said quail instead of partridges, but was too polite to correct him.

"Do you think we could start out to-morrow?" asked the boy, after he had eaten and thanked his host.

"Better wait a little longer. It'll be a long pull and you ought to be rested up," advised the old man. "Hubert says you want to git to Judge Ridgway's. I know where that is. We kin boat it a piece o' the way and then tramp it till I put you on the trail. You strike the trail on a big peninsula runnin' in the swamp. Then all you got to do is to follow that trail about ten miles till you git to your uncle's neighborhood."

All Ted's anxieties dropped from him as he listened. Home had not seemed so near since the day he and Hubert were lost in the swamp, and when he fell asleep he dreamed that he was actually there.

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XX

IN the morning, feeling well and strong, Ted rose early and followed Hubert out of the cabin to the camp fire. There their attention was attracted to two large fox-squirrels lying on the grass.

"I shot 'em befo' you waked up," said their host, who was busily preparing the morning meal. "The woods is chock full of 'em."

Both boys ate a hearty breakfast, after which Ted felt so fully restored that he declared he was ready for the hardest kind of a tramp. But he was again advised to wait till the following morning.

The boys spent the day talking with their new friend, gathering young "greens" from his little vegetable garden, giving some help toward the preparation of the meals, and lying about on the grass and sleeping. Ted took great interest in a bow belonging to and manufactured by the old trapper, considering himself highly favored on being allowed to shoot away two or three arrows, which latter he diligently searched for and returned to their owner. Both bow and arrows were made of ash, the latter being tipped with sharpened bits of steel. The bow-string was made of tough gut of the wild-cat.

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"You-all come go with me now, if you want to see some fun," said Mr. Smith at sundown.

He then took bow and arrows and led the boys about a quarter of a mile away in the woods, telling them he would show them how "partridges" (quail) roosted at night. When the place was reached twilight had fallen, but a dozen or more of the birds were distinctly seen squatting near each other in the wiregrass.

"Now watch me bag 'em," said the old trapper; and, lifting his bow, he bent it almost double, the string twanged, and the arrow sped on its way.

Again and again the bow twanged, and in amazement the boys began to see, as they did not at first, that each flying arrow cut off the head of a quail. The neighboring birds looked startled, turning their heads from side to side as if striving to pierce the gathering gloom, but there was no noisy plunge of the remainder of the covey until the old man had shot as often as he wished and stepped forward to gather up his arrows and the slain.

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"You see, I shoots 'm in the head to keep from sp'ilin' the meat," he smilingly explained.

"What a fine shot you are!" exclaimed both boys in a breath.

"I could never do that in the world," said Ted.

"It took me years to learn that trick, but I learned it, and you could, too, if you tried hard," the old trapper said, generous in his pardonable pride.

As they sat about the fire after supper the subject of the war came up. The trapper asked for news and Ted outlined the general situation as he had understood it before the swamp misadventure cut him off from sources of information.

"If I was young enough I'd be in it," declared their host, much to Ted's satisfaction, going on to say that the Civil War was over before he was quite old enough and that the Spanish-American war was over almost before he heard of it, for he was in the Okefinokee that very year. "And now I'm too old to be a soldier," he concluded, with a smile and a sigh.

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"I've heard my Uncle Walter say that 'the will is almost as good as the deed,'" remarked Ted politely.

"From all I hear them Germans is a mighty bad crowd, and they need the worst thrashin' any lot of people ever got," the trapper continued. "And the young men o' this country ought to see that they git it good and heavy. But some of 'em ain't goin' about it right. Some of 'em is kickin' about the draft, and some of 'em is scared to death; and they tell me some of 'em is *hidin' out*."

The old man spat in his disgust. The boys became alert, perceiving that he had knowledge of and was thinking of the camp of slackers on Deserters' Island. They looked at each other significantly and waited for him to go on.

"But it ain't *my* business to see that the sheriff is on his job," continued old George Smith, stroking his long beard. "I'm a old man, and I got to live in peace, 'speshly these days when there's young men without a particle of respect for gray hairs. I 'tends to my own business."

"My uncle said he heard that there were some slackers hiding in this swamp," said Ted, cautiously and invitingly. [Pg 253]

"Mebby so; the Oke-fi-noke's a big place," responded the old man, after a moment of perceptible hesitation. "I don't see," he quickly added, "why there's all this kickin' about the draft. They drafted 'em 'way back in the sixties, South and North, too. We got to have it that way."

"My uncle says it's the fairest as well as the quickest plan."

"Ther must be more chicken-hearted young men now than ther was in my young days," remarked Mr. Smith. He fell into a thoughtful silence, from which he roused himself suddenly, saying: "Well, let's go to bed. Got to git up bright and early in the mornin'."

It was evident that he did not intend to speak openly of Deserters' Island. The boys were no less inclined to be cautious, not knowing what his personal relations with the slackers might be. After an exchange of significant glances, they tacitly agreed to keep silent also, at least for the present. It troubled Ted to think that an honest, patriotic man, such as their host appeared to be, should place his "peace" above his duty to inform against the hiding slackers, but he took comfort in the thought that the fugitives from the draft would not long be left in quiet possession of Deserters' Island. [Pg 254]

"Mr. Smith won't tell on 'em," he whispered to Hubert after they had gone to bed, "but just wait till we get home. Uncle Walter will have the sheriff starting into this swamp in a day's time."

When a woodpecker, boring loudly into the cabin's roof, roused him next morning, Ted saw that the sun was shining, realized that he had overslept, and wondered why he had not been called. Hearing voices outside, he conjectured that the old trapper had been delayed by the arrival of visitors. But what visitors? The boy thought instantly of Deserters' Island, which was undoubtedly the nearest inhabited area within many miles. In sudden fear, he checked the noisy movements he was making. Then, listening intently, he heard the unmistakable voice of Sweet Jackson!

Creeping to the front wall, Ted peeped out through a crack between the logs, and at once his eyes confirmed the evidence presented by his ears. Sweet Jackson and Mitch' Jenkins, their guns across their knees, were seated near the camp fire eating the breakfast the old trapper was serving them. [Pg 255]

"We wanted to make yo' camp last night," Jackson was saying, "but we was too fur. When we made it up to come over this-a way, I thought I'd bring a hide to trade for some plug-tobacco."

"Well, I'll trade," said old Mr. Smith, with his usual good-natured manner.

Ted bounded softly back to the bed and, bending down, shook Hubert.

"Quit pushin' me," complained Hubert, still half asleep.

"Hush!" whispered Ted warningly. "Look at me! Listen, and don't make a noise. Some of the *slackers* are out there!"

Hubert's rebelliousness disappeared on the instant, and he stared at his cousin in silent fright. Then he, too, heard Jackson's voice, whereupon he started up, looking wildly about, as if for some means of escape.

Without waiting to say more Ted hurried back to his peep-hole.

"Can't we slip out and run?" whispered Hubert as soon as he reached Ted's side. [Pg 256]

"How can we? There's no window on the back and they are facing this way. They'd see us. We've got to stay right here till they go away, or till we get a chance to slip out."

"But what if they should come in here?" suggested Hubert.

"We'll have to risk it."

The breakfast was now over, and the two slackers rose to their feet. A few moments later the excited boys took note that all three of the men stood with their backs to the cabin door.

"Now's our chance," whispered Hubert. "Let's slip out, sneak round the house and run off."

"We'd better wait, I think," said Ted. "They might turn round on us before we——"

The boy stopped suddenly, for now the old trapper and Jackson turned, the latter saying: "Well, bring out your tobacco." The former moved toward the cabin accordingly.

"Let's lie down and pretend to be asleep, so they won't hear him speak to us," hurriedly proposed Ted.

When the trapper stepped into the room the slumber of the two boys appeared to be profound. He looked at them, smiled, and, as if deciding not to call them till later, went about the business of the moment, bending down over a large covered box with his back to them. Noting all this, Ted [Pg 257]

congratulated himself upon the success of his plan. It did not occur to him that curiosity might bring Jenkins into the cabin, or that the officious Jackson might wish to see for himself how large a store of tobacco the cabin contained.

So when a heavy tread was heard at the door, the boy faced the unforeseen as well as the affrighting. There was now nothing left for him and Hubert to do but cover their faces with their blankets and lie still, which they did, fearing that the very beating of their hearts would be heard.

The less curious Jenkins might have overlooked them, in the subdued light of the interior, but Jackson's roving eyes alighted on their outlined figures almost at once.

"Who-all's this?" he asked sharply. "I see you got comp'ny."

"Jes' two boys that got lost huntin' in the swamp," answered the old man quietly. "I kep' 'em a day or two to rest up. They had a hard time and was real sick."

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"*Two boys?*" echoed Sweet Jackson, in tones of keen expectancy; and, stepping across the intervening space, he roughly tore away the coverings and exposed to view the shrinking boys.

For a moment Hubert seemed about to obey an impulse to hide his face in the moss of the bed, but Ted rose promptly and faced Jackson with a steady, watchful gaze.

"So you come over this-a way, did you?" cried Jackson, with a triumphant grin. "Wasn't it lucky that I come, too, just in time!" he sneered.

"Why, do you know them boys?" asked the old swamp-squatter, turning, in great surprise.

"*Know 'em?* They belongs to our camp," declared Jackson. "I want more than yo' tobacco, old man; I want them boys."

"We *don't* belong to their camp," cried Ted, his voice unsteady, addressing the old man. "We only found our way there when we got lost, and then they wouldn't let us go because they were afraid we'd tell on them."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" asked the old man, greatly troubled.

"I wish I had," said Ted. "We waited to tell you and then—then—we thought, maybe, we'd better not."

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"He's lyin'," said Jackson glibly. "He was scared to tell you they'd run away from where they belonged."

Jenkins turned upon Jackson with an indignant manner, but hesitated, and seemed to decide to keep silent. Noting this with discouragement, Ted checked an angry response to the insult and turned again to the old man:

"Everything I have told you is the truth. Won't you stand by us?"

The old swamp-squatter looked sharply from man to boy and back again, his expression indicating great disturbance of mind.

"If you are a-takin' them boys without the right to do it," he said, "you may have *double* trouble on yer hands befo' long."

"That's *my* business, and you'd better 'tend to your'n—if you know what's good for you!" There was menace in Jackson's tone.

The old man surrendered the plugs of tobacco with a trembling hand, then took a step toward Ted.

"You see, the trouble is," he said, rather pitifully, "that I can't take the word of two boys agin the word of two men. If they claims you, I can't stop 'em. But I'm awful sorry because I've thought a heap o' you boys."

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"Thank you," said Ted huskily, comprehending the old swamp-squatter's helplessness, and moved to make a polite acknowledgment of the compliment even at such a moment.

"Will you go peaceable, or do you want a whippin'?" demanded Jackson.

"Better go peaceable," advised the old man, speaking gently. Ted turned and exchanged glances with Hubert. They read in each other's eyes the conviction that there was nothing to be done but yield for the time, and that it was better to yield without a struggle than to suffer intolerable indignities and brutal usage. After swallowing hard, like one taking a bitter dose, Ted announced in a low voice that they were ready to go.

"Come on, then, and be quick about it," ordered Jackson, striding out of the cabin.

Jenkins and the boys followed. The old man lingered in the doorway, looking very sorrowful.

As the party was crossing the clearing to take the trail through the woods, Ted suddenly announced that he would have to "thank Mr. Smith for his hospitality," and, before he could be hindered, ran back to the door of the cabin. Jackson and Jenkins halted, turning to look on curiously as the boy performed this social duty.

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"You've been very kind, Mr. Smith, and we thank you very much," said Ted, loudly enough for

all to hear. Then, with his back to the slackers, he added in a low voice: "There's *one* thing you can do to help us. You know where Judge Ridgway lives and—"

"That's all right, Ted, honey," the old man loudly interrupted. "You sure are welcome to what little I did for you boys."

This speech was accompanied by three distinct pressures of Ted's hand which seemed satisfactorily significant. The old man then turned to shake hands with Hubert, who had been permitted to follow Ted.

"When are you goin' out again, Mr. Smith?" called out Jackson.

"I think it'll be some while," was the answer.

But when the old swamp-squatter was left alone in his clearing, his activities seemed to show that he had suddenly changed his mind. [Pg 262]

"What's to keep that old man from goin' out and tellin' on our whole crowd?" asked Jenkins, as soon as they were out of hearing.

"He's scared o' me—that's what," was the confident answer.

Jackson halted as he spoke, took some heavy string out of his pocket, and, suddenly seizing Ted from behind, began to tie his hands. Protesting in hot indignation, the boy struggled so fiercely that Jenkins was called on for help.

"Not on your life," said Jenkins, standing apart. "I won't touch him. I ain't a party to this thing. *You* are takin' them boys, not me. I'm jes' walkin' long with you. You don't need to tie 'em anyhow. If they was to cut and run, you could easy catch one, and the other wouldn't stay off by himself."

But Jackson persisted. Checking Ted's resistance with violent language and ugly threats, he had his will, then served the protesting but unresisting Hubert in the same way.

"I know my business, Mitch' Jenkins," he said. "They ain't a-goin' to give me the slip this time." [Pg 263]

Then followed a tramp of about two miles to the point of the island where the slackers had left their bateau. Much of the route was covered with dense thicket and bramble-infested jungle, and the boys suffered. Sometimes, when they stumbled and fell, or pushed through thorny brush, being unable to use their arms and hands, they received painful scratches or blows on face or head. Finally Ted rebelled, throwing himself down and persisting doggedly at all threatened costs.

"I won't go another step until you untie our hands," he declared, setting his teeth. "You can beat me if you are devil enough," he informed Jackson, with blazing eyes and unflinching calm, "but I won't budge."

Jackson swore furiously and lifted his foot to kick, but was checked by Jenkins, who said:

"And if you beat him, you may have to beat me."

Then the two men glared at and paid their respects to each other in unprintable language. Hubert hoped that they would fight hard and long, and that in the midst of it he and Ted might run away; but, as usual, the cowardice beneath Sweet Jackson's bullying exterior showed itself. He discharged much violent language, but prudently declined the contest of physical strength offered by Jenkins. [Pg 264]

"What did you come in this swamp for, anyhow?" he demanded. "You ain't worth a cent."

"You kin find out what I'm worth if you want to," goaded Jenkins.

"Oh, shucks!" cried Jackson, with a show of vast disgust; and taking out his knife, he cut both Ted's and Hubert's bonds, intimating that he washed his hands of the consequences.

After that peace was restored, the tramp was resumed, and more rapid progress was made. [Pg 265]

XXI

THEY landed on Deserters' Island late in the afternoon. The news of their arrival appeared to reach the camp ahead of the captive boys, for as soon as they followed the upward path through the swamp-cane to the outskirts of the familiar clearing they saw July running to meet them. The negro's smiling expressions of delight at sight of them were checked by his recollection that they were returning to captivity.

"I sho is sorry dey cotch you if I is glad to see you," he apologized. "But, Cap'n Ted, you won't have such a hard time dis time 'cause de gen'l'mens is got back an' now de dawgs'll have to keep dey place."

Ted did not wait for an explanation of this mysterious announcement, for he now saw Buck Hardy standing near the sleeping-loft and ran eagerly toward him.

"Oh, Mr. Hardy," he cried, in enormous relief and satisfaction, "I'm *so* glad to see you. We've had a terrible time since you left. I—I—I hope your mother is better."

Buck smiled down on the delighted boy, warmly clasping his hand.

"She's all right now, thank you, kid," he said. "Sorry I had to stay outside so long. Just got back two hours ago—with Peters and Jones. So you've had a terrible time, eh? July has been tellin' me, but he don't know it all, and I want to know it all up to this minute. Did Sweet Jackson do anything to you after he caught you? Did he—whip you—or—"

"He would have, if it hadn't been for Mr. Jenkins."

"Tell me all about it."

After walking into the clearing attended by the pleased and garrulous negro, Hubert shook hands with Al Peters and Bud Jones, but awaited his turn to speak to Buck Hardy, not wishing to interrupt the big slacker's earnest conversation with Ted. As he looked around, Hubert saw Billy seated a short distance away and wondered why he seemed to take no interest in their arrival. Judging from past experience, he would have expected the half-wit not only to be pleased but even to caper around him and Ted, giggling and shouting his expressions of gratification. But now Billy seemed to be intently contemplating some object in the grass at his feet and to be oblivious of everything else.

The news of the return of Hardy, Peters and Jones evidently reached Jackson before he came up from the landing, for when he appeared he had a conscious and depressed air. He spoke a perfunctory greeting to Peters and Jones and then, as he busied himself about the camp, his roving glance frequently returned in a stealthy sort of way to Buck Hardy where he stood questioning and listening to Ted. His manner was expectant and he probably was not surprised when Buck, turning from the boy toward the groups near the fire, called out:

"Sweet Jackson!"

Jackson pretended not to hear and sought to delay the coming reckoning.

"Billy! You Billy," he called sharply, "go bring me some fresh water."

The absorbed Billy looked up for a moment with an air of one rudely awakened from a dream, but he did not move and his eyes promptly returned to the object in the grass that seemed to fascinate him.

"Don't you hear me?" shouted Jackson.

"Don't you hear *me*?" shouted Buck. "Sweet Jackson, step out h-yuh and take yo' whippin'."

Jackson could pretend inattention no longer. Planning to force the other men to interfere while storming at Billy, he now whipped a revolver out of his pocket and wheeled round.

"Drop it," ordered Buck. "I've got you covered. I expected this and I was ready."

Two men rushed to Jackson's side, he permitted Zack James to take his weapon, and moved a step or two forward. Then Buck took his hand from the revolver in his coat pocket.

"What I done to you, Buck Hardy?" demanded Jackson with as blustering an air as he could support.

"Nothin'," answered Buck. "You know better'n to do anything to *me*. It's what you've done to two helpless boys when I was gone. *You* know what I'm talkin' about. I can be sorry for a natural-born coward. If I saw you runnin' from the draft officers and hollerin' that you wished you was a baby and a *gal* baby at that, I'd be sorry for you. But I can't stand a man that's a coward underneath and a bully on top whenever he thinks there's nobody to stop him. I whipped you once for beatin' on that po' weak-minded Billy. This time it's for what you did to two as nice boys as there ever was. I'd whip you for it if every man in this camp stood behind you. But there ain't nobody to stand behind you because they all despise you."

This withering speech and his fear of certain punishment combined caused Jackson's lip to twitch nervously. He doubled his fists and prepared to ward off the coming blows, determining to strike back at the outset in order to lessen his disgrace by a stubborn show of fight. But, try to stand his ground as he might, he found himself retreating backward before his advancing enemy.

Before Hardy had arrived within striking distance Jackson had backed into Billy and trodden upon the half-wit's outstretched legs.

"Git out o' my way!" stormed the retreating man, glad to divert attention from himself.

Billy sprang up and jumped out of reach, as if believing that he had been attacked. Then he faced his supposed foe, a strange glow in his eyes.

Suddenly Sweet Jackson became aware that he was treading upon some soft living body, which yielded beneath his weight and struggled in a peculiar, writhing way. As his glance swept downward, he heard a harsh rattling sound and saw that he stood upon a large coiled snake.

The look of mortal terror on his face and his gasp of horror caused Buck Hardy to stop in his tracks, and several of the on-lookers to start forward, just as the rattler struck the unfortunate

man on the right leg above the ankle. With a wild cry Jackson jumped—too late!



With a wild cry Jackson jumped—too late!

A laugh at such a moment was the most unexpected and shocking thing in the world, and for the moment it drew every eye to Billy, who, giggling, cried out:

"That's right, son! Give it to him, son!"

Then Ted and Hubert and July comprehended what had happened before Jackson, in an agony of alarm, staggered out into the open, crying that he had been bitten by a rattlesnake and calling for help.

"I'm mighty glad I hadn't hit him," murmured Buck Hardy, as he joined those who, grabbing sticks and guns, started in pursuit of the snake which was now rapidly crawling away.

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The rattler was quickly overtaken and killed, greatly to the indignation and sorrow of Billy. Then the attention of all was centered upon Jackson, who now sat with his back against a tree, tearing off shoe and sock in a hurried, terrified way, groaning aloud and shuddering in horror. The wound, when exposed, was seen to be swelling already.

"If anybody's got any whisky, for God's sake bring it out," shouted Buck Hardy.

He looked from one face to another, as heads were shaken, several reminding him that they were in a prohibition State. Only Jim Carter admitted that he had "just a smodgykin" saved up for a time of need. He ran to the sleeping-loft and returned with a flask containing less than half a pint of colorless whisky. This was forthwith poured down Jackson's throat.

Meanwhile Zack James and Mitch' Jenkins had drawn stout cords as tightly as possible round the leg above and below the wound, with a view to check the circulation of poisoned blood. This done, large portions of the raw quivering flesh of a turkey just killed were pressed hard, one after another, upon the wound itself, these supposedly acting as an absorbent.

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One of the men suggested that the raw flesh of the rattler be applied in lieu of the turkey, mentioning a story he had heard to the effect that the best results could be thus obtained; but the poisoned man shuddered and refused to permit this.

He called pitifully for "a doctor," and the men about him only looked at each other helplessly, the nearest physician being many miles too far away to be sent for and brought through the swamp's difficulties in time to be of any service. There seemed to be nothing further to do but to continue to apply raw flesh to the wound.

By the time July announced supper, which nobody could eat, Jackson's leg was startlingly swollen and an hour or two later he had begun to wander in his mind.

Meanwhile, Hubert had related to Buck Hardy and several other listeners how he had one day been invited to visit the rattlesnake at its hole; how Billy had fed it, and seemed to be on the friendliest terms with it. Ted and July having confirmed Hubert's story, it became clear to everyone that Billy had brought the snake into the camp and was playing with it when the retreating Jackson stepped upon it. Nobody forgot that Jackson was of an ugly temper and had harshly used the half-witted boy whom he had brought into the swamp and who was said to be his cousin; but none the less was Billy now looked upon with suspicion and aversion, and by common consent he was shut up in the prison-pen that had been built for July. Rafe Wheeler gave expression to the general sentiment when he said:

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"We don't want no sich walkin' free aroun' this camp. Fust thing we know he'll be tolin' up another rattlesnake to bite some of us."

As the poisoned man grew steadily worse and the inevitable issue had to be faced, Buck Hardy called Peters, Jones, Jenkins and James into consultation.

"He won't last through the night," said Buck in low tones, "and I reckon we'll have to bury him right h-yuh. He'd spoil before we could git him out. What do you say, men?"

All agreed that this was the only thing to be done, Zack James adding: "And 'sides that them that undertook to tote him out would run a turrible risk of goin' to jail for dodgin' the draft."

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"Another thing," said Buck: "there's that po' fool Billy. He ought to go to his people, and I know you all want to get rid o' him. What had we better do about that?"

"Rafe Wheeler is goin' out for salt in the mornin'," said Zack James. "Maybe we could git him to take him."

This suggestion was approved, Wheeler was approached; and, though he objected, saying that he was afraid to lie down in the woods with "a crazy snake-charmer," a collection of contributed quarters and dimes offered as a substantial reward, induced him to undertake the disagreeable task.

Shortly after midnight Sweet Jackson drew his last breath, after his physical anguish had been mercifully dulled by delirium. Then a hush fell on the camp. Ted and Hubert retired to the sleeping-loft, but all the men sat about the fire until break of day. Straightening the limbs and covering the face of the dead, they sat about a freshened fire, speaking little and thinking much. Young men who had scarcely reflected seriously in all their lives did so now. Some of them feared the blow that had fallen was a judgment not only upon Jackson but upon the slacker camp in general, and more than one troubled mind wrestled with the question as to whether to turn from a selfish and cowardly course and go where duty called.

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Awakening rather late in the morning, Ted and Hubert heard the sound of carpenter's tools and, descending from the sleeping-loft, they saw two of the slackers engaged in the construction of a rough coffin. Later they learned that others were digging a grave several hundred yards out in the pine woods. As July was giving them their breakfast, they also heard with relief that Wheeler had "gone out," and that poor Billy had been persuaded to accompany him.

An hour later the body was placed in the coffin and four men bore it to the grave, where the whole camp assembled. When the boys reached the spot Buck Hardy softly called Ted to come to him where he stood in consultation with several of the slackers.

"We ain't got no preacher nor no Bible," he said to the boy, "and we've agreed that the least we can do is to stand round the grave and every man say what he can remember of the prayers he used to say. We don't have to say 'em out loud if we don't want to."

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There was a slight pause, and then Buck rather awkwardly added:

"Kid, I was thinkin' that, as you are the speaker in this camp, maybe you could remember some o' them pieces out o' the Bible they say at funerals, and——"

"Oh, Mr. Hardy, I'm afraid I can't," gasped Ted, appalled by the solemn responsibility thus placed upon him.

"You can do it, kid," urged Buck. "Don't be scared. Nobody will crack a smile, and we'll all think you're just great." As Ted still hesitated, Buck said further: "If you can remember any o' them Bible pieces, I think Sweet's folks would be glad if you said 'em."

"Well—I'll try—to remember some," said the shrinking boy, unable to resist this last appeal, "and—and—I'll do my best."

"Good for you," said Buck, putting an affectionate hand on Ted's shoulder.

Then he turned, gave the awaited signal, and all present formed a circle round the grave. Then, with bent and uncovered heads, practically every one repeated in whispers the whole of known or fragments of long-forgotten prayers.

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As soon as the last man to do this looked up, thus signifying that he had finished, Buck stood a little forward with Ted, his hand on the boy's shoulder. Then Ted, in a voice at first low and trembling but gradually strengthening, his eyes fixed upon the coffin, repeated:

"Jesus said, I am the Resurrection and the Life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead,

yet shall he live.... Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them.... Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...."

The boy hesitated and, turning to Buck whispered anxiously:

"I—I don't think I can remember any more."

"That'll do fine," whispered Buck, then announced aloud: "Now we'll bury him."

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XXII

AFTER the slackers had spent the afternoon in heavy sleep and eaten a hearty supper, the atmosphere of gloom was partially lifted from the camp; but the thoughts of all were still busier than their tongues as they sat and smoked about the fire. Though conversation lagged, nobody was sleepy, and all lingered, lounging on the grass until Ted suddenly rose to his feet and asked if he might say a few words.

"I am only a boy," he said, "and a boy is not expected to talk to men, but there are a few things I want *so much* to say, and I hope you will let me."

"Go ahead, kid," said Buck Hardy.

Al Peters and Bud Jones added their permission, the others remaining silent. All stared at the boy, giving him close attention. Instead of shrinking before the steady gaze of so many eyes, he felt inspired thereby. It had been so ever since he was first given declamation exercises at school. Always he had found writing "a composition" a distasteful, unwelcome and heavy task, but as soon as he was given a chance to speak to attentive listeners his work became easy, his active mind became more fully awake, crowding thoughts clamored for expression, and, while he talked, the subject given to him developed far beyond any previous outline that he had made. And it was so now, his proposed few words becoming many and his promise to be very brief being soon forgotten.

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"Of course, we are all thinking a lot about that poor man," he said, "and perhaps some of you have thought, as I have, how much better it would have been for him and his family if he had gone to the war and died gloriously for his country instead of coming to such an end in such a place as this at such a time. But I don't want to say much about Mr. Jackson. Ever since the days of old Rome, my uncle says, it has been agreed that we ought to say little about the dead unless we are ready to say something in praise.

"I speak of him because the way he died reminds me of what I read in that newspaper Mr. Jenkins brought in here when he came. I read in that paper of how a captain in our army wasn't true to our side because his parents were Germans and he had relatives in Germany, and of how he was sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor. That and lots of other things I've read show what we are up against in this country. My uncle says our Northern States are full of foreigners who came over here just to make money, and they and their children still love the countries they came from, the Germans especially, who, I've read, claim twenty millions in our country that are German by birth or descent."

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"Gee-whiz!" cried Buck Hardy, quick to see the boy's point.

"Of course, most of these have been here long enough to become real Americans. My uncle thinks there is doubt about only the more recent immigrations. But even these are a great population, and the things that have happened prove that very many of them are working for the Kaiser with all their might. They spy for Germany and blow up and burn down munition plants. They do even more harm by their cunning whispers and continual talk. They get hold of ignorant people and try to persuade them that it costs too much in blood and money to fight Germany and that, anyhow, the world would be better off under the Kaiser's rule. I read of one German, a professor in one of our colleges, who actually argued in print that the wisest thing to do is to submit and make peace on any terms. You see, they are not real Americans, and still love and admire Germany; they would really enjoy having the Kaiser walk on their necks, and they may think that to try to make this country one of the tails to the Kaiser's kite is just the thing they ought to do. Besides, they know that German rule would bring them forward and make them the aristocrats in this country."

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The listeners to this boyish, but pointed and intensely earnest harangue were all of old American stock and at this point all of them, without exception, were visibly indignant.

"Don't you see what this brings us up against?" asked Ted. "And what we are up against reminds me of the way Mr. Jackson died. This great German element that is secretly for the Kaiser is our Snake in the Grass that watches and waits and will come out and strike openly if ever a German army lands on our shores. Meanwhile it tries to poison the minds of our people and it does all the damage it possibly can on the sly. You see what we have to fight right here at home and how, in a way, we have a harder pull and need more help than any of our Allies."

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"Now this is my answer to the argument I have heard in this camp. Some of you have said that you are not needed because the country is so big and powerful and has so many men. We *are*

powerful, but, you see, we have the secret foe at home as well as the open foe on the French border, and we need all our strength—all our able-bodied young men—so that we can go ahead in a big way and *smash* the hateful Huns. Our country needs *you*, and *you*, and *you*," cried Ted, nodding his head toward Buck Hardy, and then toward every man around the camp fire in turn.

"Do you want to see a German viceroy taking orders from the Kaiser at Washington?" he demanded. "Do you want to see a German general in command of Atlanta and of every other State capital? Do you want to see a strutting German boss lording it over every town and county in this country? If you do, then you can say that you are not needed. Maybe you can't be stirred up by the President's call to make the world safe for democracy, because that may sound to you like something far away—though it isn't—But don't you—" cried the boy, tears starting in his eyes—"don't you want to see the American flag keep on flying? Don't you want to see your neighbors and all our people live in freedom and safety? Don't you want Americans still to rule in the country which our ancestors fought for and won and built up? Even little children have not been safe from the cruelty of the Germans. Do you want them protected? Do you want to keep our young women from being carried off into slavery? Do you want your mothers and sisters and sweethearts to belong to foreign beasts? Do you want to see in your own neighborhoods the dreadful things that have been seen in Belgium and France? The people in France have suffered so that when our first soldiers landed some of the French kissed the very hem of their garments. Do you want to wait until *we* feel like that toward any people who might come to help us to drive back the German hordes?"

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/* "Breathes there a man with soul so dead Who never to himself hath said, This is my own, my native land!" */

"Breathes *here*, to-night, a man with soul so dead that he thinks of the safety of his own skin instead of the safety of his country, his people, his women, and who is not willing to stand up and fight for freedom, for security, for the right to live in peace, against powerful and wicked aggressors? Oh, God, I wish *I* were old enough to go to the war and do my part!"

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Then, overcome by his emotions, Ted threw himself down on the grass and sobbed aloud. Hubert, who was near, put an arm over his cousin and sobbed with him. July, who had crawled nearer on the grass while Ted was speaking and now lay flat on his stomach close at hand, reached out a hand and touched the boy's shoulder, whispering:

"Nem-mind, Cap'n Ted. You done yo' part to-night. You been doin' yo' part ever since you come to dis camp. Don't you cry, Cap'n Ted, honey."

"Did you ever see the like o' that boy?" asked Al Peters softly. "He sure made the cold chills run up and down my back."

The remark was made to Buck Hardy, whose lips were twitching nervously and who did not answer.

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"Too bad he *ain't* old enough," said Bud Jones. "He'd sure make a dandy cap'n in the army."

The other slackers stared into the fire in gloomy silence.

Suddenly Buck Hardy rose to his feet, clearing his throat as he too looked steadily into the fire.

"Well, fellows," he said, "I don't know how the rest o' you feel, but I'm ready to quit. I'm tired o' playin' the game of a sneakin' suck-egg dog and I want to try the game of bein' a *man*."

"Goin' to desert, air you?" asked Zack James in a harsh, unsteady voice.

"No—goin' to *quit desertin'*."

"Goin' to go back on *us*," insisted James, "jes' because a *boy* has got lots o' lip and can talk to beat the band."

"No," said Buck, keeping his temper. "He sure is game and a great kid, and he stirred me up powerful; but I made up my mind before to-night. I made it up when I was by my sick mother's bed. I'm free to say that that boy's talk before that had a lot to do with it, but the truth is I ain't been satisfied from the start. I never did really belong to this crowd. I got in wrong last summer when I thought I knew better than the Congress of the United States about that draft business and was fool enough to get mad."

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Zack James blew out his breath in a sort of contemptuous hiss.

"I meant to tell you all as soon as I come back yesterday," continued Buck, taking no notice of James, "but the trouble in camp stopped me. I only come back to get them boys, and to-morrow I'll start out with 'em. I'm goin' to take them boys home and then I'm goin' to the war."

"Oh, Mr. Hardy," cried Ted, who had been drying his eyes as he listened, and who now started up, "I'm gladder to hear that than to know that we are going home!"

Mitch' Jenkins now spoke for the first time.

"Maybe you are goin' to take them boys home," he said, "but you ain't goin' to the war. You are goin' to jail, and then you are goin' to be shot."

"What do you mean?" demanded Buck in startled tones, plainly disturbed.

Then Ted darted his hand into an inside pocket and brought out a battered newspaper clipping.

"That's what they are sayin' in my neighborhood," declared Jenkins. "And that's why, when I heard of you fellows on the quiet, I came in to join you. I'd let the time to register go by, and so I come in here a-kitin'." [Pg 287]

"Mr. Jenkins," said Ted, boldly facing hostile eyes, his voice quite steady, "you heard a wild rumor of the sort the Germans in this country are spreading all the time. I have the real facts here, Mr. Hardy. I cut this out of that paper Mr. Jenkins himself brought in, thinking I might need it. It got wet when we crossed the 'prairie,' but you can read it. It is a part of Provost Marshal General Crowder's report on the first draft. It says that out of nearly ten million men not much over five thousand arrests were made for failure to register, that more than half of these, after registering, were released. "The authorities," read the boy from his clipping, "wisely assumed an attitude of leniency toward all those who after arrest exhibited a willingness to register and extended the *locus penitentiae* as far as possible, believing that the purpose of the law was to secure a full registration rather than full jails."

Ted handed the clipping to Buck, who, after looking it over carefully, handed it to Al Peters, remarking: [Pg 288]

"Another lie nailed. I don't mean that you did the lyin', Jenkins. I reckon it was the Germans."

The clipping passed from Peters to Jones and then to Jenkins, each holding it near the fire and reading in silence. Jenkins studied it carefully and then, without comment, passed it to James, who, after hardly a glance at the printed lines, tore up the clipping and threw it into the fire.

"What good will that do you?" asked Peters scornfully.

"Nothin' but newspaper lies to fool runaways like us out of their hidin' places," said James bitterly.

Ted, who regarded the clipping as of great value and considered it his property, turned with an outraged face to Buck, who chose to take no notice of an incident which appeared to him unimportant.

"Well, fellows," he said in conclusion, "I've put you on notice, and now all I've got to do is to get ready."

"So you've gone back on us," repeated James, his voice trembling with anger, "and you'll go out and put the sheriff on our trail?" [Pg 289]

"I didn't say that. I don't expect to hunt up the sheriff. I'll be satisfied if he don't hunt me up. But if he asks me straight up and down, I don't engage to do any lyin'."

"You mean that after them boys has blabbed the whole thing, you won't deny it?" demanded James.

"I told you I wouldn't do any lyin'," said Buck sharply.

"All *right*," said James menacingly. "That's all I want to know."

"How much more do you deserve?" asked Buck, his tone showing irritation for the first time. "Al Peters," he said suddenly, turning to the young man addressed, "I don't think you belong in this crowd, either. If there's any yellow dog in you, I ain't seen it. Don't you want to come along with me and join the *men*?"

"Buck," said Peters, rising and stepping forward, "I have a good mind to do it."

"Good for you! Now, Jones, let's hear from you. I ain't seen any yellow dog in you either. I think that down underneath you're a *man*. Don't you want to come along?" [Pg 290]

"Buck, I think I will," said Bud Jones.

He spoke as lightly as if a fishing trip had been proposed. He even smiled as he rose and took his stand in the group of which the boys were now the center.

Zack James started up, staring and muttering, his manner suggestive of impotent rage. He drew Thatcher aside and whispered to him.

"How about you, Jenkins?" asked Buck, smiling. "You're new and I hardly know you, but from things I've heard it looks to me like you're pretty nearly all white."

"No, thank you," said Jenkins, with mocking courtesy. "I'm stayin'. It's risky—with the sheriff gettin' on to it in three days' time—but it ain't as risky as goin' to jail with the chance o' bein' shot."

"Then, that's all," said Buck. "No use to ask any o' the rest."

"July wants to go out with us," spoke up Ted.

"I sho do want to go wid Mr. Hardy an' Cap'n Ted," declared the grinning negro. [Pg 291]

"All right, July. I brought you in and, if you want to go, I'll take you out."

The two groups were now quite distinct, first Carter and then Jenkins having joined James and

Thatcher.

"So," said James, as if estimating the relative strength of contending forces, "there's three of you and the nigger and the boys, and there's four of us—five when Wheeler gets back."

"Yes, you'll get Wheeler—not a doubt of it," said Buck, as if greatly amused. "And you're welcome to him."

Then he turned his back on James, remarking to those about him: "Well, I think our crowd had better go to bed. We ought to start early in the mornin'."

To this there was general assent, the three men and the two boys moving at once toward the sleeping-loft, followed slowly by the negro.

"Good night," called out Buck, his tone quite friendly.

But no response came from the four slackers who, standing in their tracks, watched the departing "deserters" with hostile eyes.

As the three men and the boys were climbing the ladder, July quietly disappeared. Stealing into the bushes bent double, he skirted the clearing, treading very softly. Five minutes later he lay in the brush within earshot of the four slackers who still stood in consultation.

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XXIII

TED went to bed a very happy boy, seeing nothing but the wonderful achievement of his fond dream. Hubert alone noted that the three men put their guns within reach of their hands when they lay down, and he alone heard Al Peters whisper:

"What if them fellows want to make trouble?"

The boy was glad to hear Buck answer: "Oh, shucks, there ain't spunk enough in *that* bunch."

Some two hours later Buck saw reason to modify this contemptuous opinion, for July brought startling news. Climbing up into the sleeping-loft very quietly, the negro bent down over Peters, Jones and Hardy in turn, shaking each until assured that each was fully awake. Each grumbled sleepily, protesting and questioning. Not until all three stood up and peered at him in the dim light did July fully explain.

"Sorry to 'sturb you gen'l'mens," he apologized, "but it ain't safe to stay sleep in dis place to-night. I's scared dem mens out dere is fixin' to burn it down on you."

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"What in the dickens made you wake us up to tell such a fool tale as that?" demanded Buck skeptically.

"I tellin' you de trufe," insisted July in an injured tone. "I was lookin' an' listenin' when Mr. James shook his fist at dis place an' says: 'Less burn 'em up—dat's de quick an' sure way.' Dem's his very words. I slipped up on 'em an' watched an' listened."

Peters and Jones looked at each other and then at Buck.

"Zack James is a fool anyhow and now that he's mad, his brains is plumb addled," said Buck in a disgusted tone. "Nothin' but talk. Jenkins wouldn't stand for it."

"Well, you better believe dem mens is gittin' ready to fight," insisted July. "Dey's tuck all de provisions an' put 'em wid dey guns behind a bunch o' perimeters close by de big pine—you know de big pine—and dey got another fire built down dere. And dey's tuck all de boats an' hid 'em. I sneaked round an' watched 'em while dey was doin' it all."

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This was serious. Buck made no further protest when Peters said:

"Boys, we'd better look out for ourselves."

"Dey's 'spectin' a fight," said July. "When I fust crawled up to listen Mr. Thatcher was a-sayin': 'If we got to be shot, we mought as well be shot right yuh in de swamp widout waitin' for de Gov'ment to do it.'"

"And what did Jenkins say?" asked Buck.

"I couldn't make out, but I think fum de signs dat he argued an' argued an' den give in to Mr. James an' them."

"Anyhow he won't let that fool James burn this place down on us."

"We'd better move out, though, and do it quick," said Jones. "Zack James may be drunk. I smelt whisky on him to-day."

"We've got four guns," remarked Peters.

An immediate move being agreed on, the boys were wakened. The guns and blankets were divided between the three white men, who also secured a few personal belongings which they

kept in the sleeping-loft. The negro was told to give the boys any tins of salmon or sardines that he could find and to shoulder as large a load of raked up moss as he could carry, after dropping it through the opening in the floor.

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But before this was done, or any one had descended the ladder, Buck lay flat on the floor, thrust his head and shoulders through the opening and looked about. As he did so, he saw a man hurrying away—after listening beneath the loft, as it appeared. Buck then went half way down the ladder, gun in hand, and looked about more fully, noting that the old camp fire had burnt out and that a new one burned steadily some two hundred yards away at the point July had indicated, the upright figures of two men being visible within the circle of light.

"Come on, boys," he said softly, after a few moments.

Within fifteen minutes the move had been made in silence and without disturbance, even the moss being transferred to the chosen, grass-covered spot which was shut in on three sides by thick clumps of palmettos. Here they were amply screened both on the side looking toward the sleeping-loft, which was about a hundred yards away, and on the front looking toward the slackers' new camp fire, which was some two hundred yards distant. No upright figures were now seen within the circle of light, the alert slackers evidently having taken alarm and sought shelter behind their own "bunch o' perimeters."

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There was no moon, but myriads of stars rained soft light through the clear atmosphere, and, as the three white men took turns watching on the exposed side of their fireless camp, they were able to see every object distinctly for a considerable distance out among the scattered pines.

July shaped the pile of dry moss into a comfortable bed and Ted and Hubert lay down under blankets, as Buck insisted that they should do; but there was little sleep for anybody during the rest of that night. None of the white men lay down even while off sentinel duty. The three mostly sat in a group, watching, or listening, or softly discussing plans for the coming day.

At last morning slowly dawned, nothing of importance having occurred meanwhile. As soon as the growing light brought out distinctly the outlines of every familiar object on the island within reach of the eye, Buck stepped out into the open, gun in hand, faced the slackers' leafy fort, and called:

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"Jenkins! Jenkins!"

In a few moments Jenkins, also carrying a gun, stepped into view.

"Well, Jenkins," shouted Buck, a sneer in his tone as well as in his words, "that nice little Sunday-school game of burnin' the roof over our heads didn't come off, after all. I reckon we was too quick for you."

"Now, Buck Hardy," cried Jenkins, "you ought to know I wouldn't stand for nothin' o' that sort."

"You're in with a bad crowd, Jenkins. Well, what do them yellow dogs in the bushes behind you aim to do?"

"*I'd* ruther see nothin' done. The whole thing is crazy. I say, let you fellows go out without any trouble. That's the only thing to do, *I* say."

"But your yellow dogs don't agree, one of 'em 'specially—the one that wanted to burn us out. I know who he is, and I've a good mind to walk right over there and break every bone in his body."

There was a sudden rustling of the palmettos behind Jenkins that seemed to indicate preparation for war. Noting this, Peters and Jones leveled their guns through their own palmettos without exposing the muzzles to the view of the watchers in the opposite leafy fort. The two boys and the negro looked and listened with all their eyes and ears, their excitement now intense. But Buck Hardy stood in a careless pose, gun in hand, as before.

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"Jenkins," he said, "if you've got any influence with Carter and Thatcher, talk to 'em. Then stack all your guns against that big pine. Then *we'll* stack our guns where you can see 'em. Then I'll walk over there empty-handed and wipe up the ground with Zack James. Let that settle it. *I'll* be satisfied."

Jenkins had no time to speak, even if ready with a reply. The last word was hardly uttered when there came a flash from the green behind him, a loud report followed, and a bullet whistled by Buck Hardy's head.

Instantly Peters and Jones fired their guns. Then Jenkins leaped out of sight, and Buck, after firing where he stood, sought cover beside his friends.

The slackers promptly fired a volley from their green covert in response, the bullets rattling through the palmettos and passing over the heads of the two seated boys.

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"Lie down flat!" Buck commanded them.

"Here, nigger, take this extra gun and shoot," cried Peters, shoving it toward July with his left hand as he raised his own gun with his right.

July took the gun with a frightened air and a sickly smile, but prepared to obey.

Hubert flattened himself out on the grass and lay still, as ordered; but Ted, unable to endure

such inaction, with its attendant inability to see what was going on, crawled quietly and unnoticed into the palmettos to the left of the men until he reached a point where, by resting on his elbows and cautiously parting the leafage in front of him, he could scan the open and see the green covert sheltering the enemy as it trembled under the shock of each volley fired into it.

"Aim low," he presently heard Buck say. "The only way to end it is to hit some of 'em."

"I wish we had an American flag to run up," thought Ted, as the next volley was fired.

A moment later he forgot this aspiration, as a cry of pain was heard from the slackers' covert.

"Somebody's hit!" cried Peters gaily.

Buck chuckled. Jones laughed aloud. Intense excitement reigned, mingled with a fierce exultation which Ted, as he realized afterward, fully shared.

The three white men and the negro fired again, and were raising their guns once more when Buck suddenly called a halt.

"Hold on," he said. "Looks like they've quit. And if they have, we'll quit, too."

All listened intently and looked cautiously forth. There were now no answering shots. It was evident that the slackers had either "quit" or, as Peters suggested, were "hatching some mischief."

While keeping a wary eye on the open woods behind them, the watchful listeners waited for some sign from the silenced "fort," and presently it came. A white handkerchief rose on the end of a stick and fluttered above the clump of palmettos.

"Hello, there!" shouted Buck. "Is that you, Jenkins? It's got to be Jenkins, or we won't trust you."

"It's me," they heard the voice of Jenkins, rather fainter than it had been during the previous parley. "It's all over, Hardy. You've got us. James and Thatcher have run—they're in the boats and gone by this time. Nobody here but me and Carter."

"Step out, then, and stack your guns."

"We're both hit, but I reckon we can do that much."

Jenkins came out of cover, limping, and stood his gun against the tree. Behind him came Carter, dragging his gun with one hand, his other arm hanging limp at his side.

"I reckon it's all right," said Buck. "But, July, you stay here and keep them boys till we make sure."

Then the three white men, holding their guns in readiness, walked across the open to investigate. Left alone with the boys, July suddenly began to laugh with all the abandon of the happiest of darkies.

"Dat sho was a grand fight," he assured the boys. "An' what you reckon, Cap'n Ted? Atter I shot once I wasn't scared. I des 'joyed myself shootin' at dem slackers an' list'nin' to de bullets rattlin' round us in dese permeters. I wouldn't 'a' believed it. I sho is a 'stonished nigger dis maw'nin'."

July laughed ecstatically, and before the amused and pleased boys had spoken he continued:

"Look yuh, Cap'n Ted, maybe I won't haf to have des a cook's job in de army. Maybe I'd 'joy myself mo' still shootin' at dem Germans out o' one o' dem holes in de ground. If dey want to try me, I's willin'—I don' care how soon de Gov'ment put a rifle in my hands an' sick me on dem Germans!"

Then the grinning negro gave vent to his feelings in a prodigious and joyful yell—a sort of war whoop in advance.

"July, this is simply *great!*" cried Ted, full of enthusiasm as he beheld a soldier born for Uncle Sam in the most unexpected quarter. "And I'm not so very much surprised either; for I have heard old army men say that a great many good soldiers are afraid at first."

Then they heard Buck's shout that everything was "all right," and the two boys and the negro raced eagerly across the intervening space.

"July," ordered Buck, "bring a bucket of water and any old cloth you can find. And be quick."

Carter was seated with his back against a tree, his face very pale and his bared arm showing a deep flesh wound out of which came an alarming flow of blood. Jenkins, seated near, had uncovered a bleeding but much less serious flesh wound in the calf of his left leg.

"Zack James was at the bottom of the whole fool business," Jenkins was saying. "He was drinkin' all night. You can see his empty bottle behind them permeters."

"Lucky for him that he beat it before I got my hands on him," said Buck.

While Peters and Jones were checking the red flow from Carter's wound and very carefully binding it up, Ted noticed with alarm that blood trickled down Buck's left wrist. He had received instruction in first aid as a part of his Boy Scout training and now insisted on dressing his friend's

wound, although Buck protested that the bullet had "just grazed" his arm and no attention was necessary. Ted cleared the drying blood from around the scratch and, tearing into strips his handkerchief which he had washed and dried the previous afternoon, neatly employed a part of it as a bandage.

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"Thank you, little doctor," said Buck, smiling and pleased.

Then Ted turned to Jenkins and very carefully performed the same office for him, in this case there being some real need.

"You sure are a nice kid," said Jenkins gratefully. "I didn't think you'd do it for me because I wasn't on your side in the fight."

"Do you take me for a *German*?" demanded Ted, vastly indignant. "The Americans and the English and the French always attend to wounded prisoners of war. Only the Germans leave the enemy wounded to die, or kill them. They fire on the Red Cross and sink hospital ships, too. But we are different."

"Lord, no; I'd never take you for a German," apologized Jenkins, with a twitch of his lip and a twinkle in his eye.

Ted looked around, bright-eyed, upon the scene about him and the swamp-island surroundings, sighing, not with sadness, but with relief and satisfaction in the shaping and fortunate issue of events. Well pleased, he noted that the sun had risen in a clear sky and that birds were singing joyfully.

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The boy vaguely sensed the wonderful and ever-compensating fact that nature had received no shock and its marvelous mechanism remained untouched; that the world was beautiful and its inarticulate creatures were happy, in spite of man's strain and strife, his guns and his wars.

"Hurry up now, July, and get us some breakfast," the voice of Buck Hardy was heard calling.

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XXIV

TWO tramping parties approached each other on the borders of the great Okefinokee in the late afternoon.

The one just emerged from the swamp consisted of Ted Carroll, Hubert Ridgway, the three reformed slackers, the negro, and the two "prisoners of war," the first of the latter moving with a slight limp and the second carrying his arm in a sling.

The party descending toward the swamp consisted of Judge Ridgway, in hunting dress and carrying a gun, the widely known sheriff of that section, several deputies, a negro with a heavy provision-pack, and the venerable swamp-squatter whose long beard running down in a point had reminded Hubert of "a ram-goat" until the old fellow's kindness had won the hearts of both boys.

As the homeward-bound party wound out of the swamp brush, and the party moving down the slope skirted a blackjack thicket and came into full view, both halted momentarily, uttering ejaculations of astonishment. Then Ted and Hubert, whose keen young eyes saw everything and whose quick minds leaped upon the explanation, raced forward, shouting, and rushed into their uncle's arms.

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Judge Ridgway held them hard and kissed them; then, with an arm round Ted on his right and an arm round Hubert on his left, he sat on a log and listened as the boys' tongues ran a veritable race.

The sheriff, his deputies; and the old swamp-squatter stood respectfully apart. The three reformed slackers and the "prisoners of war" halted where the shouting and racing boys had left them, comprehending what had occurred and awaiting further developments, even the three who counted on the friendship of the boys not altogether easy in their minds. But July, grinning, delighted, curious, edged nearer until he heard Hubert crowd upon Ted's last words, saying:

"And Ted made speeches to them nearly every night. I told him and told him it wouldn't do any good, but it did a lot of good. It converted them."

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"And you were just starting to look for us?" asked Ted.

"Yes—the moment we were ready, without waiting for an early morning start. I'll tell you later what kept me away from home so long, and why my servants thought you were staying in town, and how Cousin Jim thought you were just having a good time hunting around the plantation. I had just got home when your good old swamp-squatter friend turned up and told us where to find you."

"It doesn't matter, Uncle," said Ted. "I'm awfully glad—now that it's over—that you *didn't* start any sooner, because, if you had, you know, some of the great things that happened might not have happened."

Judge Ridgway smiled and squeezed the boy, then said:

"Well, now let me have a look at your party. Suppose you bring up the 'prisoners of war' first."

Turning away with a vastly important air to execute this commission, Ted and Hubert ran into the venerable Mr. George Smith.

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"I'm that glad to see you boys I don't know what to do," declared the smiling old swamp-squatter, grasping their hands. "I'd 'a' footed it out to Judge Ridgway's even if Sweet Jackson had 'a' locked me up and flung away the key."

"He won't bother you any more," said Hubert, without stopping to explain.

"Thank you *so much*, Mr. Smith," said Ted. "I just knew you would."

Then the boys ran on their way.

"They are all here except James, Thatcher and Wheeler," Judge Ridgway was saying to the sheriff, who had stepped to his side. "To-morrow you can send a party in to round them up."

Then followed the rare spectacle of a Judge "holdin' court right dere in de open pine woods"—to quote from July's later description. For Ted and Hubert had brought up the "prisoners of war."

"Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Carter," said Ted, presenting them.

"Good names that have not been honored," Judge Ridgway sternly commented, looking the prisoners up and down with a keen, appraising eye. "I imagine that you haven't much to say for yourselves, for there isn't much to be said. Have you had enough of dodging the law of the land and shirking your duty, hidden like thieves in a swamp? Are you ready to register and go to the war when called?"

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"Yes, sir," answered Jenkins and Carter in a breath.

"That's the main requisite, and the situation is now practically in your own hands, for, as the higher authorities have wisely said, what the country wants is full armies, not full jails. Take them in charge, Mr. Sheriff. I will only say further that I should like to see them given every chance, Mr. Jenkins especially, for whom my dear boys have spoken a good word."

When the "prisoners of war" had stepped apart in the company of the deputies, Jenkins exchanging a parting smile with Ted as he went, Judge Ridgway spoke again to the sheriff:

"I want the other three young men to spend the night at my house. Their case is different. I think also that I'll have my servants put up the young negro for the night—my boys are so grateful to him. I will be responsible for the four and see that they are registered to-morrow."

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"All right, Judge," said the sheriff, and, saluting, he marched off with his deputies and the "prisoners of war."

Judge Ridgway rose from his seat, smiling, as Ted and Hubert brought up their three friends and introduced them. He shook hands first with Peters and then with Jones, saying:

"Well, boys, you made a very serious mistake, but even serious mistakes can be rectified; and I understand that you have voluntarily done so already, so far as was in your power. *Voluntary* rectification is everything. Little more can be asked, and we'll say no more about it."

Then he turned to Buck with an extremely friendly manner, holding the young man's hand in a warm clasp.

"Mr. Hardy, I am deeply indebted to you," he said. "I shudder to think of what my boys might have suffered but for you and your commanding influence over that lawless crowd."

"Judge—Judge Ridgway, you—you make me ashamed," stammered Buck, awkwardly, his eyes lowered. "What I did for them was nothin' to what Ted did for me. That boy made me feel like I'd never get any peace o' mind till I'd bagged about sixteen o' them Germans."

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"You're the right stuff!" declared Judge Ridgway, with a suddenly renewed grip of Buck's hand.

After smiling with the greatest satisfaction into Buck's uplifted eyes, he addressed the three young men collectively: "I want you all to spend the night at my house."

"Oh, Judge, we don't want to impose——" began Peters.

"Not a word; you've got to come, all of you," declared Judge Ridgway merrily, as he noted the looks exchanged by the embarrassed young backwoodsmen. "I want you to help my boys tell their wonderful story. Even Ulysses after all his travels never found a keener listener than I shall be."

He was about to add that all had now better start on the homeward tramp, when he noticed the old swamp-squatter lingering to say good-by.

"Come back and stay all night, Mr. Smith," he hospitably invited. "Then you can make an early start in the morning."

"Thank you, Judge, I believe I will," the old man eagerly accepted.

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July had already been informed by Hubert that he was to be the guest of old Asa and Clarissa for the night, and he could now be seen with the black pack-carrier hurrying along the path ahead, eager, as he had confessed, to reach the Ridgway kitchen and relate to a gaping audience

the marvelous adventures of "Cap'n Ted."

"Walk on with your friends, Ted," directed Judge Ridgway. "I want to speak to Hubert."

As soon as he learned that the boys were lost in the swamp Judge Ridgway telegraphed his brother in North Carolina, and that morning he had received a long answer.

"I've heard from your father, Hubert," he now informed the boy. "Both your father and mother want me to send you home at once. They think Ted's influence is bad for you."

"Oh, they don't understand," cried Hubert, his grip on his lachrymal ducts visibly loosening. "I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for this great trip with Ted. I'm more of a man right now than I would have been without Ted. To be with Ted is the greatest thing in the world!"

"Hubert, shake hands with your uncle," said Judge Ridgway, stopping short. "There's much better stuff in you than I supposed. Good boy! You won't have to go till to-morrow, and I'll see to it that you come down to visit Ted soon."

A few minutes later Hubert joined the party ahead and told Ted that his uncle wanted to speak to him. Ted ran back gladly, shouting as he drew near:

"Oh, Uncle—I forgot. What's the news about the war?"

"A great battle^[A] is raging on the west front—but we'll talk about that later."

[A] The great German drive beginning March 21, 1918.

Judge Ridgway put his arm over Ted's shoulder, and they walked forward.

"I'm to have you for keeps now," he said. "Your Uncle Fred has at last agreed to give you up."

"That's just what I've wanted!"

"We have much to talk about. As to your future, I rather think it will have to be West Point for you, eh?"

"Splendid!" cried Ted, his eyes glowing. "Oh, Uncle, everything is coming just as I wanted it. Isn't it wonderful how things come out all right? And I'm always expecting it, too. In the very worst times in the swamp I told Hubert we'd get out of it and even be glad of what we'd gone through. And now I'm expecting, I'm sure of, the greatest thing of all—our victory over the Germans!"

An hour later, just as the white front of the Ridgway house showed through the trees from afar, Judge Ridgway and Ted joined the others, and, looking around upon all his friends, the boy exclaimed:

"*Won't* we have a party to-night!"

"Yes, I think it will be a 'party,'" said Judge Ridgway. "I think Clarissa will try to serve such a supper as she has sometimes seen in her dreams. And I think we may even drink a toast to my Ted."

Putting an affectionate hand on the boy's shoulder, Buck Hardy slightly amended the announcement of their host.

"To *Captain* Ted," he said.

THE END

Transcriber's Corrections

Following is a list of significant typographical errors that have been corrected.

- Page 58, "beargrass" changed to "bear-grass" for consistency of use (grape-vines and bear-grass ropes).
- Page 107, "repetion" changed to "repetition" (in tireless repetition).
- Page 118, "wildcat" changed to "wild-cat" for consistency of use (an ordinary wild-cat).
- Page 118, "wildcat's" changed to "wild-cat's" for consistency of use (the dead wild-cat's feet).
- Page 124, "inclosed" changed to "enclosed" (space enclosed on three sides).
- Page 197, "himself" changed to "himself" (Lifting himself guardedly).
- Page 301, "anwering" changed to "answering" (no answering shots).

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CAPTAIN TED: A BOY'S ADVENTURES
AMONG HIDING SLACKERS IN THE GREAT GEORGIA SWAMP ***

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