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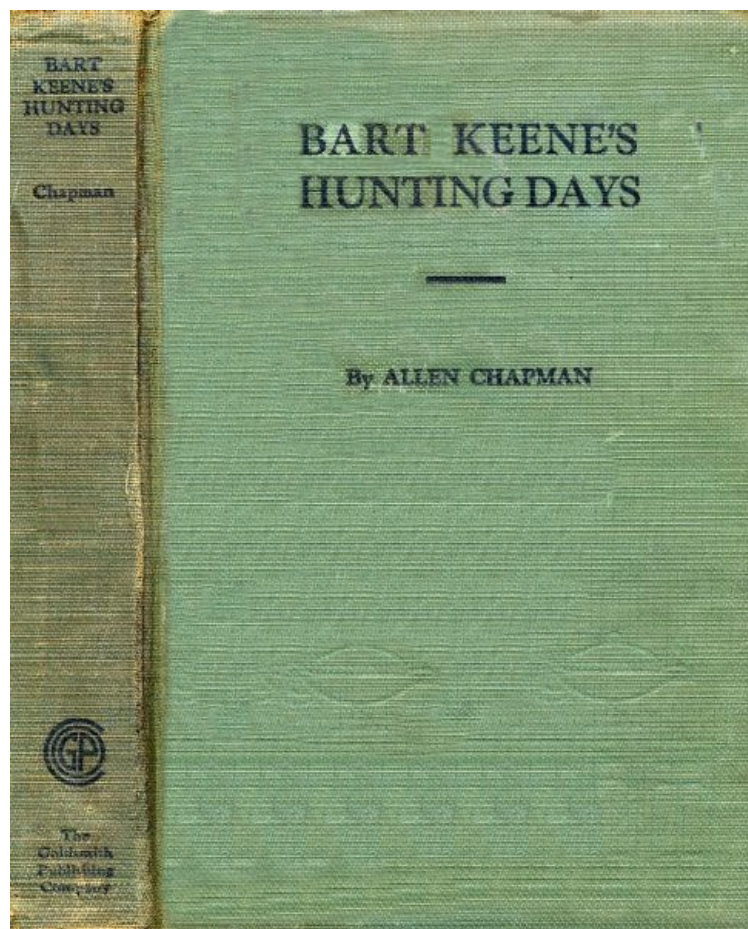
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## **BART KEENE'S HUNTING DAYS**

Or

The Darewell Chums  
in a Winter Camp

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

AUTHOR OF "BART STIRLING'S ROAD TO SUCCESS," "WORKING  
HARD TO WIN," "BOUND TO SUCCEED," "THE YOUNG  
STOREKEEPER," "NAT BORDEN'S FIND," ETC.



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# DAYS

## CHAPTER I

### A MIDNIGHT EXPEDITION

"Hold on there! Go easy, now, fellows," cautioned Bart Keene to his two chums, as they stole softly along in the darkness. "What are you making all that racket for, Ned?"

"It wasn't me; it was Frank."

"I couldn't help it," came from Frank Roscoe in a whisper. "I stumbled on a stone."

"Well, don't do it again," retorted Bart. "First thing you know some one will hear us, and the jig will be up."

"And then we can't play the joke on Stumpy," added Ned Wilding.

"Of course not," went on Bart. "Easy now. Come on. Keep behind me in a line, and walk in the shadows as much as possible. We're almost there."

The three lads bent upon playing a peculiar trick on their chum, Fenn, or "Stumpy" Masterson, kept on toward the Darewell High School, at which they were students. The building set well back from the street, and the campus in front was now flooded with brilliant moonlight. It was close to midnight, and to approach the institution unobserved, to take from it certain objects, and to steal away without having been noticed, was the object of the three conspirators.

"Are you coming?" asked Bart, as he turned around to observe what progress his companions were making. He saw Ned and Frank standing still, crouched in the shadow of a leafless tree. "What's the matter?" he continued, somewhat anxiously.

"Thought I heard a noise in the building," whispered Frank, hoarsely.

"You're dreaming," retorted Bart. "Come on. It's getting late, and we want to finish."

"Yes, and it's as cold as Greenland," added Ned. The boys had on light overcoats, for winter was near at hand.

Once more the two advanced, and joined Bart. The three were now in the shadow of one of the wings of the school, and, as far as they knew, had not been seen.

"Which way are you going in?" asked Ned, of Bart, who was leading this midnight expedition.

"Through the side court, and in at the girls' door. That's most always open, as Riggs, the janitor, lives on that side of the school, and he doesn't take the trouble to lock the door, as his house is so near."

"Good idea," commented Frank. "Lead on, Falstaff, an' may he who——"

"Cut it out," advised Bart sharply. "This is no time to spout Shakespeare stuff."

Once more the three advanced. Suddenly Bart stopped, and Ned, who was close behind, collided with him.

"What's wrong now?" whispered Ned, as soon as he caught his breath.

"Hush!" cautioned Bart. "I saw a man just then! He was right by the front door of the school." Bart had come to a halt in the shadow of a buttress, just before stepping across an open space that led to the court.

"A man," murmured Ned. "Probably it was Riggs, the janitor."

"No, he was too tall for Riggs," answered Bart. "Besides, he didn't limp, as Riggs does, from a leg that was once broken. No, this man wasn't Riggs."

"What was he doing?" asked Frank.

"Standing near the front door, as if he was going in. Then he seemed to change his mind. I think—There he is again!" exclaimed Bart, suddenly, and he shrank farther back into the dense shadows, his chums following his example.

At the same instant Ned and Frank caught sight of the man. The stranger approached the front door as if afraid of being seen, and, every now and then, he turned about, as the boys could notice to take an observation. As they looked on they saw him suddenly open the front door, after fumbling about the lock, and enter the school, closing the portal behind him.

"Well, what do you think of that?" gasped Bart, after a moment's pause.

"He's a burglar!" declared Frank.

"Let's go tell the police," suggested Ned.

"No, wait a minute," advised Bart, putting restraining hands on his two chums. "Don't tell the

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police.”

“Why not?” Ned wanted to know.

“Because they might ask what we were doing around the school at night, and we don’t want to tell—do we?”

“That’s so,” agreed Frank. “Maybe that chap isn’t a burglar, after all.”

“You’re right,” came from Ned. “What could a burglar steal in the school?”

“Books, and instruments from the laboratory,” was Bart’s contribution to the opinions. “But I, myself, don’t believe he is a burglar. Possibly he is some one whom Riggs hired to help out with the sweeping and dusting.”

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“Let’s wait and see,” suggested Frank, and this was agreed to. Silently the chums, from their place of hiding, kept their eyes on the school. Presently there was a flicker of light in the windows of one of the upper rooms.

“There!” exclaimed Ned, “what did I tell you! He’s a new janitor, sweeping out,” for the light moved to and fro.

“What room is that?” asked Bart.

“Professor Long’s—the place where we’re bound for,” answered Frank.

“Hush! Not so loud,” pleaded Bart. “Some one may hear you, and get on to our trick. I guess you’re right. We’ll wait until he gets out of the way.”

“It may be a long time, and Fenn may come looking for us,” ventured Ned.

“Can’t help it,” decided Bart. “We can’t go in while the man is there.”

There seemed no way out of it, and the three chums crouched in the shadows, waiting. It was cold, and more than once they wished they had not started to play the joke on Fenn, but they were not going to give up now. They saw the light, moving to and fro, but it did not leave the room where they had first observed it—the classroom of Professor Long, the science teacher.

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“He must be giving that a good cleaning,” remarked Bart. Hardly had he spoken than the light disappeared. A few minutes later it was visible on the floor below, and then it could be traced, as the person carrying it, descended.

“He’s coming out,” declared Ned.

“So much the better,” commented Frank.

An instant later the front door opened and the man who had gone in, hurried out. He seemed in great haste for, giving a quick look around, he darted away from the school, down the front walk, and up the street.

“Fellows, that was no janitor!” declared Bart. “I believe he was a burglar!”

“But he didn’t have any bundles,” declared Frank. “If he had stolen anything, he’d have to pack it up, as anything of value in the school is quite bulky. I don’t believe he took anything.”

“Then why did he run?” demanded Bart.

This was a poser for his chums, until Frank said:

“It may have been one of the teachers who went back after some papers he forgot.”

“Didn’t look like any of the teachers,” said Bart. “Besides the teachers wouldn’t run, as if the police were after them, and they wouldn’t act as frightened as that man did.”

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“Well, what are we going to do about it?” asked Ned. “If we’re going to play that joke, let’s get busy. We won’t say anything about seeing the man unless something develops, and I don’t believe it will. Come on in. The front door seems to be open. We can go in that way, instead of around through the court; less chance of Riggs seeing us.”

“All right,” agreed Bart, “only I wish I knew who that man was.” The time was to come when the boys would have given a great deal to have been able to penetrate the identity of the mysterious stranger. But the three chums gave little heed to that now, for they were intent on playing a joke that Bart had evolved. A little later, finding the front door unlocked, they were inside the school, just as the distant town clock boomed out the hour of midnight.

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## CHAPTER II

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### THE MISSING DIAMOND BRACELET

There were three lads who had entered the Darewell High School so mysteriously at midnight, and, had any one seen them, who was acquainted with them, he would have at once asked:

"Where is the fourth member of the quartette? Where is Stumpy Masterson?" For there were four lads in the town of Darewell who were so inseparable that they had come to be known as "The Darewell Chums." Their names you are already familiar with, and some of my readers have met them before in the previous books of this series.

In the first volume, entitled, "The Heroes of the School," there was related how the four friends took part in a strange mystery, and how they got at the bottom of it. At one time they went up in a balloon, and were captured by some men who were their enemies, so that, for a time, it looked dubious for the lads. But our heroes were wide-awake, and resourceful, and managed to take care of themselves.

Their home, as I have said, was in the town of Darewell, which was located on the Still River, a stream that flowed into Lake Erie. Living not far from that great body of water, the four chums often made trips to it, though more frequently they went swimming in or sailing on the river, in summer, and skated on it in winter.

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In the second volume of the series, called "Ned Wilding's Disappearance," a story was told of how Ned tried to become a millionaire on his own account. He speculated in stocks, and to do this he had to go to New York. There he became mixed up in some peculiar transactions, and he thought it was necessary for him to disappear to avoid arrest. His chums, who followed him to the city, tried for some time in vain to find him, and poor Ned suffered many hardships before the affair was finally straightened out.

"Frank Roscoe's Secret" was the title of the third volume. There always seemed to be a mystery about Frank Roscoe, and his chums could never penetrate it. At times he was moody and distraught, and he seemed to have some secret that worried him. He made no confidant of any one and succeeded in avoiding all inquiries.

The four lads went camping, and it was hoped that Frank would forget his troubles, but, instead, he seemed to get right into the thick of them. Frank, for some years, had believed his father dead, but it transpired that he was not. Mr. Roscoe was kept in a private insane asylum, though he had full possession of his reason, only he was made ill by drugs constantly administered to him by men who had an interest in keeping him out of the way. How he was rescued, and the perils the boys ran in saving him after they had released him from the institution, you will find set down in the third book.

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In the fourth book, called "Fenn Masterson's Discovery," there was related the details of a long trip the chums took on the Great Lakes. They were aboard a vessel commanded by Captain Wiggs, and almost from the start the boys were involved in a mystery. They were pursued by strange men, when they landed to witness a large grain elevator on fire, and eventually they succeeded in causing the breaking up of a gang of Chinese smugglers, and a band of scoundrels who were secretly taking valuable minerals from a cave, under land owned by a man whom the boys had once befriended. It was not until after some strenuous happenings that these events had come to pass, and, more than once, our friends were in danger. But Fenn Masterson succeeded in getting on the trail of the mystery, through an odd discovery he had made, and, though he was captured by the enemy, he used his eyes and ears to good advantage, so that when his friends came he could lead them to the secret cave.

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Following the exciting events of their cruise on the Great Lakes, the boys had returned to Darewell, and had resumed their studies at the High School, where they were great favorites with the other pupils. At the time this story opens the fall term was well under way, and football was the chief sport, our heroes playing on the first team of the school.

The reason for the midnight visit of Bart, Frank and Ned to the school was this: Stumpy, the missing member of the quartette, was an odd sort of lad, always making collections of one thing or another. Sometimes it was postage stamps, or postmarks, and again minerals, or jackknives, or butterflies.

The day of the midnight visit, when the Darewell Chums, together with Bart's sister Alice (who wanted to be a trained nurse) and her chum, Jennie Smith, were in a drug store getting soda and cream, Fenn had pulled from his pocket, together with his handkerchief, a small mud turtle. There had been a wild scramble on the part of the girls, and some ladies in the store, before Fenn recaptured the reptile.

"What's that for?" Bart had asked.

"Oh, nothing," Fenn had answered, as casually as possible.

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"It certainly *is* something," Ned had insisted, and they had badgered Fenn until he finally admitted that he was now collecting mud turtles, and had a number of them in a pen at home.

This had at once given Bart his cue for playing a joke, and it might be mentioned that the fun-loving youth never let go by a chance to play a trick. A little later, that same afternoon, after Fenn had been sufficiently "rigged" over his new fad, Bart Keene might have been seen whispering cautiously to Ned and Frank.

His proposal was that the three of them should pay a surreptitious visit to the school that Friday night, and, from the room of Professor Long, the science teacher, take a number of turtles, snakes and small alligators which the instructor kept for the use of his class in biology. The three conspirators planned to remove the reptiles, take them to Fenn's house, slyly put them in with his

collection of turtles, and then see what their chum would say when he found his number of reptiles so unexpectedly increased.

The plan found favor on the part of Ned and Frank. They had met at Bart's home after supper, and started off, leaving word with Alice, that if Fenn accidentally came, he was to be detained, entertained, or something done to him, to prevent him from becoming suspicious over the absence of the three lads. [13]

But Fenn, or Stumpy, which he was more frequently called, had no suspicions, and did not leave his house that night. Meanwhile, as told in the first chapter, Bart and the others had gone to the school, had suffered a momentary alarm at the sight of the mysterious man, and had finally gained an entrance through the front door, unexpectedly found open.

"Well, we're in here, what's next on the program?" asked Ned, of Bart.

"Go ahead up stairs, and don't make any more noise than you have to."

Long familiarity with the interior arrangements of the High School enabled the three lads to ascend the stairs without the aid of a light. Bart, as a precaution, however, had brought along a pocket electric flash lamp, to use when they reached the case of live reptiles.

They got to the room where Professor Long gave instruction, and when Bart sent out little flashes of light, all gazed quickly around.

"No traces of any burglar here," observed Frank.

"Guess you're right," admitted Bart. "But we surely saw some one up here with a light." [14]

"Might have been one of Riggs' friends," commented Ned. "Anyhow he isn't here now. Come on, and let's finish. It's getting late. The cabinet of turtles, alligators and snakes is over here," and he led the way across the almost dark room, for the electric lamp only gave light in a small circle.

Professor Long was more enthusiastic over science than are most teachers, and he used live animals to illustrate points in biology, evolution and kindred studies. Hence he had quite a collection of reptiles, which were kept in a case especially constructed for them, where they could be fed and watched, and live under conditions as nearly approaching those of nature as possible.

The three conspirators proposed "borrowing" a few specimens, smuggling them into Stumpy's collection, which was kept in a shack in his back yard, and, after witnessing his surprise, they would take Professor Long's reptiles back to the school. The interval between the closing of the school Friday night and the Monday morning opening gave them time for this.

"Get some of the toads, lizards, alligators and snakes, besides the mud turtles," advised Bart, "and take care that the beggars don't bite you. I don't want to get blood poison, even if my sister is studying to be a trained nurse. Here, I'll hold the light, and you fellows can put the creatures in the bags." [15]

"Yes, you will!" exclaimed Frank, somewhat indignantly. "You want us to run all the risks! No, sir, you put the lamp down and pitch in yourself. If we get bit, so do you."

"But the lamp won't give any light unless I press the spring," explained Bart, for the electric switch was thus operated.

"I'll show you how to make it," volunteered Ned. "I can fasten the spring with a match," which he proceeded to do, the light glowing without any one touching the spring. Bart had no further excuse, and assisted his chums in transferring to the bags he had brought a large part of Professor Long's collection. The reptiles made little resistance, though one of the large turtles did nip Frank slightly.

"Never mind, Alice will put on some carbolic salve or peroxide," said Bart, cheerfully. "I guess we've got enough now. Look out, there's a snake going to get away!" He grabbed the lively reptile just in time, and stuffed it into his bag.

The three conspirators hurried away from the school, and made their way to the back yard of Fenn's house. The shack was fastened with a simple catch, which Bart had no difficulty in loosening. Then, working quickly and silently, the three chums made a large addition to Fenn's collection. The snakes, turtles, lizards and frogs from the school cabinet were put in the boxes with Fenn's pets, and the small doors fastened. Then the hut was closed. [16]

"Now we must be on hand here early to-morrow morning," said Bart, as they sneaked away.

"Sure. We'll pretend to Fenn that we are anxious to see his collection," said Ned. "He'll be only too glad to take us out here, and then we can see his expression, when he catches sight of the visitors. Oh, we'll be on hand all right!" and then the trio went to their homes.

Early the next morning, Bart, Ned and Frank called on Fenn. He had not been in evidence the night before, so they felt sure their trick had not been discovered. He came to the door in response to their whistles.

"Say, you fellows are on the job early, aren't you?" inquired Stumpy, with just a shade of

suspicion in his tones.

"We want to have a little football practice," answered Bart. "And we came to see if you'd show us your collection of turtles."

"Hey? What's that?" asked Fenn, quickly.

"That's straight, Stumpy," added Ned. "We won't hurt 'em, will we, fellows?"

"Sure not," agreed Frank.

His suspicions lulled to rest, Fenn led the way to the shack in the back yard.

"I haven't fed 'em yet," he remarked. "I was just going to when you chaps came along. I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"Oh, it's awful to have to pay these social calls on young ladies!" mocked Bart, pretending to yawn. "It keeps you up so late, and morning comes too soon."

"Aw, cut it out," advised Fenn, with an injured air, but he blushed. "Now, no poking the turtles," he stipulated, as he opened the shack door.

"Visitors are politely requested not to feed or annoy the animals," quoted Bart, from some menagerie sign. "Do they eat much?" he asked of Fenn.

"Oh, not much, especially in cool weather. They're sort of sluggish then. I haven't got many yet, but I expect to—"

By this time Fenn had the door open, and the sight that met his eyes almost bereft him of speech.

For, to his small collection had been added nearly all the reptiles from the High School. Snakes reared up their heads and hissed at him. From the corner of one cage a large mud turtle stuck out its leathery neck. A fat toad, one of many, squatted on the box of worms Fenn kept for his "pets," and two alligators, like twins, waved their long tails to and fro.

"For the love of Mike, what have you here?" cried Bart, pretending to be frightened.

"Good land! You never said you had so many!" added Ned.

"Is it safe to go in? Let me hide behind you, Stumpy. You're so fat and juicy that they'd grab you first," said Frank.

For a moment Fenn did not speak. Then he understood the joke that had been played.

"You fellows think you're awful smart; don't you?" he demanded. "Well, all I've got to say is \_\_\_"

"That you're stung! Eh, Stumpy, my lad?" cried Bart good naturedly, clapping his chum on the back. "Take your medicine like a man. You're stung good and proper. We thought your animals would be lonesome, so we added a few for luck. Pretty, aren't they?" and, at the sight of Fenn's bewildered face, Bart went off in a paroxysm of mirth, finally lying down on the ground outside the shack, and rolling over and over.

Frank and Ned joined him, and their howls brought Mrs. Masterson to the back door to see what was the matter. As soon as she saw the four chums she knew, without being told, that it was some joke.

"It wouldn't be them, if they weren't up to something," she observed, as she went on getting breakfast.

Fenn was not long proof against the infectious laughter of his chums. The frown faded from his face, and a smile replaced it. Soon, he too, was laughing heartily at the joke played on him.

"All I've got to say," he remarked, "is that you fellows went to a lot of work to get a laugh. You must have brought nearly all the school collection," for he recognized the professor's specimens.

"We did," admitted Bart, "but it was worth it all; eh, fellows?"

The boys paused to admire Fenn's "pets" as well as to take a more careful view of the reptiles they had "borrowed" from the school. Then Bart and his two chums put back into the bags the snakes, lizards, turtles, toads and alligators belonging to the professor, and hurried back with them to the school. They were lucky in escaping observation by the janitor, and soon the science-cabinet cages held their former tenants.

There was a football game that afternoon, in which the four chums took part, playing hard and well, their team winning the contest by a narrow margin. They took a short walk, Sunday, discussing the game, and talking rather vaguely of the possibility of going to a winter camp that year.

"I think it would be just the cheese, fellows," observed Bart.

"It would, and the crackers, too," conceded Ned. "But I don't see how we can manage it."

"Maybe we can," declared Frank indefinitely.

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When the four chums went to school the following Monday morning they were made aware that something unusual had taken place. It was not so much in what was said, as in an indefinable air of expectancy on the part of several members of the faculty. After the usual opening morning services, Principal McCloud advanced to the edge of the platform in the assembly hall, and remarked:

"Young gentlemen, I have something to say to you. After I have finished, Mr. Long, the science teacher, has a few words to add."

At once Bart cast apprehensive looks at his chums. Had the "borrowing" of the specimens been discovered? It looked so.

"Some time between Friday night and this morning," went on the principal, "this school was entered, and some objects were taken from the science cabinets."

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There was no doubt about it. The blow had fallen. Bart, Ned and Frank prepared to "take their medicine."

"It has been discovered," continued Mr. McCloud, "that several specimens of snakes, lizards, toads and alligators were surreptitiously removed from Professor Long's cabinet. This would not have been so serious, for, whoever took them, brought them all back again—that is all save one. I regret to report that one of the finest and largest specimens of mud turtles is missing. Now Professor Long has a word to say."

Mr. Long, who was a small man, with a bustling, nervous manner, came briskly to the edge of the platform.

"I can only confirm what Professor McCloud has said," he began. "While I regret exceedingly that any persons, least of all pupils of this school, whom I may say we suspect, could so far forget themselves as to run the risk of damaging my collection of reptiles, that is not the worst I have to speak about. The loss of the mud turtle is serious, for it was a rare kind, but there is something else missing. It is a valuable diamond bracelet, belonging to my wife. She gave it to me, as she was going away on a little trip, to take to the jewelers to have the setting of some of the stones tightened, and I placed it in the cabinet with the reptiles for safe keeping, until school should be closed, Friday. I forgot all about it until this morning, and when I went to look for it, I discovered that my collection had been disturbed."

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"It was easy to see," went on Mr. Long, "that some one had taken the reptiles out, and placed them back, for they were not in their proper cages. It was also easy to see that my wife's diamond bracelet was missing. It is valued at over a thousand dollars, and I presume was taken by accident, or, perhaps, for a joke. In either case I shall be glad to have it back."

"I might add that I have certain clues as to who were the midnight visitors to the school, for one of them dropped his knife, and it has his name on it."

Bart frantically felt in his pocket, and then, conscious that many eyes were on him, sat still, but a guilty flush suffused his face.

"If the bracelet is returned to me," went on Mr. Long, "all will be well. If not, I must take—" he hesitated a moment—"strenuous measures," he added. "I will await in the principal's office, any one who may wish to see me," he concluded significantly, after a pause.

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"You are dismissed to your classes," said Principal McCloud. "Any one who wishes to see Professor Long has permission to do so."

The boys arose, and filed from the assembly hall; the girls were on the floor below. Bart looked at Frank and Ned. Then Fenn whispered:

"Maybe the missing turtle is in with mine."

"Maybe," Bart whispered back. "But what of the diamond bracelet? We never took it!"

"The man—the stranger—who was in the school just before us?" replied Ned. "Fellows, I guess we'd better make a clean breast of it to Mr. Long!"

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## CHAPTER III

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### A FRUITLESS SEARCH

There was much buzzing and whispering among the pupils as they marched to their classrooms—whispering which the teachers and principal thought best to ignore under the circumstances, for the morning announcement had been an unusual one.

Bart, Fenn, Ned and Frank were in the same grade, and their first morning period was taken up with a Latin recitation. All four were doing some hard thinking as they got out their books in Mr. Kenton's room. Bart Keene was the first of the four chums to make up his mind. He felt a certain responsibility, since he had proposed the joke.



"Mr. Kenton," he asked, "may I be excused for a moment?"

"What for, Keene?" inquired the Latin instructor.

"I wish to—to speak to Professor Long."

There was an audible gasp of astonishment from Bart's classmates at this. Ned and Frank started to their feet, to utter a protest. They saw Bart's motive, but they were not going to let him bear the brunt of the punishment alone. There was a curious look on the face of Fenn. [25]

"You may go, Keene," went on the instructor.

"May I also?" exclaimed Frank, and again there was a buzz of excited whispers. The other lads knew what Bart's request meant.

"Silence!" called Mr. Kenton, sharply. "One at a time is enough," he added grimly. "We will proceed with the lesson. Ned Wilding, you may begin to translate."

Discipline held sway once more, and the boys settled back into their seats. Bart, conscious that the eyes of every lad in the room were on him, walked out. He found Professor Long in the chemical laboratory, preparing for some class work.

"Ah, Keene," remarked the science instructor, as he mixed some unpleasant-smelling liquids in a test tube. "Did you wish to see me?"

"Yes—yes, sir," stammered Bart. "You said—that is—I—er—I was the one who took the collection of reptiles," blurted out the uneasy lad. "But I didn't take the diamond bracelet! We didn't see anything of it! I hope you'll believe me! You don't know how unpleasant it is to be accused. At one time I—that is my chums and I—were accused of blowing up the school tower with dynamite, and—"

"Yes, I remember that happening," went on Mr. Long, gravely. "You were innocent on that occasion." [26]

"And we are innocent now!" burst out Bart. "We—that is I—took the turtles and the alligators, but we—that is I—never saw the bracelet. Are you sure it was in the cabinet, Mr. Long?"

"Very sure, Bart. But you might save yourself some embarrassment by telling me all the details. I'm glad to see you willing to bear all the blame, but, if you were alone in the escapade, how is it that I found Ned Wilding's knife, and this handkerchief with Frank Roscoe's name on it," and the instructor, with a smile, held up the articles he mentioned.

"I—I dropped Ned's knife," replied Bart. "I had borrowed it."

"And Frank's handkerchief?"

"I—I didn't have that," and Bart looked confused.

"I think I can guess how it was," said Mr. Long at length. "You were all four after my collection, and—"

"Not all four!" interrupted Bart. "Fenn wasn't there. You see we were playing a joke on him," the lad went on, in a burst of confidence, realizing that it was useless to try to shoulder all the blame. "Ned, Frank and I came in here Friday night and got the things. I knew I had lost Ned's knife, but I didn't think I'd dropped it here. But Fenn wasn't along. We took the things to his house, and put them in the pen with his reptiles. He is making a collection." [27]

"So I understand," remarked Mr. Long. "Therefor I have a proposal to make. It is barely possible that in gathering up the toads, alligators and turtles from my cabinet that you boys picked up the bracelet with them. You may have dropped it in the place where Fenn keeps his collection. Perhaps if you go there and look you will find it, and also the missing turtle, which I value highly. But, of course, the bracelet is more valuable, and as it was a birthday present to Mrs. Long she will feel the loss very much. Will you kindly go and look? I am sure Mr. McCloud will excuse you."

"I'll be glad to make a search!" exclaimed Bart, eagerly. "Perhaps if Ned and Frank—"

"Just what I was about to propose," interrupted the instructor. "I'll request the principal to let you four boys leave your classes this morning, to make a hunt for the missing bracelet—and the turtle. Don't forget that."

"I'm—I'm very sorry—sorry we disturbed your collection, Professor Long," stammered Bart, "but I know we never touched, or saw, the diamond bracelet." [28]

"I know you didn't mean to take the bracelet," went on Mr. Long, a bit stiffly. "Of course it was a foolish, and, at the same time, a risky trick to play, and, while I believe you had no intention of keeping the bracelet, I cannot but believe that in some way you removed it from the cabinet, either in catching up one of the reptiles hurriedly, or otherwise. I shall be glad to talk with Ned and Frank. But now I suggest that you go to Fenn's house and make a search."

"We never took or saw the bracelet, Professor!" declared Bart, with great earnestness. He felt, somehow, just as he did the time the unjust accusation of blowing up the school tower was made against him and his chums, as related in a former volume of this series.

"Well," remarked the teacher, "I can only say that you boys were the only ones in the school after the closing hours Friday. Some time between then and this morning, the reptiles were taken and returned—that is all but one large turtle—and the diamond bracelet belonging to my wife. There can be but one conclusion, and I——"

"We were not the only ones in the school between Friday night and this morning!" exclaimed Bart, and instantly his thoughts reverted to the stranger who had acted so mysteriously. [29]

"What do you mean?" asked the instructor, quickly.

"I mean—the janitor," replied Bart, with a sudden change in his tone. He had started to mention the man, but concluded not to. He had several reasons for this, as will develop presently.

"There is where you are mistaken," declared Professor Long. "The janitor, and two assistants whom he hired, cleaned out the school late Friday afternoon. I know, for I remained here to go over some of my class records. It was late when I left, and the janitor had finished before I was ready to go. I know this because Riggs asked me to be sure and close the front door and put the spring lock on when I came out. I was the last person to leave the school Friday night, and I locked the door. Riggs had gone. The reason why he did his cleaning work Friday night, and not Saturday, as is usual, was because he wanted to go away over Sunday. He did go, I understand, so you see you boys were the only ones in the school."

"And did you lock the front door after you?" asked Bart with a sudden suspicion in his mind, as he thought of the mysterious man.

"I did, certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Oh—nothing—only I thought—I—" Again Bart was about to speak of the midnight visitor to the school, and again he refrained. [30]

"By the way, how did you boys get in the school?" asked Professor Long, suddenly.

"I—er—we—that is——"

"Never mind," hastily interrupted the instructor, "I should not have asked that. I have no wish to pry further into this matter than is necessary. Believe me, I appreciate your motive in making a clean breast of it. I do not care to know all the details. Boys will be boys, I suppose. Only get me back the diamond bracelet and the turtle. I will see Mr. McCloud at once, and I'm sure he will let you make a search at Fenn's house."

Bart's opportunity had passed. If he only had mentioned the fact that he and his chums found the front door open, and had seen a mysterious man enter the school, things might have turned out differently, and much trouble have been averted. But now it was too late. Mr. Long hurried to the office of the principal, and returned shortly with permission for the four chums to go and make a search.

"But why didn't you tell him about the man we saw?" asked Ned, as they were on their way to Fenn's house.

"Because," answered Bart. [31]

"That's a regular girl's reason," objected Frank.

"Well," answered Bart desperately, somewhat weary and nervous over the ordeal through which he had gone, "the chief reason was that if I told that, I'd have to tell why we didn't notify the police. That's where we made a mistake. If that fellow was a thief, and took the bracelet, we should have called the police."

"We didn't know he was a thief—we don't know it yet," declared Frank.

"No, but when we saw a stranger sneaking into the school, we should have had gumption enough to notify the authorities," insisted Bart. "That's where we were slow. I didn't want to make it any worse. If we find the bracelet, all right; we won't have to tell how silly we were."

"And if we don't find it—which is very likely to be the case—what then?" asked Fenn.

"Well, we didn't take it, that's certain," decided Frank. "Neither by accident nor intentionally—did we take that bracelet."

"Then the man we saw, did," said Ned.

"Yes, and he's far enough off by now," observed Frank. "Fellows, I'll bet he was the thief!"

"How could he be?" asked Bart. "He didn't know the bracelet was in the cabinet. Besides, no ordinary person would think of looking among a lot of reptiles for anything valuable." [32]

"Well, if we don't find it I think we'd better tell about the man," was Fenn's opinion.

"It will be too late then," insisted Bart.

"Too late? Why?" Frank wanted to know.

"Because if we come back without the missing turtle and bracelet, and tell about having seen a mysterious man enter the school just before we did, on Friday night, every one will say we made

up the story to shield ourselves. No, the best way, if we can't find that diamond ornament, is to keep mum about the man."

"And let them accuse us?" cried Frank, indignantly.

"For a while—yes," replied Bart. "It won't be the first time, and probably not the last. But I don't mean by that for us to sit still under the accusation."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Fenn.

"I mean to find the missing bracelet, Stumpy!" was the emphatic answer. "That's what we've got to do! It's up to us! We didn't take it, but perhaps that man did. If so we've got to find him as well as the bracelet. Come on, now, not so much talking. Let's get busy, but, remember, if we don't find the bracelet now, we must keep mum about the man, if we don't want to be laughed at, as well as accused."

There was a momentary discussion, but Bart's chums agreed with him, as they usually did. They hastened on to Fenn's house, and at once began a frantic search about the yard and in the shack where the lad kept his reptiles. [33]

But there was no sign of the bracelet. Fenn lifted out every one of his turtles, toads and kindred specimens, and the place was gone over carefully. So was the route the boys had taken to and from the school. But it was a fruitless search.

"Fellows, let's look for the mud turtle, anyhow," suggested Ned. "Maybe we can find that for Professor Long, if we can't get the bracelet."

They looked in every likely and unlikely place for the missing turtle, but it had vanished as completely as had the bracelet. They were loath to give up the hunt, but concluded that there was nothing else to do. As they were about to return to the school much cast down and dispirited, to report no progress, Fenn exclaimed:

"Fellows, I have just thought of something."

"Out with it," ordered Bart.

"I believe the mud turtle has the bracelet!" exclaimed the stout youth.

"The mud turtle? Are you crazy?" demanded Ned.

"No, I'm not," answered Fenn, with a show of indignation. "Listen! The missing mud turtle was a large one, and a species that has a very long neck. Now it would be the easiest thing in the world for the turtle to get the diamond bracelet over his neck, and walk off with it. One of mine once got his neck in an iron ring, and I didn't know it for quite a while, as the folds of skin on the reptile's neck hid the iron. I'll wager that's what's happened in this case. We'll find that the turtle is wearing Mrs. Long's diamond bracelet on its neck!" [34]

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Bart.

"Well, there might be something in it," admitted Ned. "Let's have another look for that turtle, fellows."

"We'll look for the turtle all right," agreed Bart, "but as for expecting to find Mrs. Long's diamond bracelet on its neck—why you fellows are crazy to think of such a thing. You might as well expect to find hickory nuts growing on a peach tree. You're loony! Off your trolley! You've got bats in your belfry, as the poet says," and, when Frank and Ned thought it over, they were inclined to agree with their chum.

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## CHAPTER IV

### IN THE SHOOTING GALLERY

Fenn's suggestion gave a new impetus to the hunt, which was renewed with energy. Mrs. Masterson, who heard from the boys what had taken place, joined them in searching through the long grass of the back yard for the turtle. But it was not to be found.

"It's very likely a good distance from here," said Fenn, who was well versed in the habits of the reptiles. "They go slow, but they keep it up, and this one has had two days' start. We'll have to hunt farther off than this for him."

"Then that's what we'll do!" declared Frank. "We'll organize ourselves into a hunting party for a diamond-studded turtle," and he laughed.

"It's no laughing matter, though," declared Bart. "If we go back and tell that kind of a yarn we'll look ridiculous."

"Then why tell it?" inquired Ned. "Let's keep mum about that part of it, too. We'll simply report to Professor Long that we can't find his wife's bracelet, or the turtle, either, but every spare minute we get we'll be on the lookout for the reptile." [36]

"And the man, too," added Fenn. "We want to find out who he was."

"Of course," agreed Bart. "We should have given the alarm when we saw him going in the school, but it's too late now. Come on back, and take our medicine."

It was not a very happy quartette of lads who made their way back to the Darewell High School. They went directly to Professor Long, who turned his physics class over to another instructor, and conducted the chums to his private room.

"Well?" he asked suggestively.

"We couldn't find the bracelet or the turtle," said Bart.

"I was afraid not," was Mr. Long's quiet comment. "I have notified the detectives."

"You—you're not going to have us arrested—are you?" blurted out Frank. "My father——"

"Have no fears on that score," answered the professor. "I have not the slightest grounds for thinking you boys *stole* the bracelet," and, perhaps unconsciously, he emphasized the word.

"We never took the bracelet!" declared Ned stoutly.

"Of that I am not so sure," was the retort. "I do not accuse you—that would not be right. You have accused yourselves, after a fashion. What I think is this: I believe the bracelet was accidentally taken out of the cabinet in the confusion, and, perhaps, dropped on the way to Fenn's house. That is why I am sending for the police. Some person may have picked it up, and may be keeping it. I believe that is all now. You may return to your classes," and though he tried to speak calmly, there was a note of disappointment, not to say displeasure, in Mr. Long's voice. [37]

Naturally the story was all over the school by the noon recess, and Bart and his chums were besieged with questions. They had held a brief consultation, and resolved to make only certain statements. These were to the effect that though they had played the trick with the reptiles, they knew nothing of the bracelet, and their search for that and the turtle, had been without avail.

Needless to say, that few, if any, of the students had the least suspicion against the chums. Nor, for that matter, did any of the faculty entertain any unjust thoughts. It was regarded more as an accident. Mr. Long being the party who suffered, could, perhaps, be excused for thinking that perhaps the boys had taken the bracelet in a joke, and were now afraid to return it. In fact he hardly knew what to believe. In due time the police came to the school, made an investigation and questioned our heroes. They went away as wise as they came. But, as several days passed, and there was no trace of the bracelet, there was an undefined air of suspicion directed against the chums. It was not in so many words, but nevertheless they felt it. [38]

Two weeks passed, during which, in all of their spare time, Bart and his chums made a search for the turtle in such places as the reptiles were wont to be found. But, of course, they discovered none wearing a diamond bracelet on its neck, though they did find a few specimens which Fenn added to his collection. It was not the time of year when turtles abounded.

Several football games were played, and there seemed to be no ill spirit manifested against the four lads, until one Saturday about three weeks after the disappearance of the diamond ornament. Then, during a hotly-contested game with the Fernwood High School, one of the opposing players remarked to Bart, after a hard scrimmage:

"We're not used to playing against diamond robbers, and maybe that's why we can't break through your line."

Bart's answer was a blow that knocked the sneering lad down, and resulted in Bart being ruled out of the game. From then on the Darewell eleven seemed to go to pieces, and they lost the game. [39]

There were many sore hearts among the students that night, and accusing glances were cast at Bart. His chums felt his position deeply.

"I know it was a hasty thing to do," said Bart, contritely, "but I couldn't help it."

From then on there seemed to be a spirit manifested against the four chums, and, naturally, they resented it. The others would not desert Bart, and when he refused to apologize to the lad he had struck, and was permanently ruled off the eleven, Ned, Frank and Fenn resigned. They resisted the pleading of the manager to remain, so that the school eleven would not be crippled.

"It's the school's place to stick by us, as much as it is ours to stick by the eleven," declared Frank. "The fellows are beginning to think we took that bracelet. We'll show them that we didn't, and, in the meanwhile, it's better that we don't take part in any games."

His chums agreed with him, and for a time it seemed as if they would be sent to Coventry. But a calmer spirit prevailed, and when some of the school societies took up the matter it was agreed that the four had a right to do as they pleased, and that the lad who had made the offensive remark was in the wrong; and so matters quieted down. [40]

But the football season ended anything but brilliantly for Darewell, and the four chums felt this bitterly in their hearts, though they could do no differently than they had done.

"I should think you boys would hire a detective on your own account," said Alice Keene to her

brother, one November evening, when the four chums were at Bart's house. "You could get one easily, and perhaps he could locate the bracelet for you."

"We'll do it ourselves," remarked Bart firmly.

"If we could only find the turtle we'd have it, I'm sure," declared Fenn, who had not lost faith in his odd theory.

"We've looked in every likely place where turtles are around here," said Frank.

"Yes; and now we ought to go farther off," came from Ned. "I say fellows, what's the matter with going on a little hunting expedition soon? The weather is just right, we all have guns, and I think the trip would do us good."

"Why not make it a big hunting expedition while we're at it?" suggested Frank.

"A big one? What do you mean?" asked Bart.

"Why, I mean go camping, as we did not long ago. We don't mind the cold, or ice and snow. We could make a winter camp, around the Christmas holidays, and have lots of sport." [41]

"And a Christmas tree in the woods!" cried Alice. "That would be lovely! Jennie Smith and I would come out and see you—if it wasn't too far."

"Yes, Jennie'd recite poetry, and you'd insist on making us drink hot ginger tea, so as not to catch cold," observed Bart.

Alice looked a little hurt, until Ned added:

"Well, I'm sure ginger tea would be all right in a snow storm, such as we had the last time we camped in the winter."

"Of course," agreed Alice, gratefully.

"It would be a good thing to get away from school and the town of Darewell for a while, at least," was Bart's opinion. "People are beginning to think we really stole that bracelet."

"Oh, Bart!" remonstrated Alice, reproachfully.

"Well, it's the truth," he went on doggedly. "I'd as soon have 'em say it as look it. I'd like to get away for that reason, and, of course, it would be sport to have a winter camp again."

"Then let's do it," proposed Ned. "At the same time we can look for mud turtles."

"You won't see many, unless there's a thaw," was Fenn's opinion. "But you can count on me going."

"And me," added Frank and Ned.

"Hasn't anything been learned of the missing bracelet yet?" asked Mrs. Keene, coming into the room, in time to hear some of the conversation. [42]

"No," answered her son, "and it's my opinion that it never will be found, until—" He paused in some confusion.

"Until when?" asked his mother.

"Until we locate it," finished Bart. "Well, fellows, let's talk of a winter camp. Maybe we can manage it around the holidays. We don't get much of a vacation, but I guess we could afford to take an extra week."

"Is your gun in shape again, since you broke it?" asked Ned.

"Sure. I fixed that spring," replied Bart. "I'll show you. Come on up to my den. I'm not allowed to have firearms in the dining-room," and he led the way, his chums following. From then on, until the three left, the talk was a conglomeration of powder, shot, shells, guns, game and camp-life.

The weeks passed. Little mention was made of the bracelet now, but Mr. Long showed by his manner that he had not forgotten the loss of it. He was not exactly distrustful of the boys, but his bearing was, to say the least, a bit suspicious.

One evening, following an examination in school, Bart remarked to his chums, as they gathered at his house: [43]

"Come on down to the shooting gallery. They've got some new guns there, and I want to try them. It's good practice if we're going camping. Besides, I'm full of Latin verbs and Greek roots, and I want to clear my mind."

"You don't need any practice," remarked Ned. "You can beat us all to pieces shooting."

"I have to keep in practice, though," asserted Bart, who, to give him credit, was quite expert with the rifle.

A little later the four were in the gallery, trying their skill with the new rifles which the proprietor had purchased.

"Here's one that ought to suit you, Bart," remarked the man in charge, who was well known to the boys. "It's well balanced. Try that small target."

"No, I want something moving, Clayton," replied Bart. "Start off the birds and beasts."

These were small images of birds and squirrels that moved around on a sort of endless chain arrangement. Clayton, the man in charge of the gallery, set the machinery in motion, and the painted effigies began to go around. Bart raised the rifle—a repeater—to his shoulder, took quick aim, and fired. A bird was knocked over, then a squirrel went down, and, in rapid succession he repeated this until he had fifteen hits to his credit, out of a possible sixteen. [44]

"Fine!" cried Ned, enviously.

"I should have had 'em all," announced Bart with a shake of his head. "Here, some of you fellows try."

They did, but could not do nearly as good as had Bart. Then Bart contented himself with making bullseyes at a stationary target, though Frank and Ned made another effort to equal Bart's record with the moving objects. Frank came the nearest with ten.

"Now I'll try for sixteen out of sixteen," announced Bart, as Clayton reloaded the weapon for him.

By this time a crowd had gathered in the gallery, which, being a new amusement resort in town, was quite an attraction. Bart paid no attention to the spectators grouped back of him, but, with the coolness a veteran shot might envy, he began.

Report after report rang out, and at each burst of flame and puff of smoke a bird or a squirrel toppled over, until fifteen straight had gone down.

"That's the stuff!" cried one man, enthusiastically, as Bart was about to make his last shot.

"Hush!" cautioned Clayton, but Bart did not mind. He fired his last bullet, and knocked over his sixteenth target, only he did not hit it as squarely as he had the others. [45]

"That's very good shooting, my lad," remarked a man who had stood near Bart's elbow. "Very good indeed. Would you like to try your skill with me; on a little wager?"

"I never bet," answered Bart, coolly, as he tried to get a glimpse of the man's face. But the latter wore a slouch hat, which was pulled well down over his eyes, shading his features.

"Oh, I don't mean a bet," was the quick answer. "I only meant that the loser would pay the bill for cartridges," and he laughed, not unpleasantly. As Bart had often done this with his chums, and other lads in town, he had no objection to it, and the arrangement was made.

"What shall it be, sixteen straight?" asked the stranger, as he carefully selected a gun.

"Double it if you like," replied Bart, who was just warming up to his work.

"Ah, you're game, I see," was the laughing comment. "Well, I'm willing. Will you go first?"

"I'll shoot sixteen shots, then you can do the same, then I'll take sixteen more, and you can finish," answered Bart, and this arrangement was made.

By this time word had gotten around that some remarkable shooting was going on in the gallery, and it was packed almost to the doors. Bart and the stranger had difficulty in getting room to aim properly. [46]

Bart started off, and in rapid succession made sixteen straight targets of the moving objects. There was a cheer, and it was repeated when his rival duplicated the lad's performance. Bart was not exactly annoyed, but he felt that his reputation was at stake. He was easily accounted the best shot in Darewell, but now it seemed likely that he would have to share the honors with this stranger. Bart felt himself wishing that the man would show his face, but the soft hat remained pulled down well over the fellow's eyes.

Bart began on his second round, and all went well until the last shot. Then, in some unaccountable manner, he missed it clean. Still, his performance was a fine one.

The stranger said nothing as he took his place. Slowly and confidently he pulled the trigger, and worked the lever that ejected the discharged shell, and pumped a new bullet into place. For fourteen shots he never made a miss. Then, on the fifteenth of the second round he made a blank by a narrow margin. A start of annoyance betrayed itself. At best he could but tie Bart. Once more the gun sent out flame and smoke. [47]

"Missed!" called out Clayton, quickly, as he looked at the target.

Bart had won. The stranger paused a moment, as if to make sure that he had lost, and then, throwing down on the counter the price for his shots and Bart's, he turned to leave the place. Several stared at him, for it seemed as if he should have said something, or congratulated his rival, but he did not. He pushed his way through the press of men and boys, and reached the outer door.

Then, by some accident, a man brushed against him, and the stranger's hat came off. Bart, who

was looking at him, could not repress an exclamation of astonishment.

"What's the matter?" asked Clayton.

"Nothing—nothing," murmured Bart, quickly.

"Come on, show us some fancy shooting," urged Sandy Merton, who at one time had been an enemy of the chums, but who was now on friendly terms with them.

"No—I can't—now," answered Bart, a bit shortly. "Come on, fellows," he called to Ned, Frank and Fenn. They followed him, wondering at his haste. Bart was making his way rapidly to the door. Once outside he gazed up and down the street. It was deserted, and lay cold and silent under the moon.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Bart, in disappointed tones.

"Who?" inquired Ned.

"That man—the man I shot against."

"Well, what difference does that make? Did you want another contest? You beat him."

"I know it," spoke Bart quietly. "But do you know who he was?"

"No," answered Frank and Fenn together.

"He was the man we saw getting into the school the night Mrs. Long's diamond bracelet was taken!" answered Bart. "That's the man who can prove that we are innocent—that's the thief! Come on, let's see if we can catch him!" and Bart started off on a run.

[48]

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## CHAPTER V

[49]

### AN INITIATION

Hardly appreciating Bart's explanation, his chums set off after him. Down the moonlit street they sped, their footsteps ringing out on the frosty night. But though they could not have been far behind the man who had engaged in the shooting contest with Bart, they caught no glimpse of him.

"I guess it's no use," remarked the leader, pulling up as he peered down a deserted alley. "He's given us the slip."

"Do you really think it was the same man?" asked Fenn.

"Sure. Didn't I have a good look at his face?"

"Yes, I know you did this time, but we didn't have at the school the night we were hiding in the shadow. Are you sure it's the same man?"

"Of course. I had a good look at him just as he was entering the front door of the school. The moon was as bright as it is to-night, and he had his hat pushed back. Oh, it's the same fellow all right. Besides, didn't he run when he found out his face had been seen? I thought there was something suspicious about him when I was shooting against him, but I couldn't tell what it was. However, he realized that we were after him."

[50]

"I don't see how that can be," spoke Frank. "He doesn't know we're the fellows who are accused of taking the bracelet, for he is a stranger in town. And, anyway, he doesn't know that we saw him entering the school—that is providing it's the same man, Bart."

"Oh, it's the same man all right, and I wouldn't be surprised but that he was suspicious of us. Else why did he hurry away so quickly? I wish we could have caught him."

"Maybe we'd better notify the police," suggested Ned.

"No," declared Bart. "We've gotten along so far without their help, and we'll work this out alone. Besides, the minute we notify the police we'll have to explain why we didn't tell about the man before, and that won't do. No, we'll keep mum. Let's look a little farther."

They continued on down the main street, with short excursions into alleys and side thoroughfares, but all to no purpose. No trace of the man was to be seen, and they returned home tired from their run, and somewhat discouraged.

The chums said nothing to their folks of their experience at the gallery, though Bart's fame as a shot spread among his school companions, and there was some speculation as to who the stranger might have been.

[51]

"Whoever he was, he's almost as good a shot as you are, Bart," remarked Sandy Merton. "You ought to arrange for a return match with him."

"Perhaps I would—if I could find him," agreed Bart.

"That's so he did go out rather suddenly," went on Sandy. "Do you know who he was?"

"No, I wish I did," murmured Bart, and then he changed the subject, fearing Sandy might ask leading questions.

The police had practically given up looking for the diamond bracelet, and Professor Long made no further references to it, though it was easy to see by his manner that he had not forgotten it. An undefinable air of suspicion hung over the four chums, though Fenn, from the fact that he had not entered the school, was, more or less, exempt. But he would not have it so.

"No," Stumpy said, "if one of us is guilty we all are—only, as a matter of fact, none of us is. We'll find that bracelet yet, and the missing turtle, too. If not this fall or winter, we will this spring. I know a new swamp where lots of turtles are, and we'll have a try at that some day," he told his chums.

[52]

Meanwhile matters at school continued to fill most of the time of the chums. The Darewell institution was a large one, and, of late, a number of secret societies had been formed among the junior and senior students. Sandy Merton was president of one of the junior organizations, known as the "Shamma Shig," in comic reference to some of the college Greek letter fraternities.

"Why don't you fellows join our society?" Sandy asked Bart and his chums, one day.

"I'm afraid we'd be balloted against, and it would spoil our good records," answered Fenn.

"Get out!" exclaimed Sandy, good-naturedly. "Come on, let me propose your names. We want a bigger membership, and I can guarantee that you'll get through all right."

"What about the initiation?" asked Frank. "Some we've been through have been pretty stiff."

"Well, we don't claim to have the easiest rites in the school, but they're not so fierce," replied the president proudly. "I can tip the fellows off, and we can make an exception in your cases, if you like, only——"

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Bart, quickly. "We'll take all that's coming to us—that is if we join. We'll think about it."

[53]

The chums talked matters over among themselves that night, and came to the conclusion that it would be a good plan to join the "Shamma Shigs."

"All right, then, we'll do it," concluded Bart. "I'll let Sandy know, and he can get the goat ready for us to ride."

The initiation took place three days later, in the afternoon, and was held before a "crowded house" in the barn owned by Sandy's uncle.

"Here are four worthy and gentle knights, who seek admission to our ranks," announced Sandy, who was disguised with a sheet, all splashed over with red paint, to represent blood. He had a hickory nut in his mouth, to make his voice sound deep and hoarse, and was supported on either side by one lad in a purple sheet, and another one in yellow, the trio forming the "Mystic Three."

Bart, Fenn and the others were put through some strenuous exercises, including the riding of a "goat" which was a saw-horse, with knots and bumps of wood nailed here and there on it, to represent bones. They were dipped into the rain-water barrel by means of a rope and pulley, and they were cast from "the terrible height into the awful chasm," which ordeal consisted merely in being pushed down a space of about three feet, upon some hay, but being blindfolded was supposed to make up for the difference.

[54]

Then they had to climb a steep "mountain" which was an old horse tread-mill, geared up unusually high, and finally had to "drink the terrible cup," which was supposed to be some horrible mixture, but which was really only molasses, ginger and water.

"Now for the final test," proposed Sandy, to the four. "Are ye ready for the last act, or are ye timid and do ye shrink back from the terrible danger that confronts ye? If so, speak, an' ye shall be allowed to depart in peace. But, if ye would brave the awful dangers and gloom of the bottomless pit, say the word, an' then shall ye be true knights of the Shamma Shigs."

"Go ahead, we're ready," replied Bart, irreverently.

"Let her flicker," added Ned.

"'Tis well—blindfold them," ordered Sandy, giving his red-spotted robe a shake.

"What, again?" asked Frank.

Sandy did not answer, but thick bandages were put over the eyes of the candidates. Then from sounds that took place in the barn they knew that a horse was being hitched up.

"We're going to have a ride," observed Fenn.

[55]

"Quiet, Stumpy," cautioned Bart, in a whisper. "Keep still, and let's see if we can catch on to what they're doing."

A little later their hands and feet were bound, and the candidates were put into a large wagon, and the drive began. It lasted for some time, and, try as they did, Bart and his chums could not



imagine in which direction they were being taken. But, as they were familiar with the country for several miles in any point of the compass from Darewell, they were not worried.

"Halt!" Sandy finally ordered, and the creaking, jolting wagon came to a stop.

"Ye have one more chance, candidates," went on the president, as he touched the foreheads of the four with something cold and clammy—a hand, from the feel of it, but it was only a rubber glove, filled with cracked ice. "One more chance ere ye dare the dangers of the bottomless pit," went on Sandy. "Wilt withdraw?"

"Naw, let her go," replied Fenn nonchalantly.

"'Tis well. The bottomless pit awaits ye," threatened Sandy, and then, one at a time, the four were carefully lowered over the side of the wagon, down into some depths, as they supposed, but in reality only a short distance, so strangely are distances rendered when one is blindfolded. [56]

"Ye are now in the pit, whence there is no escape," went on Sandy, "but, if ye are true knights, and no craven cowards ye will come to no harm. In one hour's time we shall release ye. Bide here until we return."

His voice sounded faint and far away, but it was only because he was speaking into a pasteboard box he had brought along for that purpose. Then the sound of the wagon departing was heard, and the four chums were left, sitting they knew not where, with their hands and feet tied, and their eyes bandaged.

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## CHAPTER VI

### AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

"Well," remarked Fenn, after a somewhat long pause, "I don't know how you fellows feel about it, but I think they've rather put it all over us; eh Bart?"

"Somewhat," admitted the leader of the Darewell Chums. "But it isn't so bad as I expected. I wonder where we are, anyhow?"

"Might be ten miles away," observed Frank.

"I'll wager we're not more than half a mile from home," came from Ned. "They drove roundabout to fool us."

"That's what I think," remarked Bart. "Anyhow we've got to stay here an hour, and I don't much fancy it, either. But since we've gone this far we might as well go the whole distance, I suppose. It's a good thing it's comparatively warm, or it wouldn't be any fun staying here. Where are we, anyhow?"

"I'm going to find out!" declared Fenn suddenly.

"How, Stumpy?" asked Frank.

"I've almost got one hand loose. I'll soon have it out, and then I'm going to take off this bandage. There's no use of us staying here like a lot of chickens tied up, when we can just as well get away." [57]

"That's the trouble—we can't get away," came from Frank. "I've been trying for the last ten minutes to loosen these cords, but I can't slip a single knot. They knew how to tie 'em all right."

"You just watch me," called Fenn, who was squirming about on a bed of leaves.

"Watch you—yes, with our eyes bandaged," said Ned, sarcastically. "That's a hot one."

"Patience, noble knight," mocked the stout lad, "and I'll soon release ye."

"Stumpy is so fat that they didn't have rope enough to tie him," remarked Bart. "That's the reason he thinks he can get loose."

"I don't think it, I know it!" cried Fenn in triumph a few seconds afterward. "I've got both hands out, and now here comes off my bandage."

A moment later Fenn uttered a cry.

"What's the matter?" asked Bart, making an unsuccessful attempt to get rid of the ropes binding his arms and legs.

"Why we're in Oak Swamp, or, right on the edge of it," replied Fenn. "They brought us farther than I thought they did. But we'll fool 'em all right. We'll get loose, skip out, and when they come back they won't find us. Wait until I get these ropes off my legs, and I'll help you fellows." [58]

Fenn was as good as his word. A few seconds later he was free from his bonds, and, in turn, he released Bart, Frank and Ned. They all looked around in some surprise, for they had no idea that they had been brought so far from home. The wagon had traveled faster than they had suspected. [59]

"Oak Swamp," mused Bart. "It's a good thing it's coming on winter instead of summer, or we'd be eaten up with mosquitoes. Well, let's get out of here. I don't like the place."

Indeed it was gloomy and dismal enough at any time, but now, on a late fall evening, with darkness fast approaching, it was anything but an inviting place. The swamp derived its name from a number of scrub oak trees that grew in it. During the summer it was a treacherous place to visit, for there were deep muck holes scattered through it, and more than one cow, and several horses, had broken out of the pastures, and wandered into the wet place, only to sink down to their deaths. It was said that several years before a man had endeavored to cross the swamp, had been caught in a bog hole, and sucked down into its depths, his body never having been recovered.

So it was with a feeling of no little satisfaction that Bart and his chums found themselves able to leave the gloomy place sooner than they had expected. [60]

"It'll be a good joke on the others," remarked Ned, as he gathered into a heap, the rope fetters that had bound him. "We'll sneak away, and when those fellows come back for us they'll think we've rolled into the swamp, and sunk, and they may make a search for us. Let's hide the cords and bandages."

"Sure," agreed Frank. "We'll turn the tables on them."

"Well, whatever we do, let's get away from here," suggested Fenn. "It's too gloomy for my notion. Look, there's the ledge they lowered us from. It isn't two feet high, but it seemed like a hundred," and he pointed to a small ledge of rock, where Sandy Merton and his mates had stood as they lowered from the wagon the lads who were being initiated. Had it not been that Sandy stood on the end of the vehicle, he would not have been high enough to bring about the delusion of the boys going down into some bottomless pit.

The four chums had gathered up the severed ropes, and, folding the bandages up in them, hid them all under a big stone. Then they started for home.

Oak Swamp was several miles from the town of Darewell, but there was a fairly good road between the places, since the swamp was but slightly off to one side of the main thoroughfare. As the four started off, with Fenn in the lead, they chuckled to think of the blank looks of the initiating team, when the members should return for the candidates, to find them missing. [61]

"I almost wish we could stay, and hide, and hear what they'll say," observed Ned, laughing at the prospect.

"I don't. I want to get home," came from Frank. "Ugh! This is a gloomy place after dark."

Suddenly Fenn, who was some distance in the lead, jumped to one side.

"What's the matter; see a snake?" called Bart.

"A snake, this time of year? Not much, but it's a whopping big mud turtle," cried the fleshy lad. "I'm going to catch it, fellows. Maybe it's the one that got away from Professor Long's collection. That's the only way I can account for a turtle being out of doors at this season of the year."

"And while you're at it look and see if it hasn't got a diamond bracelet on its neck, and a wedding ring on its toes, Stumpy," advised Bart, mockingly. "If it has, it'll be all to the mustard, and we'll be cleared of suspicion. Look and see if it has its teeth filled with gold, while you're about it, but, above all, don't forget the diamond bracelet." [62]

"Aw, let up, can't you?" begged Stumpy. "What's the use of poking fun at a fellow all the while, just because I made one break. Besides a turtle *might* get its neck through the bracelet."

"Oh rats!" was Bart's reply. "But catch the turtle, if you're going to."

Fenn made a grab for the slow moving reptile, and caught it. He examined it carefully in the fast-fading light.

"Well, pick off the diamond bracelet; why don't you?" asked Bart, chuckling at his joke.

"Dry up!" advised Fenn, still looking at the turtle.

"Chuck it away, and come on," suggested Ned.

"Chuck it away? I will not!" retorted Fenn indignantly. "This is a rare kind of turtle, it must have been dug up out of its winter hole by some one. I'm going to keep it for my collection."

"What? Haven't you given that up by this time?" asked Bart. "I supposed that you'd be gathering specimens of snowflakes, or samples of dog biscuit by this time," for he knew Fenn's failing, and a month, at most, was the period devoted to any new fad. But this time Fenn seemed more in earnest.

"No, I'm going to keep this," went on the amateur collector. "It's a good one. I shouldn't be surprised but what Professor Long would be glad to get it for his collection," and Fenn gazed admiringly at the turtle. [63]

"Here's another," announced Frank suddenly. "And there is a third one," and he pointed to two more of the reptiles crawling sluggishly along.

Fenn ran over and examined them, but he took care not to lose his first specimen.

"They're a common variety," he declared. "I don't want 'em for my collection, and Professor Long has several like them."

"And neither one wears a diamond bracelet—how sad," chimed in Bart, laughingly.

"That's all right—make fun if you want to," said Fenn, a bit sharply, "but it's no joke to be under the disgrace of the implied accusation that we stole the bracelet."

"I know it," agreed Bart soberly, "but looking for mud turtles that might possibly have it on their necks isn't going to help matters any. We might much better look for the man who was in the school just before we were. If any one took it, he did—not some turtle."

"Oh, it's possible that a turtle did poke its head and neck through the bracelet when it was in the cabinet," said Ned, "but, of course, it's out of the question to think that we can find that turtle, or, for that matter, that the bracelet would remain on the turtle's neck." [64]

"Guess you're right," admitted Stumpy. "Well, I've got a good turtle for my collection, anyhow."

"Isn't it funny so many of 'em are out to-day?" asked Ned, as the four walked on, Fenn carefully carrying his prize. "It's so near winter I should think they'd be going to sleep, like a bear, in a hollow log, if they do sleep in logs."

"Oh, they curl up and go to sleep in some warm place for the winter," declared Fenn, who considered himself a sort of authority on the reptiles. "But the reason so many are out to-day is because it has suddenly turned warmer. They'll soon be going into permanent winter quarters though. But come on, it's getting dark. Let's get a move on."

"I shouldn't wonder but what we'd have snow," observed Bart, casting a look at the clouds. "It's about time."

"I wish it would," said Ned, "or else that we'd have skating. But what about going camping, Bart? Have you thought any more about it?"

"Yes, and I think I can arrange so we can go. I feel just like going off in the woods with our guns."

"To hunt mud turtles with diamond bracelets," put in Frank, with a laugh. [65]

"Yes, mud turtles or anything else that comes our way," went on Bart. "Yes, I think we'll have a winter camp this season, and if we do—" He stopped suddenly, and appeared to be looking at some object just ahead in the woods, for the boys were now out of the swamp proper. Bart's chums followed his gaze.

"There's a man," observed Fenn, in a low voice.

"Yes, and he seems to be looking for something," remarked Bart, guardedly. "He's poking away the leaves with a stick. Look at him."

The man was, as yet, not aware of the presence of the boys. He was walking slowly along, with his head bent over, as if eagerly scanning the ground. Now and then he poked away the dead leaves with his stick. A moment later, as the four chums could see in the little light that lingered after an early sunset, the man stooped over, and picked up something.

"A turtle! He's looking for mud turtles!" gasped Fenn, for it could be seen that the man had picked up one of the reptiles that seemed to be unusually numerous that day. Unconsciously Fenn had spoken louder than he intended, and the man heard him. He turned quickly, gave one startled look at the boys, appearing ill at ease at the unexpected meeting, and then, wheeling around, he made off through the woods, soon being lost to sight amid the trees. [66]

"He took the turtle with him!" exclaimed Fenn. "He must be collecting them, too!"

"Yes, and did you notice who he was?" asked Bart, who appeared to be laboring under some excitement.

"No. Who?" gasped Ned.

"The mysterious stranger who entered the school just before we did—the man who shot against me at the gallery! Fellows, it's the same man—we must catch him!" and, as he had done that night in the shooting gallery, Bart darted after the stranger, followed by his chums, Fenn still carrying the turtle.

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## CHAPTER VII

### GETTING READY FOR CAMP

"Come on, fellows!" exclaimed Bart, as he stumbled on ahead. "We mustn't lose sight of him again! There's some mystery about that man. I believe he stole the diamond bracelet." [67]

Slipping, and almost tripping over sticks, fallen trees, stumps and stones, the chums hurried on. But the man had a number of advantages. He had a start of several hundred feet, darkness was coming on, and he evidently knew the paths through the woods better than did the boys, for when they caught occasional glimpses of him he appeared to be running at full speed, whereas they had to go slowly, and pick their way.

At last they could see him no more, and, as it seemed to grow rapidly darker, the boys were forced to give up the chase.

"Well, wouldn't that get on your nerves?" Bart demanded of his chums, as they stopped for breath. "That's the third time we've seen that man, and the second time he's gotten away."

"The next time he sees us he'll know enough to run without waiting to take a second look at us," observed Frank, grimly. [68]

There was little use lingering longer in the woods, the chums decided, so, after a last look about, hoping for a sight of the mysterious stranger, they once more started for home. It was quite dark as they got out on the main highway, and to their great delight they saw approaching Jed Sneed, a teamster whom they knew. He readily consented to give them a ride back to town.

As they were nearing the centre of Darewell Ned exclaimed:

"By jove, I believe it's snowing! I felt a flake on my face."

"You're right," added Bart, a moment later. "It *is* snowing," and a little flurry of white flakes confirmed his words.

"Yes, and I don't like to see it," remarked Jed, the teamster, as he cracked his whip, to hasten the pace of his horses.

"Why not?" asked Frank.

"Because it's a sign we're going to have a long, hard winter," went on the man, who was rather an odd character, and a great believer in signs of various kinds. "It's a sure sign of a hard winter when it snows just before the new moon," Jed went on. "It'll be new moon to-night, and we're going to have quite a storm. Besides it's down in my almanack that we're going to have a bad spell of weather about now. I shouldn't wonder but what we'd have quite a fall before morning," and certainly it seemed so, for the flurry was increasing. [69]

"Sandy and those fellows will have lots of fun hunting for us," remarked Ned with a chuckle. "They'll think we've been snowed under."

"I see Sandy Merton, and two or three lads in a wagon, just before I met you chaps," observed Jed. "They asked me if I'd met you, but I hadn't—up to then. What's up? Been playing jokes on each other?"

"They tried one on us, but I think it's on them," said Bart. "Well, here's where I get off, fellows. Come over to-night, and we'll have a talk," and Bart was about to descend from the wagon, as his street was reached first.

"Hold on! Wait a minute! Don't get down on that side!" cried Jed, earnestly.

"What's the matter; is the step on this side broken?" asked Bart, in some alarm, as he hastily checked himself.

"No, but you started to get down with your left foot first," explained the teamster. "That's sure to bring the worst kind of bad luck on a fellow. My team might run away before I get two blocks further. It's a bad sign to get out with your left foot first. Don't do it." [70]

"Oh, Jed, you're a regular old woman!" exclaimed Bart good-naturedly, for he and his chums were on familiar terms with the teamster. Nevertheless the lad did as requested, and changed his position, so as to leave the wagon in accordance with the superstitious notions of Jed.

"That's better," remarked the man, with an air of relief, as Bart descended. "Yes," he added, as he drove on, "we're going to have quite a storm."

He was right, for that night the ground was covered with the white flakes, but the thermometer did not get down very low.

After supper Bart's three chums called on him, and, a little later they received an unexpected visit from Sandy Merton and some of his friends. The latter were much worried when they had gone back to Oak Swamp, and had failed to find a sign of the candidates whom they had initiated into the "Shamma Shig" society.

"Say, that's a nice trick to play on a fellow," declared Sandy, indignantly, when he found that Bart and his friends were safe and snug at home. "We've been hunting all around that swamp in the dark for you, and we're all wet and muddy. Why didn't you stay there?" [71]

"Didn't think it was healthy," observed Bart, with a chuckle. "You told us you wouldn't be back for an hour, so we concluded to leave. You should tie your ropes better, Sandy."

"We weren't going to leave you there an hour," went on the president of the secret society. "That was only a joke on you."

"Well, our coming away was only a joke on you," declared Ned with a grin. "Are we full-fledged members now, Sandy?"

"I suppose so," was the somewhat ungracious answer. Then as Sandy's chums declared that the manner in which they had been outwitted by the four chums was perfectly fair, it was agreed to call the incident closed, and consider the initiation finished.

"You're now regular members," declared Sandy, "and you can come to the meeting to-night, if you want to."

The chums went to a "hall" that had been fitted up over the barn of Sandy's uncle. It had all the features of a regular secret society meeting room, with inner and outer sentinels, a hole cut in the door, through which doubtful visitors could be scrutinized; and once inside a more or less blood-curdling ritual was gone through with. But the boys enjoyed it, and, his good nature restored by presiding at the function, Sandy told how he and his friends had been much alarmed at finding Bart and his companions missing, and how they had searched in vain for them. [72]

A thaw, a few days after the storm, removed most of the snow, but it remained long enough for some coasting, in which our heroes took part. Meanwhile they had made some guarded inquiries regarding the mysterious man, but had learned nothing. No one else seemed to have observed him, or, if they had, they thought nothing of it.

Nor was any trace found of the missing diamond bracelet. The police had practically given up work on the case, but the boys had not. They felt the stigma that still attached to them, and they resolved, if it was at all possible, to remove it. The parents of the lads were somewhat indignant that there should be even a suspicion against them, but there seemed to be no help for it, and Mr. Long, thinking to better matters, offered a reward for the return of the property. But he had no answers.

"Well, Bart, what about camp?" asked Ned, one cold morning in December, when an overcast sky gave promise of more snow.

"I was just thinking it was time we got down to business about it," was the reply. "I'm ready to go, if you fellows are. I've spoken to my folks, and they're willing I should take two weeks out of school, besides the regular Christmas holidays. There's not much doing the week before that vacation, and not much the one after. That will give us nearly a month—the last half of December and the first half of January." [73]

"Good idea," commented Frank. "I'm sure I can go. Dad is going west to visit some relatives, and, as I don't care about making the trip, I'm sure he'll let me go to a winter camp."

"I haven't asked yet, but I'm sure I can go," said Fenn, and Ned was also hopeful.

"Well, suppose we go down to my house after school, and look over our camping stuff," suggested Bart, for the tents, stoves and other paraphernalia was kept in his barn. The boys had gone camping several times before, both winter and summer, and had a very complete outfit, as is known to those who have perused the other volumes of this series.

Bart's idea met with favor and, when lessons for the day were over, the four chums were overhauling cots, inspecting the big tent and seeing if the portable stove was in good condition. It was a dark, lowering afternoon, and, since morning, the promise of more snow had been added to by several flurries of the white flakes. [74]

"Well, everything seems to be in good shape," observed Bart at length. "We've got about two more weeks of school, and then we'll cut it, and hike for the woods. We must look up a good place, and you and Stumpy had better find out for sure if you can go, Ned."

"We will," they promised.

"All right, then come on out, and let's try a few shots," went on Bart. "I've got some new cartridges, with smokeless powder, and I want to see how they work."

A little later the four chums were ready to take turns with two rifles Bart owned. The target was set up in the deserted orchard, and the fun began.

Bart was easily the best shot of the four, and this was so soon demonstrated that he consented to take his aim in difficult positions, such as firing with his back to the target, using a mirror to sight with. He did other "stunts" which, I have no doubt, some of my readers have seen done in "Wild West" shows, or on the stage.

"There's no use talking, Bart," observed Ned, "you can put it all over us when it comes to handling a rifle."

"Well, I've had more practice," said Bart modestly. "You fellows will do as good when you've had more experience." [75]

"I'm afraid not," spoke Fenn, with a sigh. "Here, see if I can hit that tin can on the fence post."

He raised the weapon, sighted it carefully, and pulled the trigger. There was no smoke, for the powder was of the self-consuming type, but a bright sliver of flame shot from the muzzle of the gun, plainly visible in the fast-gathering darkness. The can was not touched, but, an instant after Fenn fired, some one beyond the fence set up a great shouting.

"Great Caesar, Stumpy, you've shot some one!" gasped Bart.

Poor Fenn turned a sickly color, and the rifle fell from his nerveless hands. The shouts continued, and there was a commotion in the bushes.

A little later Alice Keene, with her hands full of bandages, and carrying a small medicine chest, rushed from the house and past the group of terror-stricken lads toward the fence, whence the yells continued to come.

"Oh!" cried the girl. "I was afraid some one would get hurt when you boys used those horrid guns! You had better telephone for a doctor, Bart, while I go see if I can stop the bleeding! Who is hurt?"

"We—we don't know," faltered Fenn. "I was shooting at a can, but I missed it. I didn't know anybody was in the bushes." [76]

Bart hurried into the house to telephone for a physician, while Alice in the rôle of a red-cross nurse, hurried on toward the fence. The shouts were growing fainter now. The boys, with white faces, followed her.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### AN ODD LETTER

"Suppose he is dead?" faltered Fenn, as he stumbled along. "Will—will I be arrested."

"Don't worry until you see who it is, and how badly he is hurt," advised Frank. They were soon at the fence. Ned and Frank parted the bushes that grew higher than the topmost rail, and plunged on through. Fenn followed, but Alice was going farther up, where she knew there was a gate.

The sight that met the eyes of the boys was most reassuring. Standing up on his big wagon was Jed Sneed, calmly pitching off cord wood into a pile. The fuel was evidently for Bart's house.

"Were you—are you—that is—you aren't dead; are you?" gasped Fenn. "Is—is anybody?"

"Not that I know of," answered Jed, as he straightened up. "But I come pretty nigh bein'. As nigh as I want to. I just heard a bullet sing over my head, as I was stooping down to get hold of a stick. Who was shooting, anyhow?"

"I—I was," faltered Stumpy. "I missed the tin can I aimed at. Did I come very close to you?" [78]

"I didn't take time to measure the distance," announced Jed dryly, "but it was close enough."

"We heard you yell," said Frank, "and we thought some one was killed. We didn't know it was you."

"I was hollering at the horses, partly," explained the man. "The pesky critters won't stand still when they hear shootin'. So it was you fellows; eh? Well, I ought to have knowed better than to come out with this load of wood to-day. Jest as I was startin' a black cat run right across the road in front of the horses, and that's one of the very worst kind of bad signs. I should have turned back, but Mr. Keene wanted this wood to-day, so I kept on. Then, as if one warnin' wasn't enough, I had another. Jest as I was turnin' in this back way, thinkin' it would be a little shorter, three crows flew over my head, goin' South. They must have stayed up pretty late, but there's no worse sign than three crows, unless it's to meet a snake with his tail toward you. But, as Mr. Keene wanted the wood, I come on, and look what was the result—I was nearly killed."

"Oh, I guess the bullet didn't come so near you as you thought," suggested Ned, partly for Fenn's benefit. "Fenn usually fires high, and he missed the can clean. Then, you're down in a sort of hollow here, and I guess it was well over your head." [79]

"I hope so," remarked Jed. "A miss is as good as a mile, I guess. Still, it was partly my own fault, for not payin' attention to them signs. You can make up your minds I won't tempt fate that way again. I'll turn back next time when a black cat crosses in front of me. And then, too, I ought to have give you chaps warnin'. I heard you shootin' as I drove up, and then, when it stopped, I s'posed you was done. Then when that one shot came, and whizzed over my head, I thought it was all up with me. I hollered some, to let you know I was here, and to quiet the team. Then I went on tossin' off the wood."

Fenn breathed easier. Some color was beginning to come back into his cheeks. A moment later Alice came hurrying along, having found the gate.

"Is he badly hurt?" she asked. "Have they got him in the wagon? Perhaps you'd better drive right to the hospital Mr. Sneed," for she knew the teamster, who did odd jobs around town.

"Wa'al, I don't mind drivin' to the hospital for ye," announced Jed with a grin, "but there ain't no need for it."

"Don't tell me he's—" but Alice paused, not willing to utter the fatal word. Several rolls of bandages fell from her hands.

"Oh, I'm all right," went on Jed. "I'll live to be an old man if I wait to be shot, I guess. Whoa, there, ponies," this last to his team.

"Then isn't any one hurt?" asked Alice, and though she was undoubtedly glad of it, there was a distinct note of disappointment in her voice.

"No one," explained Ned, as he told how it had happened. Jed took part of the blame, for not announcing his presence, but, nevertheless, Fenn was a bit shaky for some time after the incident, and Ned and the others were nervous.

"The doctor will be right over!" suddenly cried Bart, bursting through the bushes. "Who is it, and is he badly hurt?" Then he had to be told how it was, and he hurried back into the house to countermand the order for the physician. Alice gathered up her bandages, and with her box of remedies retraced her steps. She had missed a chance to practice for her chosen profession, but she was glad of it.

A more careful investigation of how Fenn had stood when he shot, and a calculation of the angle at which he held the rifle, showed that the bullet must have gone well over Jed's head, so it was not so bad as at first thought.

"But it was mostly my own fault," concluded the odd man, as he drove away. "Never again will I keep on when I see a black cat—" He stopped suddenly, checked his team, and got out of the empty wagon. [81]

"What's the matter now?" asked Frank.

"There's a horseshoe in the field there, and it's turned the wrong way for luck," explained Jed, as he picked it up. "I was drivin' right toward it—must have come off one of my horses when I was comin' around to get a good place to toss off the wood."

"Anyway it had the curved, or open side, toward me, and if you go toward a horseshoe that way it's a sure sign that you'll have no luck in a year. A mighty sure sign, too."

"What are you going to do?" asked Bart, as he saw Jed put the shoe back on the ground again.

"Oh, I just turned it around again. Now I can drive toward it right, and I'll have good luck—you see," which he proceeded to do, and, after his wagon had passed the shoe, he got out again, picked it up, and then went on, well satisfied with himself.

As the days went on the weather grew colder. There were frequent snow storms, and the snow did not melt. The Christmas holidays were approaching, and the boys were preparing for camp life, each lad having secured permission to take some time out of school. [82]

One night, when the four chums were at Fenn's house, getting ready some things, and talking of the fun they expected to have, there came a knock on the front door. As the boys were the only ones downstairs, Fenn volunteered to answer it.

"Though I don't know who can be calling at this hour," he remarked, for it was nearly ten o'clock. He opened the door, and his startled exclamation brought his chums to his side.

"There's no one here!" cried the stout lad, "but I was sure I heard a knock—didn't you?"

"Sure," replied Bart, and the others nodded. "There has been some one here," went on Bart. "See the footprints in the snow. It's snowed since we came. Some one ran up, knocked, and ran away again."

"I wonder what for?" murmured Fenn, looking up and down the deserted street. "Probably a joke. Maybe it was Sandy Merton."

"Whoever it was, he left something," said Frank, suddenly.

"What?" asked Fenn.

"This letter," answered Frank, picking up a missive from the doorstep. The white envelope, so much like the snow, had not at first been noticed.

"Bring it in and see what it says," proposed Bart, and soon, under the light of the gas in the dining-room, the boys were perusing the strange missive. [83]

"It's to me," said Fenn, as he rapidly scanned it. "But what in the world does it mean? And it has no signature. Listen to this fellows," and he read:

"MR. FENN MASTERSON,

"Dear Sir:—I understand you have quite a collection of mud turtles. Would you be willing to part with them? I mean for a consideration, of course. If you would kindly communicate with me. I will pay you a good price for all the turtles you have. But I must make this stipulation, which, at first may seem odd to you. But I have a reason for it. I can not meet you personally. If you are willing to sell your turtles will you write a note to that effect, and leave it in the dead sycamore tree

on the edge of Oak Swamp? That is the only way in which you can communicate with me. Kindly let me hear from you soon.”

As Fenn had said, there was no signature. He turned the strange letter over and looked at the back. It was blank.

“Well, wouldn’t that jar you!” exclaimed Bart, as he took the note from Fenn’s hand.

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## CHAPTER IX

### OFF TO CAMP

[84]

“This must be a joke,” remarked Fenn, at length, after he had once more read the note. “Sandy Merton, or some of the other fellows, who want to have some fun with us, wrote that.”

“I think not,” said Frank, thoughtfully.

“Why?” inquired Ned.

“Some man wrote that,” went on Frank. “That’s no boy’s handwriting. There’s too much character to it. What are you going to do about it, Fenn?”

“Nothing, I guess. Of course, I’d sell my turtles and things, if I got a chance, for I think I’m going to collect different kinds of wood now, and——”

“What did I tell you?” interrupted Ned triumphantly. “I knew Fenn’s fad wouldn’t last much longer.”

“It would, if we weren’t going camping,” declared the stout youth, with vigor. “Only when I’m away there’ll be nobody to look after the things. Mother is afraid to feed ’em, and dad won’t, so if I had a good chance to get rid of ’em I’d do it. Only I wouldn’t do business with a fellow like this, who doesn’t sign his name, and who wants me to act as if I was leaving money in response to a black-hand note. I’ll not pay any attention to it.”

[85]

“I would, if I were you,” said Frank, quietly, but with some determination.

“You would?” asked Bart, in some surprise.

“Sure. I think there’s something back of this,” went on Frank. “If I were Fenn I’d enter into a correspondence with him, and try to find out what was at the bottom of it.”

“What do you think it is?” asked Ned. “Let’s make another examination of the letter, detective style, and see what we can deduce from it.”

“I think the man who wrote that letter is the same man we have met several times—the mysterious stranger who entered the school—the man who stole the diamond bracelet,” spoke Frank, quickly.

“Then if you’ve got it all figured out, we don’t need to puzzle over this letter,” decided Ned.

“Oh, I don’t say I’m altogether right,” came from Frank quickly. “That’s only one theory.”

“And I think it a good one,” added Bart. “Fenn, suppose you answer this letter, and leave your reply in the dead sycamore tree.”

“What shall I say?” asked the heavy-weight chum.

“Oh, you don’t need to be specific. Say you don’t like to do business this way, that you prefer to meet the writer. Then we’ll leave the letter in the tree, hide, and nab him when he comes for it.”

[86]

“Good!” cried Ned. “That’s the stuff. Regular detective business, fellows. Come on, Fenn, write the letter.”

“I think that would be a good plan,” commented Frank, who, being more sober-minded than his chums usually were, often said the final word when some scheme was afoot. “If the writer wants to resort to such tactics as leaving an anonymous letter on the doorstep, we can retaliate by playing the spy on him. Get busy, Fenn.”

“When shall we leave it in the tree?” asked the stout lad.

“To-morrow,” answered Bart promptly. “We haven’t any too much time before going to camp. We’ll try to catch him to-morrow, and maybe we can solve the mystery of the diamond bracelet.”

It took some time to compose a letter to the satisfaction of all four lads, as each one had some suggestion to make, but it was finally done, and enclosed in a strong, manilla envelope, ready to be left in the dead sycamore tree. Then the chums planned to go to Oak Swamp the next afternoon, early.

The appointed time found them at the place, and, as they came in sight of the tree, they adopted precautionary tactics previously agreed upon.

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"For," Bart explained, "we want to catch that man, and we've got to go about it right. He's given us the slip a number of times. Now, naturally, he'll expect us to-day, and he'll be in hiding somewhere near the tree. Look around carefully, and see if we can't spot him before we deposit the letter."

Accordingly, the lads made a cautious approach, but there was no sign of a man, or any one else near the big tree. The approach to the swamp appeared deserted, and on that afternoon, with a dull, leaden sky overhead, and a mournful wind sighing through the trees, Oak Swamp was anything but a cheerful place.

"It's going to snow," observed Ned, as they walked slowly on toward the tree.

"Keep quiet," advised Bart, in a sharp whisper. "The man may be in hiding."

There were patches of snow on the ground about the sycamore, but an examination of them did not disclose any human footprints, though there were squirrel and rabbit tracks which gave the boys hope that they would get plenty of game when they went to their winter camp.

"He hasn't been here," was Fenn's opinion, as he took his letter and stuck it in a conspicuous place in a crack in the bark. [88]

"Then we'll hide and wait for him," decided Bart.

The four lads hid themselves in the thick underbrush not far from the tree, where each one could command a good view of it, and the path leading to it. They agreed, on a signal from Bart, to rush out, and, if possible, grab the mysterious man in case he should appear.

Then began a period of waiting, and it was made all the more tiresome from the fact that the boys could not be together and talk. They had to crouch down, in uncomfortable positions, not moving, for fear of betraying themselves, and, of course, it was out of the question to talk. The hours dragged. It seemed to grow dark suddenly, but it was due to the thickening of the storm clouds overhead. Then came some flurries of snow, which ceased from time to time, and then, with a suddenness that was startling, the storm broke.

"No use waiting any longer," called Fenn, rising up from behind his bush, and peering through the swirling flakes. "He won't come now."

"Keep quiet, he may," ordered Bart, and though the storm raged, they kept up their vigil half an hour longer. By this time it was so dark that the sycamore tree could scarcely be distinguished, and even Bart declared it was useless to remain longer. They started for home, the storm increasing every minute, and they left the letter in the tree, in case the man might arrive. [89]

"This will be fine weather for camping," cried Ned exultantly, as he plowed through a small drift.

They began their preparations for camping the next day. It did not take them long to get their things in readiness, for they had spent several days overhauling their outfits. The tents, one for sleeping and the other for cooking and eating in, were rolled up, cots were folded, the stove, cooking pots and pans, were placed in boxes, provisions were purchased, and the bedding examined. Of course, the lads did not forget their guns, and they had a good supply of ammunition.

As to the location of their camp, they had settled on it only after a strenuous debate. Fenn and Frank were for going to the one where they had previously had such good luck hunting wild turkeys, but Bart and Ned wanted to go to a less frequented part of the State, where larger game, such as an occasional bear or deer, could be had, and, in the end they carried their point, though it meant a longer trip, and necessitated going by railroad.

Finally all was in readiness, the last of the packing had been done, good-byes had been said, Alice had made up a little medicine chest for her brother, and Jennie Smith had even composed an "original poem" in honor of the occasion. [90]

Jed Sneed had taken the camp stuff to the express office in his big sled, and was to come back for the four chums, who carried their guns with them. The storm had hardly ceased, and there was plenty of snow on the ground.

"What'll you boys do if you get snowed in?" asked Mr. Keene as he watched his son and the others getting in Jed's sled, for the start was made from Bart's house.

"Oh, we'll wait until it thaws," replied Ned.

"Take care of yourselves," admonished Mrs. Keene.

"And drink hot ginger tea in case you get wet," ordered Alice, with her most professional air.

"All right," chorused the boys.

"All ready?" asked Jed, as he looked around.

"All ready!" replied Bart.

"Gid-dap!" called Jed, cracking the whip, and the horses plunged forward into a drift, the bells jingling a merry tune. The start for camp had been made.

## CHAPTER X

[91]

### A RAILROAD ACCIDENT

Jogging along the road to the depot, the four chums asked each other all sorts of questions, as to whether this or that article had been included in the camping outfit. For so much remained to be done at the last minute, in spite of preparations some time ahead, that they were afraid something would be forgotten. But, fortunately, everything necessary seemed to have been put in the packages, which had been shipped on ahead, so they would be there when the campers arrived. They were to get out at the railroad station of Cannistota, and drive ten miles into the woods.

"Say, what did you do about your mud turtles, Fenn?" asked Bart, as the sled bumped along, for the road was rough.

"Oh, I arranged with Sandy Merton to feed them. I'm going to pay him for it. He promised to look after them. I hope he doesn't forget. Hello! there he comes now. Hello, Sandy!" called Fenn, as he saw the president of the Shamma Shig secret society plodding along through the snow.

"Hello," responded Sandy, transferring his bundle of books from one arm to the other. "Say, but you fellows are lucky chaps! Cutting out several weeks of school, and going off hunting. I wish I was you!"

[92]

"Don't forget my turtles," pleaded Fenn.

"I'll attend to 'em, Stumpy," promised Sandy. "Bring me back a bear skin; will you?"

"If we get enough for ourselves we will," agreed Bart, and Sandy went on to school, looking back at the chums with envious eyes, for, as has been explained, the campers left about a week before the Christmas holidays began.

"Well, maybe we'll have a good time—I mean of *course* we will," said Frank, "but, all the same, Sandy is better off than we are—in one respect."

"How?" asked Ned.

"He isn't under suspicion of having stolen a valuable diamond bracelet."

"That's right. Hang it all! I wish we could clear that thing up," remarked Bart, with energy. "Never mind, maybe it will clear itself up before we get back."

"Whoa!" called Jed, suddenly, pulling up his team.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned.

"The nigh horse jest stumbled with its left fore foot," explained the driver, as he got out of the sled.

[93]

"Hurt?" inquired Bart.

"No, but it's a sign of bad luck, and I don't like it, especially when you fellows are going off on a pleasure trip."

"What are you going to do?" Frank wanted to know, for Jed was kicking away the snow in front of the horses.

"I'm looking for a black stone," he explained. "If you can find a black stone, after a horse stumbles like that, it's all right."

The boys wanted to laugh at the almost childish superstition exhibited by Jed, but did not want to make him feel bad, so they managed to keep sober faces, as he kicked about in the small drifts. Finally he uttered a triumphant cry.

"I've found it!" he announced, as he pocketed a small black stone. "Now it will be all right. Gid-dap, ponies," and the horses started off again, utterly indifferent to signs of all kinds.

The four chums talked of nothing but camp on the way to the station, and, as for Jed, he was so occupied in watching for signs and omens, good and bad, that he was not a brilliant conversationalist. Just as they approached the depot the driver pulled sharply to the right, turned out of the main road, and urged his horses in a circle around the standpipe of the water tank that supplied the locomotive tenders. Then he swung the team up to the platform.

[94]

"Why did you do that?" asked Ned, in curiosity.

"For good luck," replied Jed. "Nothing better for good luck than going around in a circle just before you start off on a journey. It's sure to bring you back safe, and I want to see you lads again."

"How do you make it out that a circle will bring any one back safe?" inquired Frank.

"Because, it stands to reason, don't it?" asked Jed, with conviction. "A circle's round, ain't it?"

Very well, bein' round it hasn't got any end, nor yet any beginnin'. That means you've got to come back to the place where you started. I know a circle always brings good luck when you're goin' on a journey. I know it for sure. Once I went over to Hampton Junction without goin' around in a circle before I started. What was the result? A feller stole my pocketbook that had a dollar an' nineteen cents in it. Don't tell me there's nothing in signs."

The boys laughed, and Jed did not seem to mind. They leaped out on the station platform, and paid the teamster, who wished them all sorts of good luck, in addition to having worked the "circle degree" on them, as Ned expressed it.

"Here!" exclaimed Jed suddenly, as the chums were about to go and purchase their tickets, and he held out a black object to Bart. [95]

"What is it?" inquired the lad.

"That black, lucky stone I picked up when the horse stumbled. Take it along. It will keep you from having an accident, Bart." The youth was about to refuse, but not wishing to hurt Jed's feelings he put the rock in his pocket.

A little later the train pulled in, and, getting aboard, the four chums waved a farewell to Jed, who could be observed standing up in his sled, making some queer signs, evidently with the idea of bringing more good luck.

"Well, we're off at last," remarked Ned, as the train gathered speed, "and some of Jed's signs seem to be coming true."

"How do you make that out?" asked Frank.

"It's going to clear," replied Ned, with a look at the sky. "I shan't mind snow, after we've got our camp established, but it's no fun to set up tents in a storm, so I'm glad it's going to clear. Jed's signs are all right."

It was a ride of several hours to Cannistota, and the boys beguiled the time as best they could. About noon, when the train was passing through a lonely mountainous region, where the woods were as dense as if they had never been cut, Frank remarked:

"Well, what do you say to lunch? It's about time," for they had brought along a goodly supply of food, as they could get no meals on the train. [96]

"I'm with you," announced Bart, as he reached up to the rack over the seats for the baskets. He was standing on his tip-toes, for the rack was high, and was just taking down one of the small hampers, when there came a sudden crash, followed by a ripping, tearing sound, and before Bart knew what had happened he was deposited in a heap on top of Fenn, who, in turn, was mixed up with Frank and Ned.

Bart lay stunned for a few seconds and then, as he picked himself up, and the other lads regained their feet, they saw that every passenger in the car had been hurled from his or her seat.

"What happened?" cried Bart.

At the same moment from the car in which were the four chums, as well as from the other coaches, there arose the shrill screams of women, and the crying of children. The train had rolled on for a few feet, after the crash, but had come to a sudden stop.

"An accident!" cried Fenn. "The train's wrecked! Come on, let's get out," and he scrambled to his feet and started for the door as the conductor and a brakeman ran through the car toward the engine.

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## CHAPTER XI

### PUTTING UP THE TENTS

After the first paralyzing shock of the crash the passengers seemed to come to their senses. Women who had been screaming ceased, and children stopped their frightened crying. Men began to gather themselves together, to crawl out from under seats where the sudden stop had thrown them, and prepared to leave the car.

"What's the matter, conductor?" called Bart to that official, as he was hurrying out of the car.

"Don't know—yet," was the answer flung back over his shoulder.

"We'll go see," spoke Ned. "Anyhow, our car's not smashed; that's one good thing."

"No, and it doesn't seem to have left the track," observed Frank. "Maybe we only hit an obstruction."

By this time the four chums were out of their car, and they were followed by a number of men passengers. From other cars a like stream was pouring.

One glance sufficed to show that whatever the wreck was, it was not a terrible one, for there were no telescoped coaches, and, in fact, none seemed to have left the rails, while as for the engine that, too, seemed to be in its usual place at the head of the coaches. The crowd was moving toward the forward end, and thither Bart and his companions went. Matters were becoming quiet, and it was evident that no one was seriously hurt.

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The boys found quite a throng around the engine, and they could now see that the cab, on one side, was splintered, and that the forward end of the coach next to the engine, which was the baggage car, was also damaged.

"What's the matter? What happened?" scores of voices asked the railroad men, who, including the fireman and engineer, were examining the locomotive.

"Driving rod broke," explained the conductor. "It threshed around like a flail, and smashed the cab, on the fireman's side of the engine. Luckily he was putting on coal, or he'd been killed. Then the engineer threw on the emergency brake, and the front end of the baggage car crumpled up. Luckily it's no worse. Has any one heard of any persons being hurt?" the conductor asked the crowd.

"I guess bruises and cuts from broken windows will be about the extent of the injuries, conductor," replied a fat man. "But how long are we likely to be delayed here? I have an important engagement in Vailton to-day."

[99]

"We'll have to wait until we can telegraph for another engine," replied the railroad man. "It will take several hours, I'm afraid."

There were some expressions of dismay, but, in general, the crowd was thankful that it was no worse. The engineer and fireman were busy trying to get the bent driving rod loose from where it had jammed up somewhere in the interior of the locomotive.

"Let's go back in our car, and look after our things," proposed Bart. "We can't do any good here, and it's cold," for they had rushed out without their overcoats. The other passengers were returning to their coaches by this time, leaving the problem of moving the train with the railroad men.

The four chums had been in their seats but a short time, having found their possessions somewhat scattered, but safe, when a brakeman came hurrying in. He hastened to the glass-fronted toolbox, fastened near the ceiling in the center of the car.

"I've got to get out that sledge-hammer, axe and saw," he explained to a woman, who was sitting in the seat under the case. "May I ask you to move, madam?" She did so, and then the brakeman was in a quandary, for it was necessary to break the glass in order to get at the tools. The trainman looked about helplessly, for he had not been on the road long. Bart saw his difficulty.

[100]

"Here, I'll break the glass," volunteered the lad. "Stand back," Bart produced the black, lucky stone which Jed had given him, and threw it through the glass front.

There was a crashing, splintering sound, and the glass was in fragments. The brakeman could get at the tools, which he quickly did, hurrying out with them.

"Well, that lucky stone came in handy, after all," remarked Ned.

"It sure did," agreed Bart, "though he could have used the end of a flag stick just as well, if he had thought of it."

While the engineer, firemen, and some of the brakemen worked over the disabled engine, another trainman walked back to the nearest telegraph office to summon a relief engine. Meanwhile the passengers waited with what patience they could.

"Well, suppose we eat now," proposed Bart.

"Good!" exclaimed Frank. "Pass out the sandwiches," which Bart proceeded to do.

In the seat across the aisle from the boys was a little girl. Hungrily she eyed the food as it came out of the baskets, and, in a voice that could be heard from one end of the car to the other, she piped out:

[101]

"Mamma, I'm hungry. Why didn't we bring some lunch?"

"Hush, dear," said the child's mother. "We will soon be at our station, and we can get something to eat."

"Not very likely to be there soon, ma'am," observed the fat man, who was in a hurry. "By Jove, I wish I'd thought to bring a snack. I will, next time I travel on this road."

"But, mamma, I'm awful hungry," insisted the child, as she gazed eagerly at the chums who were munching away in great enjoyment.

"Hush!" begged the mother, but the child repeated her request for something to eat.

"Here," spoke Bart, suddenly, and passed over a chicken sandwich to the little girl. "Will you let her take it?" he asked the mother.

"Certainly, but I'm afraid it will be robbing you."

"Not at all, we have plenty. Perhaps you'd like one too?" and Bart handed the woman one, which she received with thanks.

"I'll give you a dollar for two sandwiches, young man," said the fat man, eagerly.

Bart hesitated. At the same time several other children in the car, seeing the girl eating, began to demand food. [102]

"I say, fellows," said Bart, quickly. "I'll tell you what's let's do! We'll distribute our lunch among the youngsters on the train. There must be several of them, and they're all hungry. It will be some time before they can get to where there's lunch."

To the credit of the Darewell Chums be it said that they did not hesitate a moment.

"Go ahead," exclaimed Ned, and the others nodded assent.

"I wish you'd accept my offer before you came to that conclusion," sighed the fat man. "But go ahead. The kids will be glad to get it. I'll have to dine off chocolate caramels, I guess."

Bart's plan was soon in operation, to the delight of a number of boys and girls, no less than their distracted mothers. As for the chums, they had each eaten a sandwich before giving away their lunch, and they thought they could stand it until they got to Cannistota. They were given an informal vote of thanks by the grateful parents.

Then ensued tedious waiting until the relief engine came. There were many murmurs, and much fault-finding, but there was no help for it. The candy boy sold out his stock of sweet stuff in record time, even down to the chewing gum. At length a welcome whistle was heard, and soon the train was under way again. [103]

"Well," remarked Ned, as he settled back in his seat, "we will enjoy our supper, anyhow."

"Yes," remarked Bart. "I don't altogether believe in Jed's good luck signs. I'd just as soon he would have omitted some of 'em."

"Oh, well, we'll be in camp to-morrow," announced Frank. "Then we can eat whenever we feel like it."

The chums were late in arriving in Cannistota, and they went at once to a hotel. They had arranged to do this anyhow, as they knew there would not be time to put up tents the same day that they started off on their camping trip. After a substantial meal, to make up for their light dinner, they inquired at the express office, and learned that their camp stuff had arrived safely. They arranged for a teamster to take it to the woods where they had decided to pitch their tents, and early the next morning they were under way.

"It's a dandy day," observed Fenn, as he looked at the cloudless sky overhead, and saw the piles of snow on every side.

"A little too warm," was Bart's opinion. "Still, it may not be thawing so much in the woods. I'm anxious to get a shot at something. We can't hunt deer, you know, when there's tracking snow, but I hear there are bears where we are going." [104]

"A feller I know killed a big one last week, not a great ways from where you're going," observed the teamster.

"That's the stuff!" cried Bart, as he looked to make sure he had his favorite rifle.

In due time the camping site was reached, the teamster helped them unload, and then drove back, leaving the four chums alone in quite a lonely stretch of wilderness. But they were used to depending on themselves, they knew they had plenty of food, and they hoped to procure more with their guns.

"First thing on the programme is to make the camp-fire, and then set up the tents," declared Bart, who constituted himself a sort of leader.

Previous experience stood the boys in good stead, and in a short time a roaring fire was blazing, and a kettle of soup in the making was suspended over it. Then the canvas shelters were put up.

It was not easy work, and the boys labored hard, but at last the white tent stood among the trees, making a picturesque spot in the wilderness. Then the cooking shelter was put up, and the stove set, after which Fenn, who constituted himself cook on this occasion, served dinner.

The rest of the day was spent in cutting firewood, seeing to the fastenings of the tents, putting up cots, arranging their baggage and food supplies, and in putting together their shot guns and rifles, for each lad had two weapons. [105]

By this time it was nearly night-fall, and some lanterns were lighted, and hung within and without the tent, giving the place a cheerful look.

As Fenn was walking about, getting ready for a late supper, he stumbled over something, and nearly fell.

"What's that, a tree root?" asked Bart. "If it is, chop it out, or we'll all be doing the same thing."

"It wasn't a tree root," observed Fenn, as he turned to examine the object. "By cracky, boys!" he exclaimed. "Look here! It's a whopping big mud turtle!"

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## CHAPTER XII

[106]

### THE PLACE OF THE TURTLES

Fenn's chums hurried over to where, in the gleam of a lantern, he was contemplating the slow-moving reptile. The turtle was a large one, of a common species, and was ambling along as if it did not at all mind the attention it had attracted.

"Grab it, Fenn!" exclaimed Ned. "It'll be a dandy for your collection."

"That's what it will," agreed the stout youth, and he grabbed up the turtle, which at once drew in its tail, head and claws, presenting no vantage spot to an enemy.

"By Caesar, here's another!" exclaimed Bart, a moment later. "Another turtle, Fenn!"

"Yes, and here's a third one!" added Frank. "It's a big one, too, Fenn. Shall I catch it for you?"

"Wait a minute, fellows," replied Fenn, earnestly. "Don't touch those turtles!"

"Why not?" asked Ned. "Are they poisonous?"

"No, but there's something queer about so many being out in the woods in the middle of winter. It isn't natural. There is something out of the ordinary, and we must see what it is."

[107]

"Maybe they're hunting for the one of their number who wears the diamond bracelet," suggested Bart, with a laugh, for, in spite of the gravity of the loss, he could not forbear an occasional joke at Fenn's rather odd theory.

"No, it isn't that," went on Fenn earnestly. "But I did have a notion that perhaps the turtles might have escaped from the queer man who wrote and offered to buy my collection—the man we suspect of stealing the bracelet."

"Why he isn't in this vicinity," remarked Frank.

"You don't know whether he is or not," was Fenn's answer. "This seems to be a good place for turtles, though I can't understand why they should be out in cold weather. But perhaps there is some reason for it."

There was, and a strange one, as the boys soon discovered.

"Anyhow, they're here," observed Ned, "and what are we going to do about it?"

"Don't touch 'em, I want to see in what direction they are traveling," called Fenn, who, as soon as he had placed in a safe place the turtle he had caught, came over to where his chums were contemplating the other two.

"They're both heading for the same place, wherever that is, if that's any help to you," remarked Bart.

[108]

"Yes," spoke Fenn, "it may indicate something," and he looked at the big reptiles, who were crawling along.

"They're going in the same way as the one was you got," declared Frank, and the others confirmed this.

For some minutes Fenn observed the movements of the turtles, until they disappeared under some bushes. Then he straightened up and said:

"Well, I don't believe that mysterious man is in this vicinity, and certainly none of these turtles is wearing a diamond bracelet. I admit I'm away off on that, fellows. But there's something queer here, and I'm going to get at the bottom of it. It isn't natural for turtles to be out so plentiful this time of year, and there must be some cause for it."

"Fenn, you can theorize about turtles all you like, but I want my supper," called Ned.

"Same here," came from Frank. "Dish it up, cook!"

Thereupon Fenn gave over watching the turtles, and, a little later, seated cozily in the tent, the chums partook of a supper of canned baked beans, with hard-tack or pilot biscuit, and coffee. Then they sat around, discussing various matters, from the railroad accident to their arrival in camp.

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Cots were provided, with plenty of blankets, so they would not suffer from cold, and as an additional precaution a small fire was kept going in the small, sheet-iron, wood-burning stove, which they had brought along to warm the sleeping tent.

"Ah, fellows, this is something like life," remarked Bart, as he arranged himself on his cot. "Listen to the wind howling outside. We'll have more snow, I expect, before morning."

"Let it snow!" exclaimed Frank. "We're all right now. We'll have to have our Christmas tree here, fellows. Did you bring anything along to put on it?"

"Oh, we'll hang up our stockings instead of having a tree," suggested Ned with a laugh. "But what's the matter with you, Fenn? Why are you so quiet?"

"He's thinking of some of the girls he left behind him," mocked Bart. "Aren't you, Stumpy? Which particular one last gave you a lock of her hair?"

"Oh, cut it out!" begged Fenn. "I wasn't thinking of such nonsense at all. I was wondering where those turtles came from. This is a regular stamping place for them, and in the morning I'm going to go on a search."

"Do you really think so many of them around here means anything?" asked Frank. [110]

"It means something, certainly," replied Fenn. "This part of the State is noted for turtles, however, there being a number of different species, but I never knew before that they came out in winter. That's what puzzles me."

"Maybe we're over a hidden volcano, and it's warmer than anywhere else in the neighborhood," suggested Ned.

"Maybe," assented Fenn, "only it doesn't seem very warm just now. There's a draught somewhere. Bur-r-r-r! No wonder!" he exclaimed. "The tent flap has come open. Who fastened it?"

"I did," confessed Frank. "I'll fix it." The canvas was soon made secure, and then, while the wind whipped itself into a gale outside, the boys fell asleep in their warm tent, Fenn's last thoughts being about a place where he had seen the three turtles.

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## CHAPTER XIII

[111]

### THE MUD VOLCANO

Bart's first act, on awakening in the morning, was to go to the tent flap, and look out. Then he called to his companions, who were still asleep:

"Say fellows, it's a fine day; only it's snowing."

"Did you wake us up to tell us that?" demanded Ned, as he turned over for another nap.

"Well, you don't want to sleep all day, do you?" asked Bart, looking at his watch. "It's eight o'clock. If we're going to do any hunting we'd better get a move on."

There was much yawning and stretching, but finally the chums were up and dressed, and breakfast was served.

"Now for a nice lot of game," exclaimed Bart, as he got out his rifle, and looked over his supply of ammunition. "I think I'll load for bear to-day."

"Do you mean to say you expect to go shooting in this storm?" asked Frank, for it was still snowing. The white flakes were of a considerable depth on the ground, but the two tents, standing as they did under some gigantic pine trees, were much protected. [112]

"Of course we're going hunting to-day," declared Bart. "That's what we came for. Some bear steak wouldn't go at all bad, especially as we can't get fresh meat here."

"No, nor fresh bread, either," added Ned. "I miss my rolls with my coffee."

"I'm going to bake some biscuits for dinner," declared Fenn. "I brought along some self-raising flour."

"Good for you, Stumpy!" cried Ned. "Pity, though, you didn't bring along some self-baking bread, and some washless dishes."

"Well, if we're going, let's go," proposed Frank. "Will it be safe to leave our stuff in camp, unprotected?"

"We can't take it with us," said Bart. "Besides, there isn't any one within ten miles of this place. That's why I wanted to camp here. It will be all right. Well, I'm ready if you are."

"I'm going to take my shot-gun," decided Frank. "Maybe I'll see some wild turkeys or some partridge. They'll do if Bart doesn't get his bear."

Fenn, instead of getting ready his gun, as the others were going, had gone to the box where he had placed the large turtle, captured the night previous.

"For cats' sake!" exclaimed Ned, "aren't you done playing with that yet, Fenn?"

"I'm not playing," was the retort. "I'm going to try an experiment."

"Aren't you going hunting with us?" asked Bart.

"Not this morning. I'm going to solve this mystery of the turtles, if I can. Besides you fellows will shoot all that's necessary. I'll stay around here, and get ready for a partridge pot-pie or a bear roast, just as you prefer."

"Oh, come on hunting," pleaded Bart. "What's the fun in staying here?"

"Well, I don't know as I shall stay right in camp," went on Fenn. "I'm going to make this turtle lead me to where the other ones went. In other words, I'm going to use this one as a guide."

"You're crazy!" scoffed Ned.

"Maybe," admitted Fenn, calmly. "You fellows go on with your hunting, and when you come back maybe I'll have something to show you."

They tried to induce Fenn to accompany them, but he was firm in his determination to solve the "turtle mystery," as he called it, and, in the end, Bart, Ned and Frank tramped off through the storm, for it was still snowing, while the stout lad remained behind, watching the turtle, which he had placed on a cleared place on the ground in front of the tent.

"Now go ahead, my fine fellow," spoke Fenn to the reptile. "Which way do you want to head?"

[114]

The turtle seemed undecided about it, for some time after Fenn had placed it on the ground it did not move, but remained with head, legs and tail withdrawn into the protecting shell. But Fenn was patient, and knew better than to poke the reptile to make it move. Presently a long, snake-like neck was thrust out, and black, beady eyes glanced cautiously around, while the parrot jaws were slightly parted, as if to ward off any attack.

Fenn kept behind the turtle, which, in a few minutes, finding that it was not disturbed, stuck out its legs, and began to raise itself up, as if taking an observation. Then it turned partly around, and, to Fenn's delight, started to crawl in the same direction as that taken by the other two reptiles the previous evening.

"That's the stuff!" cried Fenn. "That confirms my theory. There's some place where these turtles hang out, and I'm going to find it. The three we found must have wandered away from the common camping ground of the turtles of this vicinity, but they all head back toward it. Now I'm going to find it."

He did not wait for the reptile he had captured to lead him to the place. That would have taken too long, but, after quickly scratching his initials on the back of the turtle's shell, together with the date, so he would know the reptile again, Fenn replaced it on the ground, and started off through the woods in the indicated direction. He had his gun with him, but he did not expect to do any shooting, and he carried a pocket compass, for the woods were unfamiliar to him.

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For a long distance Fenn tramped on, plowing through the woods, making turns now and then to avoid streams, partly frozen over, leaping them when he could, fording them at other times, for he had on high, water-proof hunting boots, but keeping as nearly as he could in the proper course.

"Maybe I'll find a well-protected cave, where the turtles live during winter," thought the stout lad, as he made his way under some low hemlock trees, well laden with a blanket of snow. "If I do, I can get some new specimens, anyhow, and perhaps enough to sell to that man who wrote me the letter. Mighty queer about him. I wonder who he was? I wonder if, by any possibility, he could be up here in these woods?"

This idea caused Fenn to look around somewhat apprehensively, but there was no one in sight. He did see something, however, that caused his heart to beat faster, and this was a brace of plump partridges on a tree, not far away.

[116]

"I wonder if I can shoot straight enough to bag them?" murmured the lad, as he quickly raised his gun, and banged away, first with the left, and then with the right barrel. Somewhat to his surprise when the smoke cleared away, Fenn saw the two birds lying in the snow. He had made a good shot.

"Well, we won't go hungry to-night, anyway," was his comment, as he picked them up and put them in the pockets of his hunting coat. "But I'm going to keep on," he added.

He had gone perhaps half a mile farther, when he suddenly stopped and sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Sulphur spring," he remarked, half aloud. "Guess I'll go take a look at it. Whew! It's strong enough. I don't need any other guide than my nose."

Making sure of the direction in which the strong odor of sulphur was wafted to him, Fenn temporarily abandoned his quest for the place of the turtles. The odor grew more pronounced, for some sulphur springs are so strongly impregnated with that chemical in solution that the smell carries for miles, especially on a windy day. The region where the chums had gone camping, as



they learned later, was well supplied with these freaks of nature.

A few minutes later Fenn had come upon the object of his search. The spring gushed out from the side of a hill, and so strong was the sulphur that the stones, over which the spring, and the stream resulting from it, flowed were a yellowish white. [117]

“Whew!” exclaimed Fenn again. “This ought to be good for whatever ails you, but I don’t like it.”

He remained looking at the spring for a few minutes, and, as he was about to move away he was startled by a deep, booming sound in the woods, off to his left. Fenn started.

“Blasting?” he exclaimed aloud, in a questioning tone. “No, it can’t be that, either,” he added. “They wouldn’t be blasting around here!”

The next moment he heard a pattering around him, and several large globules of mud came down, seemingly from the sky. Some struck on his hands, and others dotted the white snow about him.

“That’s queer,” murmured the lad. “It’s raining mud—or else—” he paused a moment, as the remembrance of the booming sound returned to him. “No,” he added, “there must be a spouting, boiling spring around here. That’s what it is! I’m on the track of it now.”

Fenn dashed off to the left, through the forest. He was eager to see what had caused the curious shower of mud. In a few minutes he came to a little clearing in the woods—a clearing remarkable, among other things, from the fact that the ground there was devoid of snow. There was a warm, damp look about it, too, as when, in a snow storm, the sidewalk over a bakery oven is devoid of the white flakes. [118]

But that was not the most curious thing that met Fenn’s eyes. He made out numerous mud turtles crawling about over the patch of ground that was free from snow. There must have been a score of the reptiles.

Then, as Fenn looked, a curious thing happened. He had just noted that, in the centre of the clearing, there was a large patch of water, and, a moment later the middle of this spring seemed to lift itself bodily up. Up and up the water spouted, and in an instant its comparative purity was changed to a deep mud color, as a miniature geyser of earth and liquid shot upward.

“A mud volcano!” exclaimed Fenn, as he understood what the phenomenon was. “A mud volcano! This explains the mystery of the turtles!”

An instant later he was under a shower of mud from the boiling spring.

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## CHAPTER XIV

 [119]

### BART’S FIRST SHOT

Fenn made a dash for the shelter of a spruce tree, and watched the descending shower of mud and water. It was soon over, and he stepped out again, to view the curious volcano. He crossed the open space, free from snow, and a number of turtles scurried away at his advance.

“That’s how it is,” remarked the lad, “that the turtles are so numerous around here. It’s as warm as toast around that mud volcano, and they don’t have to hibernate. The ones we found near our camp must have wandered away in search of food, and were on their way back here. I’ve solved part of the mystery, anyhow. Now to examine this curious place.”

The boiling spring, or mud volcano, as such phenomenons are variously called, consisted, in the main, of a large pool of muddy colored water, lying at the foot of a hill. All around it were dead trees, and the smell of sulphur, though not so strong as at the first spring Fenn had visited, was plainly noticeable. The water had a dead, stagnant look, after the eruption, and Fenn was careful not to approach too close, for he could not tell when the spring would spout up again. He saw a number of turtles on logs and bits of wood that extended out into the pool, and others plunged from the bank into the water at his approach. [120]

“They don’t seem to mind the sulphur and the mud,” said Fenn to himself. The lad had read in his school books of the mud volcanoes. They are of a type similar to the hot geysers of Yellowstone Park, though not so large or numerous. Though called boiling springs in some parts of the country they do not boil or bubble on the surface, as a rule, though there is a constant supply of warm water from some subterranean source, so, that, as in the case with the spring Fenn was viewing, the water ran over from the pool, and trickled off through the woods.

Mud volcanoes or boiling springs, while not common, are to be met with in New York and Pennsylvania. The writer recently visited a large one in New York State, near Lake Ontario. It was around Christmas, and a cold blustering day, yet the water from the spring was quite warm, and had melted the snow for quite a distance in all directions. The water was impregnated with sulphur and salt, and though there was not an eruption when the writer was present, there were marks on surrounding trees showing where mud had been hurled to a height of thirty or forty [121]

feet.

There are various theories to account for the action of the mud volcanoes. One is that steam is formed away below the surface, and, seeking an outlet, throws the mud and water with it. Another is that the force of water, flowing from some mountain lake, by an underground passage, spouts up through the boiling spring, being heated in some manner in its passage.

But Fenn did not trouble himself much about these theories as he looked at the curious spring. It was a gloomy, lonesome place, and the presence of so many turtles, some of them very large, added to the uncanny aspect.

"Well, there are turtles enough here to stock several collections," murmured Fenn. "Lots of different kinds, too. I will take some home I guess. Now if I had that mysterious man's address I'd send him word. This mud volcano will be a curious thing to show the other fellows. I wonder how warm the water is?"

He approached, to thrust his hand into the edge of the spring, when an ominous rumbling beneath his feet warned him. He jumped away just in time, and, as he ran for the shelter of the trees, there was another upheaval of mud, and he received a share of it. He remained in the shelter until the spring subsided, and then made his way back to camp. [122]

His chums were there when he arrived, and something in their looks prompted Fenn to ask:

"Well, where's the bear steak, and the partridges for roasting."

"No luck," declared Bart in disgust. "Never saw a bit of game! I guess we camped in the wrong place."

"Oh, no we didn't!" exclaimed Fenn in triumph, as he produced the two plump birds from his pockets. "Here's what I got, besides bagging a boiling spring for my morning's work."

"Say, where'd you get those?" asked Bart eagerly.

"Come on, show us?" begged Ned.

"Time enough," responded the stout lad. "I'm going to have dinner now, and then we'll have these birds, roasted, for supper. There's more where they came from. Now I'll tell you about the mud volcano," which he did, graphically, so that his chums were eager to go and see it. But they decided to wait until the next day, and to have a good supper of roast partridge that night. Fenn cooked his game to perfection, and was given a hearty vote of thanks.

A visit to the mud volcano was made the next day, and there were found to be more turtles than on Fenn's visit. The volcano was observed in action, much to the wonderment of the three lads, who had never seen anything like it, and once Ned, who was too venturesome, was caught under an unusually large shower of mud. [123]

"Well, let's go hunting now," proposed Bart, after a pause. "I haven't had a decent shot since we came to camp. I've got to get that bear before I go back."

They tramped off through the woods, their eyes eager for a sight of game, large or small. Each one had a compass, so that if they became separated they could make their way back to camp, for the forest was dense. The snow had ceased, and the weather was clear and cold.

Fenn and Frank had shotguns, and elected to try to bag some wild turkeys or partridges, so they went off to one side, while Bart and Ned, with their rifles, kept together.

Suddenly Bart, after an hour's tramping in the woods, with never a sight of anything larger than a rabbit, which he would not fire at, came to an abrupt stop. Ned, who was right behind him, halted also.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"What is that over there?" asked Bart, also in a whisper, and he pointed to a black object near some bushes. [124]

"A stump," replied Ned promptly.

"Do stumps move?" inquired Bart.

"Of course not."

"Well that one did, so it isn't a stump. I think it's a bear."

Bart's opinion was unexpectedly confirmed the next moment, for the animal turned and uttered a loud "woof!" as it sniffed at the snow at the foot of the bush, evidently in search of something to eat.

Bart dropped to one knee, and took quick aim. It was his first shot since arriving at camp, and it was one worthy of much care, for bears were none too common to risk missing one.

The rifle cracked, but there was no cloud of smoke, for Bart was using his new smokeless cartridges. The lad pumped another bullet into the barrel, and fired again, for the bear had not moved after the first report.

Then, as the echoes of the rifle died away, the two lads saw the animal quickly rear itself upon its hind legs, and swing around in their direction.

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## CHAPTER XV

[125]

### FENN FALLS IN

"Shoot again, Bart!" cried Ned. "You missed him!"

Bart had pumped another cartridge into place, but before he could pull the trigger the bear staggered a few paces toward him, and then fell in a convulsive heap. There was no need to fire again.

"He's dead!" cried Bart, exultantly, as he leaped forward. "My first bear, though it did take two shots to settle him." But as he saw a few minutes later, when he examined his prize, the first bullet would have done the work, had he waited long enough, for it was in a vital spot.

"Now to get him to camp," proposed Ned, when he and his chum had sufficiently admired the dead bear. "We'll have enough fresh meat for a week."

"Yes," assented Bart. "Let's see how we're going to get him back." He raised the fore end of the bear, by his paws, and grunted.

"What's the matter—heavy?" asked Ned.

"Try it and see," advised Bart. Ned did so, and grunted in his turn. The truth of the matter was that the bear, though not of full size, was fat and plump, and of greater weight than the boys expected. Then, too, the weight was "dead," which made it all the more awkward to carry. Bart and Ned tried again, by turns, and both together, but the bear was too much for them.

[126]

"We'll have to get Fenn and Frank to help us," said Bart and he fired his rifle three times, in quick succession, and then, after a pause, twice, more slowly—the prearranged call for assistance. Fenn and Frank came running up a little later, fearing that some accident had happened, and they were much relieved when they found that their help was wanted in transporting the bear.

At Fenn's suggestion a long pole was cut, the bear's paws were tied together and the pole thrust through them, and then, with two lads on either end of the shaft, and Bruin swinging between, the journey back to camp was safely made.

Bart insisted on skinning his prize, saying he was going to make a rug of the hide, and the best portions of the meat were cut off for future use. As it was desired to allow the flesh to cool a bit before using it, the campers prepared a meal of the food they had in stock, reserving the bear steaks for supper.

The rest of the day was spent around camp, several improvements being made, with a view of rendering life more comfortable during their stay. The bear steak, broiled with pieces of bacon stuck on it, was voted most delicious, and Fenn ate so much that he said it made him sleepy.

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It grew much colder in the night, and before morning there was a demand for more blankets on the part of Frank and Ned. As there were no more, Bart volunteered to get up and replenish the fire in the stove, for it had died down.

As he was putting on more wood he suddenly paused, and seemed to be listening. Then he quietly went to the tent flap and peered out into the darkness, illuminated by a lantern hanging from the ridge pole.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned. "Did you see another bear, Bart?"

"I thought I heard some one walking around," was the answer. "It's snowing again. I don't see any one."

He went back to bed, every one sleeping more in comfort now that the tent was warmer. In the morning, Bart was the first one up, and he opened the tent flap. As he looked out, noting that the sun was shining, though the weather was cold, the lad uttered a cry of astonishment.

"What's the matter?" asked Fenn, pausing in his dressing operations.

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"Some one *was* sneaking around last night!" declared Bart. "See the footprints!"

The campers rushed from the tent in various stages of negligee, and stared at a track of human footprints, clearly visible in the new-fallen snow.

"Whoever it was he came close to our tent, and was evidently going to look in, when I must have frightened him off by getting up to put wood on the fire," said Bart.

"Who was it?" asked Ned.

"I'm sure I don't know," responded Bart, "only it was some one who evidently wanted to get

away unobserved. Look, you can trace where he came out of the woods, approached our tent very cautiously, and then, when I frightened him, he took it on the run." This was easy to confirm by the spaces between the footprints, for when the midnight visitor had approached slowly and stealthily the marks were comparatively close together, but where he had run they were far apart.

"Let's get dressed, and have a look around," said Fenn. But though they searched for some time they could not find the intruder, even if his footsteps were plainly visible, leading off into the forest.

"We'll get breakfast and trace him up," suggested Frank. "Might as well do that as anything else." [129]

"Let's look and see if he's taken anything," suggested Fenn.

"No need to do that, Stumpy," was Bart's opinion. "You can tell by his tracks that he wasn't near enough to our camp to have stolen anything. Even the bear meat is safe," and he looked to where it was suspended on a tree limb, by means of a long rope, a precaution taken to keep it out of the way of prowling animals.

With their guns in readiness for any game, the four chums set out after breakfast on the trail of the unknown, midnight visitor. The marks were easy to follow, for very little snow had fallen after Bart had replenished the wood in the stove.

"Say, do you notice which way he's heading?" asked Fenn, excitedly, when they had gone on about a mile.

"Not particularly," said Frank. "Why?"

"He's gone to the mud volcano—that's where he's gone, fellows!" declared the stout youth. "I wonder what he wants there? Maybe he's after mud turtles. Maybe he's the same man who wrote to me."

"He might be almost anybody, Stumpy," was Ned's opinion. "We can't tell until we see him. Get a move on." [130]

The footsteps were becoming fainter now, for the wind had drifted the snow across them in a number of places, but they were sufficiently visible to indicate that the man had kept on in the direction of the boiling spring.

Just before the boys reached that phenomenon, the marks vanished altogether, coming to an abrupt stop in the snow, but it was evident that this was due to the wind covering the tracks with white crystals from the drifts, and not because the man had mysteriously vanished.

"Well, we may as well go on to the spring," spoke Fenn. "Maybe we'll find him there."

But the vicinity of the mud volcano was deserted, though numerous mud turtles were crawling about over the warm ground, which was devoid of snow.

"I'm going closer and have a look," decided Fenn, as he started away from his chums.

"Better be careful, Stumpy," warned Bart. "It doesn't look as if there had been an eruption lately, and you may catch it all of a sudden."

"Oh, I'll chance it," said the heavy-weight lad.

He walked close to the edge of the spring, which was motionless save for the water that ran from it. Fenn was looking for footprints in the soft ground, but he and his chums had made so many on their own account, on their previous visits to the place, and, as they were still visible (for the ground had not frozen), the amateur detective was at a loss. [131]

"There doesn't seem to be anything here," announced Fenn, as he turned to come away. Hardly had he spoken than he was seen to jump back. That is, he tried to do so, but he was too late. An instant later he was observed to throw up his hands and slowly sink into the marshy ground on the edge of the warm spring.

"Help! Help!" cried poor Fenn, as he felt himself going down. "Help, fellows!"

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## CHAPTER XVI

### FRANK MAKES PANCAKES

"Fellows, he's fallen in a quicksand!" yelled Bart. "Come on, help him out!"

"Look out we don't get in it ourselves," cautioned Frank, but it was from no desire to shirk any danger in rescuing his chum that he was thus thoughtful. Rather he wanted to be on the safe side. "Go ahead, Bart and Ned. I'll get some tree branches, in case you can't reach him," he added. [132]

Ned and Bart started on a run toward their unfortunate chum. Poor Fenn was engulfed almost to his shoulders, and was struggling ineffectually to get out.

"Don't worry, we'll save you!" called Bart encouragingly. "Hold on, Stumpy."

"That's the trouble—there's nothing to hold on to," panted Fenn.

"Is the water hot?" asked Ned.

"No, only warm; but I'm in as much mud as I am water. Give me a hand, and pull me out."

Bart and Ned advanced to do so, but, to their dismay they found that they were themselves sinking in. As they had approached on this side of the boiling spring on a previous occasion, much closer to the water than they now were, it was evident that there had been a shifting of the earth underneath the surface. [133]

"We can't come any closer, Stumpy," announced Bart. "We'll sink in ourselves." He was about to go back.

"Don't—don't leave me!" begged the unfortunate lad, making another attempt to lift himself out of the slough. "Don't go back on me, Bart!"

"We won't. We were only trying to think of a way to get you out," answered Bart, as he held Ned back from going too close.

"Here, this will do it," cried Frank, running up at that moment with a long, tree branch. "Take hold of this, Stumpy, and we'll haul you out."

Standing where the ground was firm, Frank thrust forward the branch, Bart and Ned assisting their chum. Fenn grasped desperately at the other end, and his three companions braced themselves.

There was a straining, a long, steady pull and Fenn slowly began to emerge from the hole. Once he was started it was an easy matter to pull him out completely, and in a few seconds he was out of danger, and standing beside his chums on solid earth. But such a sight! [134]

He was covered with mud almost from his head to his feet. It dripped from his clothes, and his hands were thick with it, while some had even splashed on his face. He had not been rescued more than a minute before there came a rumbling sound, and a spray of mud and water shot up into the air. The volcano was in eruption, and Fenn had been saved in the nick of time, for the place where he had been sucked down was right on the edge of the disturbance.

"How did it happen?" asked Frank.

"It was so quick I can't tell," answered the muddy lad. "All I know is that I went down and seemed to keep on going."

"Better come over to where the water flows out of the spring, and wash off," suggested Ned, and Fenn agreed with him. The water with which he removed the worst of the mud from his clothes was unpleasant smelling, impregnated as it was with salt and sulphur, but there was no help for it. As the three labored to get Fenn into some sort of presentable shape, numerous turtles crawled around them, evidently disturbed by the unaccustomed visits.

"Well, I'll do, I guess," remarked Fenn, at length, trying to catch a glimpse of himself in the little stream of water. "Wow, but that's dirty mud, though!" [135]

"Next time don't go so near," cautioned Bart.

"You should have told me that first," answered Fenn, with a grim smile.

With a final look at the place of the mud volcano the boys turned back toward camp. They had not learned much, save that the mysterious visitor had come in the direction of the boiling spring—why, they could not fathom. Fenn spoke of getting some of the less common turtles to add to his collection, but his chums persuaded him to wait until they were ready to go home.

Fenn's first work, when he reached the tent, was to change his clothes, and then, making a good fire in the wood stove he took a bath, with water melted from snow. He felt better after this, and was about to proceed with the getting ready of supper, for they had taken their lunch with them on their tramp to the spring, and had made coffee on the way.

"Fenn, you sit down and rest, and I'll get the meal," suggested Frank, good-naturedly. "I think I'll give you fellows a treat."

"What'll it be?" asked Ned.

"How would pancakes go?" inquired Frank with a triumphant air.

"Can you make 'em?" asked Bart, doubtfully.

"Sure. I did it at home once; for dad and me. We have some prepared flour here, and the directions are on the package. You fellows go outside, and when the cakes are ready I'll call you in to supper." [136]

"That suits me," observed Bart, and the others assented joyfully. Leaving Frank in the cook-

tent, they busied themselves about various things, awaiting the call for supper, and with no great amount of patience, for they were hungry.

"Do you fellows smell anything," asked Bart, after a long wait, and he sniffed the air strongly.

"You don't mean to say Frank's burning those cakes, do you?" inquired Ned anxiously.

"No, I don't smell him cooking them at all," answered Bart. "They ought to be pretty nearly done by this time, for it doesn't take long. Maybe he's in trouble. I'm going to take a look."

He advanced cautiously to peer into the cook tent, whence came a series of rather queer sounds. Bart took one look through the flap, and then beckoned to his chums.

"Look, but don't laugh," he cautioned them.

It was well he did, for the sight that met their eyes made them want to howl. Frank was in the midst of the tent, surrounded by several pots, pans, pails, dishes and other receptacles, filled with pancake batter. He was industriously stirring more in the bread-pan, and there was a puzzled look on his face. [137]

"Hang it all," Frank's chums heard him mutter, "I can't seem to get this stuff right. Guess it needs more flour." He put some into the batter he was mixing, and then stirred it. "Now it's too thick," he remarked. "It needs more water." He poured the fluid in with a too lavish hand, it seemed, for he murmured: "Gee whiz! Can't I get this right? Now I've got it too thin. I'll have to empty part of it out."

He looked around for something into which to pour part of the batter, but every available dish in the tent seemed to be filled.

"No use saving it," Frank went on. "I'll just throw some of it away. I've got lots left." He emptied part of the batter into a refuse pail, and his face wore such a worried expression as he came back to his task, that Bart and his two chums could not hold back their laughter any longer. As they burst into peals of mirth, Frank glanced up, and saw them spying on him from the tent flap.

"Hu! you fellows think you're mighty smart, I guess!" he muttered.

"How are you coming on?" asked Bart "Are you stocking up for fear of a blizzard, Frank?"

Then the comical side of the situation struck the volunteer cook, and he, too, joined in the fun. [138]

"It's funny how this thing came out," said Frank, with a dubious air. "First the batter was too thick, and then, when I put more water in, it was too thin. Then I had too much, and I had to empty some of it out. Then I did the same thing over again, and had to keep on emptying. I never could seem to get it right, and I've used up nearly a sack of flour. I put the flavoring in, too."

"Flavoring? What flavoring?" asked Fenn quickly.

"Cocoanut, I guess it was. I found it in a cocoanut box, anyhow."

"I never heard of cocoanut flavoring in pancakes," said Fenn dubiously, "but maybe it's all right. But I'll show you how to mix 'em, Frank. We'll just put two or three dishes of this batter together in the pan, add a little more flour, and some salt, and it'll be ready to bake," and, as he talked Fenn soon beat up the batter to the right consistency, for he had a knack of cooking. Then a frying pan was put on the stove, for they had brought along no regular griddle, it was greased, and Frank, who insisted on doing the rest, was allowed to pour out the batter, and do the turning. This part he managed fairly well, and soon he had a big plate full of nicely-browned cakes. [139]

"Seems to me they smell sort of funny," remarked Ned, as he sat down to the table, and helped himself liberally.

"Oh, that's only your imagination," declared Frank. "They're all right. Eat hearty, fellows, there's lots of 'em." There was—enough for a squad.

Fenn poured out a liberal amount of maple syrup on his pile of cakes. He put a generous piece of the top brown one in his mouth. The next minute he uttered a yell, and made rush for the outside of the tent.

"Wow! Oh!" he cried on his way.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Frank, as Fenn hastily drank several glasses of water on his return.

"What did you say you flavored those cakes with?" demanded the stout youth, while Bart and Ned paused, with their forks half raised to their mouths.

"Cocoanut," answered Frank.

"Soap powder, you mean!" exclaimed Fenn, as he made a dash for the box that served as a cupboard, and took out a pasteboard package that had contained cocoanut. "I put soap powder in this to have handy when I washed the dishes," explained the fleshy youth, "and you flavored the cakes with it, Frank. Wow! Wow!" [140]

"Oh punk!" groaned Bart, as he pushed his plate away from him, "and I was counting on

griddle cakes!"

Frank cautiously smelled of the pile of cakes on his plate.

"Guess you're right," he admitted dubiously. "I'm sorry fellows, but my pancakes are a failure."

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## CHAPTER XVII

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### TREED BY A WILDCAT

They made the best of it, laughing and joking, and the meal was finished on some victuals that remained from the day before. Frank was inclined to blame himself, and, after that, Fenn, because the latter had put the soap powder into the cocoanut box, but the amateur cook's chums were good-natured over his failure, and comforted him with the proverb "accidents will happen in the best of regulated camps."

The weather the following day turned out unexpectedly warm, and, as Bart, Fenn and Ned elected to remain in camp, and straighten it out somewhat, besides cleaning their guns, and mending some torn clothes, Frank said:

"Guess I'll go off, and try my luck, if you fellows don't mind. Maybe I can bag something."

"Going alone?" asked Bart, looking up from his rifle, which he had taken apart. "If you wait until after dinner I'll go along."

"I don't mind going alone," was Frank's rejoinder, and this was true, for, however good a chum he might be to the other lads, he was rather an odd chap, and frequently went off on solitary strolls. His friends were used to this, and did not mind.

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"Aren't you going to take a rifle?" asked Ned. "You might see some big game."

"Guess not. I'm after birds. You fellows have scared off all the deers and bears," and, with a light shotgun over his shoulder Frank set out.

It was lonesome enough in the woods, after leaving the winter camp, to suit almost any one who was fond of solitude, and Frank really rejoiced in the calm and quietness all about him. The only sound was the occasional flutter of a bird in the branches, or the soft, slushing noise made by snow toppling from the trees to the ground.

Frank walked on, his eyes alert for a sign of any game that would restock the camp larder, but, for a long time he saw nothing. He had covered about three miles, and was beginning to think that he would have his trip in vain, when, as he went down into a little gully, where the snow lay rather deeper than on the level, he heard a noise, and saw a movement in the underbrush.

"There's something!" he exclaimed half aloud, and he swung his gun around. "Now let's see what sort of a shot I am."

He advanced cautiously, thinking he might flush a covey of birds. But the sound was not repeated, and, look as he did, Frank could see nothing. With ready gun, and eyes that gazed eagerly forward, he kept on, making as little noise as possible.

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Suddenly he heard a yelping bark, followed by a shrill cry of agony, and there was a great commotion in a clump of bushes about a hundred feet directly in front of him. Some animal or animals were evidently threshing about in the underbrush.

"A dog! It's a dog, and something has caught it!" exclaimed Frank. "Maybe it's a bear! I wish I had my rifle!"

He had no thought of turning back, even though he had but a light shotgun. The commotion increased, the yelping and barking finally dying out, to be succeeded by a low moan, and then there was a silence, and Frank could hear the crunching of bones.

"Poor dead beast," he murmured. "Maybe I can get a pop at the other creature; and if I get close enough, and put two charges of shot into it at short range, and in the right spot, I may kill it. I'm going to try, anyhow." He little knew the danger he was running, for he had had, as yet, no view of the creature upon which he was creeping.

As he walked forward he stepped on a dead branch, concealed by the snow, and it broke with his weight, a sharp snap sounding in the still forest. Instantly the crunching of bones ceased, there was a slight movement where the fight had taken place, and a savage growl resounded.

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"I'm in for it now," mused Frank. "I've got to see it through. I can't run, but I don't like that growl."

He stood still for a moment, hoping the beast would show itself. Then he advanced a few more steps.

As he got to one side of the concealing bushes he saw a curious sight. A big, lithe, tawny creature, with ears laid back, and with flashing eyes, was crouched down over some smaller

animal, savagely regarding the boy. It had been rending and tearing the smaller creature, and, at a glance Frank saw that it was a fox. It had been the whines and barking of the fox that he had heard, and the groans had come when death followed the stroke of the sharp claws of the wildcat, for it was that savage and tawny beast that now glared at Frank—a wildcat disturbed at its meal.

Frank saw before him one of the tragedies of the forest. The fox had been preying on a wild turkey, as was evidenced by the half-consumed carcass, and the feathers scattered all about. Then along had come the wildcat, intent on a meal, had crept upon the feasting fox, had leaped down from a tree, and, with the quickness of light, had given the death stroke. Now Frank had come, the fourth factor in the woodland tragedy. [145]

For a moment the lad stood regarding the savage creature, whose blazing eyes never left his face. Then, as cautiously as he could, Frank brought his gun to bear. Oh, how he wished he had his rifle now, for well he knew that more than a charge of small shot was needed to kill the big cat.

“But if I can give her both barrels at once, right in the eyes, maybe it will do for her,” he mused quickly.

Once more came the menacing growl, and the cat crouched for a spring. From her jaws dripped foam and blood. Frank raised his gun, and took quick aim. He pulled both triggers together, and the recoil nearly sent him over backwards. But he recovered his balance with an effort, and gazed through the smoke at the crouching creature.

To his horror, instead of seeing her stretched out dead, or writhing in the final struggle, the lad saw the big, tawny body bounding over the snow toward him. On she came, growling and snarling, and Frank saw that he had fired too high, and that with the small shot he had only succeeded in slightly wounding the wildcat on top of the head. The creature’s eyes had escaped, and, now with the yellow orbs blazing with deadly hate and anger, she leaped forward as though to serve the lad as she had served the fox. [146]

“Can I get in another shot?” thought Frank. He “broke” his breach-loader, the empty shells flew out, and his hand sought his belt, to slip in two fresh cartridges.

To his horror he found that they would not fit! He had brought out his smaller gauge shotgun, and the cartridges in it were the only ones available. They had been fired. Those in his belt were too large. And the wildcat was bounding toward him!

There was but one thing to do, and Frank did it. Wheeling quickly he raced for the nearest tree which would sustain him. Fortunately there was one not far away. He managed to reach it well ahead of the wildcat, and began scrambling up. He dropped his gun, since it was useless, and only hindered him in his ascent. And he needed to make all the haste he could, for he was hardly well up out of reach of the cruel claws, before the enraged brute bounded against the foot of the tree with a snarl.

“She’ll come up after me, as sure as fate!” thought Frank desperately. “I’ve got to stop her in some way.”

The cat began climbing, an easy task with her long, sharp claws. Frank reached up, and saw, over his head a dead branch, that was big and sufficiently strong for his purpose. Working with feverish energy he broke it off, and, when the big cat’s head was close enough the young hunter brought the large end of the stick down on the skull with all his might. [147]

With a howl of rage the big beast loosed its hold, and dropped back to the earth. Then it looked upward, glaring at Frank as if wondering what kind of a foe he was. But not daunted by the reception she met, the animal once more began climbing up. Once more Frank raised the club, and dealt her another severe blow.

“I hope I crack your skull!” he murmured.

But alas for his hopes! The blow was well delivered, and sent the cat back snarling and growling, but the force of it broke the branch off close to the lad’s hand, and the best part of his weapon fell to the ground.

“I’m done for, if she comes back at me!” he thought, but the cat had no such intentions, at present at least. The two blows on the head had stunned her.

Down at the foot of the tree crouched the brute, as if to announce that she would wait there until after dark, when she would have the advantage. [148]

“I’m in for it now,” mused the lad. “Treed by a wildcat, and nothing with which to shoot her. I *am* in a pickle. The fellows won’t know where to look for me, and I can’t fire any shots to call them. I *am* up against it.”

He made himself as comfortable as possible on his small perch. At his first movement the cat started up from her crouching position, as if to be on the alert, but, seeing that her prey did not attempt to descend, she again stretched out, and began moving her paw over the place where the shot had torn her scalp.

For half an hour Frank sat there, turning over the situation in his mind. He hoped the cat might



tire of waiting, or go back to the fox she had killed, but the animal showed no such intentions. Noon came, and there was no change. Frank was tired and cramped, and he began to feel the pangs of hunger. He moved about, seeking to be comfortable, and every time he shifted his position the wildcat would growl, as if resenting it.

"Maybe when I don't come home to dinner the fellows will come looking for me," thought the treed lad. "They may be able to trace my footsteps."

But the afternoon began to wane, and no relief came. Frank was desperately weary, and was beginning to be alarmed. Not only was the prospect of a night in the tree most unpleasant, but he feared that after dark he could not watch to ward off the approach of the beast, whose ability to see after nightfall was better than was his. Then, too, he feared that his muscles might get numb, and that he would fall. [149]

"Well, I'll cut another club, and have it in readiness," Frank thought, and, as there were no more suitable dead limbs that would serve, he whittled off with his knife, a tough green branch, that would answer as a club.

This movement on his part was resented by the cat, who raised up and tried her fore paws on the tree trunk, tearing off bits of bark. But she did not venture to climb. The memory of the blows on the head probably deterred her.

It began to get dusk. The cat seemed to know this, and began prowling about the foot of the tree, as if waiting until the veil of night had completely fallen before making another attack. Now and then she growled and once howled dismally.

"Maybe she's got a mate," thought Frank. "If two of them come at me——" He didn't like to dwell on that.

The big cat curled herself at the foot of the tree, and looked up at the boy, not far above her head. Then, as Frank carefully shifted his position, to get rid of a cramp in his left leg, his fingers came in contact with his belt filled with cartridges. [150]

"Oh, if I had only brought the right size, or else had my other gun," he mused regretfully. "There'd soon be a different story to tell. As it is——"

He paused, struck by a sudden thought.

"By Jove! I'll try it!" he cried. "Wonder why I didn't think of it before."

Taking out a cartridge, and bracing himself in the crotch of a limb so as to have both hands free, he dug out, with his knife, the wad that held the shot in place. He let the leaden pellets fall to the ground. At this the cat growled, but the lad paid no attention to her.

Next he removed the wad over the powder, and poured the black grains out into his hand. From his pocket he took a piece of paper, and, emptying the powder into this he laid it in his cap, which he managed to balance on a limb in front of him. Working rapidly in the fast-gathering darkness he emptied several cartridges, until he had a sufficient quantity of powder in the paper.

This he wadded up tightly, leaving one end twisted into a sort of fuse. Next he tied a string to his improvised bomb. [151]

With trembling fingers he lighted the fuse, and then, when it was burning well, he began to lower the paper of powder toward the wildcat. The beast snarled as she saw the tiny flame approaching, but she did not withdraw. Rather she reared on her hind feet, and was about to strike at the little tongue of fire.

This was better than Frank hoped for. An instant later there was a big puff of flame, and a dull report. The powder in the paper had exploded almost in the face of the wildcat.

With a scream of rage and pain the creature dropped to all fours, and began clawing the dirt and snow. The fire had burned her severely, and she was wild with pain.

"Good!" exulted Frank. "I wish I had another!" He peered down at the snarling cat, and began to open more cartridges. But it was too dark to see to work, and he had to stop, for he spilled the powder.

Suddenly, above the yelps and growls of the brute, the lad in the tree heard a hail far off in the woods. He listened a moment, and then shouted:

"Here I am, fellows. Over here! I'm treed by a wildcat! Look out!"

"We're coming," shouted Bart's voice. "Where are you?" [152]

Frank rapidly twisted some paper together, lighted it, and waved the improvised torch above his head. He hardly dared descend yet. A shout told him that his light had been seen. Then, off through the woods, he saw the flicker of a lantern.

"Come up easy," he cautioned. "The brute is still here, though I burned her some."

He dropped the blazing paper to the ground. It flared up, and the cat, with a snarl, sprang away.

An instant later a shot rang out, and the beast turned a somersault, falling over backward—dead. Bart had seen the tawny body in the gleam from the burning paper, and had fired in the nick of time.

“You can come down now, Frank,” he cried, as he and the other chums rushed up to where the wildcat was still twitching in death.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

[153]

### THE MYSTERIOUS MAN AGAIN

Frank’s story was soon told, and he was helped back toward camp by his comrades, for he was stiff from his long position in the tree.

“You want to be more careful of your gun, next time,” cautioned Bart, “and take the right one.”

“Yes, and you want to take some grub with you,” added Fenn. “You never can tell what will happen in the woods. Hungry, aren’t you?”

“Don’t mention it,” begged Frank, earnestly. “I could even eat pancakes flavored with soap powder.”

“Well, we’ll soon be in camp,” remarked Ned. “We’ve got plenty to eat there. We would have started searching for you long before this, but we supposed you had taken some grub, and would stay all day. But when it got dark, and you didn’t show up, we feared something had happened.”

“Something had,” observed Frank earnestly.

“We had tramped about for some time before we saw the puff of the explosion,” went on Bart. “You had a great head on you, Frank, to think of that.”

“I had to think of something,” was the response. “Wow! but that beast was a savage one!”

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They reached camp in due time, and Frank was provided with a good meal, and plenty of hot coffee.

The warm weather continued for the next two days, and the air was almost like spring. The boys thoroughly enjoyed it, and went on long tramps through the woods. They were on the lookout for the mate of the wildcat, but saw no further traces of the ugly beasts.

There was a stream, not far from camp, and there the chums went one day, cut a hole through the ice, which was too thick to melt much, and fished for pickerel, with such good luck that they had a fish dinner that day. Then on several succeeding days they went hunting, getting some wild turkeys, and some wild ducks, which gave them a variety of food for their larder.

For a week they lived this way, and Bart was in hopes of bagging a deer, since the snow had disappeared, and it was lawful to shoot them. But, though he tramped far and near he did not see any. Once he descried one on top of a distant hill, but it was too far off for a successful shot, and when he started on the trail the animal dashed into a thick forest, and was soon lost. Bart returned to camp, somewhat dispirited.

He practiced at a target occasionally, as did his chums, but they could not begin to equal Bart in making bullseyes, though Ned ran his friend a close second.

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The boys tramped about, did the work necessary in camp, hunted and fished and thoroughly enjoyed life during the mild weather of the unexpected thaw. Not that they did not enjoy it when it was cold and snapping, or even snowing, but they could do much more when the weather was milder.

“But we’ll pay for this,” declared Bart one day, when they had started on their second week of camp life. “We’ll have a storm soon, I’m thinking.”

“Let it come,” declared Fenn. “We’re ready for it, and the folks know we’re all right,” for they had walked to a cross-roads rural free delivery box that day, and deposited some letters to go to Darewell, as they knew the mail carrier would collect the missives.

“You won’t get your deer if the snow comes,” spoke Frank, “and, by the looks of the sky, we’ll have a flurry before night.”

“I know it, and that’s the reason I’m going out this afternoon, and have another try for it. Are you fellows coming?”

“I’m not,” announced Fenn. “Too tired. I’m going to stay here and chop wood. You fellows won’t do it, and we’ve got to have some for the fires.”

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“I’ll help,” agreed Frank.

“Will you come, Ned?” went on Bart.

"Nope, I'm going to clean my gun. There'll be some good shooting after the storm, and I want to be ready for it."

"All right, then I'll go alone," decided Bart. "I want a deer," and putting a supply of cartridges in his belt, and seeing that his gun magazine was filled, he started off.

For some time Bart tramped on without a sight of anything. Then, when he was going through a lonely part of the forest, if one part of that uninhabited place was more lonely than another, he was startled by a crashing sound in the underbrush. He started, and threw up his gun in anticipation, but he could not help laughing when a big rabbit, as startled as the lad was himself, stood up and looked at him.

"Skip away, bunny," remarked Bart with a laugh, "I'm looking for bigger game than you," and he kept on, while the hare scurried for cover.

Bart covered several miles, and, almost unconsciously, he found that he was traveling in the direction of the mud volcano, or boiling spring, having swung around in a half-circle since leaving camp.

"By Jinks!" exclaimed the youth, as he came to a halt in the midst of a little clearing, "I believe I've got an idea. That mud volcano water is partly salty. Now, why shouldn't deer go there to get the salt? They love it and I may catch one there. I never thought of that before. I've read of 'salt licks,' where deer congregate, but I never figured out that our boiling spring might be one. I'll keep on to there, and maybe I'll get a shot." [157]

This gave a new direction to his chase, and he turned to make his way to the spring. He had not taken ten steps before he was again startled by a crashing in the underbrush. He thought it was another rabbit, and he was about to pass on when he looked up, and saw, through the leafless trees, a big buck gazing full at him. It was only for an instant, and before Bart could bring his rifle to bear the deer had bounded off.

"He's headed for the boiling spring!" cried Bart in his excitement. "Now I'll get him! I hope I get a shot before it begins to snow, and it's likely to do it any minute now."

Bart started off rapidly in the direction taken by the buck, with his gun in readiness for a quick shot, though he hardly hoped to get one until he had continued the chase for some time longer. The crashing in the bushes encouraged him, and told him that his quarry was ahead of him, and on he rushed.

Almost before he knew it he was within sight of the boiling spring, and he checked his pace, hoping to come upon the buck licking the salty deposit from the rocks in the little stream that flowed from the place where the mud volcano was. He thought the animal might even stop for a drink in a fresh spring, that was not far from the salty one. [158]

As Bart peered through the bushes, with his rifle ready to throw up to his shoulder, he was conscious of some movement in the underbrush on the other side of the spring.

"He's made a circle, and he's here ahead of me—on the other side," thought the lad. "I think I've got him!"

With eager eyes he watched. The bushes continued to move and vibrate. Something seemed to be coming down to the edge of the spring. Bart's nerves were on edge. His hands were almost trembling, but he controlled himself by an effort, and he raised his gun slowly to take aim.

He saw something brown moving amid the brambles. It looked like the head of a deer. Bart slowly and cautiously raised his gun to his shoulder. He drew a bead on the brown object.

A moment later, and just as the lad was about to press the trigger, there stepped into view a man! It was a man and not a deer that Bart had been about to fire at, and a cold chill came over him. He had paused just in time. [159]

But as he looked at the individual whom he had mistaken for a deer he felt a second tremor of excitement, for, as he had a glimpse of his face Bart was made aware that the man was none other than the one about whom there was such a mystery—the man who had sneaked into the schoolhouse the night the diamond bracelet was stolen—the midnight visitor at the camp, perhaps.

At the same instant that Bart was aware of this the man saw him. He hesitated—made a gesture as if of despair, and turned to dive into the bushes. A moment later there came a sudden snow squall, shutting off from Bart's view the man he had so nearly shot.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### LOST IN THE WOODS

Pausing for an instant to get his bearings, Bart dashed forward, circled around the edge of the mud volcano, and ran on in the direction he had seen the man take. [160]

"I'm going to catch him," thought the lad, fiercely. "I'm going to get at the bottom of this. Why does he seem to be following us—hanging around our camp? What's he doing here? Did he take the diamond bracelet? I'm going to find out some of those things—when I catch him." He added the last with a grim smile, for, as he went on, and the snow storm increased in fury, Bart was aware that he had no easy task before him.

The swirling white flakes were now so thick that he could hardly see five feet in advance, and he was soon made unpleasantly aware of this, for he collided, with no little force, into a tree. The shock threw him backward, and he nearly dropped his gun, but it had one good effect, for it made him pause to consider what he was doing.

"I wonder if there's any use in me going on like this?" Bart reflected. "He's got a good start of me, and he evidently knows these roads as well as I do. Guess I'd better go back to camp, get the fellows, and then see if I can trail him. Though if it keeps on snowing it's not going to be easy to see his footprints. I wonder if I can hear anything of him?"

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He paused in a listening attitude, but the only sounds that came to him were those of the wind howling through the leafless branches of the trees, and the swish of the snowflakes as they swirled downward. Once Bart heard a crashing amid the underbrush to one side. He darted in that direction, thinking it was the fugitive.

There came, at that instant, a lull in the storm, and, peering at the lad from under the shelter of a pine tree was the big buck, the chase of which had led to such unexpected results. Bart fired, point blank, but he saw the deer bound away, and he knew he had only wounded it slightly, if at all. He started after it, but a moment later the snow began again, more thickly than before, and everything was blotted out.

"That settles it," murmured Bart, grimly, "back to camp for mine. No use keeping up the chase to-day."

It was not without considerable regret that the lad retraced his steps. He wanted, very much, to get the buck, and he wanted still more to capture the mysterious man who seemed to be playing such an important part in the lives of himself and his chums.

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"I'll get the other fellows, and then we'll see if we can't trail him," mused Bart, as he neared the camp.

To his delight, just before he reached it, the snow ceased falling, and he felt that now there was a chance to trace the man by means of his footsteps, for they would not be covered by the white crystals. But there was the promise of more snow, and Bart knew they had little time to spare.

"Come on, boys!" cried Bart, when he came in sight of the tents, and saw Ned and the others sweeping away the snow from the front entrances. "Come on. I'm after him!"

"Who?" demanded Frank.

"The mysterious man! Come—no time to lose!" and Bart rapidly told what he had seen.

"Wait until I get my gun, and I'll be with you!" cried Fenn.

"Aren't we going to have dinner first?" asked Ned.

"We'll eat a light lunch, and take a snack with us," proposed Frank. "We don't want to waste too much time."

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In a little while they were ready to start, each one with a few sandwiches, while Bart, in addition, carried a small coffee pot, and a supply of the ground material for making the beverage in the woods; water could be had by melting snow over a fire they would build.

Bart led the way toward the mud volcano, the location of which was now well fixed in the minds of the boys.

"Here's where I first sighted the deer," Bart explained when he reached the place. "By Jinks! I wish I could have potted him, though! He was a beaut!"

"And where did you see our mysterious friend?" asked Frank.

"Not until I got to the spring. We'll soon be up to it."

But when they reached the spot, which, because of the warmth of the water, contained no trace of snow, though elsewhere the ground was white, there was, of course, no evidences of the man, save for blurred footprints.

"That's right where he stood," declared Bart, "and he went off in this direction."

"Then it's up to us to follow," asserted Ned. "We can see his tracks. They're pretty plain now, but they won't be in a little while, for it's going to snow more."

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They hurried on, trailing the man like officers of the law after a criminal. The footprints were plainly visible in the snow, being blurred occasionally by little drifts that had blown over them. They showed that the man had run a good part of the way, for the marks were far apart and irregular.

They had gone on for perhaps a mile, seeing no sign of their quarry, but loath to give up, when there was a sudden darkening of the atmosphere, the wind increased in violence, and then the air was again filled with flying flakes, so thick that the lads could not see ten feet ahead.

"Might as well give up now," called Bart. "His tracks will be covered in five minutes."

"Let's wait a bit, and see if it stops snowing," proposed Frank, and they did, standing in the shelter of some trees. But the white flakes showed no inclination to stop, and with something like despair in their hearts the four chums prepared to return to camp.

"And it's about time, too," remarked Ned, looking at his watch. "It's after five, and it will soon be dark. Let's eat. I'm hungry."

"Oh, wait a while," advised Bart. "We'll soon be back at camp. I think I know a short cut, and then we can have a hot supper." [165]

"Well, go ahead," agreed Frank. "A short cut will be just the thing. I'm tired."

Bart started off with an air of confidence, hesitated a moment, and then plunged his hand in his pocket.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he burst out.

"What's the matter?" inquired Fenn.

"My compass—I haven't got it. Let me take one of you fellow's."

"I haven't any," said Fenn. "Left it in camp."

"So did I," added Frank and Ned.

"You did?" asked Bart, blankly.

There was a pause—the boys knew what it meant to be out in the woods in a snowstorm, without the little swinging needle to guide them.

"What did you do with the one you had, Bart?" asked Frank. "You had one, didn't you, when you were out after the deer, and saw the man?"

"Sure I did, but I took it out of my pocket when I stuffed this lunch in, and must have forgotten to put it back. I remember now, I left it on the box in the tent. But I thought you fellows would sure have one."

"Well, we haven't," said Frank, with an uneasy laugh. "What's to be done?"

"Oh, I dare say we can get back—somehow," went on Bart. "Come on, fellows. I think I know the way." [166]

They started off, with no light hearts, and tramped through the blinding snow, but it was with little confidence. Several times Bart stopped to get his bearings. Once he and Fenn disputed about a certain turn, and Bart so insisted that he was right, that the other two lads agreed with him. It grew darker, and they wandered into drifts, stumbled into unexpected hollows, and brought up against trees, sometimes falling over stumps. At last Bart said:

"Fellows, there's no use going on this way any farther. I'm off the track. I shouldn't have started out. The fact of the matter is that we're lost in the woods, and we've got to make the best of it!"

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## CHAPTER XX

 [167]

### A NIGHT OF MISERY

Bart's announcement brought looks of blank astonishment and dismay to the faces of his chums. They had so depended on him, that, to have him go back on them in this fashion, was a shock.

"Are you sure we're lost?" asked Ned, slowly.

"No doubt of it, in my mind," answered Bart, and he laughed a little. The strain of keeping up the pace on a route he was not at all sure of, was harder than admitting the fact of being lost in the wilderness.

"What are we going to do?" asked Fenn, rather helplessly.

"The first thing to do will be to gather wood for a fire before it's too dark to see," announced Bart, with assumed if not real cheerfulness. "Then we'll make a blaze, and eat."

The mention of food was cheering in itself, to say nothing of the prospect of a fire, and then, too, the act of being busy took from the minds of the lads the thoughts that they were lost.

In a short time they had gathered quite a pile of wood. Some of it was dry, for it was under the [168]

low-lying branches of spruce and hemlock trees, and the snow had been kept from it. From the interior of hollow logs some "punk" was obtained, and this, together with some dead branches, that had lodged in a hollow under a big rock, made enough fuel to get a blaze started.

"But where are we going to stay to-night?" asked Frank, when the flickering flames had dispelled some of the darkness.

"Don't worry about that," advised Bart. "Some of these fir trees are as good as a tent, and nearly as dry. We can stay under them until morning."

"Will we be any better off by morning?" asked Ned, dubiously.

"Lots better," replied Bart, cheerfully. "But let's get ready for some hot coffee. Lucky we brought the pot along. Ned, you gather some snow in it, and we'll put it on to melt. Fenn, you get some flat stones, to make a sort of fireplace. Frank, you cut some branches from that hemlock, and make cots under that big tree over there. I'll help. That will be our tent to-night. Everybody get busy, now."

Ordering his chums about in this way was the best thing Bart could have done, and, in a short time, everyone was so occupied that he had no time to think of the unpleasant situation. Soon the coffee was boiling away, and Bart had arranged an old log, under the shelter of a tree, for a table. Thereon their frugal meal was spread out. [169]

Luckily each lad carried a drinking cup with him, and this served in which to dispense the coffee. They had no milk, of course, but Bart had been thoughtful enough to bring along some sugar, so the beverage was not at all unpalatable. Then, by the light of the campfire, they sat about, munched their sandwiches, drank the strong coffee, and talked of their afternoon's adventure.

"Why, that isn't a half bad place to sleep," remarked Fenn, as he looked at the "bunk" Bart and Frank had made.

"Sure, it's great," added Ned, but it was probably the cheerfulness engendered by a hot drink and food that made them see things with more hopeful eyes.

They had no blankets, but they wore thick clothing, and had on heavy coats, so their situation was not so bad. Besides, the weather was not cold, though it was growing more so, and the snow still fell thickly. The heavy branches of the tree under which the boys crawled, served to protect them.

They stretched out, and hoped to be able to sleep, in order that morning might come the more quickly, but either the strong coffee, or the unusual situation, kept them wide awake. They lay close together, for the sake of warmth, but first Bart would turn over, restlessly, and then, in sequence, Fenn, Ned and Frank would do the same thing. [170]

"What's the matter; can't you fellows sleep?" asked Ned, at length.

"No; can you?" inquired Bart.

"Nope. Let's talk."

"All right. Say, what do you suppose that man was doing around the mud volcano?" ventured Frank.

They had discussed this, in all its bearings, several times that afternoon, but it was a subject full of new possibilities, and they eagerly welcomed another chance to talk about it.

"I think he was after mud turtles," said Bart.

"Say," asked Fenn, suddenly, "did it ever strike you fellows that this fellow might be a detective?"

"A detective?" gasped the other three.

"Yes; after us," went on Stumpy. "You know we're suspected of taking that bracelet. It hasn't been found, and what would be more natural than for Professor Long to hire a private detective, and have him shadow us. I didn't think of that until just now, but I'll wager I'm right. You'll find that man is a detective, and he's watching us; trying to get a trace of the bracelet. Maybe he thinks we have it, and are going to hide it off in the woods here." [171]

"Say!" cried Bart, "that's not a bad 'think' of yours, Stumpy. I wouldn't be surprised but what you are right," and then they fell to discussing that aspect of the case. It was quite a reversal of the former situation. Instead of them being after the mysterious man, he might be after the chums.

"But how do you account for him entering the school that night, before the bracelet was stolen?" asked Frank.

"Maybe he was shadowing us—or, rather, you fellows—" said Fenn, who, as will be remembered, was not present on that occasion. "Or, maybe we're mistaken, and the man Bart saw to-day may not have been the one who entered the school."

"Oh, he's the same one," declared Bart, with conviction.

There was more discussion, and, if it did nothing more, it served a good turn, for it shunted the thoughts of the lads into new channels, and they began to feel sleepy.

But, just as they were about to doze off, there came an exclamation of dismay from Bart.

“What’s the matter?” asked Bart.

“Stream of water trickling down my neck,” was the answer. “I believe it’s raining!”

There was no doubt of it. Instead of turning colder it had grown warmer, and the snow had changed to rain. The tree, thick as were the branches, was little protection against the rain, and, as it increased to a regular downpour, the plight of our heroes was miserable in the extreme. There was nothing to be done but make the best of it. They huddled together, turned up the collars of their coats, and tried to crawl to spots more or less protected. But they were soon pretty wet, and, to add to their misery, they saw their fire die down, and go out.

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“Wow! This is fierce!” exclaimed Ned, as a stream of water trickled down his neck. “I wish it was morning. It wouldn’t be so bad if we could travel.” But there was no help for it, and they had to sit there in the storm and darkness, waiting for daylight.

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## CHAPTER XXI

[173]

### UNEXPECTED HELP

Never had hours seemed to drag so slowly. There was nothing to be heard save the drip, drip of the rain in the forest, and the mournful sound of the wind in the trees. Once Bart went out, and tried to coax into a blaze the few, faint, remaining embers of the fire, but it was out of the question. He did have it started, but a swaying of the trees overhead sent down a shower of drops, and the blaze was completely extinguished.

“Hang the luck!” exclaimed Bart, as he hurried back into the partial shelter of the tree under which were his chums. “It’s all my fault, for not keeping my compass.”

“No, we should have kept ours,” declared Fenn. “It’s up to us, too.”

“Well, then, I shouldn’t have seen that mysterious man,” went on Bart, determined to blame himself in some fashion, “and we wouldn’t have come on this wild-geese chase.”

“No, it’s a good thing you did see him,” said Frank. “We want to know what he’s up to.”

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“I only hope he’s as badly off as we are,” put in Ned, with a shiver. “But say, fellows,” he went on, in a few minutes, “don’t you think it’s slacking up some?”

They all listened. There was no doubt about it, the rain was less in violence, but the wind was rising.

“Maybe it’s going to clear,” suggested Fenn.

“If it does, it’ll be colder,” was Bart’s opinion. It did clear, shortly after that, and there was a decided drop in temperature. Through the boughs of their shelter the boys could see the stars coming out. Miserable, and feeling chilled to the bone, the chums crowded close together.

It soon grew so cold that they had to come out of their shelter to move about and get their blood in circulation. But this served a good purpose, for it gave them something to do. At last a faint streak of light appeared in the east—the herald of the rising sun—and, a little later, the red rim of Old Sol appeared. Never was the big luminary more welcome.

“Now for a fire!” cried Ned, “that is, if we can find any dry wood.” They did manage to pick up a few sticks from inside a hollow log where they had placed them the night before, in anticipation of some emergency, and soon they were warming themselves in front of the flames. But there was nothing to eat, and no coffee left, though Bart did manage to make a potful of what passed for it out of the grounds of what they had used the night before.

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“Well, let’s start for camp,” proposed Frank, when they had drunk the hot, if not palatable beverage. “Think you can find the way, Bart?”

“I guess so—I’ll try, anyhow.”

They started off, getting the direction as best they could by the sun, and for an hour tramped forward, feeling, on the whole, rather miserable, but hoping to soon be in camp.

Several hours passed, and they seemed to be no nearer the place where their tents were. Bart’s face wore a puzzled look. He stared around at the trees, as if they would help him solve the problem. Then he said:

“Fellows, I’m sorry, but I don’t know where we are.”

“Lost again, do you mean?” asked Ned.

"I don't believe we've been un-lost, if that's the proper term," went on Bart. "I guess we haven't been on the right path since last night."

"What are we going to do?" asked Frank, helplessly. "I'm as hungry as a bear."

"And I'm almost frozen," added Bart, with a shiver, "so you're no worse off than the rest of us," and there was a note of impatience in his voice. [176]

The chums looked at each other. Their plight was disagreeable, not to say desperate. They knew that the forest in which they had encamped was large in extent, and was seldom visited. If they had to spend another night and day in it the consequences might be serious.

"Well," began Bart, "I suppose the only thing to do is to keep on. We may strike the right path. There are several trails around here."

He was about to start off again, when they were all startled by hearing a crackling in the underbrush. It seemed to come from their left.

"Get your gun ready, Bart," whispered Fenn. "Maybe it's a deer."

"Maybe it's that mysterious man," came from Ned.

Bart had raised his rifle, and, a moment later some one emerged from the thick trees, and stood on the edge of a little clearing, confronting the boys. The newcomer was a youth of about their own age, and on his back was evidently a camping pack. He carried a gun, and at the sight of Bart, with half-raised rifle, the other slowly brought his weapon around for quick use.

But Fenn, who had been staring at the latest arrival with eager eyes, suddenly cried out: [177]

"It's William Perry! Don't you know him, fellows? The lad whose mother took us in at the time of the blizzard—William Perry—whom we found in a snowbank in New York!"

"William Perry?" faltered Bart, lowering his rifle.

"William Perry?" came from Ned and Frank, in a sort of a chorus.

"The Darewell Chums!" exclaimed the other lad, while wonder spread over his face. "The Darewell Chums here?"

Fenn started toward William on the run. He was soon shaking hands with him, and leading him over to where Ned, Frank and Bart stood.

"However in the world did you get here?" asked Bart. "Are you lost, too?"

"No," replied William Perry, "I'm working for a lumber company, and I'm on my way from one camp to another. I had to spend last night in the woods. But what are you doing here?"

"We've been out in the woods all night, too," said Frank. "We're camping, but we lost our way," and he quickly explained the circumstances.

"Where's your camp?" asked William, who, as my readers will remember, was the son of the widow in whose house the chums found shelter during a blizzard that overtook them when they were on a hunting trip, as told in the second volume of this series entitled "The Darewell Chums in the City." Later they found William in New York. He had gone to become a sailor, but had deserted because of a brutal captain, and went into hiding. He was found half frozen in a snowbank, from which the chums rescued him, and sent him back home. [178]

"Our camp?" repeated Bart, in answer to William's questions, "I only wish we knew where it was."

"I mean what's it near?" went on William.

"Oh, the mud volcano," replied Frank, "if you know where that is."

William did, and quickly said so.

"I've been working for this lumber concern for about six months," he went on, "and I know these woods pretty well. But I always go prepared to spend a night in them, as I had to last night."

"And can you show us the way to our camp?" asked Ned.

"Sure. You're not more than five miles from it. I guess you've been going around in a circle. Come on, I'll show you," and with the confidence of experience William Perry led the way through the woods. He had appeared in the nick of time.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### CHRISTMAS IN CAMP

With new hope in their hearts the chums followed William. They did not mind the cold or [179]



hunger now, but hurried on, intent on reaching their tents, donning dry clothing, and starting a roaring fire. Then they would have something to eat.

On the way William told them of his new position. Following his experience in New York, after he had run away from the cruel sea captain, he had worked at odd jobs. Then, on his return to his home, near Darewell, the chums' fathers had gotten a good position for him.

Some time previous to his opportune meeting with the lost lads, William explained, he had taken service with the lumber company, which owned most of the woods where the winter camp was. It was part of the youth's duties to go from camp to camp with documents and messages.

"It's fine, too," he said, "when the weather is good. When it's too bad, I stay in camp with the men, but I must have made a miscalculation this time, for I was caught in the storm. But it happened for the best, after all."

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"That's what," agreed Bart. "If it hadn't been for you I don't know what we'd have done. Can you stay in camp with us for a while?"

"Well, long enough to have dinner, if you've got enough to eat."

"Oh, we've got plenty," Ned assured him. "Bart's a good shot, you know," and the chums took turns in explaining how they had come to make a winter camp in the woods. They said nothing about the missing diamond bracelet, however, nor about the mysterious man.

Camp was reached none too soon for the comfort of our heroes. They found nothing disturbed, and from their stock of dry wood, under one tent, a roaring fire was made. The lads changed to dry clothes, had a hot meal, which William Perry shared with them, and then he said he must be on his way.

"Can't you spend a week with us?" invited Frank, as the lumber lad was about to go.

"I'm afraid not. This is my busy season, you know."

"I have it!" cried Fenn.

"Let's hear it, Stumpy," suggested Bart. "Out with it."

"Well," went on the fleshy lad, "next Tuesday is Christmas. You don't have to work Christmas, do you, William?"

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"No, I guess not."

"Then I'll tell you what to do. Spend Christmas here with us. We're going to have a good time. Not much in the way of presents, for we didn't bring any out in the woods, but we'll have a Christmas tree, even if Bart does want to hang up his stockings," and Fenn winked at his chums.

"It sounds good," spoke William, wistfully. "I don't believe I can get home for Christmas, or I would go see my folks."

"And we'll have roast wild turkey, rabbit stew, partridge potpie and bear steak, also some venison, if Bart has any luck," went on Fenn.

"It sounds better and better."

"And then there's going to be a plum pudding," added Fenn proudly.

"A plum pudding!" they all cried.

"Yes, I brought all the materials along. We're going to have a regular plum pudding for Christmas!"

"Then I'm coming," promised William. "I'll get along now, and hurry on to the lumber camp. I'll ask the boss for a few days off, so I can get here Saturday, and stay over until the next Wednesday, which will be the day after Christmas."

They voted that plan a good one, and soon afterward William was tramping back through the woods, having promised to be on hand at the time specified.

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The chums felt no ill effects from their night in the woods, for they followed Bart's advice and took plenty of hot ginger tea, made from the materials Alice had supplied.

The next few days were busy ones for the campers. They made some improvements about the tents, arranged an extra bed for William, and brought in a good supply of wood, which was put under shelter. Bart went hunting several times, and did manage to get a buck, but it was smaller than the one he had chased. Several rabbits, a number of partridges, and some wild turkeys were shot, which, together with the supplies already on hand, promised an abundance for Christmas.

Fenn, meanwhile, true to his promise, was busy over the plum pudding, which, he said, would take several days to make.

"I should think it would," remarked Ned, one afternoon, when Fenn was occupied with chopping bowl and knife in the cook tent. "It's a wonder you didn't start last Fourth of July, Stumpy."

"That's all right, I know how to make this pudding," asserted Fenn, with a superior air.

"He's mighty proud of it," whispered Frank to Ned, as they moved away. "I wish we could play some joke on him."

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"Maybe we can."

"I'll think of one," went on Frank, who had not yet gotten over his failure with the pancakes, for which he partly blamed Fenn.

William arrived that Saturday afternoon, and was soon made to feel at home in the camp. He was given a spare gun, and on the Monday before Christmas, all five went for a hunt, though they did not expect to go far from camp.

They bagged some small game, and Bart made a remarkable kill of a brace of partridges, getting one each with his left and right barrels, when it seemed that both birds would escape.

"That's fine shooting, Bart," remarked William.

"Oh, Bart's a good shot," answered Ned proudly, and not at all jealous. But before long Bart was destined to make a more remarkable shot than that.

As the boys had said there was to be practically nothing in the way of giving each other presents while in camp. Fenn, for the joke of the thing, rigged up a small Christmas tree, on which were hung pretended gifts.

"Well, let's get to bed early to-night," suggested Frank on Christmas eve.

"And get up a good appetite for my plum pudding," suggested Fenn. "It's a dandy! I've got it all made, and all I have to do is to warm it, and make the sauce. It's in that box," and he pointed proudly to one in the cook tent.

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Christmas was ushered in with a snow storm, which made the woods a place of beauty. It was not very cold, and the boys, jumping from their beds, wished each other the joys of the season.

Most of the work of getting ready the dinner had been done the day previous, so there was little work Christmas morning. They went hunting, but did not see anything to shoot, and, in fact they did not need anything, as the larder was well stocked.

"Now," ordered Fenn, on their return, "get a move on, fellows. Get the table set, and I'll look after the other things," for the turkey and some partridges had been partly cooked the day previous, and needed only a final turn in the oven. Several dainties had been brought from home, in anticipation of this feast, and they were now set out.

Such a dinner as it was! Eaten in the midst of a silent wilderness, with the keen sharp air of winter all about, the boys had appetites that would have been the envy and despair of a person troubled with dyspepsia.

"Well, have you had enough, fellows?" asked Fenn, as he stood over the platters of turkey and partridge.

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"Too much," groaned Bart.

"I hope you have room for the pudding," spoke Fenn, anxiously. "Don't say you can't eat some of my plum pudding! Why I have a regular sauce, made from a recipe in a book, to eat on it."

"Oh, I guess we can tackle a slice," remarked William, and Fenn went proudly to the stove, where the pudding was being kept hot, and soon had it on the table, flanked by two bowls of savory sauce.

"Let me carve it," begged Ned, with a look at Frank and Bart. "I'll serve it, Fenn. You've done enough."

"All right," agreed the manufacturer of the pudding.

Ned carefully inserted a knife in the smoking heap on the plate. Fenn looked proudly on, as a generous piece was passed to William, as the guest of the day. Then Bart and Frank were served. The latter gave a sudden outcry.

"I say, Fenn!" he demanded. "Is this a joke, or what? I thought you were going to give us plum pudding!"

"So I am. What's that on your plate?"

"I don't know what it is," declared Frank, indignantly, "only I know it isn't plum pudding. It looks like dough, but it's got the queerest collection of plums in it that I ever saw. Look, here's a piece of rubber boot, part of a shoe, some pine cones, some sticks of wood, stones, part of a rope, some brass cartridges and some flannel bandages. Plum pudding! Take a look," and Frank passed to the astonished Fenn, the plate of the dubious looking mess.

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## FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW

For several seconds Fenn said nothing. He sat and gazed in blank dismay at the odd conglomeration on the plate that Frank had passed to him. At last he asked faintly:

"Is it—is it all this—this way?"

"Mine is," declared Bart.

"And mine," added Ned, while William simply passed up his plate for inspection.

"It's a trick! A mean trick!" burst out Fenn indignantly. "And I know who did it! Frank Roscoe, you did this to get even with us for my mistake about putting soap powder in the cocoanut box, so that it got into the pancakes! But that wasn't my fault."

"You had no right to take the cocoanut out of a box, and put soap powder in without telling a fellow," replied Frank. "If it hadn't been for that my cakes would have been a success, and I suppose if you'd been more careful your plum pudding wouldn't have so much trash in. As it is I don't see how we can eat it," and he poked gingerly at the mess on his plate. [188]

"Well, you fellows may call this a joke, but I don't!" burst out Fenn, now angry in earnest, and he started to leave the table.

"Hold on, old chap. Wait a minute," advised Bart, soothingly. "I guess it's gone far enough. William, just hand out the other pudding, will you?"

The visitor, with a grin, took a covered dish from behind the stove, where it had been set to keep warm. He lifted off the cover, and displayed to the astonished Fenn the original plum pudding, smelling most delicious, and smoking hot.

"Try some of this," said Ned. "Maybe it will be better."

"But I—what—where—what makes—is it——" stammered Fenn, and then his chums burst into a laugh.

"Yes, it's the original pudding," explained Frank. "We just wanted to have a little fun with you, that's all. We hid away the pudding you made, and, at the last minute, substituted one of our own that contained all the odds and ends we could pick up in camp, held together with a lot of dough. I guess we can throw it away now, and eat the real thing," and he emptied his plate, and those of his companions, of the dubious mess, and dished out some of the real plum pudding. [189]

"Ah! Um! This is something like!" murmured Ned, with his mouth full. "Great stuff, Stumpy!"

"Do you like it?" asked the now delighted Fenn.

"Sure!" came in an enthusiastic chorus, and the Christmas dinner was well rounded off by the pudding that Fenn had made with such care.

William spent the remainder of the day in camp with his friends. They went for a walk in the afternoon, did some shooting at targets, for Bart decreed that the game must have a holiday as well as the hunters, and at night, inside the snug tent, with the fire blazing brightly in the stove, and the cold wind blowing outside, they spent a jolly evening, singing songs and telling stories.

William bade his friends good-bye the next morning, and started off through the woods, with his pack upon his back. The chums felt a little lonesome after his departure, but it soon wore off, for there was much to do, to get in wood and water, straighten up the camp, and prepare for a storm, which, according to all the evidences, was soon to break.

It did that night. All the next day, the following night, and part of the next day the wind blew with unabated violence, and the snow was heaped in big drifts.

Fortunately the camp was in a sheltered position, and the drifts were not high immediately around it, but when the boys ventured out they found it hard traveling, for the snow was deep. All around, the woods were covered with a mantle of white, which had sifted down through the trees, while the firs, spruces, hemlocks and pines, which had heavy foliage that caught the white crystals, were mounds of white. [190]

"It's a good thing we had plenty to eat," observed Bart, as he and his chums looked around the camp, "for we never could have gotten it during the storm."

"That's right," agreed Fenn, "but, as it is, we'll have to get something soon, unless we want to live on canned stuff. The fresh meat is nearly gone." For, while practically prisoners in their tents during the storm, they had eaten considerable, and the cupboard was somewhat depleted.

"Oh, we'll soon stock up again," declared Bart. "It will be good hunting now, and, though we can't shoot any deer, I may get a chance at another bear, and there will be plenty of rabbits and game birds. We'll take a chance at it after breakfast."

They started out, taking care to have their compasses with them, though they did not expect to go far. No bears were to be seen, but partridge, pheasants and wild turkeys were plentiful, and, in addition to getting a supply of these, they shot several rabbits. [191]

In the tent that evening, before going to bed, the boys were cleaning their guns, in anticipation

of a hunt the following day. Suddenly Fenn, who was nearest the flap, uttered a word of caution.

"Listen," he said in a whisper. "I think I hear something."

The others became silent at once, but they heard nothing.

"Guess it was the wind, Stumpy," observed Bart, as he put an oiled rag down the barrel of his rifle.

"Maybe," assented the stout lad, as he arose and peered out. He came back, remarking: "I didn't see anything, but I thought I heard some one prowling around."

It was not until the next morning that the boys recalled the incident of the night previous. Then Frank, who was walking about the cleared space in front of the tents, to get up an appetite, as he expressed it, uttered a cry of wonder.

"Look here!" he shouted.

"What?" cried Fenn, running up to him.

"A turtle!" went on Frank, picking up one of the reptiles that was slowly crawling along, made sluggish by the cold. "Here's a mud turtle, and see, some one has been walking around here," and he pointed to footprints in the snow. [192]

"I was sure I heard some one last night," declared Fenn, triumphantly.

"That mysterious man again, I'll wager a cookie!" exclaimed Bart. "But what is the turtle doing here? Is it the same one you had, Stumpy?"

"No, it's a different kind. Maybe that mysterious man dropped it, and was hunting around for it."

"Hard to tell," remarked Frank. "Anyhow, isn't it rather queer, Stumpy, to see mud turtles out this time of year?"

"Sure it is. They don't come out by themselves to play around in the snow. Either some one dug this one up, or some one had it and dropped it. Well, I guess the best thing we can say is that it's part of the mystery. If we could only meet with that man who seems so afraid of meeting us, matters might be explained. As it is——" Fenn could only finish by a shrug of his shoulders.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

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### A SHOT IN TIME

For some time the young hunters discussed the curious happening, but they could arrive at no solution of the mystery. Fenn took the turtle, and put it in a box back of the stove, hardly knowing why he did so, except that he had some notion of adding it to his collection, or of giving it to Professor Long.

"Well, there's no use talking about it any more," decided Bart. "Let's get ready and go off on another hunting trip. We haven't got much longer to stay here—not more than two weeks."

This suited his companions, and soon they were cleaning their guns, sorting cartridges and fitting them in their belts, taking care not to make the mistake Frank did, when he was treed by the wildcat; and looking to their clothing and hunting boots.

That afternoon Fenn was seen to be busy in the cook tent. He looked out now and then, disclosing a face on which were many spots of flour.

"What you up to now, Stumpy?" asked Bart, who had finished his hunting preparations. [194]  
"Making something good for grub?"

"Sure," answered Fenn. "How does meat pie strike you?"

"All right, as long as it isn't made of rubber boots and flannel bandages," answered Frank.

"Not this time," declared Stumpy. "There'll be no monkey-shines with this pie. We'll have it hot for breakfast before we start off hunting."

He was busy all the rest of that afternoon, and, judging by the time he spent over it, the pie was going to be an elaborate affair.

Fenn was the first one up the next morning. He tumbled out of his blankets, made a hurried toilette, and, a few minutes later was heard to excitedly cry out:

"Here! That'll do you fellows! A joke's a joke, but this is too much! Where did you put it, you lobsters?"

"Where did we put what?" asked Bart, sticking his head out of the tent flap. "Why this unseemly noise, Stumpy, my son?"

"You know well enough. Where's the meat pie?"

"You don't mean to tell us you've gone and walked in your sleep, and eaten that meat pie we were to have for breakfast; have you?" cried Ned.

"No, I haven't; but some of you fellows have hidden it," declared Fenn. "Come on, now. This is enough of that joke. Tell me where it is, Bart, and I'll warm it up for breakfast."

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"Why, I haven't seen it, Stumpy." Bart's voice had the ring of innocence.

"Then you hid it, Frank."

"Not on your life. I've got too good an appetite."

"Then Ned must have put it somewhere. Tell us, Ned."

"Search me!" cried Ned, earnestly. "I never touched it, Stumpy. Where did you put it when you went to bed?"

"In the cook tent, high up on a box. Some of you fellows must have taken it, for snow fell in the night, and there wasn't a track going into the tent when I came out here. You fellows took it before you came in to bed. Own up, now!"

"I didn't!" declared Bart, and the others asserted their innocence.

"Well, somebody has it!" insisted Stumpy, earnestly. "The meat pie is gone, and it was a dandy, too!"

His distress was evident. The other lads, likewise, felt the loss of their chief breakfast dish. Stumpy looked at them with an eye of suspicion, but they gazed frankly back at him.

"That mysterious man——" began Frank.

"Wait a minute," suggested Bart, who had finished dressing. "I'll take a look."

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He went carefully out to the cook tent, and made several observations. Then he stooped down and carefully brushed off the light layer of snow that had fallen during the night. When the undercrust was exposed he uttered an exclamation.

"There's the tracks of the thief who stole the meat pie, Stumpy," he said, pointing to some marks in the snow.

"Who was it?" asked Ned.

"A fox," answered Bart. "He sneaked into the tent after we had gone to bed, and took the pie off the top of the box where Fenn had set it. Then he carried it off, and the snow obligingly came and covered up his tracks. I guess if we look far enough we can find the basin that held the pie, where the fox dropped it."

They made a circle about the camp, and soon Fenn uttered a cry of triumph.

"Here's the pan!" he called. "It's empty. No meat pie for breakfast this morning," he added regretfully.

"I wish we could shoot that fox!" exclaimed Ned vindictively. "As it is you'll have to give us pancakes, Fenn."

There was no help for it. The pie dish had been licked clean, though how the fox had managed to carry it from the tent was something of a mystery. However, Fenn soon stirred up a mess of cakes from self-raising flour, and a hot breakfast was partaken of, while hunting plans for that day were discussed.

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"I'm going to look for the thieving fox," declared Fenn. "The idea of that dandy pie going to waste!"

"No foxes," insisted Bart. "Nothing less than bear to-day, fellows. We don't want to bother with small game," and they started out.

But the bears seemed to have warning of the approach of the young Nimrods, for none was in evidence, though there were tracks in the snow, which Bart, enthusiastic sportsman that he was, followed hopefully for some distance, until they disappeared down in a deep gulch, where even he did not think it wise to follow.

"Let's separate a bit," suggested Frank, after another mile or two had been covered. "I think there are too many of us here. Ned and I will go off together, and you and Stumpy do the same, Bart."

"All right," agreed the stout lad, and Bart nodded assent.

"Come on over this way, Stumpy," called Bart to his partner. "We'll get all the bears, and leave the rabbits for those fellows."

It was about an hour after this that Bart, who had gone on a little in advance of Fenn, whose wind was not of the best, heard a grunt of surprise from his stout comrade. Mingled with it was an expression of fear. The lads had just passed through a little clearing, and Fenn had stopped to

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look back. In an instant Bart saw what Fenn was gazing at.

It was a noble buck, with wide, branching antlers, and he stood on the edge of the little glade, glaring, as if in defiance, at those who had invaded his home. As Bart looked he saw Fenn raise his rifle.

“Don’t! Don’t shoot, Stumpy!” called Bart. “It’s against the law. There’s tracking snow!”

But it was too late. The stout lad’s rifle cracked, and by the start the buck gave Bart knew his chum had wounded the animal.

The next instant, after a savage shake of his big head, with the spreading horns, and a stamping of his sharp hoofs, the angry animal sprang forward, straight at Fenn. The lad was excited, and was trying to pump another cartridge into the chamber, but the mechanism of his gun had jammed.

“Jump, Fenn! Jump to one side!” shouted Bart, bringing his rifle around. There was no time to think of the game laws. His chum was in danger, and he would be justified in shooting.

But before he could fire the buck was upon poor Fenn. With one sweep of his sharp horns the beast swept the lad aside, knocking him down. Then, with lowered head, the animal tried to gore the prostrate lad. [199]

Fenn saw his one chance for safety, and took it. He scrambled up, grabbed the horns, and held on like grim death. The buck reared, swung around and tried to strike Fenn with the knife-like hoofs. Then a curious thing happened. One of the hoofs went through Fenn’s loose belt, and this so tangled up animal and boy that they both went down in the snow, and rolled over.

“Fenn will be killed,” gasped Bart, and his heart almost stopped beating. But the buck struggled to his feet again, and succeeded in getting his leg free from the belt. Fenn had again grabbed hold of the horns of the infuriated animal, which, at that instant swung around, presenting a good shot to Bart. Should he fire? Could he hit the buck and not injure his chum? It was ticklish work, but the need was great. Bart decided in an instant, took quick aim and fired.

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## CHAPTER XXV

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### NED’S RABBIT TRAP

Bart was using a new kind of powder, and there was no need to wait for the cloud of smoke to clear away to see the result of his shot. He beheld, an instant after the report of his rifle, the big buck swaying unsteadily. The lad was about to fire again, but there was no need, for the animal slowly sank to the snow-covered earth, and fell with a thud.

“Jump back, Stumpy! Jump back!” yelled Bart, fearing that the heavy animal would crash on top of Fenn. But, though the stout lad was incapable of leaping back, he managed to push himself out of danger, from the hold he had on the horns. Then he rolled over the snow, now red from the blood of the buck.

Bart rushed up, with rifle ready for another shot, but there was no need. His one bullet had struck a vital spot, and the big animal was breathing his last. Then Bart turned his attention to his chum.

Fenn was lying curiously white and still upon the snow, and, as Bart looked, he saw a stream of blood coming from under where the lad was stretched out. [201]

“Fenn! Stumpy! Are you hurt?” he cried, laying down his gun, and endeavoring to raise Fenn’s head. As he did so he saw that the lad’s wound was in his arm, where the sharp prongs of the deer had cut a gash. It was bleeding freely, and Bart knew this must be stopped.

Not in vain had he listened to his sister’s almost constant talks about first aid to the injured. Bart recollected some of Alice’s instructions, and, a moment later he was binding up the cut with some bandages which he had stuck in his pocket with the idea of using to clean his gun, but which now served a more useful purpose.

Bart was glad to see that, as he wound the linen rags around Fenn’s arm, the flow of blood ceased. Then, rubbing the unconscious lad’s face with snow, Bart noted a wave of returning color, and, a moment later, Fenn opened his eyes.

“Is anybody hurt?” he asked, slowly.

“You’re the only one—except the buck,” answered Bart, with a sigh of relief, “and you’re not so badly off, I guess, that is, unless you’re wounded some other place besides the arm.”

“No, I think that’s all. But what happened to the buck?” and Fenn looked around.

“There he is,” replied Bart, pointing to the dead animal. “You certainly had nerve to tackle him by the horns, Stumpy.” [202]

"No, I didn't," was the simple answer. "It was all I could do. It was either that or let him gouge me, and I didn't want to do that. Did you shoot him?"

"Yes, and it was close work, too, for your head was almost in the way."

"But you did it!" exclaimed Fenn, enthusiastically. "You saved my life, Bart, and—" but Fenn could say no more. The nervous shock was too much for him, and he put out his hand and silently clasped that of his friend.

"Oh, it was easy once I made up my mind to fire," went on Bart. "I drew a bead on him, and I thought of the game laws, but I knew I was justified."

"It was a corking good shot," exclaimed Fenn, admiringly. "You're a wonder with the rifle, Bart."

"Oh, not so much, I guess. But how about you? Can you walk?"

"Yes, I'm all right. I got scared there for a while, especially when that brute got his leg down inside my belt. I thought it was all up with me."

"So did I. You shouldn't have fired at him."

"I know it, but I let her go before I thought. I'm done with hunting for a while."

"Nonsense, you'll be at it again in a few days. But, if you can walk, let's get back to camp, and get the other fellows. Then we'll come after our meat. We'll have enough venison for a month."

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Fenn was rapidly recovering from the effects of his encounter with the buck, though he was still a trifle shaky. He managed to march along, however, and it was found that the cut on his arm was his only injury, except for some bruises and a severe shaking up.

The boys managed to get the buck on some tree branches, after Fenn and Bart had returned to camp, where they found Ned and Frank waiting for them, and they dragged the carcass over the snow to the tents. There it was cut up, and hung in trees, out of the way of foxes, or other prowling beasts.

With enough food in camp for the rest of their stay, the four chums now took things a little easier, only going out for occasional game birds. Fenn's injury seemed to be healing from the effects of the medical salve put on from the box Alice had provided.

It was one afternoon, three days later, that Ned was observed to be busy with an empty box, some big rubber bands, and string.

"What are you up to now?" asked Frank.

"You'll see," was the answer. "I don't know whether it will work or not, so I'm not going to say what it is." A little later Ned started off through the woods, carrying his contrivance.

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His chums were busy about camp, cleaning their guns, bringing in wood or water, and "slicking up" generally, and so paid little attention to Ned. It wasn't until half an hour afterward that, hearing startled cries in the woods, from the direction of a little clearing where rabbits were numerous, that Bart exclaimed:

"Something's happened to Ned! Hurry up!"

They ran to the place, and saw a curious sight. Ned was lying on the snow-covered ground, his hands stretched toward a sapling while his feet seemed encased in the box at which he had been working a short time previous.

"What's the matter?" panted Bart.

"Get me loose first, and I'll tell you," cried Ned.

"Are you fast?" asked Frank.

"Fast? Of course I am! Can't you see for yourself. I'm caught by my hands and feet in some rabbit traps I was setting."

"Serves you right," commented Bart, trying not to laugh. "You ought to be a sportsman, and shoot your game."

"I didn't want to shoot 'em," explained Ned. "I wanted to catch 'em alive and tame 'em. Hurry up and get me out; will you, fellows?"

They soon released him. His feet were caught under a box, which was weighted down with rocks, while his hands were held in a slip-noose of heavy cord that was fast to the tree, which had been bent over to act as a spring. Ned was stretched out like a prisoner "pegged-out" in the army. He was soon released, and explained that as he was setting the noose trap, his feet had unexpectedly gotten under the box trap, which was sprung, and then the noose slipped, holding him fast at both ends.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

### A VISIT TO TOWN

"Well," remarked Bart, as they walked back to camp with Ned, "there's no use setting any traps now, Ned. The rabbits were watching you, and they saw just how they worked, so you couldn't catch the simplest bunny in these woods."

"I'll make another kind of trap," declared Ned. "I want a rabbit to keep Fenn's turtle company."

"Don't bother about it," said Fenn, dryly.

"Why not?"

"Because my turtle got away in the night. He went back to the boiling spring, to join the others for a New Year's celebration, I guess."

"That's so, to-morrow is the last day of this year," observed Frank. "We ought to celebrate it in some way."

"We will," said Bart. "We'll sit up, and watch the old year out and the new one in, and fire our guns off at twelve o'clock. But what's the matter, Stumpy?" for Fenn was holding the arm injured by the buck, and on his face was an expression of pain.

"It's been hurting considerable since morning," explained the stout youth.

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"Let me look at it," demanded Bart, and, when the bandages were taken off, there was disclosed a red and angry sore. The arm was much inflamed.

"I was afraid of this," said Bart. "We've got to go to town and let a doctor look at this. You may get blood poisoning, Stumpy."

"Oh, I guess not. Can't you put some of the stuff on from the box Alice gave us?"

"I'm afraid to take any chances. Besides, I don't think there is anything strong enough for blood poison in the box. No, fellows, we'll go to Cannistota. It's only ten miles. We can easily walk there and back in a day, and, if the doctor thinks it better for Stumpy to stay in town over night, so he can treat him, why we can arrange for that, too. We'll start in the morning, early."

"Then we'll see some of the celebration," put in Frank.

"What celebration?"

"Why the New Year's doings that William Perry said were always held in Cannistota. Don't you remember?"

"Sure, that's right," agreed Bart. "It will do us good to make the trip. Game is getting rather scarce around here now, and we must begin to think of getting back. We certainly have had a swell time, and I don't want anything to happen to Fenn's arm."

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"So get ready, fellows, and we'll make a trip to town, and see what civilization looks like. It seems as if we'd been away six months, instead of three weeks."

"Shall we take our guns?" asked Frank.

"Might as well. No telling what game we'll see on our way back, and going in. We'll fix up the camp so if we have to stay away over night it will be all right, though I don't imagine any one will bother it."

"Unless it's that mysterious man," said Ned, significantly. "He may come snooping around."

"Well, if he does we can't help it," replied Bart, "only I'd like to catch him."

"And I'd like to get back Mrs. Long's diamond bracelet!" exclaimed Frank, with a flash of his dark eyes. "It's not pleasant to be considered a thief!"

"Nobody really believes we took it," declared Fenn.

"Well, don't let's talk about it," declared Bart. "We will try to have a good time in town—that is, if Fenn's arm doesn't get any worse."

"Oh, I don't believe it will," answered the injured lad, pluckily. But the sore was very painful.

Preparations for leaving camp were soon under way. The chums had an early breakfast the next morning—their last breakfast of the year, as Ned laughingly remarked—and then, with Fenn's arm well wrapped up, so he would not take cold in it, and each of the other lads carrying a gun, they started off for the town of Cannistota.

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The weather was pleasant, though a bit cold, and the sun was shining brightly on the snow which still covered the ground. The going at first was heavy, for it was through the woods, over a trail hard to discern, but when they struck the lumber road, leading into Cannistota, the traveling was easier.

They saw no game, save some rabbits, and a few squirrels, but they would not shoot at these.



They could not make very good time, and it was nearly noon when they came in sight of the town, which lay in a valley, surrounded on all sides by hills.

"Now for the doctor," decided Bart, "and then we'll see what's going on."

"And get dinner," added Ned, who was fond of his meals.

"Sure," added Frank, who was no less a good handler of knife and fork.

As the lads entered the main street of the town they were struck by the festive appearances on every side. Stores and houses were draped with flags and bunting, while from several electric-light poles men were stringing long wires, with small incandescent bulbs of various colors fastened on at intervals. This was in the centre of the place, where the two main streets crossed, and, on inquiring, the lads learned that it was planned to hold a sort of procession, with the Old Year, typified by Father Time, going out, while the New Year came in. This formality would occur in the centre of the town, under a canopy of colored electric lights. In addition there were to be bands of music, songs, and other numbers on a festive program. [210]

"Say, we ought to stay and take this in," suggested Ned, as he saw the carnival spirit manifested on every side.

"Maybe we will," assented Bart, "after we hear what the doctor says about Fenn's arm."

The medical man looked grave when he saw the injury caused by the buck's horn.

"There is nothing to be unduly alarmed about," he said, "but it is well that you came in time. It needs attention, and while fresh cool air, such as you get in camp, is good, I shall have to treat the wound with antiseptics. You must remain in town at least three days."

The boys were a little dismayed to hear this, but as they had made tentative plans to be away from camp if necessary, it did not altogether upset their calculations. The doctor gave Fenn some medicine, dressed the sore, and recommended the lads to a quiet hotel, to stay while the wound was being looked after. [211]

"You'll enjoy your visit to Cannistota," the doctor said with a smile, "for we always have a good time here on New Years. There is plenty of excitement."

The boys were soon to find that this was true in an unusual sense, for they took part in a most exciting scene.

"Well," remarked Fenn, as they came away from the office of the medical man, "it might be worse. What'll we do now?"

"Let's eat," suggested Ned, and they all fell in with this proposal.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

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### THE MAN WITH THE TURTLE

The chums took their meal at one of the two hotels in Cannistota, and, liking the appearance of the place, which the doctor had recommended, they made arrangements to stay there for a few days, during which time Fenn's arm was to receive treatment. They had adjoining rooms, and, once they had visited them, and left the few belongings they had brought from camp, they were ready to go out into the street again, and watch the preparations being made to celebrate the advent of the New Year that night.

"I know one thing we'd better do," remarked Frank, as they strolled along.

"What's that?" inquired Bart.

"Send telegrams to the folks at home, telling them where we are, and wishing them good luck for the New Year."

"Good!" exclaimed Fenn, "but don't say anything about my sore arm. My folks might worry."

This was agreed to, and then each lad wrote his own telegram, explaining briefly why he was not in the woods, the carnival forming a good reason for the change. [213]

"This will be a good plan in case they have any word to send us," remarked Ned. "A telegram will reach us at the hotel, but it never would at camp."

Bart had taken his rifle with him when they left the hotel, and when his companions joked him about it, asking him if he expected to see a bear or a deer in the town, Bart replied:

"I want to take it to a gunmaker's and get a screw set in a little deeper," referring to one on the lock mechanism. "It works loose every once in a while, and now's a good time to have it fixed, when I'm not likely to have a use for the rifle. I intend to do a lot of hunting when we get back to camp."

As the chums strolled on, they saw, on every side, more evidences of the carnival spirit. On several side streets, as well as on the main ones, flags and bunting were in evidence, and colored electric lights were being strung. Linemen were high up on poles arranging extra wires, and others, below, were passing up the colored bulbs, or pliers, and other tools needed by their mates on the high poles. The boys watched this for some time, and then, at Bart's suggestion, they strolled toward the centre of the village.

There a still busier scene was observed. There were a number of linemen on the tall poles, and, as the boys looked on, the current was turned into the hundreds of various-hued bulbs, to test them. It was early afternoon, and much yet remained to be done in order to get the decorations completed. [214]

The lads found a gunsmith in his shop, not far from the intersection of the main streets, and he was soon at work on Bart's rifle, talking as he worked. The boys told him of their experience in camp, and the necessity for their visit to town.

"Got scratched by a buck; eh?" remarked the old gunsmith as he gazed from under his bushy white eyebrows at the lads. "That happened to me once. Their horns seem to sort of poison a wound. I guess it's because the critters rub their antlers up against all sorts of trees and bushes. They get poisonous juices on 'em."

Soon the lads were again strolling along the street. The afternoon was passing, and presently the town, which was now thronged with visitors, would be in the full sway of the carnival.

Fenn was walking ahead of his chums, looking in the store windows, and taking care that he did not collide with persons in the crowd, and so injure his sore arm. The stout youth saw, just ahead of him, an establishment devoted to the sale of pets of various kinds. There were pigeons, white rats, puppies, gold fish, some monkeys and parrots, and scores of canary birds. As several specimens were on exhibition in the windows quite a crowd was gathered about watching the antics of a pair of monkeys. Fenn, always interested in such things, drew closer, motioning to his chums, who were walking slowly, to join him. [215]

As he turned back toward the store he saw a man entering—a man, at the sight of whom, the stout lad started, and looked at him again, more sharply.

"I wonder if it can be—yes, it's the same man—the mysterious man we've been after so long!" murmured Fenn. "He's going in that store! I hope he didn't see me." He got behind a couple of men who were close to the window, and watched until he had seen the person he had observed close the door, after entering the store. Then Fenn turned to address his chums who were now at his side.

"What's the matter?" asked Bart, laughing. "You look as if you had seen a ghost, Stumpy."

"I've seen something more substantial than a ghost," replied the lad, "I've seen the man who stole the diamond bracelet, fellows!"

"Where?" gasped Ned and Frank.

"Hush! Not so loud," cautioned Fenn, for several persons were curiously observing the four lads. "He's in that store," went on the stout youth.

They could hardly believe him, but Fenn soon told them the circumstances, and repeated his belief in the positiveness of his identification. "I'm sure it was the same man," he said. [216]

"Well, we'll soon see," declared Bart. "He'll have to come out, some time or other, and then we can tell. We'll just wait here a while."

A little later they were all startled to see the man, about whom there seemed to be such a mystery, come hurriedly from the store.

"There he is!" exclaimed Fenn.

"It's him, all right," assented Bart, in low tones. "Now what shall we do; follow him?"

The man turned south on the main street, and began walking rapidly away. At that instant Fenn caught sight of a package in his hand. It was a paper bundle, but, as the stout lad looked, he saw projecting from it the long, snake-like neck of a mud turtle.

"He's got a turtle!" cried Fenn, excitedly. "Let's chase after him! We must solve this mystery now or never!"

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE PURSUIT

Fenn darted forward, and would have taken after the man on the run, only Bart put forth a restraining hand. Fenn looked at his chum in surprise. [217]

"Easy, Stumpy," murmured the tall lad, as he drew his fleshier companion out of hearing of the crowd in front of the animal store. "Do you want to give the whole thing away? Several times we've lost trace of this man because we were in such a rush, and I don't want it to happen again. You nearly spoiled everything, Stumpy."

"I'm sorry," faltered Fenn, "but I want to get at him, and have him explain."

"So do we all," went on Bart, "but we can do it better by going slow and easy. He hasn't seen us, and we can trail him and see where he goes."

"Did you notice what he had in the paper?" asked the fat lad excitedly.

"What was it?" asked Frank, who had not caught Fenn's first exclamation.

"A mud turtle. That's what he got in the store."

"Say, you had better talk lower," cautioned Frank, for Fenn had spoken loudly. "People in the crowd are beginning to notice us." [218]

"Oh, I guess there's no danger," decided Bart. "There are lots of strangers in town to-day, and we won't attract much attention. But we must take after this fellow. We'll trail him carefully now. He's still on this side of the street, and he's going slowly," Bart announced, after taking an observation over the heads of the crowd still in front of the store window. "Fenn and I will take this side of the street, and you and Ned can take the other side, Frank. If either of us miss our man we'll meet later at the hotel. Go ahead now, and keep out of his sight. Go slow, as if you were only looking at the sights, but keep your eye on the man. We'll try and find where he belongs, who he is, and why he collects turtles."

Through the crowds that were constantly increasing in size the four lads threaded their ways, two on one side of the street, and two on the other. Ahead of them was the mysterious man. He seemed to have no idea that he was being followed, and appeared only to be looking at the sights. At times the boys found difficulty in keeping within the proper distance of him, and once Ned and Frank lost him, but they soon picked him up again, and kept on. He wore a light-colored cap, which made him conspicuous in the press of people. [219]

The man seemed to be in no hurry to get anywhere. He strolled leisurely along, looking in store windows, or pausing to observe the linemen stringing the wires. The boys were after him, and their experience in the woods, trailing game, now served them in good stead. Though they looked carefully, they could not see any package in the man's hand now, and they wondered what he had done with the turtle.

The pursuit led to the outskirts of the town, and, as the streets became less congested there was danger of the boys being detected in their chase, but fortunately for them the man took a notion to swing down through a side street and retrace his steps, back toward the centre. Then the pursuit was rendered less likely to be observed.

Reaching the middle of the town the man paused to look at a lineman who was on top of a particularly tall pole, making some final adjustments to the wires and lamps. As the boys halted, not to come too close to their quarry, they saw the lineman signal to have the current turned on. The lamps glowed, but something seemed to be wrong, for he called for the power to be turned off while he adjusted a switch. There seemed to be some delay over cutting off the current, and the lineman waited. [220]

The crowd was thicker near the pole, and, not wishing to let the mysterious man escape, Bart and Fenn, who were on the same side of the street as he was, drew nearer to him in the throng. Frank and Ned were on the other side of the street. The former chums could observe the object of their pursuit more closely now. He did not seem to be a hardened character, but on the contrary, his face was refined, and his manner seemed gentle, though there was a curious, cunning air about him.

While the lineman on the tall pole was waiting for some of his fellow workmen to change the switch, he looked down into the press of people. He seemed to recognize some one, and waved his hand. To the surprise of Bart and Fenn the mysterious man waved back to the man on the pole.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Fenn, and in his excitement he had spoken aloud. The next instant he regretted it, for the man, turning, saw him. He gave a start of surprise, and then a look of fear seemed to come over his face. He gave one glance up at the lineman on his tall perch, waved what seemed to be a farewell, and darted away through the crowd.

"After him, Stumpy!" whispered Bart, excitedly. "He'll get away, I'm afraid!" [221]

The lads started to make their way out of the throng of people who were all about them. The mysterious man, too, was at this same disadvantage.

Suddenly, amid the stillness that seemed to settle over the crowd, as they watched the lineman reach far over to make a distant connection, there sounded a cry of fear and pain. High up in the air there was a flash of bluish fire, a sizzling, as of red-hot iron plunged into water, and then a shower of sparks.

"The lineman! The lineman!" screamed several. "He's on a live wire!"

Pausing in their efforts to get out of the crowd, and take up the pursuit, Bart and Fenn saw the lineman leaning over in a dangerous position. He was in a net-work of wires, and all about him seemed to be long, forked tongues of blue flame, while vicious sparks shot from one wire to the other. The unfortunate man had caught hold of the outer end of a cross-arm on the pole, and, while his feet were on one lower down, he was thus held in this strained position. Around his waist was a leather belt, passed about the pole, and this also retained him in position.

His cry of alarm had brought several other linemen to the foot of the pole.

"Are you shocked, George?" called one, anxiously.

"No," came the faint reply, "not yet, but something has gone wrong. One of the wires has broken, and has charged all the others. I'm safe as long as I lean over this way, but I can't get back, and I can't get down."

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"Unhook your belt and slide down," suggested one.

"I can't. If I let go with my hands I'll come up against the wires carrying the main current, and, if I do——" he did not finish, but they all knew what he meant.

The crowd was horror-struck. The man was in the midst of death. He could not move to come down, for fear of coming in contact with wires, which, though previously harmless, were now dangerous because the broken conductor, carrying a heavy charge, had fallen over them, making them deadly.

"Hold on, and I'll come up to you!" shouted a lineman, preparing to ascend the pole.

"No, don't," cried the unfortunate man.

"Have the current cut off at the power house!" yelled a voice in the crowd below.

"Yes! That's the thing to do!" echoed a score of others.

A man ran out of the crowd to the telephone—the same telephone over which word had been sent to the power station to turn the power on for the preliminary test. In a few seconds central had given the frantic man the main electrical station.

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"Cut off the power—cut off the power!" he cried. "One of the linemen on the pole is in danger of being shocked to death."

Anxiously he waited for the reply. None came.

"Ring again, central!" he called frantically. Over the wire he heard the distant ringing of the bell in the power station. The delay seemed like an hour, though it was only a few seconds.

"Why don't they answer? Why don't they answer?" cried the man desperately. "Ring 'em again, central. Ring hard!"

"I am ringing hard," responded central. "There doesn't seem to be any one there."

"There must be!" insisted the man. "It's a matter of life and death! The current must be shut off!"

He waited, moving about nervously, while holding the receiver to his ear. Those near him could not imagine what was the trouble. Then came a click in the receiver that showed that some one was at the other end of the wire.

"Hello! Hello!" cried the man who was trying to have the power cut off. "Why didn't you answer before. Why don't you shut off the current? There's a man being killed—what's that?"

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He fairly yelled the last words, and those near him saw a look of horror spread over his face.

"What's that?" he shouted. "The electrician has stepped out you say? What? He thought the power was to be left on? Oh! He'll be back in five minutes? But that will be too late. Can't you—hold on there—don't go away—what's that—yes, I hear you but—don't go away—do something—pull out the switch—do something—never mind the electrician—you do it—don't go away—don't go away—Ah—it's too late!"

He turned to those standing near him at the telephone.

"The only electrician now at the power station stepped out after turning on the current," the man explained dully, as he hung up the receiver. "There was some mistake. He thought the wiring was finished, and that the power was to remain turned on. So he went out, and he left a green man in charge, who doesn't know anything about the engines, or dynamos. This man said he'd run out and get the electrician. I tried to stop him—tried to make him understand that he, himself, must do something—must shut off the current—but I couldn't get it through his head. He dropped the telephone, and ran out after the electrician. Now there's no way of shutting off the power until the engineer gets back, and, by that time——" He paused significantly, and rushed out. Nothing more could be done at the telephone. It was as if the wire was broken.

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Up on his high perch the lineman was becoming weaker from the strain, and the fear of death. He looked down at the crowd below. Bart and Fenn gazed upward. How they wished they could help!

"Is that man—that mysterious man gone?" asked Bart, in low tones.

"Yes," replied Fenn, "he's hurrying down the street. We'd better take after him, if we want to catch him. He's getting to be very suspicious of us. We ought to catch him."

"I know it. If we could only signal Ned or Frank we might run some chance——"

At that moment another lineman, standing near Bart, turned to him, and asked excitedly, as he saw the rifle in the lad's hand:

"Are you a good shot? A man's life may depend on it! Can you shoot straight?"

"Pretty straight," answered Bart, wondering what was coming next. The lineman was excited, he approached nearer to Bart, and motioned to his friend high up on the pole—the man from whom death seemed but a short distance away.

"Is your rifle loaded? Then, if it is, for mercy sakes fire and see if you can sever that main feed wire," and the lineman pointed to a thick conductor, which was shooting out blue sparks, and which had charged all the other wires with the deadly current. "See if you can cut that wire," went on the lineman eagerly. "It's the only chance to save his life!"

[226]

Bart hesitated. He turned to see the man whom they had pursued, making his escape. If he got away it might mean that they would never see him again—never have the theft of the diamond bracelet solved. It was a choice between the honor of the Darewell Chums and the life of a man. Which would Bart choose?

There could be but one answer to this question.

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## CHAPTER XXIX

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### BART'S BEST SHOT

Bart turned to Fenn. He was just about to whisper to his chum to take up the pursuit of the mysterious man, leaving him to attempt a difficult shot to save the life of the lineman, but at that instant there was a swaying in the crowd, and a boy stumbled up against Fenn's sore arm. The injured lad uttered a cry of pain. His face turned white, and he was struggling to stay on his feet.

"Catch him! He's going to faint!" cried some one, and faint poor Fenn did, being caught in the arms of two men.

Bart felt his brain reeling, but, by a strong effort he held himself together.

There was now no chance of continuing the pursuit of the mysterious man. Fenn was being carried to a place where he could be cared for. It was impossible to communicate with Ned and Frank, who were on the other side of the street, and Bart could not go away and leave the man on the pole to die. There was no help for it. He must stay and try, by a most difficult shot, to sever the dangerous wire.

"Will you do it? Can you do it?" asked the lineman who had proposed the extreme measure to the lad. "It's the only chance. Can you cut that wire?"

[228]

"I think so," was the quiet answer. No one in that crowd knew under what a strain Bart Keene was at that moment. No one associated the now unconscious Fenn with him, and no one dreamed that Bart was anxious to continue after a man who he believed to be a criminal, and who was fast making his escape.

"Can you hold on a minute longer, George?" called a workman on the ground, up to the lineman on the pole.

"Yes," came back the faint answer, "but it's hard work. Can't you shut off the current? If I make a move I'm a goner. Can't you turn off the current?"

"We're going to try to cut the wire," went on the man who had thought of the plan. "We can't get the current shut off right away. Listen carefully, George. Hold as still as you can. There's a lad here with a rifle. He's a good shot, he says, and he's going to fire at the live wire until he cuts it. It's going to be a close shave for you, as the wire is pretty near to your head. Have you nerve enough to stand it?"

"I—I guess so," came the hesitating answer. "Go ahead!"

The crowd below was scarcely breathing. The man on the pole could be seen straining himself to maintain his perilous position. He looked down. Death was below him, and on every side, and none dare climb the pole to help him. The rifle seemed the only chance, unless some one could go five miles to the power house, and have the current turned off, or unless the electrician returned, and this would take so long that the man's hold would loosen, and he would either fall, or be shocked to death. It all depended on Bart, and the lad knew that he must now shoot true, if he never shot straight again. It was to be his best shot—a well-nigh tragic shot.

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"Clear a space for the lad!" ordered the lineman, as he and his fellows began making a circle about Bart. "Give him room. Have you got plenty of cartridges, young man?"

Bart nodded. He felt that he could not speak, and he knew that the chamber of his rifle was filled. Yet he hoped to do the trick with only one bullet.

The shot was a hard one. He must cut a wire within four inches of the shoulder of the man whose life he was trying to save, and he had to fire upward, and at a slightly swaying target—a target small enough at best, hardly more than half an inch wide. Yet Bart did not hesitate.

He took his position under the wires, and close to the pole. The crowd was looking eagerly on, and the man on the pole was like a statue. Well he knew how much depended on his remaining motionless. [230]

Bart raised his rifle. A mist seemed to come before his eyes, but with a gritting of his teeth he got more control of himself, and then he saw clear. He took careful aim, and then he saw that he could shoot to more advantage from the other side of the pole. He would have to fire closer to the man, but the bullet would take an outward slant in cutting the wire, and there was less danger of it glancing off and wounding the lineman.

The lad changed his position, and once more took careful aim. He took a long breath, and his finger began to tighten on the trigger. At that instant there came a puff of wind, and the wire at which he was aiming swayed toward the unfortunate man. There was a cry of horror, and several persons in the crowd started toward Bart, as if to stop the firing of the gun. But the lad was on the alert, and waited until the wire was still again.

One, two, three seconds passed. Would he never fire? Suddenly those watching him saw his figure stiffen. He braced the rifle more firmly against his shoulder. There was a further tightening of the tension of his trigger finger, and a report that seemed to the nervous crowd to be as loud as a cannon vibrated on the wintry air. [231]

An instant later there came tumbling from aloft a long wire, that writhed about like some snake, spitting blue flames and sparks. It wiggled about on the ground as a thing alive.

"Keep back! Keep back from that wire!" shouted a lineman. "Good shot, my lad! Great! You cut the wire with one bullet!"

Bart lowered his gun. Once more the mist seemed to come before his eyes, but it did not matter now, for he had saved the man. Yet no one ever knew how narrow was the margin, for, as Bart was pulling the trigger, the wire was once more swayed by the wind, and the bullet from the rifle had sped past the man's head less than two inches away. So close had he been to death! But Bart had shot true, and, ever, in after years, he called that his best shot.

A cheer went up from the crowd at the plucky act of the lad, but it was quickly hushed as one of the linemen began to climb the pole, to assist down his comrade who had had such a narrow escape. He was too unnerved to descend alone, but there was no more danger, for the live wire was out of the way, and other linemen, with insulated gloves, soon had it in its proper place.

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## CHAPTER XXX

 [232]

### THE DIAMOND BRACELET—CONCLUSION

Bart turned to make his way out of the crowd, for he was anxious about Fenn. He had given up all hope of capturing the mysterious man, who had started to hasten away before the accident to the lineman on the pole, and who, doubtless, was far enough off by this time. But Bart's progress was arrested by a voice.

"Hold on, young fellow!" exclaimed the workman whose life Bart had saved. "I want to shake hands with you. That was a corking good shot. I heard the bullet whistle past me, and then I knew I was safe. Shake!" and he extended his hand that did not tremble as much as did Bart's, such nerve did the electrician have. He had fully recovered from his thrilling experience.

Bart received modestly the almost extravagant praise accorded him, and once more began to make his way toward where Fenn had been carried.

"Where is my chum?" he asked. "The lad who fainted."

"Oh, he's coming around all right," answered a man. At that moment Fenn himself came through the press of people around Bart. He had recovered from the shock caused by the sudden pressure on his sore arm. [233]

"Are you all right?" asked Bart, anxiously.

"Sure. How about you?" inquired Stumpy. "I hear you made a great shot."

"Don't talk about it," pleaded Bart, who was now almost as nervous as a girl. "Where are Ned and Frank?"

"Following that man, I suppose," began Fenn, and then he stopped suddenly, for people looked curiously at him.

"Yes, we must look them up," went on Bart, but he felt that a further chase would be useless.

"Say, you fellows aren't going to disappear until you do me a favor," began the rescued lineman, good naturedly. "I want you to come to my house, and meet my wife. She'll want to know the boy who saved me from a horrible death. It isn't far," he added, as he saw Bart was about to decline. "Please come. I'm not going to work any more to-day. I'm too shaky."

They saw that it would not be kind to refuse, and the electrician led the way for Bart and Fenn through the crowd, who parted with murmurs of admiration for the lad who had made such a plucky shot. There was no sign of Ned or Frank. [234]

"Well, I don't know how to begin to thank you," said the man, feelingly, when they were in a somewhat secluded place on the main street. The work of preparing for the ushering in of the New Year was almost completed. "I never *can* properly thank you," he went on. "My name's George Lang, and if ever you boys want a friend, or if you want anything done in the line business, you call for George," and he meant what he said.

"I'm glad I was able to fire, and sever the wire," said Bart, as he walked along with Mr. Lang, "but I wish it had happened a few minutes earlier—or later," he added.

"I'm sorry it happened at all," declared Mr. Lang. "I never had an accident like that, and I don't want another. But what difference did the time make?"

"Because we were on the trail of a thief," explained Bart, "and he skipped out just before you got caught on top of the pole. He was a chap who had stolen a diamond bracelet, and we boys are accused of the crime. We wanted to capture him to prove our innocence. My two chums are after him, but I don't believe they'll catch him. He saw us and skipped out. By the way," the lad added, as he recollected the incident, "he waved his hand to you, and you waved back to him from the top of the pole, just before the wire broke loose." [235]

"Me?" exclaimed Mr. Lang in great astonishment. "I waved to a diamond-bracelet thief?"

"I don't say you knew him," declared Bart, fearing he had been misunderstood, "but you certainly greeted him. He had on a light cap, and he stood at the foot of the pole, and——"

"Him? Oh, you mean him—that—why——" the lineman seemed to be choking—"a thief—stole a diamond bracelet——" He had to stop to catch his breath, but whether it was from laughter, or because he choked, the lads could not decide. "Him a thief?" asked Mr. Lang.

"Or, if he didn't take the bracelet, he took the professor's mud turtle," put in Fenn, who had by this time recovered from his indisposition.

"Mud turtle! Oh, dear! Mud turtles, you say? Oh, I—excuse me," and again the lineman choked up. "I understand," he said at length. "I know who you mean. Would you like to meet him?"

"Would we?" gasped Bart and Fenn, together.

"That's enough. I'll guarantee to introduce you to him, if he's at home," went on Mr. Lang. "He lives next door to me. I know him well. A diamond thief! Oh, dear! Mud turtles!" and again the lineman seemed overcome. "Don't say another word, but come on." [236]

Much mystified, Bart and Fenn followed their friend. He led them up a quiet street, and into a neat cottage.

"Mary," he said to his wife, when he had introduced the lads, "one of these boys saved my life this afternoon, but I'll tell you more about that later. Just now I've something else on hand. Do you know if William is home?" and he nodded at the house next door.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lang, wonderingly, "he just came in. I think he brought home another turtle."

The hearts of Fenn and Bart gave jumps! At last they were on the trail!

Without a word the lineman led the way to the adjoining house. He seemed to be laboring under some emotion, as if he was trying hard not to laugh. He knocked at the door, and a man answered the summons. Bart and Fenn started back. There stood the mysterious person who had eluded them so often—the man they believed had taken the diamond bracelet belonging to the professor's wife! On his part the mysterious individual seemed anxious to run away at the sight of Bart and Fenn.

"William," began the lineman, "one of these lads saved my life a while ago. Now don't get excited—take things calmly. No one is going to hurt you, or your turtles," and he spoke almost as he might to a child, or to a sick person. "I just want to introduce you to these boys. They are looking for a diamond bracelet, and they think maybe you could help them find it. Boys, this is my cousin, William Lang," and Bart thought the lineman winked significantly at him. Was there more to the mystery? [237]

"Your cousin?" echoed Fenn.

"Yes," answered the man whose life Bart had saved. "He is one of the greatest collectors of turtles in the world," and again he winked.

"That's what I am!" exclaimed William Lang, proudly, and he seemed to lose some of his fear. Still Bart could not help thinking that his manner was very strange. "But I haven't any diamond bracelet," went on the odd individual. "I know you boys think I have it, and you've been chasing me for it, and trying to have me arrested, but I haven't got it. I tried to keep out of your way, but I couldn't seem to. You were always after me, even when I was only collecting turtles. I know about the bracelet, though."

"What do you know about it?" asked Bart, eagerly.

"Why, I read in the papers that it was stolen," said William Lang, simply. "It was taken the same night I went to the school to look at Professor Long's turtles. He didn't want me to see 'em, but I did all right. I got in when he wasn't there, and fooled him. He was so mysterious about 'em, that I thought he had a rare kind. But he didn't have at all. Anyway I saw 'em, and he doesn't know it, even to this day. I got in at the dead of night," and the man's voice sunk to a whisper, and his face took on a cunning look.

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"Then *you* were the man we saw enter the school that night!" exclaimed Bart.

"Did you see me? Did you see me?" gasped the lineman's cousin, in great alarm. "Oh, yes, I remember now, I ran!"

"Sure we saw you," answered Fenn. "We were——"

Bart gave his chum a warning look.

"I didn't mean any harm," cried William Lang. "I only went in to see the turtles. I'm a great collector of them," he added. "I heard about Professor Long's collection, and once I called on him at the school. I wanted to see his reptiles, but for some reason he wouldn't let me. But I made up my mind I *would* see 'em. I knew he was trying to deceive me—Professor Long was—so one night I took a false key I had, and I got in the school. I had a dark lantern and I saw the turtles. I got ahead of Professor Long that time," and the man laughed excitedly. "But come in, and I'll show you my collection," he added.

[239]

He turned into the house, and the two boys, after a moment of hesitation, followed. They did not yet quite understand. The lineman whispered to them, when out of earshot of his cousin.

"You must humor poor William," he said. "He is all right except on the subject of mud turtles. He thinks he has the greatest collection of them in the world. I don't in the least doubt that he went in the school by stealth to look at some. In fact, I heard from Professor Long about a visit he paid to him one day, when he wanted to see the school collection. Professor Long had heard of my cousin, and knew him to be harmless, but William got so excited on the subject of turtles that the professor concluded it would not be best to exhibit the school collection, so he refused. This made William suspicious, and very likely he made up his mind to sneak in, and get a night-view of the reptiles. I have no doubt but that he did so."

"He certainly did," answered Bart. "We saw him come out. Then, when the diamond bracelet was missed, we naturally concluded that he was the person who had taken it."

The lineman shook his head.

"William would not do such a thing," he said. "There must be some other explanation. But humor him now by looking at his turtles. You may get a clew."

[240]

The boys did so. The eccentric man, who was somewhat insane on the subject of turtles, had quite a collection of the queer reptiles—larger even than Fenn's, or the one in the High School. He talked of them interestedly. By degrees Bart led to the subject of his visit to the school, and touched on the diamond bracelet, but the man's replies showed that he knew nothing of it.

"I remember you boys," William Lang went on. "I recollect now that I saw you as I hurried away from the school, and I thought you would chase me, but you didn't. Then I saw you in the shooting gallery, but I didn't know you at first. I'm a fine shot, you know, but I couldn't shoot well that night, after I recognized you," and he nodded at Bart. "By this time I had learned of the missing bracelet, and I was afraid you might have me arrested for taking it, so I hurried away. But I never saw it."

He paused to replace in the cage a turtle that was crawling out, and the lineman took occasion to say in a whisper:

"That's another of William's odd notions. He thinks he is a crack rifle shot."

"Well, he did shoot pretty well," said Bart. "But I am wondering where on earth the bracelet can be. We are all at sea again, over it."

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"I would have more turtles if a certain Fenn Masterson had sold me his collection," went on the queer man. "I got his name from a naturalist's magazine, for he collects turtles, it seems. I wrote to Mr. Masterson, asking him if he'd sell me his turtles. But I had to proceed very cautiously, for he lived in the same town where the bracelet was stolen, and I didn't want to show myself there. So I told him to leave his answer in an old sycamore tree. Then, after I did that I became alarmed, and I didn't dare go back to see if he had replied. Oh, you can't be too careful in this business," concluded the man, with a cunning look.

"Why, *I'm* that Fenn Masterson!" exclaimed the owner of the name.



"Are you?" demanded William Lang. "Will you sell me your turtles?"

"Of course," replied Fenn, who had rather lost interest in his collection, of late. "You can have them. We hid and waited to see if you would call for an answer to your letter."

"I guess that's some more of poor William's imagination," remarked the lineman in a low voice. "Leaving a letter in a sycamore tree, and all that sort of thing." [242]

"No, that part's true enough," declared Bart. "We waited for some time in a storm for him to show up, but he never did. Oh, it's true enough. I am beginning to understand some things now. The reason why your cousin ran away from us so often was because of the notion he had that we wanted to arrest him. We would never have harmed him had we known."

"Of course not," agreed the lineman, he and Bart having talked in whispers while the turtle collector was exhibiting some odd specimens to Fenn. William Lang told of his visit to Oak Swamp, and how he had fled at the sight of the boys, fearing they wanted to cause his arrest, and he also mentioned his trips to the mud volcano, and how he had run away at the sound of some one stirring in the campers' tent, likewise how he had led the boys a chase about the town, just prior to the accident on the pole.

"But about the bracelet, I don't know a thing," concluded William Lang.

"No, and I think he tells the truth," added the lineman, in a low voice. "I'm sorry, but you boys will have to keep on with your search."

It needed but a glance at the simple face of the turtle collector to show that he was not a thief, even if he was a decidedly peculiar individual. [243]

"Well," remarked Bart, after a pause, "I guess all Fenn and I can do is to go back to the hotel, and wait for Ned and Frank to show up." The two turned to leave the turtle collector's house. William Lang was busy inspecting his queer pets, and seemed to pay no further attention to his visitors.

"William was always a little queer," remarked the lineman, as he accompanied the boys outside. "Harmless, but odd. Just daffy on the mud turtle question. I don't wonder he gave you lots to think about, or that you didn't quite know how to take him. He is all right except on turtles. He'd walk fifty miles to get a new one. But he's well off, and can afford to indulge in his fancy."

As Bart and Fenn turned into the street they saw, coming toward them, Ned and Frank. Ned was frantically waving a paper in the air.

"How'd you find your way here?" called Bart.

"People in the crowd told us you'd come here," replied Frank. "But have you heard the good news?"

"What good news?"

"The diamond bracelet wasn't stolen at all!" burst out Ned. "We just got telegrams from home. They were at the hotel waiting for us. We went there after missing you in the crowd, when something happened on the top of the pole. We tried to follow that mysterious man, but we missed him. There are also telegrams for you two fellows. I thought you had them, or——" [244]

"For gracious sake tell us the good news! What about the diamond bracelet?" yelled Bart.

"It's been found!" exploded Ned. "It wasn't stolen at all. It had fallen down a crack in the cabinet, in Professor Long's room, and a snake was taking his winter sleep over the crack. Yesterday the snake died, Mr. Long took it out—and found the bracelet."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed Bart.

"I should say it was good news," declared Fenn. "This takes suspicion from the Darewell Chums."

Two days later the boys returned to their winter camp, and, after nearly a month spent in the forest, they packed up, walked in to Cannistota, sent a teamster back for their goods, and took a train for home.

The lads arrived at their home-town at dusk. Jed Sneed was at the station to meet them.

A little later the four chums were in their respective houses, telling of their adventures to their eager parents—there was considerable to tell.

THE END

Printing, punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

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