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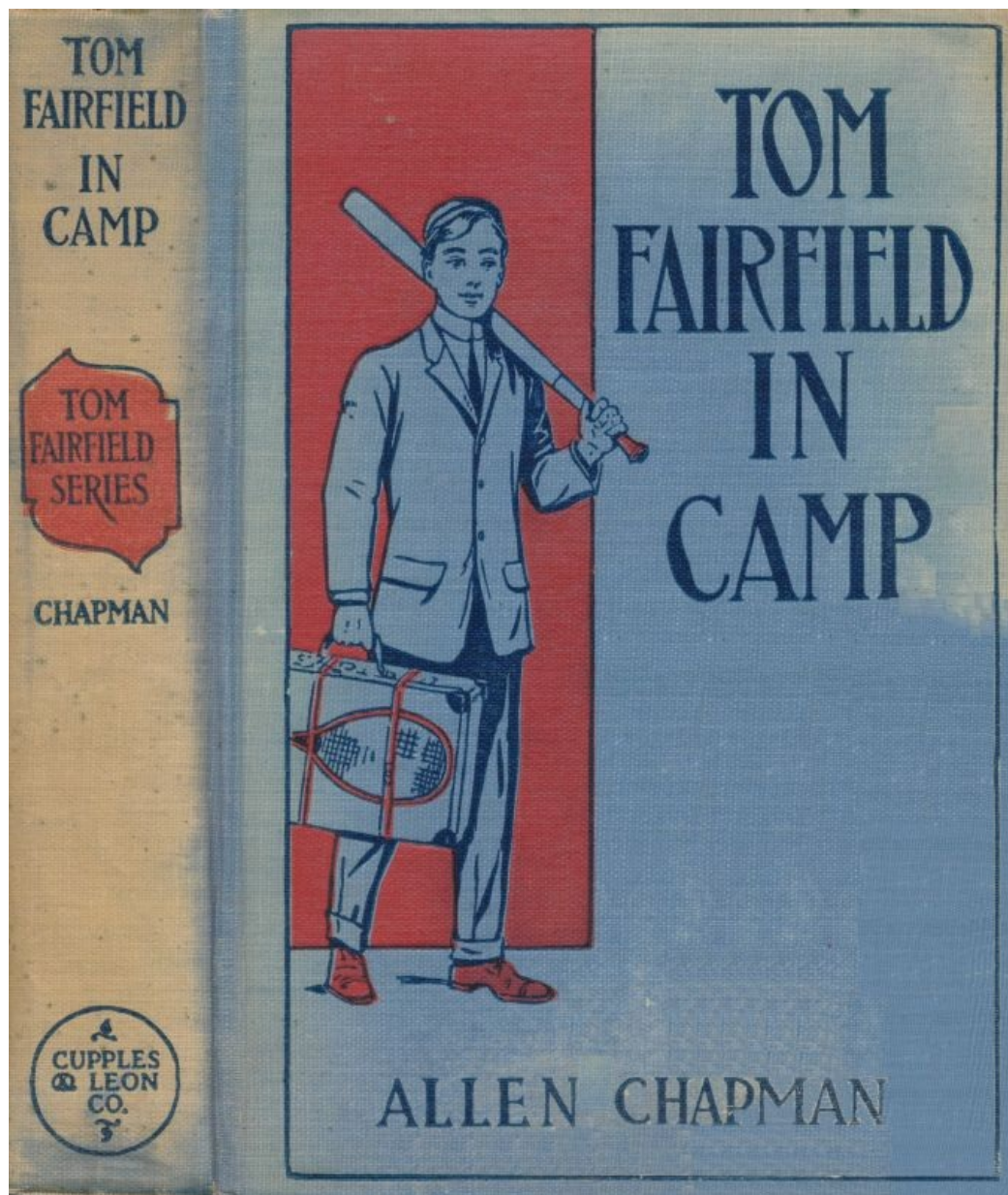
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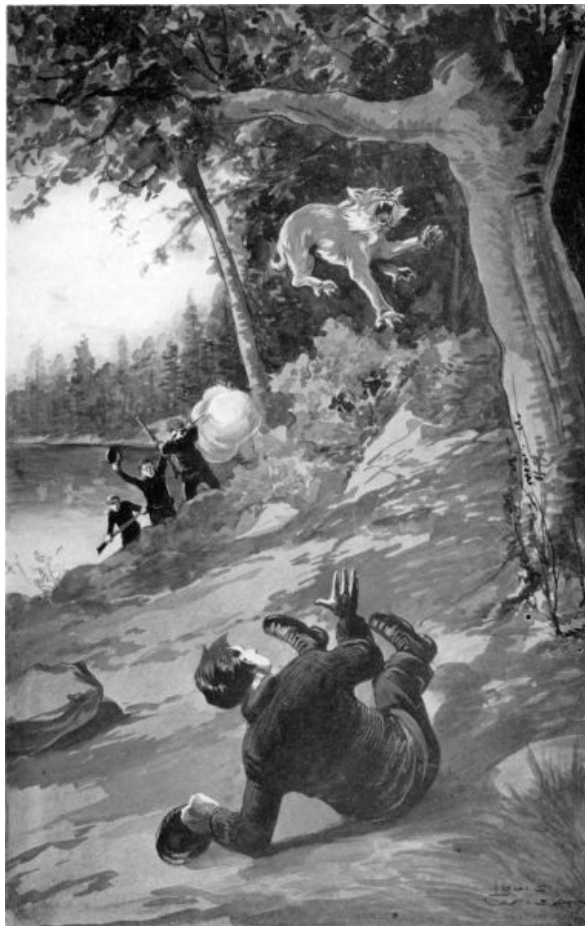
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TOM FAIRFIELD IN CAMP; OR, THE SECRET OF THE OLD MILL ***





WITH A SCREAM OF RAGE AND PAIN, THE BEAST
LAUNCHED ITSELF INTO THE AIR.

Tom Fairfield in Camp

Or

The Secret of the Old Mill

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

AUTHOR OF "TOM FAIRFIELD'S SCHOOLDAYS," "TOM FAIRFIELD AT
SEA," "FRED FENTON ATHLETIC SERIES," "DAREWELL
CHUMS SERIES," "BOYS OF PLUCK
SERIES," ETC.

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TOM FAIRFIELD IN CAMP

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TOM FAIRFIELD IN CAMP

[1]

CHAPTER I

TOM GETS A LETTER

"Say, Dick, just throw that forward switch in; will you?"

"Sure I will, Tom. Going any place in particular?"

"Oh, just for a run down the river, and on my way back I guess I'll stop and get the mail."

"Can I go along?"

"Certainly. Did you see anything of Will to-day?"

"No, he's gone fishing, I guess," and Dick Jones, one of the best chums of Tom Fairfield, threw in the connecting switch of the latter's motorboat, and the craft was ready to run.

"Now I wonder if she'll start easily, or if I've got to break my back cranking her?" murmured Tom.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick. "Hasn't she been behaving herself lately?"

"Oh, yes, but you never can tell. One day she'll run like a sewing machine, and the next I can't seem to get her started. She's like all the other motorboats, good at times, and off her feed occasionally. That's why I called her the *Tag*. I never know whether I'm 'it' or whether she is. However, here's for a try."

[2]

Tom revolved the fly wheel vigorously, but there was only a sort of sigh from the engine, as if it did not like to be disturbed from the rest it had been taking.

"One strike," murmured Tom whimsically as he looked at the engine to see if all attachments were in their proper place. "Here goes for another spasm."

Once more he whirled the heavy wheel around. But, save for a more pronounced sigh, and a sort of groan, there was no result.

"Let me try," suggested Dick.

"I'm afraid to. This engine is like a balky horse at times, and if anyone but the regular trainer monkeys with her she just sulks all day. I'll get her going yet."

Again came an attempt to make the motor do its work, and again there came a sigh, accompanied by a cough.

"Three strikes, and I'm out!" exclaimed Tom, sinking back on the seat rather exhausted. "But she's speaking better than at first. Didn't you think you heard her sort of talking back at me, Dick?"

"Yes," laughed his chum. "But say, are you sure you've got any gasolene?"

[3]

"I put in five gallons last night, and didn't run two miles."

"Are you sure it's turned on?"

"Of course I am!"

"Have you adjusted the carburetor?"

"Foolish question number twenty-six!" exclaimed Tom. "Say, you're as bad as a chap at Elmwood Hall—George Abbot. We call him 'Why,' because he's always asking questions. Don't you get in that habit, Dick."

"I won't, but I wanted to be sure you'd done everything you ought to to make the boat go."

"Don't worry. Nobody can do all he ought to do in running a motorboat. The best authority that ever was would get stuck once in a while, and then some greenhorn could come along, scatter a little talcum powder on the cylinder head, and off she'd go. And the funny part of it is that no one would know why."

For a moment Tom sat looking at the refractory engine, as though trying to read its mind, and then, with a sigh himself, he once more cranked up. This time there was hardly a murmur from the engine.

"Hum! Gone to sleep again!" commented Tom. "I can't understand this."

Taking off his coat he made up his mind that he would go systematically over every part of the engine, from the batteries and magneto to the gasolene tank and vibrator coil. He started up in the bow, and, no sooner had he looked at the switch which Dick had adjusted, than he uttered an exclamation. [4]

"There it is!" he cried.

"What?" asked his chum.

"The trouble. Look, that one wire is loose, and even though the switch was connected I didn't get any spark. It's a wonder you didn't see it when you turned it on."

"Say, I'm not a motorboat expert," declared Dick. "All I can do is to steer one."

"I guess that's right," agreed Tom with a laugh. "It's my fault for not looking there first. I must have jarred that wire loose when I came in last night. I hit the dock harder than I meant to. But I'll soon have it fixed."

With a screw driver he presently had the loose wire back in place on the switch connection. Then, with a single turn of the flywheel, the *Tag* was in operation, and Tom steered out into Pine river, on which was located the village of Briartown, where our hero lived.

"She's running fine now," commented Dick, who, at a nod from Tom, took the wheel.

"Yes, as slick as you'd want her. She's making good time, too," and Tom glanced over toward shore, watching the trees seemingly slip past. [5]

"Hey, Tom, wait up, will you?" This came as a hail from the shore, and, following it, Tom and Dick saw a lad running along the river bank, waving his hand at them. "Wait!" he cried.

"It's Dent Wilcox," said Dick Jones.

"Yes, and he's running—that's the strange part of it," commented Tom. "I wonder how he ever got out of his lazy streak long enough to get up that much speed."

"It *is* a question," agreed Dick, for Dent Wilcox was known as the laziest lad in Briartown. "Probably he wants a ride badly enough to chase after you," added Tom's chum.

Once more came the hail:

"Hey, Tom, give me a ride; will you?"

"What for?" called back our hero.

"I've got to go down to Millford for a man. I've got a job," answered Dent.

"Then you'd better walk," answered Tom. "It's good exercise for you."

"Aw, say, stop and take me aboard," begged Dent.

"Not much!" shouted Tom. "I'm not going to take any chances on stopping this engine now, just when it's going good. You walk!" and as Dick steered the boat out from shore Tom opened wider his gasolene throttle to increase the speed of the boat, which he had checked when Dent hailed him. [6]

"Aw, say, you're mean!" charged the lazy lad as the craft got farther and farther from shore. "You wait; I'll get square with you yet!"

"Think he will?" asked Dick, glancing anxiously at his chum.

"Of course not. In the first place he won't dare, and in the second he's not smart enough to think up something to do to me, and if he is, he's too lazy to carry it out after he's planned it. Dent can't worry me."

The two chums kept on down the river toward the main part of the town, for Tom's home was on the outskirts.

"I want to get a new set of batteries," explained the owner of the *Tag*. "I always carry two sets so I can run on one even if some of them give out, and one set I've got now is running pretty low. This motor won't start on the magneto, for some reason, so I have to start on the batteries and then switch over."

They soon reached the town, and Tom tied his craft at a public dock. Having purchased the batteries, and some other things he needed, he went to the post office.

There were several letters in the Fairfield box, and as Tom looked them over he found one for himself.

"Hum, I ought to know that writing," he murmured. "If that isn't from Jack Fitch I'm a cowbird. I wonder what's up? I thought he was in Europe, with his folks, this vacation." [7]

Tom quickly opened the missive. As he glanced through it he gave utterance to an exclamation of delight.

"What is it?" asked Dick, who stood near his chum.

"Why it's great news," explained Tom. "It seems that there was some slip-up in the plans of Jack's folks, and he didn't go to Europe after all. And now here it is, just at the beginning of the summer vacation, and he writes to know what my plans are. He says he'd like to go somewhere with me."

"Why don't you go traveling together?" asked Dick.

"We might, that's a fact," agreed Tom. "Hello, here's another page to Jack's letter. I didn't see it at first. Well, what do you know about that?" he cried.

"More news?" asked Dick.

"I should say so! Bert Wilson—he was my other chum with Jack, you know, at Elmwood Hall—Bert will come with Jack and me if we go somewhere, so Jack says. By Jove! I have it!" cried Tom, with sparkling eyes.

"What's the game?"

"We'll go camping! We talked of it this spring, just after I got back from Australia, but we couldn't seem to make our plans fit in. Now this will be just the cheese. Jack, Bert and I will go off camping together in the deepest woods we can find. It will be great sport."

"It sure will," said Dick enviously.

Something in the tone of his chum's voice attracted Tom's attention.

"Say, look here!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Wouldn't you like to go camping with us, Dick?"

"Would I? Say, just give me the chance!"

"I will! Do you suppose your folks'll let you?"

"I'm sure they would. When can we start?"

"Oh, soon I guess. I'm glad this letter came at the beginning of the summer, instead of at the end. I'm going home, tell dad and mother, and see what they say. Maybe dad can suggest a good place to go."

Tom's motorboat, though making good time on the home trip, did not go half fast enough to suit him, as he was anxious to get back and tell the news. But finally he did reach his house, and, while Dick hurried off to see what arrangements he could make with his family, Tom sought his parents.

"Go camping; eh?" mused Mr. Fairfield when Tom broached the subject to him. "Why of course. That will be a good way to spend the summer. Where will you go, the seashore or the mountains?"

"Mountains, of course!" exclaimed Tom. "It's no fun camping at the seashore. Mountains and a lake for mine! I thought maybe you might know of some good place."

"Well, I've done some camping in my time," admitted Mr. Fairfield, "and come to think of it, I don't know any better place than up in the northern part of New York state. It's wild enough there to suit anyone, and you can pick out one of several lakes. There's one spot, near a little village called Wilden, that would suit me."

"Then it will suit us," declared Tom. "Tell me all about it. Were you ever camping there?"

"No, but I used to live near there when I was a boy. So did your mother. It's a beautiful country, but wild."

"Then I'm for Wilden!" cried Tom. "I'll write to the fellows at once. I'm going to take Dick Jones along with us. Hurray for Wilden!"

Mrs. Fairfield came into the room at that minute, and at the sound of the name she started.

"Wilden!" she repeated. "What about Wilden, Tom?"

"Nothing, only I'm going camping there, mother."

"Camping at Wilden! Oh, Brokaw, do you think that's safe for Tom?" and the lady looked apprehensively at her husband.

"Safe? Why shouldn't it be safe?" asked Tom quickly.

"Well—Oh, I don't know but—Oh, well, I suppose it's silly of me," his mother went on, "but there's a sort of wild man—a half insane character—who roams through the woods up there, and you might meet him."

"How did you hear that?" asked Tom.

"I had a letter from a lady with whom I used to go to school in Wilden years ago," explained Mrs. Fairfield. "She wrote me the other day, and mentioned it. I told you at the time, Brokaw."

"Yes, I remember now. Old Jason Wallace. Let's see, didn't Mrs. Henderson say he stayed part of the time in the old mill?"

"Yes, he's trying to solve the secret of it, Mrs. Henderson said, and that's one reason why he acts so strange, as if he was crazy. Oh, Tom, I wish you'd go camping some other place!" finished his mother.

"What, mother! Pass up a place like that, with all those attractions—a wild man—a mysterious old mill? I guess not! What is the secret of the old mill, anyhow?"

"Ask your father," advised Tom's mother. "He knows the story better than I do."

"Let's have it, dad," begged our hero. "Say, this is great! A mystery and a wild man in camp! Maybe the boys won't like that! I must write and tell 'em to hurry up and come on. Oh, I can see some great times ahead of me this summer, all right!"

CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF THE MILL

"Let me see if I can remember the story of the old mill," mused Mr. Fairfield, as Tom stood expectantly waiting. "It's quite some years since I heard it," and he gazed reminiscently at the ceiling.

"This is better luck than I expected," murmured Tom, and, while he is thus waiting to hear the story of the secret of the old mill, I will take the opportunity to tell you something more about him and his friends, and the two previous books in this series.

My first volume was entitled, "Tom Fairfield's Schooldays," and in that I related how our hero came to go to Elmwood Hall. It was because his parents had to go to Australia to claim some property left by a relative of Tom's father.

As Tom could not go to the land of the kangaroo with his folks they decided to send him to a boarding school, called Elmwood Hall.

Tom at once entered into the activities of the school. He made a friend and an enemy the same day, the friend being Jack Fitch, with whom Tom roomed, and whom I have already mentioned, in this story. Of course Tom had other friends at the school, one being Bert Wilson. [13]

Sam Heller, and his crony Nick Johnson, made it unpleasant for Tom, but our hero managed to hold up his end. It was harder work, however, in regard to Professor Skeel, who was a most unpleasant instructor. He was unfair to the boys, and Tom proposed a novel plan to get even.

He suggested that they all go on a "strike" against Mr. Skeel, refusing to recite to him unless he changed his manners. The unpopular professor did not change, and Tom headed the revolt against him. This took Doctor Pliny Meredith, the head master of the school, and all the faculty by surprise. They did not know what to do until Mr. Skeel proposed that the whole Freshman class, of which Tom was a member, be kept prisoners in their dormitory, and fed on bread and water until they capitulated.

Among the pupils at Elmwood Hall was Bruce Bennington, a Senior, and Tom was of great service to him in securing a forged note that Mr. Skeel held over the head of Bennington, threatening to expose the student and ruin his career. Tom put an end to the illegal acts of the professor, who unexpectedly withdrew from the school.

Tom and his mates, after that, greatly enjoyed their life at Elmwood Hall, and matters were more to their liking, but Tom was not at an end of having adventures. [14]

As I have said, Mr. and Mrs. Fairfield had gone to Australia to look after some property. When Spring came they started for home, coming in a sailing vessel for the sake of the long sea voyage.

Unexpectedly, one night, one of Tom's chums saw a note in a paper telling of a vessel picking up wreckage from the *Kangaroo*, the ship on which Tom's parents had sailed. This at once plunged Tom into the depths of despair, but he did not give up hope. He at once decided to go to Australia himself, and if necessary charter a small steamer and cruise about in the location where the wreckage was picked up, hoping his parents might still be afloat on some sort of life raft, or in an open boat.

In the second volume of this series, entitled "Tom Fairfield at Sea," I related the details of his most exciting trip. For Tom's vessel, the *Silver Star*, on which he was proceeding to Sydney, was wrecked in a storm, and Tom was tossed overboard. He managed to grab a life belt, and floated until, in the early dawn, he saw two sailors from the ship clinging to a derelict which the *Silver Star* had hit, and which had wrecked her.

Tom got aboard, and a little later a partly smashed lifeboat was sighted. It was brought to the derelict by one of the sailors, and found to contain Professor Skeel, who, it seems, had, by accident, taken passage for Honolulu on the same ship as that on which our hero started out. Naturally there was a mutual surprise. [15]

Tom, the two sailors and Mr. Skeel were on the derelict for some time, and then having patched up the lifeboat they set out in that. But it was some time before they were picked up, and they had nearly starved. There was also a little boy saved from the wreck—Jackie Case—and Tom took charge of him.

Eventually Tom got to Australia, and then set out in a small steamer he hired to search for his parents. It was a long trip, but he heard that some survivors of a wreck were on an island in the Friendly group, though which island it was could not be learned. Tom searched on several and at last, and just in time, he discovered his father and mother, and some others who had gotten away in a small boat from the sinking *Kangaroo*.

That Tom was overjoyed need not be said, and he and his parents lost no time in starting back for their home in this country. All the details of the wreck, and how Tom brought his quest to a successful close, will be found in the second volume. I might add here that later nearly all those on board the *Silver Star* were saved, including the father of Jackie Case. [16]

Tom went back to Elmwood Hall, and finished the spring term, graduating and becoming a Sophomore. He had come home, ready for the long summer vacation, when he received the letter

from Jack Fitch, mentioned in the first chapter of this book.

I might state that Tom's father was quite well off, and that our hero had sufficient spending money for his needs. He had, as I have mentioned, a good motorboat.

"Well, dad," remarked Tom, when he thought his parent had sufficiently collected his thoughts. "Let's have the story of the secret of the old mill."

"As nearly as I can recollect it," began Mr. Fairfield, "this mill is located about eight miles from the town of Wilden, where, as I told you, I spent some years when a lad. No one seems to know when the mill was built, but it is quite old, and must have been put up by the early settlers. It is of stone, and used to grind grain by water power.

"The mill is on the bank of a small river that flows into Lake Woonset, and it was this lake I was thinking of when I suggested that you go camping near it. It's of good size, and there is fine fishing in it."

"But about the mill, dad. What's the secret of it, and what about the wild man?" [17]

"I'm coming to that. As I said, the mill was probably built by the early settlers, and, ever since I can remember, there has been a rumor that there is treasure concealed in or about the old place."

"Treasure, dad? What kind?"

"Well, there were all sorts of rumors. Some said pirates had come that far inland, and had buried their ill-gotten gains there, and another story was that during the Indian wars the settlers, of the then small village of Wilden, fled one day, after warning had been given them of a raid by the redmen. Before fleeing, however, it was said that they had hidden all their money, gold and silver ornaments, and so on, in the old mill. I think that story is more likely to be true than the other. At any rate it is history that the Indians once descended on Wilden, and killed nearly all the inhabitants."

"Well, I'm glad there aren't any Indians up there now, if we're going camping," remarked Tom, "though one or two might be nice for variety. But go on dad."

"So it may be true that there is some treasure in or about the old mill," went on Mr. Fairfield. "I know we boys used to hunt for it, but I never found any, though one of my chums, Tommy Gardner, did find a dime once, and right away there was a wild story that he had come upon the buried treasure. But it happened that the dime was one of recent date, so that story soon fell through." [18]

"Still, ever since I can recollect, there has been more or less of a search made from time to time for gold and silver in the mill. In fact while it was pretty much of a ruin as long as I can remember, it must be much worse now, as the treasure hunters literally pulled it apart."

"What about the wild man, dad?"

"Well, that has to do with the old mill also. This old Jason Wallace, of whom your mother spoke, is a descendant of some of the early settlers of Wilden. Naturally he heard the story of the treasure supposed to be in the mill, and he was one of the most persistent searchers after it. I never knew him very well, but it seems that constant searching, and never finding anything, has turned his mind.

"He is practically crazy now, and fairly lives in the old mill. He has fitted up some sort of a room there and goes about through the woods at times, looking in all sorts of places for the treasure, thinking I suppose that, after all, it may not be in the mill, but somewhere around it."

"Is he a dangerous character, dad?"

"Well, I suppose he might be in a way, if you crossed him, or if he thought you were trying to do him out of the treasure." [19]

"Then we won't cross him," said Tom, with a laugh. "But all this sounds interesting, and I don't believe we could camp in a better place."

"You'll be careful; won't you, Tom?" asked his mother.

"Oh, sure," he answered with a smile. "But after what I went through in the shipwreck I'm not afraid of a wild man. Why, I might even help him find the treasure."

"I don't really believe there is any," said Mr. Fairfield. "I wouldn't lose any sleep over it if I were you, Tom."

"I won't. We fellows will probably be so busy having a good time in camp that we won't go near the old mill, except maybe to take some photos of it. Is that all there is to the story, dad?"

"That's all I know," replied Mr. Fairfield. "You might see your mother's friend, Mrs. Henderson, when you get to Wilden, and she may be able to give you some additional particulars."

"She wrote me," said Mrs. Fairfield, "that the way old Jason Wallace takes on is terrible at times. He rushes around through the woods, yelling at the top of his voice, and whenever he meets people he imagines they are after the treasure in the mill. I do wish, Tom, that you weren't going to such a place. Can't you pick out just as good a spot somewhere else, to go camping?" [20]

"Oh, no, momsey! This is great! I wouldn't miss this for anything, and the fellows will think it's the best ever, I know. I'm going to tell Dick Jones first, and then write to Jack and Bert."

"Well, do be careful," urged Mrs. Fairfield, who seemed filled with anxiety.

"Don't worry," advised her husband. "Tom can take care of himself I guess. Why, he even found us when we were shipwrecked, you know."

"Yes, I know. But this is different, up there in the woods, with that crazy creature roaming about. And it's so lonesome and so far from a town!"

"All the better," laughed Tom. "It's no fun camping next door to a village. We want to rough it. I'm going to find Dick." And he hurried off to tell his village chum the good news.

CHAPTER III

TOM'S CHUMS ARRIVE

[21]

"Well, Tom, how about it?" greeted Dick, when our hero met him, soon after having heard the details about the old mill and the wild man from Mr. Fairfield. "Is it all right for camp?"

"I should say yes, and then some more! Say, Dick, it's going to be great! Think of it; a mystery to solve, and a wild hermit sort of a chap, roaming around through the woods, looking for your scalp."

"Where's that?"

"Where we're going camping—where else? Here's the yarn," and Tom told it as he had heard it. "How about that?" he asked when he had finished.

"Couldn't be better," declared Dick enthusiastically.

"Have you fixed things with your folks so you can go?" asked Tom.

"I sure have."

"Then come on down to the river and we'll take another spin in the *Tag*. I want to get out on the water, where it's nice and quiet, and talk about going camping."

[22]

"So do I," agreed Dick, and a little later the two chums were once more chugging away, and talking of everything, from the best way to kill a bear to what to do when the motorboat would not "mote," as Tom put it.

"And we may get some game up there," said Tom. "This Lake Woonset is away up in the northern part of New York state, and it's wild there. I'm going to take my gun along."

"So am I," declared Dick. "When are your other friends coming?"

"I'll get 'em here as soon as I can."

"Say, Tom, maybe they won't want me to come along."

"Don't you worry about that," declared our hero. "I'm in charge of this camping party, and I'll take whom I please. But they'll like you all right, Dick, and you'll like them. That's sure."

"When do you think you'll go camping?"

"Just as soon as we can. In about a week, I guess. I'll have to get a lot of things together. I've got a tent that will do, but we'll need another small one to cook in, and a connecting piece of canvas for an awning so we can go from the kitchen to the dining room when it rains, without getting wet. The only thing I'm sorry about is leaving the *Tag* behind."

"Why don't you take her along?"

[23]

"By Jove!" cried Tom. "I never thought of that. I believe I will. I wonder if I could ship her to Lake Woonset?"

"I don't see why not," declared Dick.

"I'll find out from dad," declared Tom.

"Then go right back and do it," suggested Dick. "We might as well get this thing settled."

Tom turned the boat back, and in a short time was getting information from his father about the shipping facilities to Lake Woonset.

"You can get the boat up there all right," declared Mr. Fairfield, "but you'll have to hire some sort of a truck to haul it to the lake, as it isn't near any railroad station."

"Oh, we'll manage it," declared Tom. "Now I'm going to mail the letters to Jack and Bert."

The missives were posted, and then Tom and Dick began to make out lists of what they needed, and to get their camping outfits together.

This took them several days, and in the meanwhile word came back from Tom's two school chums that they would come on at once. They were delighted with the prospect of going camping in such a location as Tom described, though he did not give them all the particulars by letter.

"If we're going to take the motorboat," said Dick, one afternoon, about a week later, "we had better make a sort of crate for it, hadn't we."

[24]

"Yes, and take off the rudder and propeller," added Tom. "It's going to be quite a job, but I guess we can manage it."

They at once began this task, the tent and other camping supplies having been gotten in readiness to ship. At work on the crate for the boat the next afternoon, Tom was surprised to hear a shout behind him.

"Hi there, old man!" a voice called. "What in the world are you up to?"

Tom turned to behold his two school chums, Jack and Bert, coming toward him.

"Well for cats' sake!" he cried, running forward. "I didn't expect you until to-morrow? How'd you find me down here?" for Tom was at work in his boathouse.

"We managed to get off sooner than we expected," said Jack, as he and Bert shook hands with Tom.

"And we hiked for your house as soon as we landed," added Bert.

"Your folks said you were down here, and we managed to find the place without getting lost more than ten times," broke in Jack with a laugh. "Now what's going on? Tell us all about it."

"I'm going to take the boat along," explained Tom. "And say, talk about luck! We're going to camp near a mysterious old mill, and there's a wild man roaming through the woods up there, who may sneak in and scalp us any night." [25]

"Great!" cried Jack.

"All to the string beans!" exclaimed Bert. "How did you happen to stumble on such a combination as that?"

Tom told, and the two newcomers expressed their satisfaction in unmeasured terms.

"Let's start right away!" exclaimed Jack.

"Oh, there's lots to do yet," spoke Tom. "If you fellows will get off your store-clothes, you can help crate this boat."

"Sure we will!" came from Bert. "We left our grips at your house. We'll go back and change into our old duds."

"Good idea," declared Tom. "Mother's got your rooms all ready for you."

"We know. She took us up to 'em first shot," said Jack. "Great little mother you've got, boy!"

"Glad you like her," laughed Tom.

A little later the three chums were back at the boathouse making the crate. There was hammering, pounding, splitting and sawing—that is, when there was a cessation in the talk, which was not very often, as the lads had much to say to each other.

Then, too, each one had a different idea of how the work ought to be done, and they argued freely, though good-naturedly. [26]

"Say, we'll never get anything done if we keep this up," said Tom after a while.

"That's right. Talk less and work more," advised Bert.

"Here comes Dick Jones. He'll help," said Tom, and he explained that his village chum was going to camp with them. Dick was introduced to the two Elmwood Hall boys, and they liked him at once, as he did them.

After that the work went on better, for it was no small task to crate the motorboat and an additional pair of hands were much needed.

"And what did you say the name of the lake is, where we're going camping?" asked Jack, during a pause in the hammering and sawing.

"Lake Woonset," explained Tom. "It's an Indian name. Didn't I mention it before?"

"You did, but I guess I forgot it. Lake Woonset, near Wilden, in New York state. Say, Bert—!"

"By Jove, that's so. It just occurred to me too," interrupted Bert.

"What did?" asked Tom. "What's up? What's the matter with Lake Woonset?"

"Nothing, but isn't it near Crystal Lake?" asked Jack, a curious look on his face.

"Yes," answered Tom. "But Crystal Lake is a small one. Why, what has that to do with our going camping?" [27]

"Nothing much, only we've got some curious news for you. Who do you think is going to camp at Crystal Lake?"

"I can't imagine, unless it's Sam Heller and that sneaking crony of his, Nick Johnson."

"Worse than that," declared Bert. "It's our old enemy, Professor Skeel!"

CHAPTER IV

OFF TO CAMP

"What's that?" cried Tom. "Are you joking? Professor Skeel going to camp near us?"

"I'm not joking a bit," declared Bert. "You can ask Jack."

"It's true enough," put in Tom's roommate at college. "We heard it the other day—just before we came on here—from your old friend, Bruce Bennington. I don't know why we didn't think to tell you before, except that I didn't recall that Crystal Lake, and the one where we're going camping, were so near together."

"They're about five miles apart," said Tom. "But how is it that Mr. Skeel is going up there? The last I saw of him was when the ship picked us up from the derelict, the time we were wrecked, and he went on to Honolulu. What brought him back from there?"

"It seems the place didn't agree with him," explained Jack. "He tried to get into some business there but he failed. I guess he didn't play fair. Anyhow his health failed, and the doctor said he had to get back to the United States. So he came."

[29]

"Then he heard of a relative of his who was going up to camp in the New York woods, and he decided to go along. In some way Bruce Bennington got word of it. You know Mr. Skeel tried to play a mean trick on Bruce once."

"Sure he knows it," put in Bert. "Didn't Tom show up old Skeel?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot about that," admitted Jack. "Well, anyhow, our old enemy Skeel is going to camp near us, it seems."

"It won't bother me," spoke Tom. "I don't believe he'll come near our place, and, if he does, we'll just politely ask him to move on."

"Sure," said Jack. "But it's rather odd that he should be so near us."

"It is," agreed Tom. They discussed, for some time, the possibility of meeting the former Latin teacher, who had been so unpleasant to them, and then they resumed work on making the cradle, or crate, for the motorboat.

There were busy times ahead of the boys. Their camp equipment had to be gotten together, packed for shipment, and then came the details of arranging for a food supply, though not much of this could be done until they reached Wilden.

"And maybe we'll come across the fortune that's hidden in the old mill," suggested Jack, laughing.

[30]

"Or we may make friends with the wild man."

"Don't build too much on that," advised Tom.

"Anyhow, we won't want to be puttering around the old mill much," said Dick. "We'll be out in the boat, or fishing, or going in swimming, or something like that most of the time."

"Or else hunting," suggested Tom. "I hope you fellows brought guns."

"We sure did," spoke Jack.

The boys packed their kits of clothing, taking only as much as was absolutely necessary, for they were going to rough it. A small quantity of the most needful medicines were put up, and some other supplies were included.

Their grips and guns they would carry with them, but the tent, a portable cooking stove, and a case of canned provisions, as well as some in pasteboard packages, were to be shipped by express. The motorboat, which had been well crated up, was to go by freight.

By letter Tom had arranged for a supply of gasolene which was to be left at a small settlement at one end of the lake. They could also get additional provisions there and some supplies, and they hoped to get fish enough to help out on the meals.

Finally everything had been packed up. The motorboat had been shipped, with the other things, and the boys were to leave the next morning. They would have to travel all day, reaching the town of Wilden at night. They would sleep there, and go on to camp the next day.

[31]

The evening mail came in, and there was a letter for Mrs. Fairfield. It was from her former school chum, Mrs. Henderson, and as soon as Tom's mother read it she exclaimed:

"Oh Tom! That old Jason Wallace is worse than ever."

"How so?" asked Tom.

"It seems the other day that some campers who were staying near the old mill went in the ruins and began digging about. He saw them and had a quarrel with them. Now he's got an old army musket and he keeps going about the place like a sentinel, Mrs. Henderson says. He threatens to shoot anyone who comes near. Oh, I don't want you to go there!" and Mrs. Fairfield was seriously alarmed.

"Don't worry, mother," spoke Tom. "I won't take any chances. I guess us fellows can make friends with old Wallace, and we'll have him so tame that he'll eat out of our hands, and show us all the interesting places in the woods and about the old mill."

"Oh, Tom, you will be careful; won't you?" asked his mother.

"Sure I will," he promised, and she had to be content with that.

[32]

Later, when Tom told Jack and Bert about the news from the place where they were going

camping, Jack said:

"I wonder if it could have been Mr. Skeel who bothered the old man?"

"It can't be," declared Bert. "Why he's hardly up there yet."

"He might be," spoke Jack. "If he is, and he hears anything about treasure, I'll wager that he gets after it. And he'll make trouble wherever he goes—he's that way."

"He sure is," agreed Tom, thinking of how the former professor had hidden away a secret supply of food and drink when the others were trying to save themselves from starvation in the lifeboat.

"Well, anyhow, we don't need to worry," said Dick, who had come over to Tom's house to have a last talk before the start in the morning.

"That's right," agreed Tom. "Now let's go over everything, and see what we've forgotten."

This took them the best part of the evening, and having found that they had omitted a few things, they packed them into their grips and went to bed, Dick promising to come over early in the morning to go with the three chums to the train which they were all to take to reach Wilden.

Mr. and Mrs. Fairfield went to the station with the boys. The baggage was checked, and Tom had to spend some time saying good-bye to a number of his town chums. [33]

"Hey, wish you'd take me along," said Dent Wilcox, as he shuffled along the depot platform. He seemed to have forgotten his little feeling against Tom for not taking him in the motorboat, the day our hero got the letter from his chum. "Can't you take me, Tom?"

"I might if you'd promise to chop all the wood, go for all the water, do the cooking, wash the dishes, make the beds, sweep up, and run for gasoline."

"Huh!" exclaimed Dent, looking for a place to sit down. "I guess I don't want to go."

"And we don't want you," spoke Tom in a low voice.

There was a toot of the whistle, a puffing of smoke, and the train that was to take our lads to camp, pulled in. The last good-byes were said, Mrs. Fairfield made Tom promise about a dozen things that he would be careful about, and gave him so many injunctions that he forgot half of them. Mr. Fairfield shook his son's hand, and those of his chums, and there was a trace of moisture in the eyes of father and son as they said farewell.

"Be careful, Tom," said his father. "Don't be tempted too much by the fortune in the old mill." [34]

"I won't dad, but—er—that is, I think I'll have a try for it—wild man or not."

"Well, I supposed you would, after you heard the story. But don't worry your mother."

"I won't. Good-bye!"

"All aboard!" called the conductor, and the boys hurried into the car. They waved their hands out of the windows and, a moment later, the train pulled out. Tom had a last glimpse of his mother with her handkerchief to her eyes, and he felt a lump coming into his throat.

"Oh, here, this won't do!" he exclaimed half aloud. "I must send her a postal from the first post office, to cheer her up," and he carried out that intention.

As the cars clicked along the rails, Jack, who had been looking into the coach just ahead of the one in which he and his chums were riding, uttered an exclamation.

"What's the matter—forget something?" asked Tom.

"No, but I just saw someone I know."

"Oh, if that's the case, go ahead up and talk to her," laughed Bert. "He's the greatest chap for girls I ever saw," he confided to Tom. "He'll spot a pretty girl anywhere. And he knows so many of 'em."

"This isn't a girl," said Jack in a low voice. [35]

"No? Who is it then?" asked Tom, curiously.

"It's our old enemy, Sam Heller; and Nick Johnson is with him!"

CHAPTER V

LAUNCHING THE BOAT

 [36]

For a moment Tom did not answer, but stared at Jack as if he could not believe what his chum said. Then our hero asked:

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. Take a look for yourself," and Jack moved over so that Tom could have a glimpse into the other car.

"It's those chaps, sure enough," spoke Tom. "This is a great go! Sam Heller and that nuisance Nick Johnson on the same train with us, and the prospect of meeting Professor Skeel when we

get to camp. I don't like this!"

"Neither do I," agreed Bert. "But we can't help it."

"Do you think those two fellows are going to meet that mean professor you spoke of?" asked Dick.

"I hardly imagine so," answered Jack. "Mr. Skeel wasn't any too friendly with even Sam Heller, though Sam was more in his class than the rest of us. No, I guess it's just a coincidence, that Sam and his crony are on this train. But I'd like to know where they got on, and where they're going." [37]

"They must have boarded the train before we did," explained Bert, "for I've been looking out of the window at every station we came to since Briartown, and I didn't see them hop on."

"That's right," agreed Jack. "Come to think of it now, Sam lives in Newtonville, and that's not far below your town, Tom. Nick was probably visiting Sam, and the two are off on a trip together."

"Yes, but where are they going?" persisted Tom. "I hope, if they're going camping, that they don't pick out any spot near us. There'll be sure to be trouble if they do. I won't stand for any more nonsense from either Sam or Nick."

"And I don't blame you," declared Bert.

"There's one way to find out where they're going," suggested Dick Jones.

"How?" asked Tom.

"Ask 'em."

"That's right!" laughed Tom. "Only I don't like to do it. There'd be sure to be a quarrel if I did, for Sam and I never got along well together."

"I'll ask 'em," offered Jack. "While I'm not any too friendly with them I think I can get into a conversation with 'em, and learn what's up. Shall I?"

"Go ahead," spoke Tom; and Jack sauntered into the next coach. Sam and Nick were surprised to see him, of course, and they probably suspected that Tom was somewhere about, but they did not admit it, or show much curiosity regarding Jack's presence, so unexpectedly manifested. [38]

"Going far?" asked Jack.

"Oh, not so very," replied Sam, coolly. "And yet we may make quite a trip of it before we finish; eh, Nick?"

"Sure. Where are you bound for, Jack?"

"Oh, we're just going camping—Tom Fairfield, Bert Wilson and a friend of Tom's."

"No camp life for ours!" exclaimed Sam. "It's too much work. We stop at hotels."

"Yes, and you miss half the fun," rejoined Jack.

There was some more conversation, and then Jack went back to join his chums.

"Did you learn anything?" asked Tom.

"Not much. They were as close-mouthed as clams. I did my best to pump them without showing too much curiosity as to where they were going, but there was 'nothing doing,' as our friend Shakespeare might say. I guess they thought I wanted to know, and so they took special pains to keep mum. But we won't let it make any difference to us."

"That's right," agreed Tom. "Maybe there won't be any trouble after all." [39]

The boys traveled all that day, the journey being a pleasant one for the four chums, who had much to talk about. They took an observation now and then of the forward car, and saw that Sam and his crony were still aboard.

"Well, we'll soon be at Wilden," remarked Tom, as the day was drawing to a close.

"Where are we going to stop?" asked Jack.

"At a hotel, of course," put in Bert.

"Hotel nothing!" exclaimed Tom. "In the first place there isn't any, and in the second place mother's friend, Mrs. Henderson, would feel hurt if we didn't put up at her house. She wrote specially to invite us when she heard we were going camping near Lake Woonset. So we'll go there, and proceed to make ourselves at home."

The train pulled into a station a few miles below Wilden, and to the surprise of Tom and his chums, Sam Heller and his crony got off. Our friends watched them.

"What do you know about that!" exclaimed Jack, as he leaned out of a window to look. "The expressman is pulling off some tents and other camping stuff, and Sam is telling him where to place it. Say, those fellows are going camping after all their high-flown talk about a hotel, and I'll wager we run across them again before the summer's over!" [40]

"I shouldn't wonder," spoke Tom. "No matter, we'll have a good time anyhow. We'd better be getting ready to leave on our own hook."

As the train pulled out again our friends saw Sam and Nick arranging their tent and baggage, but the two did not look up at their former schoolmates.

Wilden was soon reached, and as Tom was making inquiries of the freight agent as to whether or not his boat had arrived a man stepped up and greeted our hero.

"Isn't this Tom Fairfield, and his camping chums?" he asked pleasantly.

"It is, and you—"

"I'm Mr. Amos Henderson. My wife used to go to school with your mother, and when Sallie—that's my wife—heard you were coming up here she got all ready for you. She sent me down to the station to bring you up to the house. I said I didn't think I'd know you, but land shucks! Sallie said that didn't matter. She told me to pick out four boys, and they'd be sure to be the right ones.

"And I did, by gum! Though it wasn't a hard matter, seeing as how you're the only ones who got off the train. But come on now, supper's waiting, and Sallie won't like it to get cold."

Tom and his chums, pleased with their warm reception, followed Mr. Henderson, and were soon sitting down to a substantial meal, enlivened by much talk.

"Tell us all you can about the old mill, and that crazy man, please," asked Tom, during a lull in the conversation.

"Oh, I do hope you don't run across him!" exclaimed Mrs. Henderson. "He's really dangerous," and she proceeded to give a few more details of the story of the secret of the mill, already substantially known to my readers.

Tom and his chums asked innumerable questions, as to how to reach the mill, and where the best spot to camp would be.

"I can see what those boys are pointing for," said Mr. Henderson when the four had gone to bed.

"What?" asked his wife.

"The old mill. You couldn't keep 'em away with ropes. They'll go poking about it, looking for that treasure, which I don't believe exists, and they'll have a row with old Wallace as sure as chickens."

"Oh, Amos! What had we better do?"

"Can't do anything, as I can see. Those boys will do as they please, anyhow. But I guess they can look out for themselves."

Early the next morning Tom went to see about getting the boat and other stuff carted to the camp in the woods. On the advice of Mr. Henderson they had picked out the east shore of the lake, that being the nearest to Wilden.

"And that side is the most direct road to the old mill, by way of the river," said Mr. Henderson, "but," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "I don't 'spose you boys will go there."

"Oh, won't we though!" exclaimed Tom, laughing.

Provisions were bought, the camping stuff, together with the boat, was loaded upon a heavy wagon, and with good-byes to the Hendersons, the boys started for the depths of the woods. The boat had been hard to get on the wagon, and they knew they would have difficult work launching it, but the wagon-driver and his helper promised to assist.

During the drive through the woods Tom and the others kept a lookout on every side for a possible glimpse of the old man who had searched so long for the mill-treasure, but they did not see him. The scenery became more and more wild, and the road was almost impassable in places.

"Say, this looks like the jumping-off place," remarked Dick, as they passed through a particularly lonely spot.

"It's just what we want," declared Tom. "We'll do some real camping out here."

"Yes, I guess no one will bother you," said the driver. "No one hardly ever goes to Lake Woonset, except maybe a fellow who wants some good fishing now and then. I like it myself, but I haven't been but twice in the last three years. It sure is lonesome."

"How much farther to the lake?" asked Dick, after a pause.

"About a mile. You can see it when we get to the top of the next hill, but the road winds around."

A little later they had a glimpse of a beautiful sheet of water, set in the midst of wooded hills.

"That's great!" cried Tom, and the others agreed with him.

They drove along the edge of the lake until they came to a place where a spring bubbled out, and Tom exclaimed:

"Here's where we'll camp! Let's unload and get the boat into the water. I want to see if she'll run."

"Got gasolene?" asked Jack.

"Yes, there's plenty on the wagon, and I've arranged for a supply to be brought up to the lower end of the lake, and left there. A couple of barrels ought to last us all summer."

It was hard work to unload the boat, and harder still to launch it, but it was finally accomplished, and when the tents and camping paraphernalia had been stacked up, the driver and his helper turned back toward civilization.

[41]

[42]

[43]

"Say, it sure is lonesome!" exclaimed Dick, when the rattle of the wagon had died away.

"It won't be in a minute," said Tom. "We've got lots to do to get our camp in shape. Come on, now, everybody get busy, and we'll try out the boat."

[44]

There was some little work to be done to it, and then, having filled the gasolene tank, and improvised a dock out of some dead tree trunks, the boys were ready for a spin.

"Now to see if she'll run," remarked Tom, as he prepared to turn over the flywheel.

There was a wheeze, a cough, a sigh and a groan, and the *Tag* started off as if she had never an idea of balking.

"Hurray!" cried Tom. "This is great!"

As they skimmed over the smooth lake, the beauty of it impressed them more and more, and they were delighted with their camping place. Tom steered the boat into a little cove, and as he neared the shore something moved in the bushes.

"Look!" whispered Jack. "It's a deer, maybe."

A moment later a man, with a long white beard, and clad in ragged garments, fairly leaped into view. For a moment he stood staring at the slowly moving motorboat, as if he could not believe the evidence of his eyes. Then with a howl of rage he leaped into the water, and began swimming toward the craft.

CHAPTER VI

[45]

A BIG FISH

"Look at him!" yelled Tom. "What in the world is he doing?"

"Who is he?" inquired Jack.

"Put around!" excitedly yelled Bert. "He's coming after us!"

The man was swimming directly toward the boat as if he contemplated an attack, and for a moment, though they knew he could not seriously harm them, the boys were actually afraid. For the swimmer had a really ferocious look as he came on through the water. He got to a shallow place, and stood up, running toward the boys.

"What do you make of this, Tom?" asked Jack.

"I don't know what to make," answered Tom, as he turned the boat away from the man. "But I think I can guess who he is."

"Who?" cried his three chums.

"That's the hermit—the wild man—old Wallace—who has been hunting for the fortune in the mill so long that his mind is affected."

"By Jove! I believe you're right," said Jack.

"But what's he coming after us for?" asked Dick, for the aged man was swimming again now, and could not hear the talk in the boat.

[46]

"I don't—" began Tom when the old man interrupted with another of his wild cries, following it with:

"Get out of this lake! What are you doing here? This is my lake! All this country around here is mine! Leave at once! Get out of my lake!" and again he yelled like a madman.

"This is fierce," said Dick.

"It gets on my nerves," admitted Tom. "Let's hurry away. He may swim out after us so far that he can't get back again, and I don't want to be even indirectly responsible for any harm coming to him."

"Speed up then," advised Jack, "and we'll get so far away that he'll see it will be hopeless to keep after us."

"That's what I will," agreed Tom, and, speeding up the motor, the *Tag* was soon well out in the water.

"Go away! Get out of my lake!" yelled the old man, as he again stood up in a shallow part, and shook his fist at the boys. "Never come here again!"

Then he turned and went back toward shore.

"Thank goodness for that," spoke Tom. "He's got some sense left, anyhow."

"Whew! That was an experience," remarked Jack, as the boat turned a point of land, and the hermit was out of sight. "I hope he doesn't find our camp."

[47]

"I don't believe he will," said Tom. "I guess he was just walking around, and when he saw the motorboat it sort of frightened him. I don't suppose there's ever been a craft like this on the lake before, and the old man may have imagined it was some sort of infernal machine. He came at us

if he was going to throw us all overboard."

"He's a fierce character," declared Bert. "The less we see of him the better."

"And you don't catch me monkeying around any mysterious old mill, if a fellow like that lives in it," added Dick.

"You said he had a gun, too, didn't you, Tom?" asked Jack.

"That's what I heard, but maybe it's a mistake. He didn't have one this time, anyhow."

The boys discussed their odd experience as they motored along, and soon they were back where they had left their camp stuff. It had not been disturbed, and there was no sign that the hermit had taken a short cut through the woods to get to their location, as Tom had half feared he might do.

"Now to get busy!" exclaimed our hero as they landed at the improvised dock. "There's lots to do. In the first place we'll have an election." [48]

"What for?" asked Jack.

"To choose a cook. We've got to eat, and some one has to cook. We'll take turns at it."

They selected a cook by the simple process of drawing lots, and the choice fell upon Dick, who made a wry face about it.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom, with a laugh.

"I can't cook a little bit," was the answer.

"Oh, sure you can," declared Jack. "Anyhow we've only got canned stuff so far, and you can read the directions and go by them. Start in now and get us up a meal. I'm hungry."

"So am I!" came in a chorus from the other two.

"Well, if I've got to cook, you fellows have to get wood and water," declared Dick. "That's one of the rules of this camp."

"All right," agreed Jack, "only we won't need wood with our oil stove. I'll get you water though," and he started toward the spring with a pail.

While Dick was getting out the food, and lighting the stove, Tom and Bert opened the tents and got ready to set them up. They also laid out their stores, and planned how they would arrange the camp. When Jack came back with the water he helped at this work and soon one tent was set up. [49]

"Dinner!" called Dick, after fussing about the stove for some time.

"What are you going to give us?" asked Tom.

"And what are we going to eat from?" asked Jack. "Where's your table cloth? Set out the knives and forks."

"Table! Table cloth!" exclaimed Dick with a grunt. "Say, if you think this is a summer hotel you've got another guess coming. I've broken out the dishes, and knives, forks and spoons. You can use your lap or a log for a table, though we charge ten cents extra for logs. The money goes to found a home for aged cooks."

"Never mind about that!" exclaimed Tom. "Just give us some grub and we'll do the rest."

"Where's the bill of fare?" asked Jack. "I'm particular about what I eat."

"Soup, corned roast beef, potato chips, bread, butter, jam, condensed milk and coffee," rattled off Dick.

"I'll take it all!" came from Bert.

"Same here!" chorused the other two, and soon the lads were passing around the food.

"Say, this is all right," declared Tom, as he tasted the mock-turtle soup. They had brought along several cases of canned goods, soup among them.

"It's easy to make," explained Dick. "All you do is to open the can, chuck in some hot water, heat the mixture for a few minutes, and your soup is made." [50]

"How about the roast beef?" asked Bert.

"I—er—I boiled that," explained Dick calmly.

"Boiled it!" cried Tom. "Boiled roast beef! Oh wow!"

"What difference does it make, as long as it's hot?" demanded the young cook. "Here, you taste it, and see if it isn't good. I put some ketchup on it, and a lot of spices, and it tastes—"

"It must taste like a mixture of Hungarian goulash and Chinese chop-suey!" laughed Tom. "Boiled roast beef! Oh my stars!"

"Well, you don't have to eat it," fired back Dick, as he dished out a curious mixture. The boys tasted it, and to their surprise it was very good, or perhaps their appetites made it seem so. Then with bread, jam and coffee the meal progressed, and they all declared it a good one.

"Now for finishing up the tents, and getting ready for the night," suggested Tom.

The cooking tent was put up, with an awning connecting it with the sleeping quarters, and with a table that was made of pieces of packing boxes. They had folding cots, and these were set up, and the bed clothes gotten out. Then each one picked his cot, arranged his personal belongings [51]

near or under it, and the camp was in fairly good shape.

"And now to begin to enjoy ourselves," said Tom.

"If only the old hermit doesn't come pattering around to bother us," suggested Jack. "Bur—r—r—r! When I think of the fierce way he started after us it gives me a cold shiver."

"He was sort of uncanny," agreed Bert. "But I guess he won't bother us. I don't know what the rest of you are going to do, but I'm going fishing. I think some nice fresh fish would be pretty nearly as good as boiled roast beef. Oh, wait until I tell the fellows about that!" he laughed. "We'll have to have it at one of our midnight suppers in Elmwood Hall."

"That's right," agreed Tom. "But don't you let 'em worry you, Dick. You're doing fine."

"They can't worry me," declared Tom's country chum. "I can do queerer stunts in cooking than that. You just wait."

"Well, if we're going fishing let's go," suggested Jack.

The boys had brought their rods and tackle with them, and soon they had dug some worms, caught a few grasshoppers, and were casting in from some rocks and logs on the shore of the lake.

They had been fishing for perhaps half an hour, and no one had had more than some nibbles, when Jack, who was perched on a high rock, close to deep water, suddenly felt a jerk on his line. [52]

"A bite! A bite!" he cried. "And a big one, too! Oh, fellows, I've got a dandy. Watch me pull him in!"

His reel was whirring at a fast clip, singing the song of the fish, and he was holding the butt, and winding in as fast as he could.

There was a splash in the water, and a flash of silver drops as a big fish broke.

"Give him line! Give him line!" cried Tom.

"Reel in! Give him the butt more," suggested Dick.

"Pull him in!" yelled Bert.

Jack was working frantically. The big fish leaped and plunged. Suddenly Jack leaned over a bit too far, lost his balance, and a moment later he was floundering in the lake.

CHAPTER VII

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

"Help! Get a boat! Help me out! Blub! Splub! Come on!" stammered and yelled Jack, as he went down under the water, and came up again, somewhat entangled in his fishing tackle. [53]

"Don't let the fish get away!" cried Tom.

"Grab him by the tail!" advised Dick.

"Hold him, no matter if you do get wet," was Bert's contribution. "You've had all the luck!"

"Luck! Luck!" retorted Jack. "If you call it luck to fall in the lake I——"

He was interrupted by a flurry of the big fish, that had not yet gotten off the hook, and, as Jack had instinctively kept hold of the rod, the finny prize was still a captive.

"It's luck to get a fish like that," declared Tom. "If I had him I wouldn't let go," and he started across the rocks to the aid of his chum. Dick and Bert had also laid aside their rods and were hurrying to the immersed one.

By this time Jack had managed to swim ashore, as he was only a few feet from it, and he was clambering up the rocky bank, keeping hold of his rod and line as best he could. [54]

"Is he off?" asked Tom anxiously, as he joined his comrade. "Have you got the big fish yet?"

"Say, you care more about the fish than you do about me!" objected Jack.

"Why shouldn't I?" asked our hero, with a laugh. "This is the first fish any of us caught. Reel in now. Never mind about yourself, you'll dry, but we want that fish!"

Jack did have enough sporting blood to forget his own condition, and soon he was reeling in the fish, which was still on the hook. But most of the fight was gone from him, and it did not take much of an effort to land him. The prize proved to be a large bass.

"That will be great when Dick cooks it!" exclaimed Bert, as he held up Jack's catch.

"Me cook it!" cried the village lad. "Say, I thought everyone had to cook his own catch."

"Not much!" exclaimed Tom. "You're cook for this week, and you have to serve up all the fish and game we bring in. I'm thinking of bringing in a bear soon."

"And I've got an idea where I can get a lot of frogs' legs," added Bert.

"I'll manage to furnish a mock turtle, and we can make more soup," added Jack. "Or, if you like,

I'll keep on with the fish."

"Say!" cried Dick. "You fellows can cook your own game. I'll manage the canned stuff and——"

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"Yes, and I suppose you'll fricassee the baked beans if we don't watch you," put in Tom with a laugh.

"Oh, get out!" ejaculated the exasperated cook.

"Well, I got the fish, anyhow," said Jack as, dripping water from every point, he held up his prize. "It's a beaut, too."

"It nearly got you," commented Tom. "But say, there must be great fishing in this lake when they come right up to shore and take the bait that way."

"Oh, we've struck a good place all right," declared Jack. "As soon as we get straightened out we'll go out in the middle, and pull in some of the big ones."

"I think I can get another like yours right here at shore," said Tom, and he threw in. Shortly he had a bite, and almost duplicated Jack's catch.

Meanwhile Jack was cleaning and scaling his prize, and drying himself out. The other boys had fair luck with rod and line, and then it was up to Dick to cook the fish, which he did, frying them in bacon and corn meal.

"Oh, say, maybe they don't smell good!" cried Tom, as the savory odor was spread about the camp.

"They'll taste better," was Jack's comment.

The evening meal was a great success and they all voted that Dick was a much better cook than he had given himself credit for.

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"How are you on pies?" asked Tom, as they sat around the campfire that evening, after everything was ready for bed. "Think you can tackle them, Dick? We've got prepared flour, and you can use some jam, or canned apples, for filling."

"I'll try it," agreed the amateur cook. "We'll have pie to-morrow."

They did not sleep very well that night, as the beds were rather hard, not having been properly made, and they were all rather excited over the events of the day.

Breakfast, however, with coffee, and bacon and eggs which they had brought from Wilden, put them all in good humor, and they made a merry meal.

"Now for some fishing!" exclaimed Tom, as he went down to look about his motorboat.

"And I'm going to take a gun and see if I can get anything in the line of game," put in Jack. "It's out of season for most things, but I may get something in the bird line."

"And Dick is going to make pie," said Bert. "Make four, old man, so there'll be one apiece."

"All right," agreed the young cook good naturedly. "I won't guarantee results, but I'll do my best."

Tom started out in the boat with Bert to do some fishing, while Jack wandered off in the woods with his shotgun. Dick did up the dishes and then began rummaging around in the supplies. Soon he was whistling away and, as Tom and Bert could see, from where they were in the boat, he was kept quite busy over something.

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"Well, did you get 'em made?" asked Tom, when they had all assembled for dinner. "How about the pies, Dick?"

"There they are," was the retort, and Dick pointed to the pastry.

"Hum! They smell good!" exclaimed Jack, as he whiffed an odor from the pies.

"They look good," commented Tom.

"Let's see if they taste good," suggested Bert.

The pies were served as dessert, and at the first mouthful Tom let out a howl.

"For the love of tripe!" he cried. "What did you put in these pies, Dick?"

"Apples, of course," replied the injured cook. "What did you suppose it was?"

"Well, if those are apples then they're flavored with something funny," declared Tom. "Where's the can you used?"

Dick brought two empty tin cans up to the table, which was made from packing boxes.

"The paper labels soaked off," he explained, "but there were cans of apples on top and below these so I thought it was all right. Isn't it?"

Tom took a smell, and cried out:

"Say, fellows, he dumped a can of quinces in the apple pie stuff and baked that all together and then used baking soda for powdered sugar! Oh wow! What a taste!"

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There was a general laugh, and Dick replied with:

"Well, if you fellows think you can do any better you can have my job. I'm sick of being cook."

"Tut, tut! It's all right," said Tom hastily. "We were only fooling. You're doing fine, Dick, only,

after this, smell of a can if it hasn't got a label pasted on it, and taste the powdered sugar."

But if the pies were a failure, the rest of the dinner was good, and later on Dick proved that he could make good pastry when he used the right ingredients.

They had more fish that day, as luck was good, but the game was scarce, as might have been expected at that season of the year.

After dinner, the rest of the day was spent in getting the camp into better shape, and making the beds more comfortable. The boys were in the habit of making up a camp fire early in the evening, and sitting in the glow of it to talk. They did this on their second night, and when it had about died down Tom tossed on some heavy sticks of wood and remarked:

"Well, I'm going to turn in. I'm tired and I want some sleep. To-morrow we'll take a long boat ride."

"When are we going to the old mill?" asked Jack.

"Oh, maybe we can try that soon if we like," said Tom.

It was nearly midnight, as Tom ascertained by looking at his watch, when he was suddenly awakened by hearing something moving about near the sleeping tent. At first he thought it was one of his chums, and he called out:

"Who's that? You, Jack?"

There was no answer, and, looking across to the other cots, our hero saw the forms of his companions under the covers. They were all quiet.

"There's some one out there," he murmured.

Rising cautiously he stepped to the flap of the canvas shelter and peered out. In the dying glow of the camp fire he saw an old man silently walking toward the tents.

"For gracious sake!" breathed Tom to himself. "If that isn't the old hermit of the mill I'm a lobster! I wonder what he's doing here?"

With anxious eyes he watched, and as the moon came out from behind a cloud, to add to the glow of the campfire, Tom saw the light glint on a gun.

"He's looking for us!" whispered Tom. "I wonder what I'd better do?"

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CHAPTER VIII

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

[60]

For a moment the lad stood there at the flap of the tent, pondering over the situation. He realized that he might have a desperate character to deal with—a man who would not listen to reason, and who was impulsive, as evidenced by his leap into the water after the motorboat.

"But I've got to do something," thought Tom. "If I don't he may take a shot at us, not meaning to do any harm, but just because he's erratic. And that sort of a bullet does just as much harm as any other. If he should fire into the tent——"

Tom did not finish out his thought, for at that moment there was a movement on the part of the old man. He had been standing still, silently regarding the camp, and now he again advanced.

"He's going to see what sort of a place we have here," mused Tom. "I wonder if I'd better awaken the boys?"

He thought it over for a moment and then decided that perhaps he could best deal with the old man alone.

"But how?" he asked himself.

Tom watched the hermit. He came on with a tread like that of a cat—silently—stealthily—peering from side to side. At times he muttered to himself.

"I'll see if I can take him by surprise," decided Tom. Stepping back, where he could not be seen, inside the tent, our hero suddenly yelled:

"Get out of here! What are you doing in our camp? Be off before I set the dogs on you!"

The old man was evidently startled. He stiffened as he stood, but Tom was glad to see that he did not bring the gun to bear. From under the shaggy eyebrows the hermit gazed about him as if to determine whence came the voice.

But if Tom had any idea that he could frighten the man into going away he was mistaken. For the hermit of the mill came forward until he stood directly in front of the big tent, and then, straightening up, he fairly shouted:

"Ha! I have found you; have I? Those who brought their infernal puffing engine on my lake. Now you are in my woods. I have been looking for you. I warn you away! You must leave at once! I will not be cheated out of my fortune this way. Leave my woods or it will be the worse for you!" and he shook his fist at Tom, who had now stepped into view at the flap of the tent.

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"Hello! What's the row?" called Jack, suddenly awakening.

"Is the camp on fire?" asked Dick.

"What's wrong, Tom?" cried Bert, and all three of our hero's chums sprang from their cots and crowded around him.

"It's our old friend the hermit of the mill," explained Tom in a low voice. "He's come to drive us out of the woods."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jack.

"I don't know. Let's see what he does."

"He may be dangerous," commented Dick.

"And these may be his woods," added Bert.

"Nonsense," declared Tom. "I asked dad about it before I came up, and he said this part of the forest belonged to a big lumber company that was holding it for the trees to get bigger before cutting. This old man doesn't own it any more than we do."

"Then you're going to stick?"

"I sure am!"

During this talk the old hermit remained motionless, regarding the boys with angry eyes. Then he spoke again.

"Well, are you going to take yourselves out of my woods? Are you going to leave at once? I demand that you go!"

"No, sir, we are not going," declared Tom, firmly but respectfully, for after all, he thought the age of the man was entitled to some deference.

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"You must leave my woods!" the hermit insisted. "I have been bothered enough in the search for the fortune hidden from me. I want to be alone in my woods. Go!" and he pointed his finger toward Wilden.

"I do not think you have the right to make us go," said Tom. "I understand these are not your woods, and we have as good a right to camp here as you have to wander about. We are not going!"

For a few seconds the old man seemed dazed at the bold answer. Probably he had expected a meek compliance, but, as it developed, Tom's answer was the best that could have been given.

Pausing a moment the hermit gazed almost reproachfully at the lads and then, with another shake of his fist at them, he called:

"Well, you have been warned, and now you must take the consequences. The price of your folly is on your own heads!"

He turned and vanished into the shadows of the woods.

"Whew! Quite dramatic!" exclaimed Tom, as he turned to his chums.

"I should say so," agreed Jack. "Nice thing to be awakened from pleasant dreams and told to move on in a trackless forest at midnight. He's as bad as Professor Skeel used to be."

"Speaking of Skeel reminds me," observed Tom. "Do you think he has come up here to camp?"

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"Hard to say," murmured Bert. "But I know one thing, as long as I'm awake I'm going to have something to eat. Are there any of those chicken sandwiches left, Dick?"

"I guess so. And there's some cold tea."

"Warm it up then, and we'll have a lunch."

"Say, what do you think this is; a quick-eat restaurant?" asked the amateur cook.

"Oh, go ahead," suggested Tom. "We'll all help, and maybe we'll get to sleep again, after this interruption, if we eat."

The oil stove was lighted, and the tea put on to warm, while Dick set out a plate of sandwiches he had made from canned chicken. Then the boys ate and talked.

"That old hermit is sure on our trail," declared Tom.

"But he doesn't seem to be as dangerous as the folks made out," commented Jack.

"I guess he's just simple-minded, thinking of the treasure in the old mill," added Bert. "By the way, Tom, when are we going to visit the ruins, and have a try for the buried gold?" and he laughed.

"Oh, we'll go over there some time," agreed Tom. "I'd like to pick a day, though, when old Wallace wouldn't be on hand. I'm not exactly afraid of him, but, from what I can understand, he does own the mill, though not these woods, and if he ordered us off that property we'd have to go."

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"But we can take a chance," suggested Dick.

"Oh, sure," came from Tom. "Say, but that old chap must spend all his time wandering about the woods. I wonder where he sleeps when he's away from the mill?"

"Oh, he probably has plenty of bunks and caves that we never would dream of," said Jack.

"Well, I'm going to turn in," he added, with a yawn. "If he comes back again kindly tell him, Tom, to wait until morning before doing any more ordering-off."

Once more the lads sought their cots, to sleep undisturbed until morning. The day was spent in getting their camp more in ship-shape, and getting in a supply of wood for camp fires, and for cooking in case their oil gave out, or the portable stove failed.

In the afternoon they went fishing, and had good luck. Though they kept watch for the hermit, they did not see him. The woods and lake were as deserted as though they were in some country as yet unvisited by man, and there were no evidences that any camping parties had ever visited the region where the boys were.

"It sure is wild," said Jack, as he gazed about.

"It's just the cheese though," declared Tom. "We couldn't have picked out a better place."

"And as soon as we get busy on the secret of the old mill there may be lots of happenings," added Bert.

A week passed, during which our friends enjoyed life to the utmost. They fished, and as the lake had seldom been visited by devotees of the rod and line it proved a garden spot for such sport. One had but to throw in a line to have a bite. They hunted, too, but as the season was not open they managed to kill only a few foxes and skunks, and, as their fur was not of much value in the summer, even this they gave up as rather unprofitable work.

"It's the mill we want to head for," insisted Jack. "Come on, Tom, let's get up an expedition and go there. We can go in the boat, for, as you say, the mill is on the river that runs into the lake. Come on."

"All right, we'll go to-morrow," agreed Tom.

Accordingly, having set their camp to rights, and having put up a lunch, for they would not be back to dinner, they set off in the *Tag*, heading up the lake to where the river entered it.

"She's running better than she did at home," remarked Dick to Tom, as he looked at the puffing motor.

"Yes, but don't say anything," cautioned our hero. "She may be holding back for a kick-up. I never praise this motor, for I actually believe it knows what you say. Let well enough alone," and the others laughed at his quaint conceit.

It was a beautiful day, and the trip along the lake was much enjoyed. It was rather lonesome, but the boys did not mind that.

As they moved along the shore of a little cove Jack suddenly called:

"Hold on! I think I heard something moving near the bank there," and he pointed just ahead.

"Slow down the engine," called Tom to Dick, and the latter throttled down, making the machinery almost noiseless. Then they all heard a crashing in the underbrush.

"Maybe it's the hermit," suggested Bert.

"Very likely," agreed Jack. "I hope he doesn't begin on one of his tantrums again."

The sounds in the bushes grew, and a moment later three figures suddenly stepped into view on the sandy beach of the lake.

"Look!" exclaimed Tom in a low voice. "If this isn't the limit!"

All four boys gazed toward the figures, to behold their old acquaintances, Professor Skeel, Sam Heller and Nick Johnson!

CHAPTER IX

AT THE OLD MILL

Difficult it would be to say which party was the more surprised. Certain it was, though Tom and his chums knew that their former teacher intended coming to the vicinity, and though they realized that Sam and Nick had gotten off the train with camping stuff near Wilden, they never expected to meet the three in this spot.

And, for that matter, neither did Mr. Skeel and the two lads, with whom he seemed to be on friendly terms, think to behold Tom, for the former plainly showed the surprise he felt.

"Well what do you know about this?" asked Jack, in a low voice.

"It's the limit," agreed Tom.

"Mind your wheel or you'll have us on shore," said Bert. "There's a big rock just ahead of you."

Tom shifted the wheel with a rapid turn. He had been so interested in looking at the trio on shore that he had not noticed where he was steering.

"Shall we speak to 'em?" asked Jack.

"No, don't," advised Bert. "There's no use getting into an argument."

"And yet we might find out something about them, and what they are doing up here," insisted Jack, who generally liked to take the initiative.

"I guess we'd better not," spoke Tom. "Anyhow, they wouldn't give us any satisfaction. If they hail us we'll answer, and that's all."

But the three on shore evidently had no intention of speaking. After his first stare of surprise Mr. Skeel was seen to speak to Sam and Nick, and then, with a final glance at our friends, the trio turned and plunged back into the woods.

"Well, that's over—for the time being," remarked Dick.

"Yes," assented Bert. "Can you see which way they're going, Tom?"

"Why should we want to?"

"Because they may be going to the same place we are."

"What, to the old mill?"

"Sure."

"They don't know anything about it," declared Tom.

"How do you know? That story of buried treasure is more or less known all over this section, and the hunt old Wallace is making for it, too. So why shouldn't Mr. Skeel, and Sam or Nick know of it?"

"Well, maybe you're right," agreed Tom. "But we can't see which way they're headed. The brush is too thick."

"We're not far from the mill, if I'm any judge," said Jack.

"Why?" Tom wanted to know. "How can you tell? You've never been there."

"No, but there's a current setting into the lake now, and that means the river isn't far off. The mill is on the river, so, naturally we're near the mill. Q. E. D., as we used to say after we'd floundered through a geometry proposition."

"Well, maybe you're right," admitted our hero.

"Another thing," went on Jack. "If we're near the mill, so are those fellows. So you see——"

"By Jove!" cried Tom. "I shouldn't be surprised but what you were right, Jack. This man Skeel would be up to any proposition to make money, and he may, as you say, have heard the rumor of treasure in the old mill."

"How do you account for him meeting Sam and Nick?" asked Bert.

"Oh, it probably just happened," suggested Tom. "If they are camping near here, and Skeel is doing the same thing, it's not out of reason that they should meet. Well, if they're after the treasure in the old mill I don't see what's to prevent us having a go for the same thing."

"If Old Wallace will let us," put in Bert.

"Oh, well, we'll have to take a chance with him," said Tom. "We'll have to wait until he's away from home, which he seems to be most of the time."

"And if we get the treasure, what will we do with it?" inquired Dick.

"Wait until we do," laughed Tom. "I don't believe there is one chance in a thousand of there being any treasure there, and if there is, it's a hundred to one shot that we can't find it, nor can anyone else. But it will be fun to have a go for it."

"And if we do find it," put in Jack, "we'll all take a trip to Europe."

"No," spoke Tom, quietly, "if we do find any treasure, it will have to go to the one who owns it—the old hermit, very likely."

"Oh pshaw!" cried Jack. "After the mean way he treated us, Tom?"

"Sure. Right is right. But say, don't let's get into an argument over such a remote possibility. Wait until we get to the mill, and have a look around. I'm an expert on buried treasure, and I can tell, as soon as I see a place, what the prospects are," and Tom's chums joined in his hearty laugh.

"Well, speed up," suggested Jack, "and we'll see what sort of an Eldorado lies before us. Westward ho!" and he struck a dramatic attitude.

Tom turned on more gasolene and advanced the spark, so that the *Tag* shot ahead. There was no further sign of Professor Skeel and the two boys.

"There's the river!" exclaimed Bert, about a quarter of an hour later, as the boat went around a bend, and they came into view of a stream flowing into the lake. It was as wild and picturesque as the lake itself, with big trees on either bank, overhanging the water in places.

"Say, that's great!" cried Tom. "I'm going to get some pictures of that. Take the wheel, Jack, while I get out my camera."

Tom was soon snapping away, getting a number of fine views, while with Jack at the wheel, and Dick to watch the motor, the *Tag* swept slowly into the river. The current was not strong at this point, and it was possible to slow down to half speed, as the lads did not know the character of the water, nor how much depth there was, though the *Tag* did not draw more than two feet.

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"Let's see who'll spot the old mill first," proposed Tom, as he adjusted his camera to take more pictures when the ruin should be sighted.

"I'd rather get the first sight of the hidden treasure," declared Jack, who seemed to have more faith in the existence of the secret horde than did the others. "Anyone can see a mill," he went on, "but it takes an eagle eye to spot treasure."

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"And I suppose you think you've got the eagle eye!" laughed Bert.

"Sure I have. Say, Dick, isn't it almost lunch time?"

"I don't know. I'm not the cook this week. It's up to Tom."

"Can we eat, Tom?" asked his roommate at Elmwood Hall.

"Not until we get to the mill. Work before pleasure, my boy. That's the rule here."

"Well then, get ready with the grub," said Jack, quietly, "for there's your mill," and he pointed just ahead of them.

"By Jove! So it is!" exclaimed Tom.

They had gone around a turn in the river, and on one bank, situated on a little rise, were the ruins of an old stone mill.

In its day it had been a big structure, built of field stone, and it must have been a substantial place to which the settlers for miles around probably came with their grain. But now it was in ruins, through the ravages of time and the hands of those who sought the treasure.

As the boat approached it the boys could see where a flume had been built to take the water from the river, and direct it over a big wheel. Of the latter there was little left. Trees and underbrush grew up close to the old structure, near which were the rotting remains of a wharf where, in the olden days, likely, the craft of the settlers had tied up when they came with grist.

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"Say, it's a wonderful ruin all right," said Tom in a low voice. "Put over to shore, Jack, while I get a picture. Then we'll get out and have a look around."

As Tom focused his camera, and clicked the shutter, there was a movement in the tangle of vines and bushes near what had been the main entrance to the mill.

"Look out!" exclaimed Jack. "Some one's coming!"

CHAPTER X

[75]

A CURIOUS CONFERENCE

Holding themselves in readiness for whatever they might see, or for whatever might happen, the boys peered anxiously toward the place whence the noise and movement came.

"False alarm!" laughed Tom, as a fox leaped into view and then, seeing human enemies, slunk out of sight.

"It made noise enough for a man," declared Jack. "I sure thought it was the hermit getting ready to repel boarders."

"And treasure seekers," added Dick.

"Well, let's go ashore," suggested Bert. "That is, if Tom is done taking fancy snap shots of the old ruin."

"Sure, I've got pictures enough for now, though I may want some from the other side," assented our hero.

Making the boat fast to the rotting wharf, the four lads climbed out and made ready to inspect the old ruin.

"Look out!" suddenly called Tom. "That's a weak plank you're stepping on, Jack. You'll be through it in another minute!"

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He made a grab for his chum, but it was too late. Jack, who had hurried on in advance of the others, had stepped on a board of the wharf that was but a mere rotten shell, and, an instant later, one foot went through it, and Jack slipped down to his hip, the other leg doubled up under him.

"Help! Help!" he cried, in mock seriousness. "One foot's in the water, and the other will be in a minute."

"Are you hurt?" asked Bert anxiously.

"No, but if this leg isn't skinned all the way up I'm a loon. Pull me out, can't you?"

As Bert and Dick started toward him Tom called:

"Stand back! If we all crowd up on those old boards we will all be through. Wait until I can lay another plank down, that isn't so near gone. Then we can give you a hand."

With the aid of Bert and Dick, our hero ripped off a more substantial board, and then, stepping

on this they managed to pull Jack from his uncomfortable position, for he could not help himself.

"Well, how about you?" asked Tom, when they had all made their way off the old wharf to shore.

"Oh, so-so. I'm badly battered up, but still in the ring. One foot is well soaked, but it's warm weather and I guess I won't get the epizootic. Say, though, I'm going to be lame," and Jack limped along. [77]

An examination showed that his right leg was painfully skinned and bruised, where it had scraped on the edges of the hole in the plank, as his foot went through the timber.

"We'll bandage it up when we get to camp," said Tom, as he used an extra handkerchief on the worst cut of his chum's leg. "Do you feel able to go on to the mill, or shall we turn back, Jack?"

"Go on, of course," declared the injured one. "I'm not going to let a little thing like a game leg stand between me and a treasure hunt. Lead on, captain!"

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Bert. "You'll get the best of the pirates' hoard yet."

"Now go a bit easy," cautioned Tom. "It may be that Old Wallace is around somewhere, and, as this is his property, he'd be justified in making a row if he found us here. So go a bit slow until we size up the situation."

They were on the lower side of the mill now, the side nearest the river. The ancient structure consisted of three stories. The lower one was a sort of basement, on a level with the lower ground, where it was evident that wagons had driven in to receive their loads of grain. Here too, was some of the old machinery of the mill, the levers that controlled the water gate and other things, but now all rotted and fallen into decay. [78]

"Say, this would be the place where the treasure would be buried, if anywhere," declared Jack.

"I don't think so," spoke Tom. "It's too conspicuous."

"That's just it," argued Jack. "The more conspicuous a thing is, the harder it is to find it, sometimes. Nothing is more difficult to pick up, sometimes, than something right under your nose, as the saying is."

"That's right," agreed Bert. "Did you ever play the geography game?"

"No. What is it?" asked Tom.

"Well, you take a big map, and ask a person to find some country, city, lake or river, as the case is. Most persons pick out for the puzzle a name printed in very small type, but those who know select a name printed in big letters, that take up half the map, maybe. And it most always happens that this is the hardest to find. I didn't originate that," he added, modestly. "I think Poe speaks of it in one of his stories."

"That's right," agreed Tom. "At any rate some one has had a try for the treasure here, at any rate, if signs of digging go for anything."

This was indeed so, for the ground was torn up, and in many places stones had been knocked out of the thick walls, as if some one had looked for secret hiding places. [79]

"Well, we can't stop to dig now," said Tom. "But if things go right we may later. Let's go up on the main floor," and he started toward an ancient doorway.

"Not there!" cried Jack, holding back his chum.

"Why not?"

"The boards there will be as rotten as those on the wharf, and we'll all take a tumble. Let's go outside and around on the solid earth. I don't want to put my other leg out of commission," and he limped out of the basement of the ancient mill.

The others followed, and soon they stood in the doorway of what had evidently been the main entrance to the ancient structure. It was on a level with the higher ground, farther back from the river.

This floor contained the mill-stones, now fallen from their position, and encumbered with wreckage. There were several rooms, opening one into the other, now that the doors had fallen from their hinges, and here were holes that went through to the floor above. These holes had once contained the chutes through which the grain was fed to the mill-stones.

"There might be treasure here almost anywhere," remarked Jack, as he looked about. [80]

"And it's been pretty well grubbed for," commented Tom. "They've almost ripped the insides out of the mill looking for it. I suppose old Wallace has cut and sawed and pulled apart until it's a wonder the old mill hangs together."

"It's a well-built old place," said Dick. "The stone walls are thick. There may be a hiding place in them."

"I shouldn't wonder," and Bert shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's going to be a job to take them apart all right," and he looked at the stones imbedded in mortar that was as good still as it was the day it was mixed.

The boys wandered about the main floor, and looked for a place to ascend to the third story, but there seemed to be none.

"If we had a rope we could make it," said Tom. "We'll bring one next time."

"Huh! How you going to get up there to fasten it?" asked Bert.

"Tie a stick on the end, throw the stick up, and when it catches, crossways, in one of the chute-holes we can go up easily enough."

"Good boy! Bright idea!" complimented Jack. "Well, let's see if we can find where old Wallace hangs out. We haven't come across his living quarters yet."

There were several rooms they had not yet explored, and they now proceeded to visit them. They had evidently been the living apartments of the former miller, but now they were pretty much in ruins. [81]

"No signs of a course dinner having been prepared here," commented Tom. "It smells as musty as time. He must hang out somewhere else."

"Upstairs, I'll wager," said Dick.

"But how does he get up?" asked Jack.

"Oh, he has some secret way," declared Tom. "We'll have to get a rope and explore that third story all right."

"Say, maybe we're staying too long now," suggested Bert. "Old Wallace may come along and nab us. We've seen all there is to, I guess, except upstairs."

"But we haven't seen any gold," said Jack. "I want to find some before I go back."

"Get out!" laughed Tom. "All the gold there is in this mill you can put in your eye. But I think it might be a good idea to look outside a bit. Maybe there's some outbuilding, or some secret cache where the pirates or settlers hid their stuff. We'll take a look."

"And then we'll have some eats!" suggested Jack. "I'm as hungry as the proverbial bear."

They strolled about the old mill, and saw more signs of where a search had been made for the reputed treasure. Holes innumerable were on every side, but the attempts to locate the hidden gold had soon been given over, for the excavations were shallow. [82]

"Now for the eats!" exclaimed Jack, as they started for the dock where their boat was tied. "Lands! but I'm stiff!"

He really was limping painfully, and his chums had to help him down the hill to the river. As they approached their boat Tom, who was slightly in advance, uttered an exclamation of surprise as he peered along a path that led up the river.

"What is it?" asked Dick.

"Look," was the answer. "Old Wallace! We got away just in time."

"And see who's with him!" exclaimed Jack, in a hoarse whisper. "Professor Skeel!"

"By Jove! So it is!" gasped Tom. "Wonders will never cease. Have they seen us?"

It was evident they had not, but to make sure of it the boys hurried behind a screen of bushes, where they could see but not be observed.

"Look!" exclaimed Tom again. "They're going to have a conference."

As he spoke the others could see that the former professor and the old hermit had come to a halt in a place where the path widened. It was in a little glade, and, sitting down beneath the trees, the two men, one of whom had played such a strange part in Tom's life, and the other, who was destined to, proceeded to talk earnestly. [83]

What they said could not be heard, but it was evident that it was some subject that interested them both, for they held their heads close together as if afraid of being overheard. They little realized that they were being watched.

"What are they doing now?" asked Dick.

"The old hermit has some sort of a paper," said Tom.

"And he's showing it to Mr. Skeel," added Bert.

"Maybe it's some sort of map to tell where the treasure is," suggested Dick.

"But why would he be showing it to our old professor?" asked Tom. "If he wants to keep it a secret why is he giving it away like that?"

"Hard to say," commented Jack. "I think, though——"

He did not finish, for at that moment Mr. Skeel and the hermit leaped to their feet and gazed down the path as though they heard some one coming.

CHAPTER XI

AN ANGRY HERMIT

"Something new on the programme," commented Tom in low voice. [84]

"Do you think they heard us?" asked Dick.

"No, they couldn't. And they don't see us. They're looking the other way," said Jack.

"But there's something doing," declared Bert. "I wonder what it is?"

They had their answer a moment later, when there came into view around the bend in the path Sam Heller and Nick Johnson.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" gasped Tom. "We meet them at every turn."

"I wonder how they got here so soon after we met them?" asked Bert. "It's quite a distance to walk."

"Maybe they took a short cut," suggested Jack.

"Hush! Look what's going on now," advised Tom.

As they glanced toward where the professor and the hermit had held a conference, they saw the old man transported into one of his fits of rage. [85]

He stamped about, and shook his fist at Sam and Nick, occasionally changing by making threatening gestures at Mr. Skeel.

"Say, he's the limit!" murmured Dick.

"Listen," cautioned Tom. "He's saying something."

"Leave here! Leave here at once!" commanded old Wallace, almost hitting the two lads as he shook his fists at them. "How dare you come on my property? You are after the treasure; are you? Well, you shall never find it! I will locate it! I will make the old mill give up its secret! Be off!"

"Wait, wait," said Mr. Skeel in a calm voice, laying his hand on the hermit's arm.

"Ha! You too are in a plot against me, I believe!" cried the angry hermit. "I am sorry I ever had anything to do with you. Go away!" and he took hold of the professor, and began shoving him away down the path.

"One minute," said Mr. Skeel in soothing tones, much different from the harsh ones he had almost constantly used in his classes at Elmwood Hall. "What is it you object to?"

"These lads—what are they doing here? Are they spying on me?" and the aged man pointed at Nick and Sam.

"They are my assistants," said the professor soothingly, and, though he spoke in a low tone, Tom and his chums could hear him. "Without their aid I can not help you," Mr. Skeel went on, and when the hermit's back was turned toward him our hidden friends distinctly saw the professor make a signal of caution and of acquiescence toward the two lads, who craftily nodded their understanding. [86]

"Your assistants?" asked the hermit.

"Yes. If you want me to help you I must have them to help me. I would have told you about them, but I did not get the chance until they came so unexpectedly. Had they known that you objected to their presence they would have remained away. But I assure you that you can trust them."

"Well," said the hermit, bitterly, "since I have told you part of my secret, and trusted you with it, I suppose your assistants must be in on it. But no more! No more!" and he shook his fist toward the clouds, and glanced around as though he feared more intruders. "There were some other boys around the other day," the aged man went on, "and if I find them sneaking about my mill it will be the worse for them."

"Say, we did get away just in time," whispered Jack.

"That's right," agreed Dick.

"But what in the world does Skeel mean by saying he is going to help Wallace, and that Sam and Nick are his assistants, I wonder?" asked Bert. [87]

"That's easy to guess," answered Tom. "Skeel, somehow or other, has heard about the treasure. Now he's trying to soft-soap the hermit into letting him have a hunt for it. Probably he's promised to turn most of it over to the old man."

"I think I see him doing it, if he finds it," commented Bert.

"And Skeel has the nerve to say that Sam and Nick are his helpers," said Jack. "Hot helpers they are!"

"Oh, that was just a bit of jollying, thought up on the spur of the moment," declared Tom. "He didn't figure on Sam and Nick following him, and he had to concoct some story to account for their presence. Though I don't doubt but what Skeel, and those two cronies, are in thick about some scheme."

"Searching for the treasure?" asked Dick.

"I believe so. Well, they've got one advantage of us, but maybe we can get ahead of them yet," spoke Tom. "If only we can get a chance to do some exploring we'll do it. But we can't do anything more now."

"No, let's go down to the boat and eat," suggested Jack. "I'm still hungry."

"Wait a minute," advised Tom. "I think they're going to move on, and we don't want to run into them."

As they watched they saw Sam and Nick turn and retrace their steps back along the path. They had held a little conversation with Mr. Skeel, to one side, so that the hermit had not heard, though he eyed them suspiciously. Then Mr. Skeel and the old man resumed their talk.

"Lucky that Sam and Nick didn't come this way," said Tom, as he helped Jack to stand up. "Now don't make any more noise than you can help, or they may hear us."

"They'll hear the boat when it starts," said Dick.

"I'll drift down the river a bit before I crank up," spoke Tom. "Come on, everybody."

They started down the bank, toward their boat, having come to a halt a little distance from it. Suddenly Dick, who was in the rear, uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" called Tom sharply.

"They're going away—Skeel and the hermit, and one of them has dropped a piece of paper on the path."

"A piece of paper!" exclaimed Tom. "We must have that! Here, wait a minute! If they don't miss it, and come back for it, I'll get it."

He crawled cautiously back to his former post of observation behind the screen of bushes.

CHAPTER XII

THE PIECE OF PAPER

Anxiously did Tom's chums watch his movements. They realized, as did he, that the piece of paper, dropped either by Mr. Skeel or the hermit, might give them the very clue they needed to locate the treasure—if there was any. And they also realized the danger if Tom was seen.

"If they catch him, it will be all up with our chances, I guess," murmured Bert. "We'll have to leave here mighty soon."

"That's right. With that old professor, the hermit, and those two lads against us, we wouldn't have much chance," added Dick.

"Oh, you fellows make me tired!" exclaimed Jack. "Why, it's only four to four, and if we aren't a match for that bunch I'd like to know it! Get out of here? I guess not much! We'll stick!" Jack was like Tom—he believed in fighting to the last ditch. "Besides," he went on, "as Tom said, the woods are as much ours as they are those other fellows'."

"But the mill, and the land around it, aren't," returned Bert. "They could keep us away from here."

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Jack. "I guess Tom Fairfield can find some plan for getting around it. What's he doing now?" for our hero was somewhat screened from the observation of Jack, though the others could see him well.

"He's crawling forward again," spoke Bert in a low tone. "I guess the coast is clear. I hope he gets that piece of paper."

"What good will it be?" asked Dick.

"Some good, you can wager, or Skeel and the hermit wouldn't have been so excited over it," declared Jack. "I'd like to get a look at it."

"Tom'll get it all right," insisted Bert. "He generally does get anything he goes after."

The three lads waited impatiently for the return of their chum. Dick took another look, and reported that Tom was not in sight now.

"He's probably working his way along the path to the place where the talk went on," was Jack's opinion.

They resigned themselves to waiting, talking meanwhile of what might happen. Then, interrupting their talk, came a sound as of someone approaching down the slope.

"Who is it?" asked Jack eagerly, for he had been sitting down on a stone to ease the pain of his injured leg.

"It's Tom all right!" exclaimed Dick, who was acting as sentinel.

"Has he got the paper?"

"Yes, there's something white in his hand."

"Good!" exclaimed Tom's college roommate.

A few seconds later our hero rejoined his chums. There was a look of satisfaction on his face.

"What is it?" demanded Bert eagerly.

"I don't know yet," was the reply. "It's all folded up, and I didn't open it. Didn't want to take the

time. There's no telling when they might miss it, and come back. I made tracks as soon as I saw I could safely advance and grab it up. Come on down to the boat."

"Go slow," begged Jack, and they helped him down the slope. Not taking time to examine the bit of paper, Tom loosed the mooring line of his craft, and, pushing her out into the current, he let her drift down before starting the motor, as he did not want their enemies to hear the noise of the exhaust.

"I guess it's safe enough now," spoke Jack, after a bit, from his position on a cushioned seat in the stern, his stiff leg stretched out in front of him. "Turn on the gas, Tom, and start her off."

This was done, and soon the *Tag* was making good time down the river toward the lake.

"What about the feed?" asked Bert. "Seems to me we've earned it now, Tom."

"Let's look at that paper first," suggested Jack. "That's more important than feeding our faces."

"Here it is," spoke Tom, producing it from his pocket, while Dick took the wheel.

Eagerly the others looked over the shoulder of our hero as he unfolded the paper. It proved to be quite large, being of thin but tough fabric, and it was creased into many folds, as though it had been intended to occupy a small space. It was covered with lines, words and figures.

"An architect's plan! Nothing but a plan!" exclaimed Jack.

"That's all," added Bert in disappointed tones.

"Maybe they didn't drop it at all," suggested Dick. "It may have been there all the while, and they didn't bother to pick it up. I don't see what good it is, though."

Tom said nothing for a space. He was intently studying the sketch.

"Chuck it overboard," spoke Dick.

"No, mail it back to Skeel, and tell him how we found it," was Bert's suggestion. "It'll show him how close we are on his trail."

"I'll do neither," answered Tom quietly. "We're going to keep this piece of paper for ourselves."

"Can you make head or tail of it?" asked Jack.

"I fancy I can," answered our hero. "I think this is a detail drawing of the floor plans of the old mill, and I believe it may be the key to the location of the treasure—or at least the place where the treasure is supposed to be."

"You do?" cried his chums in a chorus.

"I sure do," replied Tom, with conviction. "And I'm sure either Skeel, or the hermit, dropped this. It wasn't there on the path before they held their confab, and neither Sam nor Nick was near the spot where the paper lay. Boys, I believe we've got a valuable clue here!"

"Let's see it," requested Jack, and Tom passed it over. His chum gazed at it thoughtfully, turned it around, and peered at it upside down. Then he remarked, as he passed it back: "Well, if you can make anything out of that, Tom, you're a good one. What does it say?"

"That I don't know yet," spoke our hero. "It's going to take some studying to ferret this thing out, but we'll do it. Meanwhile we'll just forget all about it for a little while, and have some grub. Get busy, fellows, and have dinner."

They ate with exceedingly good appetites, while the motorboat speeded on her way toward the lake. Between bites they talked of their experience, and kept a lookout for any possible signs of their former professor, his cronies and the hermit.

"It must be that there are short cuts through these woods that we know nothing about," said Tom, "or otherwise they never could have been on the ground at the same time we were, from where we last saw them. Still, I don't think they can get ahead of us this time."

And this was so, or, at least, our friends saw nothing of the four whom they were trying to circumvent.

"Well, I know one thing," declared Jack with a grunt. "I'll be glad when we get back to camp, and I can rub some liniment on this leg of mine."

"It's too bad," consoled Tom. "I hope you're not laid up with it."

They emerged from the river into the peaceful lake and in due time were back at camp, without further incident having occurred.

"Oh, wow! but I'm stiff!" cried Jack, as he attempted to leave the boat.

"Wait, we'll give you a hand up," said Tom, and they had to assist him much more than they had previously, for a severe stiffness had set in. However, they got Jack to the tent, and on a cot. Then they proceeded to give him such rough and ready treatment as was possible under the circumstances.

"Well, it feels better, anyhow," said Jack with a sigh of satisfaction as he stretched back. "Now let's have that screed again, Tom, and I'll have a go at translating it. I don't believe it can be much worse than some of the Latin stuff old Skeel used to stick us with."

"All right, try your hand at it," agreed Tom. "The rest of us will get things in shape for the night, and see about supper. How about quail on toast for you, Jack?" he asked with a whimsical smile as he handed over the mysterious piece of paper.

"Nothing doing. I want roast turkey and cranberry sauce, with ice cream and apple pie on the side."

"I think I see you getting it," remarked Bert. "Corned beef and beans will be about the menu tonight."

While Jack lay back on his cot, easing his injured leg, and studied the piece of paper Tom had picked up, the others proceeded to get the camp to rights for the night. Bert, whose turn it was to cook, started the oil stove, and began opening canned stuff. Tom looked to see if there was a good supply of wood for the campfire, for, though they did not really need it, they always lighted one for the sake of the cheerfulness.

"I say," called Bert, as he went about collecting the various items he needed for the meal. "What did you do with that piece of bacon, Tom?"

"What piece?"

"The one partly sliced off. I laid it in this box, but it's gone now."

"Is that so?" asked Tom, and there was a curious note in his voice. "That's queer. I remember seeing it there when we started off. We'll have a look."

"Oh, take another piece, and don't delay the meal," suggested Dick with a laugh.

"It isn't that," said Tom. "If things begin to disappear from camp we want to know about it, and find out who is taking them."

Together with Bert he examined the place where the bacon had been put. This was in a box, fastened about four feet above the ground, in a tree. It was a sort of cupboard, thus raised, in which to keep stuff that was not protected by tins, so that prowling rats, squirrels or chipmunks could not get in. There was a door to it, fastened with a wire.

"Was the door opened when you went to get the bacon?" asked Tom.

"Yes," answered Bert, "and I'm sure it was closed when we went away."

Tom stooped down, and began examining the soft ground at the foot of the tree. As he did so he uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked Bert, eagerly.

"There's been some animal here," declared Tom. "A fox maybe. I can see the footprints, but I'm not enough of a naturalist to tell what made 'em."

"A bear," suggested Dick.

"I don't believe there are any in these woods, though there may be. It's wild enough."

"Those aren't bear tracks," declared Bert. "I know, for a fellow with a dancing bear once went past our house, and it was just after a rain. I noticed the tracks, and they were as big as a ham. This isn't a bear."

Tom had arisen and was looking at the door of the cupboard.

"The wire fastening has been pulled out of place," he said. "And look! Here are the marks of sharp claws. The wood is all splintered. Some wild beast took our bacon all right!"

CHAPTER XIII

A SHOT IN TIME

Tom looked around at his chums. From the tent Jack poked his head, having limped from his cot at the sound of Tom's exclamation.

"Do you really think it was some sort of a 'varmint critter?'" asked Jack.

"Sure," was the answer. "You can see plainly how he tramped around this tree, and, smelling the bacon, just reared up on his hind legs, clawed the door open, and made off with part of our provisions."

"Well, it's too bad the bacon is gone," said Bert, "but this may make good hunting for us. I've been wanting to get something bigger than a fox."

"It's lucky the main part of our bacon is still in the original box, with the cover nailed on, or the beast might have gone off with that," commented Dick.

"Yes," agreed Tom. "We'll have to be more careful after this, and I guess it will be a good plan to keep the fire going more regularly. Fire is a good thing to scare 'em off."

"But we don't want to scare 'em off," said Jack. "I want to get a shot, as soon as my leg gets better. I'll get a bear, or something, before I go back."

"If they don't get *you*," commented Tom grimly. "Well, let's get supper over with, and then we'll have a conference on that mysterious paper."

The meal was enjoyed, albeit they ate rather hurriedly, for they were anxious to try to solve the puzzle. The dishes were washed by the simple process of being put to soak in the lake.

"I'll rinse them off with warm water in the morning," promised Bert.

"What's the use of being so fussy?" asked Tom. "The lake water is clean enough."

"But it's cold," spoke Bert, "and you need hot water, and soap, to get the grease off."

"Oh, we're not as particular as all that," declared Dick.

Lanterns were lighted as the dusk settled down, and then the lads gathered in the main, or sleeping tent, around some boxes that had been arranged in the form of a table. On it the paper Tom had found was spread out.

"Well, what do you make of it now?" asked Bert, when he and the others had stared at the document for some time.

"It's a plan—a plan of the old mill," declared Tom. "That much is certain. See, here is the ground floor, with the main wagon entrance. Then comes the second floor where we were, with the machinery, mill-stones and the like. Then the third floor is shown, where there were living rooms, evidently. That must be where the old hermit hangs out when he's home."

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"That part is all true enough," said Bert, "but I don't see where the location of treasure is marked on here."

"Of course not!" exclaimed Tom. "If it was you can wager Skeel or the hermit would have had it long ago."

"Then what good is the paper?" asked Dick.

"Well, don't know yet," Tom admitted frankly. "But I think it's going to come in useful." And he little knew what a service that same piece of paper was shortly to render him and his companions.

"I think it's a sell," declared Jack decidedly.

"I don't," fired back Tom quickly. "I tell you what I do think, though. I think that this is only the beginning of a search Skeel and the hermit have started for the hidden hoard. This is an old plan of the mill, evidently a copy of the original, for you can see that some of the words are spelled in the old-fashioned way, with 'f' for 's.' And the distances, too, instead of being in feet and inches are in chains and links which, though they are still used by surveyors, are not in such general use as they were in the old days."

[101]

"Then you think that the old hermit somewhere found an original of the old plans, and had a copy made?" asked Dick.

"I do, yes. And I think somehow our friend Skeel got in touch with him, and secured one of the copies to work on."

"But I can't see the good of just a plan," spoke Dick.

"I can only surmise, of course," went on Tom, "but it seems to me that what Skeel intends to do is this: He will look at the plan, and from his knowledge of mathematics he'll try to figure out the most likely place for a secret chamber, where treasure would be apt to be put. That would be more logical than digging here and there at random in the walls, with the risk of bringing them down."

"That's so!" exclaimed Jack. "But what if the stuff was buried somewhere outside the mill, Tom?"

"That's different, of course. I don't see any directions on this plan for digging in the grounds about the mill. It may be that there is another paper—a sort of map—that the hermit has, and if he doesn't find the fortune in the mill he'll have a try in the grounds—the same as others have had. But as all we have is this plan, we'll work on that."

Once more they fell to studying the paper, but they could not seem to get anywhere. The plan gave them no more clew than any blueprint of a modern building would have done. The walls were shown, the partitions, the location of the doors, windows, and various pieces of mechanism, but that was all.

[102]

"Maybe those words and figures, that seem to refer to the building, are a sort of cypher," suggested Bert.

"Maybe," admitted Tom. "I didn't think of that. How do you work out one of these cyphers, anyhow?"

"I know a couple of ways," said Jack, and they tried his method, but they only got a lot of meaningless words and figures, though they sat up until nearly midnight.

"It's no good!" exclaimed Tom regretfully. "Let's go to bed, and have another try to-morrow. I'm dead tired."

They all were. So they turned in, after making a campfire blaze that they hoped would at least glow until dawn. Nothing disturbed their slumbers, and in the morning, after breakfast, they again began studying the map.

They were forced to give it up, however, and Tom in desperation exclaimed:

"We'll just put this away for a few days, until we get another chance to visit the mill. Then we'll take it with us, and when we're right on the spot some idea may come to us that will put us on the right track."

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The others agreed that this was a good plan, and as a sort of recreation they went for a ride in the motorboat. They fished, having fair luck, and, having reached a large cove, not before visited, they went ashore and cooked the dinner they had brought with them, broiling their fish over the live coals of a campfire.

"Say, this is something like living!" exclaimed Bert, as he stretched out on some moss, and picked his teeth.

"I should say so," agreed Dick. "I'm glad you fellows let me come along."

"We're glad to have you," declared Tom. "Supposing we take our guns and go off in the woods? Maybe we can have a shot at the critter who took our bacon."

"Sure! Come on!" exclaimed Bert.

"I'm afraid I'm not up to it," said Jack. "My leg is just beginning to get better, and I don't want to strain it with walking through the woods. I might stumble."

"That's so," agreed Tom. "We'll stay here then."

"No, go on!" urged the injured lad. "Don't let me hold you back. I'll be all right until you return."

"I'll stay with you," volunteered Dick.

"No, you go along!" insisted Jack. "I'll be all right alone. Besides, I didn't bring my gun, and I wouldn't go if I didn't have a game leg. Go ahead."

[104]

Thus urged, Tom and his two chums set off in the dense woods, taking their route by a compass, so that they could more easily find their way back.

Left to himself Jack took a comfortable position, leaned against a stone that he had padded with leafy branches and ferns, and before he knew it he had fallen asleep.

Meanwhile Tom and the others tramped on, looking eagerly about for some sign of legitimate game that they could take a shot at. They roused several foxes, for the forest was almost primitive in its wildness, but they did not shoot the prowling creatures, as they were valueless for food or fur.

Tom, however, saw a big, snowy owl, and, as he wanted it for a specimen in his school den, he bowled it over.

"That'll look great, stuffed and perched on our bookcase," he said. "It'll give the place an air of wisdom."

"It needs it badly enough," said Bert, "with the small amount of studying you and Jack do."

"Get out, you traducer!" shouted Tom.

They went on for a mile or two farther, but saw nothing worth their powder or shot, and, at Tom's suggestion, they turned back.

[105]

"We don't want to leave Jack alone too long," he explained.

They thought perhaps they might meet the hermit, or Mr. Skeel and the two cronies, but they neither saw nor heard anything.

Tom was in advance as they neared the place where they had left Jack, and, as he came to a place where he could have a view of the motorboat on shore, and his chum sleeping under a tree, our hero uttered an exclamation of horror.

"What is it?" cried Bert.

"Look! That beast on the branch over Jack's head!" whispered Tom, hoarsely. "It's just going to spring!"

They saw a tawny, yellow body, crouched on a limb directly over Jack, and their chum was peacefully sleeping. The back of the beast was toward them, but Tom had a clear view of the raised head. The tail was twitching, and the body quivering in readiness for the leap upon the sleeping lad.

"Shoot!" whispered Dick.

"I'm going to," answered Tom, and, raising his rifle, he took quick aim and pulled the trigger.

They could hear the thud of the bullet as it struck, and the next instant, [with a scream of rage and pain, the beast launched itself into the air.](#)

CHAPTER XIV

TOM'S SCHEME

[106]

"Roll out of the way, Jack! Roll out of the way!" yelled Tom, as soon as the smoke had cleared from his line of vision, and he could see the result of his shot. The tawny beast was writhing on the ground in its final struggle, close to the prostrate youth.

"Jack! Jack! Wake up!" cried Bert.

There was no need for the last injunction, for Jack had sat up with a start at the report of the rifle.

"Look out that he doesn't claw you!" shouted Dick, and then Jack became aware of the cause of the commotion.

"Roll to one side!" Tom again called, and his chum understood.

It was probably the only thing that could have saved him, even after Tom's lucky shot, for the beast still had plenty of fight left in him, and doubtless associated the pain he suffered with the youth on whom he had been about to leap. The creature was trying to reach Jack.

But if the latter could not spring up and run, because of his injured leg, he could roll to good advantage, and this he proceeded to do as soon as he saw the need of it. [107]

Over and over he went, like some living log, down toward the lake shore, and away from the struggling beast.

"Give him another bullet, Tom!" cried Bert. "Finish him off now."

"Here goes!" exclaimed our hero, and from the muzzle of his repeater he pumped another leaden missile into the brute. He had a clear view now, with Jack out of the way.

The animal sprang into the air, fell back, quivered convulsively, and then lay still. The second bullet had ended its misery.

Tom, Bert and Dick ran up.

"He's done for," remarked Bert.

"Stop rolling, Jack!" suddenly called Tom, "or you'll be in the lake," for his chum, being unable to see the result of the shot, still imagined himself in danger, and was approaching the water.

At Tom's call, however, he slacked up in his queer method of progress, and arose to his feet.

"That was a close call," said Jack, as he limped up to the others. "Who did the business for our savage friend there?" and he kicked the carcass.

"Tom did. You might have known it," answered Bert. [108]

"I just happened to," said our hero modestly. "I was in the lead, and saw it first. Then I fired."

"And a good job for you that he did," remarked Dick.

"Thanks," said Jack, fervently, and his hand and that of Tom met in a firm clasp.

"What sort of a beast is it, anyhow?" asked Bert, as he surveyed the tawny body.

"A lynx, and a big one, too," declared Dick, who knew something about animals. "They're as savage as a wildcat when they're hungry, and this one probably thought Jack would make a good meal."

"I never heard a thing until the shot," explained Tom's chum. "I was sleeping soundly and I thought it was a clap of thunder. Jove! If you hadn't come along!" and he shuddered.

"Well, shall we take it back to camp with us?" asked Bert.

"I'd like to," spoke Tom, "but it's a hard job to skin it in hot weather, and I'm afraid I couldn't keep the hide. Besides the fur isn't in very good condition. I guess we'll just leave it where it is."

Then, after a rest on shore, and talking over the incident, they got in the boat, Tom taking the big owl he had shot, and started back for their camp. [109]

The next day they went off on another trip, exploring the woods and hills around the lake. They did more fishing, and looked for something to shoot, but saw nothing.

"But there hasn't any more bacon disappeared," said Dick one morning, as he was frying some for breakfast.

"No, I guess we got the lynx that took it," said Tom. "I thought I detected the odor of fried bacon and eggs on him," he added with a smile.

But if they imagined they were to be free from the prowlers of the woods they were mistaken, for, a few nights later, they were awakened by a noise near the place where they threw the odds and ends from their kitchen—empty tins, bits of food and the like.

"Something's out there," called Tom, as he and the others awoke.

"The hermit, maybe," suggested Jack.

"He wouldn't make as much noise as that," said Tom. "I'm going to take a look."

He got down a low-burning lantern from where it hung in the space between the two tents, turned it up, and flashed it from the entrance in the direction of the refuse pile.

As he did so he and the others saw a black body rear up, and then they heard a menacing growl, while something big and clumsy lumbered off in the darkness. [110]

"A bear!" cried Jack. "A bear as sure as you're alive! Take a shot, somebody!"

Dick was the first to grab his gun, and, taking the best aim he could, he pulled the trigger. Following the flash and the report the boys heard a yelp as of pain.

"You winged him!" cried Bert. "Come on, we can get him!"

He would have rushed from the tent, lightly clad as he was, had not Tom grabbed him.

"Hold on," urged our hero. "Don't do anything rash."

"Why not?"

"Because that bear—if that's what it was—is far enough off by now. And besides, he's probably only wounded. Dick's gun doesn't carry a heavy enough bullet to fetch a bear down in one shot, unless it went right into the brain. And again, you're not exactly dressed for a tramp through the woods at midnight," and Tom glanced at his friend's bare feet. "Wait until morning," he advised, "and maybe we can trail him."

Morning showed them some drops of blood, and marks in the soft earth that were undoubtedly the tracks of a big bear.

"Oh, if we can only get him!" exclaimed Dick, with enthusiasm. "Maybe he's worse wounded than we think." [111]

But though they tramped about nearly all that day they did not come upon any traces of bruin, and they had to give up the chase, though they did so reluctantly.

"Well, Tom," remarked Jack that night, as they sat about the campfire after supper, "this isn't treasure-hunting very fast."

"No, that's so. I've been sort of holding off, hoping I'd happen to think of some solution to that plan, but I haven't. How about you fellows?"

"Nothing doing as far as I'm concerned," said Jack, as he limped over to the water pail. He was much better and the soreness was almost gone.

"Two more to hear from," suggested Tom.

"I can't think of anything," admitted Bert, and Dick confessed to the same thing.

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do," proposed Tom. "We'll take another trip to the old mill."

"And do what?" asked Jack.

"We'll take the plan with us, and try to see if, by looking at the structure itself, and, then the plan, we can come to any solution. It may be we might hit on some secret room, or something like that."

"What about the old hermit?" asked Dick. "He'll be furious if he catches us there."

"Well, we'll watch our chance, and go in the mill when we're sure he's out," went on Tom. "Then we won't all go in. We'll leave someone outside to give the alarm in case he comes. How do you like my plan?" [112]

"Good!" cried Jack; and the others agreed with him.

"Then we'll start in the morning," decided Tom.

CHAPTER XV

ALMOST CAUGHT

 [113]

"If there was only some plan by which we could draw the old hermit away from the mill for a day or so, we could have all the time we wanted," remarked Dick.

"Send him an anonymous letter," suggested Jack. "Tell him the money is buried at a point about ten miles from here, and he'll go there and dig. That will leave us free."

"Yes, a hot chance we'd have of sending a letter up to him in this wilderness," laughed Tom. "You might as well say a telegram. The only way to deliver a letter would be to leave it yourself, at the mill."

"And that's as risky as the way we are going," said Dick.

It was the morning after the night on which Tom's plan had been adopted, and the four chums were in the motorboat, journeying along the lake to the river on which the ruined mill was located. They had their lunch with them, intending to remain all day, if things were favorable, and Tom had the plan carefully put away in his pocket.

"I wonder if we'll meet Skeel, and our two schoolmates?" asked Tom, as he turned on a little more gas to increase the speed of the engine. [114]

"Not very likely," was Jack's opinion. "I shouldn't be surprised but what they and the professor have taken up their quarters in, or near, the mill, to be right on the job."

"Maybe so," assented his roommate. "I wonder just where our old professor made his camp, anyhow? We might try to locate it, when we have nothing else to do."

"It would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack to look for it in these woods," said Tom. "That is, unless we had some better directions than just Crystal Lake."

"If we could get the boat on that lake, we could sail around it," suggested Bert. "If he's camping near a lake he's probably somewhere near the shore, and we could easily see his tent."

"Yes, but we can't get the boat to Crystal Lake, and it's too much of a jaunt to walk there. We'll just let Skeel alone, and stick to the old mill."

"What about Sam and Nick?" asked Jack.

"We'll let them alone, too, as long as they don't bother us," decided Tom, and, on the whole, the crowd agreed with him.

Remembering their former experience, when the old hermit had come along so unexpectedly, they decided that it would be best not to take the boat as close to the mill as before. [115]

"We'll just tie it about half a mile down the river," said Tom. "Then the noise of it won't give the alarm, and we can go up quietly. If we have to run for it I think we can do the half mile somewhat under the time old Wallace can make."

"Or Skeel, either," added Jack, for all the boys were good runners, and had done well in track athletic contests.

"What about Sam or Nick, if they chase us?" asked Bert.

"We won't run from them, that's flat!" exclaimed Tom. "And I think they'll know better than to take after us."

They turned from the lake into the river, and proceeded up that stream, with the speed of the *Tag* cut down about half, so that the craft would not make so much noise.

"I think this place will do to tie up at," remarked Tom, when they had covered a few more miles. "It's secluded, and there seems to be a good path leading along the bank. We want a good path if we've got to run," he added.

The boat was made secure, and then, taking their lunch with them, for they did not expect to start back until late afternoon, they set out to walk the rest of the distance to the ancient mill.

"Here's where we hid the time we saw Skeel and the hermit having a confab," remarked Jack, as they reached that spot. "And there's the wharf where I barked my shins. You'll not get me on that again." [116]

"Let's take a look at the place where we found the paper, fellows," proposed Tom. "I'd like to see if they came back and made a search for it."

Proceeding cautiously, they reached the spot where Tom had made his find.

"They sure have been looking for it!" exclaimed Dick. "Look how the bushes are trampled down. They've been tearing around in here for further orders!"

It was very evident that this was so, and the boys realized that the loss of the paper was known to their enemies.

"I wonder if they suspect that we have it?" asked Bert.

"I don't doubt it," spoke Tom, dryly. "But that's all the good it's going to do them. I'm going to keep the paper until I'm sure I'm giving it to the rightful owner."

"Now for the mill," suggested Jack, as they turned to go. "I don't believe we'd all better make a try for it at once. We'd better sort of spy out the lay of the land first. The old hermit, or some of his new friends, may be on the lookout."

It was agreed that this plan would be a good one to follow, and, accordingly, Tom was selected to go forward and reconnoiter. [117]

Advancing cautiously, while his companions remained in hiding, our hero got to a point where he could command a good view of the old mill.

"Now I guess I'll just lay low for a while," he remarked to himself. "If I go any closer, and Wallace is in there, it will be just as bad as if we all plumped in on him. Me for a quiet wait."

Tom made himself as comfortable as possible, and for nearly half an hour intently watched the mill for any sign of life. But he saw nothing, and he knew his chums would soon be getting impatient.

"I guess I'll take a chance and go in now," thought Tom. "I don't see anything suspicious, and if the old hermit is there, surely he would show himself by this time."

He rose from his crouching attitude, glad enough to be on the move again, for he was cramped and stiff, and was about to rise above the bush that screened him, when a slight noise in the direction of the old mill attracted his attention. A moment later old Wallace came out of the main entrance, dressed as though about to go away, for he had on his coat and cap, and carried his gun.

"Jove!" cried Tom. "That was a narrow escape! In another second I'd have been in plain view, and then the game would have been up." [118]

Hastily he stooped down again, and waited until the old man had gone down the hill, and was out of sight. Fortunately he took a course that would not bring him near the other hidden lads.

"Now to see if the coast is clear," remarked Tom, after waiting a bit to make sure that the hermit was not coming back. "If Skeel and those fellows are in there I won't mind them so much. I rather guess they won't be glad to see me."

Exercising all needful caution, Tom advanced closer to the ancient structure. He gained the old driveway, unseen, he hoped, and, walking carefully about, he listened intently. There was no

sound save the murmur of the water in the old sluiceway.

"We'll take a chance," decided the lad, and he hurried back to signal his chums. In a few seconds they joined him.

"Now, fellows, we've got to work quickly," explained Tom. "There's no telling when Wallace will be back, though I think he's gone for a long tramp. Skeel and the others don't seem to be here."

"What's your plan?" asked Jack.

"To compare the mill, as it actually is, with the copy of the drawing we have. I want to see if we can find a secret hiding place anywhere, or some means of getting to the third floor. I don't believe that scheme of tossing up a rope, and climbing it, would be safe, for it might slip, or the wood might be so rotten that it would pull away. But I think we ought to be able to get to the third story some other way."

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"So do I," agreed Jack. "Well, let's start in, and see where we come out. We'll begin at the basement."

This they did, and it did not take them long to make certain that the plan of the lower floor, as it was shown on the piece of paper Tom had found, was substantially correct.

"There doesn't seem to be any place for a secret compartment for the hiding of treasure down here," remarked Dick, when they had finished their inspection.

"That's right," agreed Tom, who had been looking at the thickness of the walls. "They are solid enough, and unless we tore them down we couldn't come at anything hidden in them. Let's go upstairs."

The examination there took longer, for, not only were they anxious to see if it was possible to secrete treasure there, but they wanted to find how the old man got to the third story, since there was no evidence that he lived in any other part of the mill.

But here, too, they were doomed to disappointment. They found that the plan they possessed corresponded with the actual building in every particular.

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"And yet I'm sure there is some secret stairway or passage," insisted Tom. "Let's try the walls and see if they sound hollow."

They were about to start this when Jack exclaimed:

"Say, what about that sentinel we were going to post? I thought someone was going to be on the watch to give warning if anyone approached."

"Well, when old Wallace went off the way he did," remarked Tom, "I didn't think it would be necessary, but perhaps we'd better do it."

"I'll stand guard," volunteered Dick, and he took his position a little distance from the old doorway, where he could have a good view about the mill.

Tom and his chums were busy sounding the walls, though they had not discovered anything, when there came a hail from Dick.

"Someone's coming!" he cried. "Better get away."

"Lively, fellows!" cried Tom, stuffing the plan in his pocket. "It may be old Wallace!"

They raced for the door, and had hardly emerged from it, to join Dick, before they saw, coming along the path he had taken a short time before, the old hermit.

For a moment he did not see them, but when Jack, who could not move quite as fast as the others, stepped on a stick which broke with a loud snap, the old man looked up and beheld the intruders. For a moment he stood transfixed, and then, rushing forward he cried:

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"Ha! So you dare to come here; do you? Oh, if I had but known, I'd have been ready for you. I've got a dungeon that's just yawning for such as you. How dare you trespass on my property?"

"Don't answer," advised Tom, in a low voice. "Come on."

His chums lost no time in obeying, but if they thought they were going to get off without a chase they were mistaken.

"I'll have the law on you!" cried the angry old man. "I'll see if you can come here trying to take my treasure from me! I'll take the law into my own hands if worst comes to worst!"

Then he started toward them, his gun much in evidence.

"Hit up the pace, boys!" Tom exclaimed. "This fellow may be a poor shot, but he doesn't know what he is doing, and it won't do to take chances. Run! I'll give you an arm, Jack."

He helped his chum, and the others hurried on, while the white-haired hermit, muttering threats, followed as fast as he could.

[122]

CHAPTER XVI

STRANDED

"Say, he can travel some!" exclaimed Dick, looking back over his shoulders when they had gone some distance. The hermit was still crashing through the underbrush after them.

"He sure can!" agreed Tom. "I would hardly believe that a man as old as he seems to be could be so spry on his feet."

"He's probably lived in the woods all his life," explained Jack, as he limped along, "and he's like an Indian. Are we getting away from him?"

"Well, we're holding our own," said Tom, as he looked back. "My! but he's a savage-looking chap, though."

On hurried the boys, anxious only, for the time being, to get to their boat and leave the angry hermit far behind.

"Wait 'till I catch you! Wait 'till I get hold of you!" the old man cried. "Young rascals! trying to do me out of the treasure I have looked for so long. Wait 'till I get you!"

"I hope he never does," murmured Dick.

"That's right," agreed Bert.

They had come, now, to the path leading along the edge of the river, and it was easier traveling for them. So, also, it was for the hermit, and he made better speed too.

"We can't seem to shake him off!" complained Jack.

"How about a trick?" asked Bert. "Can't we make a spurt, get ahead of him, and then hide at one side of the path until he gets past?"

"I don't believe so," replied Tom. "He knows this path and these woods like a book, and he'd spy out our hiding place in a minute. Besides, if we did give him the slip, he might go on until he came to our boat, and then it would be all day with us."

"How do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Why he'd set it adrift, or do some damage to it so we couldn't run it. No, the only thing to do is to keep on until we outdistance him, and then jump into the boat and make a quick getaway."

"I guess that's right," sighed Jack. "I'll try to put on a little more speed, but my leg hurts like the mischief for some reason or other. I thought it was better, but I must have given it a wrench."

"Take it as easy as you can," advised Tom, but Jack did not spare himself, and limped on. Slipping, sometimes sliding, and often stumbling, the four chums hurried along the path, with the relentless hermit coming after them.

"I suppose this ends our chances of finding the treasure in the old mill," said Bert, when they had covered nearly the remaining distance to the boat.

"I don't see why," spoke Tom.

"We won't dare risk going there again. He'd be sure to be on the watch for us."

"Oh, I don't know," replied our hero. "He can't always stay in the mill, and we may strike a time when he goes away, as we did to-day. I'm not going to give up so soon. I want to see what that treasure looks like, if it's there. I'm going to chance it again very soon, even if you fellows don't."

"Oh, we'll be with you, of course," declared Bert.

"Sure," assented Jack, and Dick nodded to show that he, too, would not desert.

A turn in the path now hid the old hermit from sight, but they could still hear him coming on, muttering threats and calling them names for interfering in his search for the hidden wealth.

"It seems to me he's farther back," spoke Tom, listening with a critical ear to the progress of the man behind them.

"It does seem so," agreed Jack. "I hope so, for I'm about all in."

They slackened their speed, and all listened intently. It was so, they could scarcely hear the approach of old Wallace now.

"He's giving up!" exclaimed Dick.

"Don't be too sure," Tom advised them. "He may be playing a trick on us. Creeping up on us without making much noise."

"Or taking a short cut, as Skeel and those two fellows did that day," added Bert.

"Come on!" urged Jack. "We don't want to be caught napping. Hurry, fellows!"

"Oh, I think we can afford to take it a bit easy," said Tom, who felt sorry for his roommate. There was a look of pain on Jack's face, and it was evident that the strain was telling on him. Still he was game.

"Do you think it's safe?" asked Bert.

"We'll take a chance," decided Tom. "We're off his property now, and he can't touch us. We can defy him, and all he can do is to call names. They won't hurt us."

"He can shoot!" exclaimed Dick, remembering the gun.

"I don't believe he'd dare," was Tom's opinion. "Anyhow, our boat's just around that bend, and we can soon reach it. Slow up, fellows," he added.

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They did, when it was evident, from careful listening, that the hermit had either given up the pursuit, or was coming on so slowly that they could easily distance him by a spurt. And, as Tom had said, they had left their boat around the next bend of the river bank.

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"Whew!" exclaimed Bert, wiping his face with his handkerchief, "that was warm work while it lasted."

"And we didn't really find out anything," added Jack.

"No, but we will!" exclaimed Tom, with conviction. "I'm not going to give up so easily."

"Hurray!" cheered Jack. "Never say die! Don't give up the ship! Bravo, Tom!"

"And we're all with you," added Dick, who had never before participated in such exciting adventures.

They had slowed down to a walk now, and Jack felt the relief to his injured leg, which was not so nearly healed as he had hoped. There were no further sounds of pursuit, and they all breathed easier, even though they realized that the hermit would have no right to attack them, as they were on neutral ground.

"I wish we hadn't eaten all our lunch!" sighed Dick, as they neared the place where they had tied their boat.

"I guess there is some left, in one of the lockers," spoke Tom. "I brought along a little extra supply, for I thought we might be hungry on the way back."

"Bless you for that my son," exclaimed Jack, half tragically. "I, too, would fain pick a morsel."

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"It'll be a mighty small morsel," laughed Tom, "for I didn't pack much."

"Anyhow we can sit in the boat and rest," said Bert. "I'm fagged out."

"I guess we all are," declared Tom.

He was in the lead, and, as he neared the clump of bushes on the bank, that hid his boat from view, he quickened his pace. The others pressed on after him, and, a moment later they heard a surprised exclamation from Tom.

"What's the matter?" called Jack. "Did you hurt yourself, old man?"

"No, but look here, fellows, our boat is gone!"

"Gone!"

"The boat gone!"

"Isn't she there?"

In turn Jack, Dick and Bert gave voice to these words.

"It's clean gone!" gasped Tom.

The three chums pressed close to his side and all four gazed at the spot where the *Tag* had been tied. She was not there, and a glance down the stream did not disclose her.

"Gone!" exclaimed Jack. "It can't be possible."

"But it *is* possible!" exclaimed Tom. "Can't you see that she isn't here?"

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"Maybe this isn't the place where you tied her," suggested Dick.

"Certainly it is. This is the very old stump that I wound the rope about."

"Maybe it came untied and the boat drifted away," was Jack's contribution.

"The kind of a knot I made doesn't come loose," declared Tom, and his chums knew he was seaman enough to make this a certainty.

"Then someone has taken her!" declared Bert. "Someone has stolen your boat, Tom. We're stranded!"

CHAPTER XVII

AN ANXIOUS SEARCH

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For several seconds the chums stared at each other in silence. Then Tom burst out with:

"Well, wouldn't that rattle your teeth!"

"I should say yes," chimed in Bert.

"There's no doubt but that she's gone," said Jack, slowly.

"You don't need a map to make that plain," explained Tom, with a sickly grin.

"But what makes you think someone took her?" asked Dick, who, perhaps, did not arrive at conclusions as quickly as did the others.

"I can't account for it in any other way," went on Tom. "The engine couldn't start itself, that's sure. I have known it to start on compression, when it was feeling real good, and had had a fine

night's sleep, but those times were few and far between. Besides it would take someone to throw the switch even then. And I know she didn't drift away, for I had a new bowline on her, and I took particular pains with the knot I tied."

"Then she's been taken away," decided Jack.

"And the next question is; who took her?" put in Bert.

"And the following one is; what are we going to do?" added Dick.

"Two pretty hard propositions," commented Tom grimly. "I fancy we can answer the first question easily enough."

"How?" asked Jack quickly. "Whom do you think took your boat?"

"Who else but Sam Heller and Nick Johnson?" retorted Tom quickly. "They're prowling around this neighborhood with Mr. Skeel, and, though we haven't seem 'em lately I've no doubt that they are around here. Very likely they came past here and, seeing my boat, knew her at once. They hopped into her, and made off."

"I believe you're right," agreed Jack. "The sneaks! I wish I could get hold of 'em now! I'd settle with 'em, game leg or not. I wonder which way they went?"

"Down the river, and out into the lake, naturally," declared Bert. "They didn't pass us as we were legging it away from old Wallace."

"Yes, I guess that's right," assented Tom.

"Which brings us to the second question," remarked Dick.

"What's that?" asked Jack.

"What are we going to do? How are we going to get back to camp?"

"And it's a mighty serious question," said Tom grimly. "It will soon be dark, and if we don't get back—well—" He shrugged his shoulders, and they all knew what he meant. They would have to spend the night in the woods, supperless. Not a very pleasant prospect, to say the least.

"Well, let's have a hunt for the boat," proposed Jack after a pause. "Maybe we can get a sight of those fellows if they're in her, and if we do—"

"Well, what?" asked Tom significantly.

"We'll swim out and take her away from 'em."

Tom shook his head. "Not much chance of that," he said. "The *Tag* would walk right away from the best swimmer among us."

"That is unless those fellows did something wrong to the motor, and it balked on them," added Tom's roommate.

"That's a slim chance," declared our hero. "Of course the *Tag* may kick up a fuss when she finds her rightful owner isn't in her, but we can't count on it. There's one thing, though, in our favor."

"What's that?" asked Dick.

"There isn't much gasolene in the tank," said Tom. "I only had enough in to about carry us back to camp, and it won't run those fellows very far. Then they'll be stuck if they're out in the lake."

"They may find our camp and get more," suggested Bert.

"I don't think so. They wouldn't be likely to head for our camp in the first place," reasoned Tom. "They'd go off in some other direction, and by the time they've traveled a few miles they won't have gas enough to fetch up at our place. No, I think we're safe enough on that score."

"But what can we do?" asked Dick. "We've got to do something."

"Of course," assented Tom. "Let's walk down to the lake, and see if we can get a sight of 'em. They may be stuck first shot, but I doubt it. Sam knows something about motorboats."

"Ugh!" groaned Jack, at the prospect of a long tramp. "I wish we had an airship."

But it was vain wishing, and there was nothing to do but to walk. Off they started, along the river bank, wondering what they would do that night if they did not get their boat. It would not be long before darkness fell, and with a prospect of no supper, and a night in the woods, it was enough to make anyone gloomy.

Fortunately they were all sturdy lads, with high spirits, and they did not easily give way to despair. It was a time, however, to severely try them.

"Seems to me someone must have moved the lake," declared Jack, after an hour's tramp.

"Why so?" asked Tom, with a laugh.

"Because it's a good deal farther off than it was when we came up."

"It only seems so," said Dick. "We'll soon be there."

They reached the place where the river flowed into the lake about half an hour later, and their anxious gaze sought the broad expanse for a glimpse of the missing boat.

"Not in sight," murmured Tom, shading his eyes with his hand, for the rays of the setting sun struck across the surface. "Not a trace of her!"

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"Let's walk along the shore aways," proposed Bert. "We may see them then."

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed Jack. "I don't believe I can go a step farther—not without a rest, anyhow."

"Then rest," said Tom. "I'll tell you what we'll do. You stay here, and we'll go along the shore for a mile or so. If we don't see 'em, then we'll come back."

"You may miss me," suggested his chum.

"We can't. We've got to follow the lake shore, and we can't get beyond the river, anyhow."

"I'll stay with him," volunteered Dick. "You and Bert go, Tom."

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Thus it was arranged, and Tom and his chum started off, following the winding shore of the lake, casting their eyes over its lonely surface for a sight of the boat they so much needed. It was an anxious search, and it was not rewarded with success.

"Well, we may as well go back," suggested Tom, after a bit. "It will soon be too dark to see, and we want to be together when night comes on."

"That's right," assented his companion. "What are we going to do next?"

"Search me," replied Tom laconically. "We'll have to rough it, I guess; make some sort of a bunk with tree branches. Or we may find a sort of cave to sleep in."

"And what about supper?" asked Bert, suggestively.

"We'll have to take in our belts a few holes, and make our hunger small, as the Indians do."

They turned back, and soon rejoined Dick and Jack, who were moodily sitting on the shore. One look at the faces of Tom and Bert told the story of their unsuccessful search as plainly as words could have done.

"Well, what about it?" asked Jack. "What are we going to do, Tom?"

"Look for a place to stay over night," was the prompt answer. "We'll need shelter, anyhow. Let's find a good place, and cut some hemlock branches for a lean-to."

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"A cave would be just the cheese," spoke Dick. "Maybe we can find one if we look."

"Then we've got to get busy," declared Bert. "It'll soon be dark."

Rather at a loss in which direction to start, the boys walked back along the bank of the river. Then, seeing a sort of trail, they followed that.

"Where does it lead to?" asked Jack, as he limped along.

"I don't know," answered Tom. "It's been traveled, I can see that, and it may lead us to some sort of shelter."

"I wish it would lead us to a restaurant," murmured Bert.

"Hey, cut out that line of talk!" warned Tom.

It was now so dark that they could hardly see, but the trail was firm under their feet. It led up the hillside that sloped away from the river, and then, turning, followed the stream.

Tom, who was in the lead, as he usually was, came to a sudden stop when they had traversed several hundred feet on the straight path. So unexpectedly did he come to a halt that Dick, who was right behind, collided with him.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "See a snake, Tom?"

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"No, but I see something better. If that isn't a cave I'm all kinds of a star-gazer. Look!"

They peered through the gathering dusk to where he pointed and beheld a black opening underneath a ledge of rock.

"It's a cave all right!" cried Jack.

"Go ahead in it," urged Bert.

"Maybe it's where that bear hangs out," suggested Dick.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Tom. "A bear wouldn't have a cave so near a main-traveled trail. He'd pick out a more secluded place for a summer residence."

"Say, you're getting mighty polite all of a sudden," declared Jack. "Go ahead inside then, if you think it's all right, Tom."

"I didn't say it was all right, but I'm going to take a chance on it if you fellows will come."

"Sure," assented Dick, who had brought his gun—the only one of the campers who had. "We'll back you up."

"Then you go ahead," suggested Tom, "as you have the only weapon. I'll come behind and light matches, so you can see to shoot if there's anything there."

"Pleasant prospect," murmured the country lad. Still he did not hang back, but advanced cautiously, Tom following him, with ready matchbox.

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It was now so dark that the cave looked all the blacker by contrast. Yet no sound came from it, and the boys were practically certain that had it been inhabited, either by human beings or wild beasts, some sign would have been manifested by this time, as they had talked quite loudly.

Into the cave went Dick and Tom, followed by the other two, who had caught up clubs of wood. "See anything?" called Jack, as Tom struck the first match. "No, not a thing. Go on in farther, Dick. Ouch!" this last as the match burned down and scorched Tom's fingers. "Hurry up with that light!" cried Dick as the darkness became more dense than ever. "I am," said Tom, but it was some seconds before he could strike one. "By Jove! There *is* something here!" cried Dick. The next moment the report of his gun sounded like a clap of thunder in the cave.

CHAPTER XVIII

BACK IN CAMP

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"Did you hit him?"
"What was it?"
"Say, we'd better get out of this!"
Tom, Jack and Bert thus cried in turn. As for Dick he said nothing, and he did nothing, for he could not see to run in the darkness of the cave, and the rush of air, following the shot from his gun, had put out the match Tom was holding up.
"Show a light there," called the marksman. "I think I plugged him all right."
Tom struck another match and held it high above his head. Dick stood his ground, and Bert and Jack, who had started to run, came back to the mouth of the cave.
"No, I didn't get him. I can see his green eyes yet!" shouted Dick. "Here goes for another shot."
"Hold on!" cried Tom.
"What's the matter?" asked Dick. "Don't you want me to hit the beast?"
"I would if there was one there," spoke Tom, quietly, "but there's no use wasting powder and lead on a stone wall."

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"A stone wall?" gasped Dick.
"Yes, that's what you shot at. Look," and Tom, advancing into the cave, held up a piece of wood he had lighted as a sort of torch, against the rocky wall of the cave. "That was what you thought were the glittering eyes of some animal," he went on, and he pointed to two shining particles of mica in the rock. They were about the distance apart of an animal's eyes, and when the match was reflected from them Dick mistook them for the orbs of a bear or some other beast. He had fired on the instant.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" gasped the marksman.
"You'd have plugged him if it *had* been anything," said Tom, as he held the little torch still closer to the rocky wall. Then they could all see where the shot from Dick's gun had flattened out between the glittering bits of mica.

"Some shot, that," complimented Bert, who, with Jack, had entered the cave.
"I should say yes," added Jack.
"And in the dark, too," came from Tom. "Well, fellows, we're here. We've got a shelter, and now if we only had something to eat, we'd be all right."

"That's so," agreed Bert, as he and Jack lighted some dry sticks of wood they had picked up on the floor of the cave. The place was now comparatively light.

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Dick lowered his gun, which he had been holding in readiness for another shot if necessary, and as the torches blazed up more brightly, he uttered a startled cry.

"What is it?" demanded Tom. "Do you see a bear?"
"No, but I see where there's been a fire in here," answered Dick, "and, unless I'm mistaken, there's something here to eat."
"Get out!" cried Bert incredulously.
"Don't raise our hopes," pleaded Jack. "I'm half starved."

For answer Dick went farther back into the cave where his companions could see some boxes. Then came a cry of triumph.

"It's all right fellows!" shouted Dick. "Someone has been camping here, and they've left enough stuff so we won't starve until morning, anyhow. Here's some canned meat, some crackers, a bit of stale bread, and a coffee pot. There's coffee too, if my nose is good for anything!"

"Hurray!" yelled Jack. "Hold me, someone, I'm going to faint."
"Is it real food?" demanded Tom.

"It looks like it," answered Dick.

"Then, fellows, get in some wood, strip some bark for torches and we'll make a fire and eat," suggested Tom. "Is there anything we can get water in, Dick?"

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"Yes, here's a battered pail. It may leak, but I guess it will hold enough for coffee. And there are some tin cups, too."

"Good! Bert, you get some water. We passed a spring just before we found this cave. See if you can locate it. Jack, you and Dick sort this stuff out, and I'll get wood for the fire."

Thus Tom soon had his little force busily employed. From the depths of despair they had been transported to delight in a short time.

A quick survey showed that the cave had been used by campers, and that within a day or two. There was enough canned meat and crackers left for at least two meals, and with the coffee, a supply of which, already ground, Dick found in a can, and with some condensed milk, the boys knew they would not starve.

"This is great luck!" exclaimed Tom, as Bert came back with the pail of water.

"It sure is," assented Jack. "I wonder who has been here?"

"I shouldn't wonder but what Sam and Nick were," replied Tom.

"What makes you think so?" they asked him.

"Because there are two cups, two knives and two forks, and two tin plates. That shows two fellows were here, and Sam and Nick are the most likely ones I can think of."

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"Could this have been their main camp?" asked Dick.

"I hardly think so," replied Tom. "I believe they just found this cave—or maybe Mr. Skeel did—and they may have made this a stopping place just to be nearer the old mill."

"Or maybe they have been searching for the treasure in here," suggested Jack.

"It's possible," admitted Tom. "Well, anyhow, let's see what sort of a meal we can get, and then for a rest. I'm dead tired."

It was a very primitive supper that they managed to cook over a fire built in the cave. There was a natural ventilation to the place, so the smoke did not annoy them much. They warmed some canned roast beef in a battered skillet, opening the can with a jackknife.

Coffee they made in the dented pot, and then they had to take turns eating, as there were only enough table utensils for two at a time. The table was a box in which the stuff had evidently been brought to the cave.

"Oh, but I feel better now!" exclaimed Jack, with a contented sigh, when supper was over.

"So do I, and I'll feel better still when I find my boat," came from Tom.

"We'll have another hunt for her in the morning," suggested Bert.

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"And we may have good luck," added Dick. "I think the finding of this cave and the food means that our luck will take a turn."

"It needs to," said Tom grimly.

For beds they cut spruce and hemlock boughs, spreading them out on the floor of the cave, and, though it was not like their comfortable cots, they slept fairly well, not being disturbed. After a breakfast, on what was left from the previous night, they held a conference.

"What's best to do?" asked Tom. "I don't want to always be giving orders."

"Sure, you're the camp-captain," declared Jack. "We'll listen to you. I should think you'd have to find the boat first, before we can do anything else. We can't swim back to our camp, that's certain."

"Well, if that's the general opinion, we'll have another try for the boat, walking along the lake shore," agreed Tom.

They set out, and retraced their route of the previous day, coming finally to the lake. As the place where the river entered was quite broad it was out of the question to swim it, or, rather, they did not like to risk it, in such unknown waters.

So they followed the lake shore for a considerable distance farther than Tom and Bert had gone the previous evening. They climbed a high hill, that gave a good view of the lake, but, strain their eyes as they could, they had no glimpse of the *Tag*.

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"They've either got her well hidden, or else they have sunk her," was Tom's despairing comment.

"Oh, maybe we'll find her," said Jack, more cheerfully.

"Say, I've just thought of something!" exclaimed Bert.

"What is it?" his chums asked him in a chorus.

"It's this! That old hermit must have some sort of a boat. He never could get on the other side of the lake, where we are camped, and over here again as quickly as he does without crossing in a boat. I believe he must have some sort of a craft hidden in the river near the mill."

Silence followed Bert's advancement of his theory, and then Tom exclaimed:

"By Jove! old man, I believe you're right. Why didn't we think of that before? Of course he has a boat! He never could get around the way he does if he didn't have. And it's up to us to find it. Come on back. We'll walk along the river bank until we get to the mill. Then we'll look for the boat."

Buoyed up by new hope, they started back, and, proceeding cautiously, they soon were below, and opposite, the ancient mill. [145]

"It'll be on this side," decided Tom, "and probably hidden under some bushes. Look carefully, and don't make much noise. We don't want old Wallace to chase us again."

The river was far enough below the old mill so that ordinary sounds made at the stream could not be heard at the structure. But still the boys were cautious. They kept a sharp lookout, too, for any sign of the old hermit.

Up and down the bank they went, peering under bushes, and in little coves formed by water eddies. Suddenly Jack cried out:

"Here it is, fellows! An old tub, but it's got oars, and we can row to camp in it."

They ran to where he stood beside an old skiff. It looked to be leaky and unsafe, but it was a boat, and they would have almost welcomed a wash-tub in their plight.

"Quick!" exclaimed Tom. "I think I hear someone coming. Get in and shove off."

They lost no time in embarking, and, when they were afloat on the river, they found that the craft was better than she looked.

"I guess we can get to camp in this," said Tom with a sigh of relief. "And, on our way, we may see the *Tag*."

"If we're not caught before we get into the lake," spoke Jack grimly. [146]

Apprehensively they looked in the direction of the old mill. All they heard was the rustle of the wind in the trees. The place seemed silent and deserted.

"Say, things are happening all right!" exclaimed Dick. "I never imagined camping was so exciting."

"Oh, things generally happen where Tom Fairfield is," remarked Jack, with a laugh.

Dick was at the oars, and rowed rapidly down stream, being aided by the current. In a short time they were far enough below the mill to make it practically impossible for the old hermit to catch them.

"Unless he has our motorboat," put in Bert.

"In that case I'll let him capture us, and then I'll take the *Tag* away from him," said Tom firmly.

Out on the lake they floated. It was a bit rough, but the skiff was a broad and heavy one, and made a good sea boat. They took turns rowing, meanwhile keeping a watch for Tom's craft, but they did not see her.

"You don't appreciate a motorboat until you have to row!" exclaimed our hero, as Bert relieved him at the oars.

"Oh, well, we'll soon be in camp," consoled Dick, and an hour later they were opposite their tents. [147]

"Everything seems all right," said Tom, with an air of relief. "Now to see if we've had any visitors."

CHAPTER XIX

STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES

 [148]

The boys found their camp undisturbed, save for the visit of some small animal that had tried to carry off a tough paper bag filled with some small groceries.

"The bacon's all right this time," commented Tom. "I guess we got the lynx that was taking it."

"And now for a square meal!" exclaimed Bert. "I'm nearly starved. Hustle, boys, and get some grub on to cook. Or, even if it's cold, it doesn't matter."

"Hustle yourself!" exclaimed Jack. "Everyone for himself, I'm going to open a can of chicken and make some sandwiches."

"Sardines for mine," commented Tom.

They had no bread, for their supply was gone, and the teamster from Wilden, whom they had engaged to bring in supplies, was not due until the next day. However, they made out very well with crackers, and ate, so Tom said, as much as if it had been a regular meal, instead of a lunch. [149]

"But we'll have a regular supper," declared Dick.

"Will you cook it?" they asked him.

"I sure will," he answered, "though it isn't my turn."

The edge taken off their appetites, they sat at ease about the camp, and talked of their adventure. Drawn up on shore was the skiff they had confiscated from the hermit.

"I wonder if he'll make much of a row when he finds it gone?" mused Jack.

"What if he does?" asked Tom. "Either he took our boat, or some of his friends did—meaning Skeel or the two lads with him—so it's only turn about if we took his craft. We had to get back to camp; didn't we?"

"Sure we did, and if he says anything we'll tell him so," came from Bert. "How are you coming on with that supper, Dick?"

"Oh, I'll start it pretty soon," and, after some further talk the country lad began. He rummaged among the stores and soon an appetizing odor came from the kitchen tent.

"That smells great!" exclaimed Jack.

"Some kind of soup, anyhow," declared Bert.

"And he's frying something," added Tom. "You just let Dick alone and he'll get up a meal. He's a natural cook."

And the meal to which Dick called his chums a little later was certainly a good one—for boys out camping. There was a canned soup to start with, and then fried chicken. [150]

"Fried chicken—think of that!" cried Tom. "Talk about being swell!"

"It's only canned chicken, fried in butter, and seasoned a bit," explained Dick modestly. "I opened some canned corn to go with it. Have some?"

"Sure!" there came a chorus, and three plates were quickly passed toward the amateur cook.

"One at a time," he begged. "I've got some—"

He paused for a moment and then cried:

"The potatoes! They're burning! I forgot 'em!"

He made a rush for the cooking tent, ignoring the out-stretched plates, and the others became aware of a scorching odor.

"Wow! but that's mean!" exclaimed Dick ruefully, as he came back wiping the perspiration from his face. "They're burned to nothing. The water all boiled off 'em. And they were sweets, too, the only ones we brought along," he added.

"Never mind," consoled Tom. "We've got enough to eat without 'em."

"Sure," agreed the others. They finished off the meal with crackers and a jar of jam, with coffee on the side. [151]

"Some better than what we had in the cave," commented Bert, passing his cup for a second helping.

"Oh, but that tasted good all right!" declared Jack gratefully.

"I wonder what Sam and Nick will say when they find their stuff gone from the cave?" asked Dick.

"Do you think it was theirs, Tom?" asked Bert.

"I certainly do. I'd say it was Skeel's, only there was stuff for two campers. Besides, I don't believe he'd rough it in that fashion. But I sure would like to see Sam and Nick now—not that I have any love for 'em—but I want my boat."

After spending the evening talking about the events of the past two days, and taking another look at the plan of the old mill, the lads turned in. They slept soundly, for they were very tired.

"Well, what's the programme for the day?" asked Jack of Tom, following a bountiful breakfast, for which Bert made pancakes from prepared flour, and served them with bottled maple syrup.

"We'll have another hunt for the boat," decided Tom. "I'll take a few more cakes, cook," he added, passing his plate to Bert.

"You will—not!" ejaculated the maker of them. "I want some myself. You've had ten at least, and if you think it's any fun making griddle cakes in a frying pan, you just try it yourself." [152]

"Just give me one," pleaded Tom, and he got it.

"Say, if we go out in the boat we may miss that teamster who is to bring our stuff," suggested Jack. "And I'd like to send a letter or two back by him, to be mailed."

"That's right—so would I," agreed Tom. "We'll wait until he shows up before going out on the hunt."

So they spent the morning writing letters. The teamster arrived about noon, with some food and supplies for them. He stayed to dinner, and declared it was one of the best he had eaten.

"Folks back in Wilden would have it that the hermit had made away with you," he said.

"Not yet, though he got our boat, or somebody has," said Tom.

"Pshaw! That's too bad. I hope you get it back. Well, I guess I'll be going. Will you be breaking up camp soon?"

"Not until we solve the mystery of the mill," declared Tom firmly.

"Oh shucks! Then you'll be here all winter," declared the man, with a laugh. "There's no mystery of that mill except what old Wallace makes himself. He's a little cracked in his upper story, I think." [153]

"I shouldn't wonder," admitted Tom. "But, all the same, I think there's something in it, after all, and we're going to have another try at it, some day."

They went rowing out on the lake after the teamster had left, taking their letters with him. It was small pleasure in the heavy skiff they had confiscated, but they were not out for pleasure just then—they were looking for the motorboat.

They covered several miles of lake shore, but saw no sign of the *Tag*, and only gave up when it was evident that they would not get back to camp before dark unless they hurried.

The next day the search was just as unsuccessful, and for several more they kept up the hunt. They saw no sign of either Mr. Skeel, the two cronies, or the hermit.

"Well, I give up," remarked Tom, despondently, one afternoon. "I don't believe we'll ever get that boat back."

"It does begin to look a little dubious," remarked Jack. "Still, luck may turn at the last minute. Where you going?" he asked, as he saw his chum start toward the forest back of the camp.

"Oh, just to take a walk. Anybody want to come?" [154]

"Not for mine," answered Jack. "I'm just going to be lazy until supper time."

"Same here," added Dick.

"You won't get any supper for two hours at least," declared Bert, who was filling the position of cook.

"Well, I'm going to take a walk and do some thinking," said Tom. "See you later."

He strolled away, and the beauty of the woods on that perfect summer day must have lured him farther than he thought. He was thinking of many things, of the mystery of the old mill, of the disappearance of his boat, and their life in camp.

"Guess it's time I started back!" he exclaimed about two hours later as he noticed the shadows lengthening. "I wish I could think of some solution of that old plan-drawing," he murmured.

Even though he hurried he did not reach the camp until darkness had almost set in. As he approached the place a strange silence about the tents seemed to smite him like a blow. In spite of himself he felt a fear.

"Hello, boys!" he called. "I'm back. Where are you?"

There was no answer. He looked all around. There was not a sign of his chums. The old boat was drawn up on shore, showing that they were not out in that. They could hardly be off in the woods at this hour. [155]

He hurried to the cook tent. Preparations for supper had been under way, but that was all. Some of the pots and pans had been knocked to the ground. The place was in some confusion, but that was natural. Of Tom's chums there was not a trace. They had mysteriously disappeared!

CHAPTER XX

LONELY DAYS

 [156]

"What in the world can have happened?" asked Tom, speaking aloud to himself. He had to do that to drive away some of the loneliness that thrust itself upon him as he walked around the deserted camp. "There's something queer been going on, and I'm going to find out about it," he added determinedly. "Maybe they're hiding away from me for a joke."

He made a round of the little spot there where they had camped in the wilderness, but there were few places for his chums to have hidden save in the woods themselves—the woods that were on three sides of the tents, the lake forming the fourth boundary.

"Well, if they're in there they'll wait a good while before I go hunting for them," he said. "If it's a joke they can come back when they get ready."

And yet, somehow, he felt that it was not a joke. He and his chums were as fond of fun as any lads, and, in times past, the boys had played many a trick on each other. But there was a time for such antics, and Tom realized that this occasion was not now. He knew his comrades would realize the strain he was under, in losing his boat, and in trying to solve the mystery of the mill against the activities of Mr. Skeel and the two cronies. [157]

"I don't believe they'd do it," mused Tom. "There is something wrong here. Hello, fellows!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Dick! Bert! Jack—Jack Fitch! Where are you?"

The echoes from the darkness were his only answers.

"They're gone," he said, "and yet, by Jove, I don't believe they'd go willingly—unless—"

He paused, for many thoughts were crowding to his brain. He had a new idea now.

"Unless they saw something of Skeel, or Sam and Nick, and followed them off through the woods. Maybe the hermit himself passed here, and they thought he was on the trail of the treasure. They would naturally follow him, and if I wasn't here they would not wait for me, knowing they could explain afterward. I'll wager that's it. They've gone for the treasure. It's all right after all."

He felt a little better, having arrived at this decision, and proceeded to get himself a meal. He lighted the stove, made coffee, and fixed up some sandwiches from a tin of beef. It was while sipping the hot beverage that another thought came to him. [158]

"I wonder if they went away prepared to stay all night?" he asked himself. "I'll take a look."

In the main, or sleeping tent, the cots had been made up that morning, as was the rule, so that, no matter how late the chums returned to camp, they could tumble into bed. The cots showed no signs of having been disturbed when Tom inspected them with a lantern. And then the lad saw something else.

The caps and sweaters of his chums still hung from the ridge-pole of the tent.

"By Jove!" cried Tom aloud. "They would hardly go off that way—in the dampness of the night—without having taken more than they wore when I started on my walk. And they had on mighty little then. Even if they had to take the trail on the jump there would have been time enough to slip on a sweater, and grab up a cap. Those fellows went off in a big hurry."

He paused, to gaze in silence around the tent. He was more lonely than ever, as he recalled the jolly faces that he had thought would greet him on his return from the stroll in the woods.

"And here's another thing," he reasoned. "If they *did* take the trail after some of our enemies, one of them would most likely have remained to wait for me, and tell me to come along. I'm sure they'd have done that. And yet—they're all gone, all three of them!" [159]

Tom Fairfield shook his head. The problem was becoming too much for him. He sought for a ray of light.

"Of course," he reasoned, "there may have been two parties of them. Skeel and the two cronies in one, and the old hermit by himself. In that case the boys may have divided themselves. Maybe that's it. Oh, hang it all!" he exclaimed as if he found the puzzle too much for him. "I'm going to wait until morning."

But the morning brought no solution of the problem. Tom awoke early, after a restless night, during which he several times imagined he heard his chums calling to him. He would jump up, rush to the flap of the tent, toss some light wood on the camp fire, and peer out eagerly, only to find that he had dreamed about or imagined it.

Once or twice he called aloud, listening and hoping for an answer, but none came. And so the night passed and morning came.

Tom felt little appetite for breakfast, but he knew he must eat to keep up his strength for the task that lay before him.

"I've got to find them!" he decided. "I've got to take the trail. Something may have happened to them. That bear we saw may have—" And then he laughed at the notion, for he knew that a bear, however large, could not make away with three strong, healthy lads. "Unless there were three bears," he mused, with a smile, "and that's out of the question." [160]

He was thinking deeply, so deeply in fact that he forgot to look to the oil stove, and the first he knew the coffee had boiled over, and the bacon was scorched in the pan.

"Oh, hang it!" Tom exclaimed. "I can't even cook!"

He fried more bacon, and an egg, and on that, and coffee, he made a lonely breakfast.

"Now to reason things out," he spoke aloud. "I'm glad the rowboat is here anyhow, I can navigate the lake to a certain extent."

He walked down to the shore, and what he saw there caused him to utter a cry of astonishment.

"There's been a struggle here—a fight!" Tom cried. "The boys have been taken away against their will!"

He bent over and looked closely at the sandy shore. It was all too evident that some sort of a struggle had taken place there, and that recently. The marks visible by day but not at night proved this.

"Those marks weren't there when we landed yesterday afternoon," decided our hero. "Besides, they're quite a distance from where we brought the skiff in. There's been some sort of a boat here," he went on, as he bent over the impression made by the sharp prow of some craft in the sand. "Someone came in a boat, got hold of the boys somehow, and carried them off. But there was a fight all right, and a good one, too, I'll wager." [161]

It did not take a mind-reader to decide this. The sand in several places was scuffed about, raised up in ridges, or scratched into depressions, while the heel marks, deeply indented in the

soft material, showed how desperate had been the struggle. But the chums had been overpowered, that was certain, for they had been taken away.

"And in my boat, too, I'll wager!" cried Tom. "The impudent scallawags! To take my boat, and then use it to carry off my friends. They must have taken some of my gasoline, too. Oh, wait until I get a chance at them!"

The new discovery was overpowering for a time, and Tom sat down to think it out. Then he came to a decision.

"I've got to help my chums," he said. "I've got to go to their rescue. There's but one place where they would be taken. The old hermit, or Skeel and the cronies, have them in the old mill—or, hold on—maybe they're captive in the cave where we stayed that night. Those are two places where they might be. What shall I do?"

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It was no easy problem for the lone camper to solve, and Tom was frankly puzzled.

"I think I'll tackle the old mill first," he decided. "That's the most likely place. Though I wonder why in the world the hermit or Skeel would want to capture Dick, Bert and Jack? Unless the treasure has been located, and they don't want us to find out about it. But they haven't got me!"

With Tom, to decide was to act, and so, putting himself up a lunch, he set off in the skiff for the old mill. It was hard rowing alone, for usually two worked at the oars, but our hero stuck to it, and in due time he reached the river. Then he decided to pay a visit to the cave.

He concealed his boat under some bushes, and, taking the oars with him, he hid them well up on the hill.

"If they get away with the boat, they can't row, anyhow," he reasoned, "and I don't believe they'll find her."

He approached the cave cautiously, for he did not want to fall a victim to those who had captured his chums. But the cavern in the hillside was empty, and Tom felt a sense of disappointment.

"Now for the mill," he mused, as he set off in the skiff again. He had almost reached it, and was debating within himself how best to approach it, when a new thought came to him.

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"Suppose they catch me?" he asked himself. "They are four to one, and, though I don't mind Sam or Nick, the hermit and Skeel would be more than a match for me. If they get me I can't be of any help to the boys."

Tom was no coward, and he would have dared anything to rescue his chums. Yet he realized that this was one of the occasions when discretion was the better part of valor.

"I think I can serve 'em best by staying on the outside a while," he argued, as he got to a point where he could catch a glimpse of the old mill. "I'll look about a bit," he went on, "and see what sort of a plan I can think out."

Keeping well in the shadow of the bushes that lined the river bank, he watched the mill. For half an hour or more there was no sign of life in it, and then, so suddenly that it startled Tom, there appeared at one of the third story windows the form of the old hermit, and he had a gun in his hands.

"There he is!" whispered Tom. "He's on the lookout for me. Lucky I didn't rush in. And he's on that third floor, though there doesn't seem to be any way of getting up to it. I've got to go for help," and Tom, waiting until old Wallace had disappeared from the casement, slowly rowed away.

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He reached the lonely camp late in the afternoon, for he spent some time going along the shore of the lake, searching for his motorboat. But he did not find it.

"Now what shall I do?" he asked himself as he sat down to a solitary supper. "Go for help, or try to make the rescue myself?"

CHAPTER XXI

TOM MAKES PLANS

[165]

Tom had two ideas, both centering about one subject—the rescue of his chums. That they were held prisoners in the old mill he had no doubt.

"Of course I could tramp into Wilden," he mused, as he sat beside the campfire, "and get a posse of men to come here and raid the place. With them to help we could make short work of Wallace, Skeel and company, and we'd get the boys out. But then, on the other hand, that would give the whole game away. I'm sure there's some sort of treasure in that old mill, or Skeel would never bother with trying to find it. The hermit must have, in some way, proved to him that it's there."

"Now, then, assuming that it is in the mill, or somewhere around it, do I want a whole crowd out here, overrunning the place, and maybe finding the treasure? I certainly don't, even though they might not find it. But what would happen would be that a whole crowd of people, who have

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nothing else to do, would hang around here the rest of the summer, looking for the treasure if it wasn't found at the time of the rescue. That would spoil our camp.

"Of course I've got to rescue the boys—that's certain. I might get some of Mr. Henderson's friends—a few of them—and make them promise to keep it a secret. Even then it would leak out, and the whole town would be out here sooner or later. We wanted to come to a wild place, and we found it. Now there's no sense in making it civilized.

"No, I'll work this thing out alone, and I'll rescue the boys single-handed. I ought to be able to do it after I rescued dad and mother from that cannibal island, and got ahead of old Skeel. I defeated him twice and I can do it again, and I will!"

Now that he had come to a decision Tom felt more hopeful, and he began to go over plans in his mind. He had made and rejected half a dozen, from undermining the mill, and blowing a breach in the walls, to making believe set fire to it and getting in under cover of the confusion.

"But I don't believe any of those schemes would do," he mused. "I've got to use strategy against those fellows. They are evidently looking for an open attack, by the way the old hermit was doing sentinel duty in the window. I wonder how in the world he got up there when there are no stairs in the mill?"

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Tom's brain was getting weary with so much hard thinking. He felt as if he was back in Elmwood Hall, and had to puzzle over some hard geometry proposition.

"I'm going to bed," he decided at length. "Maybe in the morning I'll be fresher and can think better."

He collected a quantity of dry wood, and had it in readiness to throw on the embers of the campfire. He also took a lantern with him inside the sleeping tent, turning the wick low, and he had a gun in readiness.

"I'm not going to be taken by surprise if I can help it," he mused. "That's how they must have gotten Jack and the others into their power. I'll fight if they try to get me, and they might, for with one of us loose they know there'll be an attempt at a rescue."

Tom made himself comfortable on his cot, but for a time he could not sleep. Then he fell into a doze, only to awaken with a start as he heard someone prowling about the camp.

"Who's there?" he called, sitting up and reaching out for his gun. There was no answer, and Tom arose and peered from the flaps of the tent. As he did so he saw a movement near the boxes where the provisions were kept.

"Get out of there!" he cried, as he fired in the air. A dark body leaped away and an ember of the fire, flaring up just then, revealed a small animal.

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"Only a fox!" laughed our hero. "Go ahead, you're welcome to all you can get," for he had made the provisions secure before turning in. He was not again disturbed, and to his surprise the sun was high in the heavens when he awoke.

"I must have gotten in some good licks of sleep the latter part of the night," he reasoned, as he stretched and arose. "Now for a good breakfast, and then to see what's best to do."

It was lonesome eating, all by himself, especially as he thought of the jolly times he and his several chums had had around the packing-box table.

"I wonder if they have anything for breakfast?" Tom mused, as he sipped his coffee. "Well, I hope I can soon get 'em back with me again. The hermit, or Skeel, probably captured them to prevent them from making any further search for the treasure. But I'm here yet!" and he closed his teeth grimly.

"Of course, after all, we haven't any right to it," he went on, "and if we do find it, and it belongs to old Wallace, I'll see that he gets it. But I like the fun of hunting for it, and, since they've been so mean I'll be mean too, and do my best to beat 'em."

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Breakfast over, Tom busied himself about the camp, washing the dishes, bringing in fresh water, and getting everything in order. It gave him something to do, so that he would not feel so lonesome, and he found that he could think better when he was occupied.

But, with all his reflection, he could not seem to hit on a plan of rescue. One plan after another was formed, only to be rejected.

"I know what I'm going to do!" he finally exclaimed. "I'll take another trip to the mill, and see how things are now. I may be able to get to the boys, or at least signal to them that I'm on the job. They must be discouraged by this time."

He rowed up the lake to the river, and, proceeding as before, paid a visit to the cave, thinking perhaps there might be some developments there. But the place was just as they had left it.

"Now for the mill!" exclaimed our hero. He went by a different route, this time, so as to get in the rear of the structure. But, though he looked for a long time at the broken windows, he saw no signs of his friends.

"If I could only signal them—get into communication with them," he thought, "they might propose some plan of rescue. But I'm afraid I can't. I'll have to go it alone."

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He circled about until he had a view of the front of the mill. Looking up at the upper window he saw, not the old hermit, but Sam Heller on guard with a gun.

"They're all there—all the conspirators," Tom murmured. "Probably while one watches, the search for the treasure is going on. Oh, if I could only get in there!"

CHAPTER XXII

TOM'S DISCOVERIES

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Tom waited around a bit, hoping someone might come out from the mill, or that the watcher with the gun would leave. But nothing of this kind happened.

"If they would only come out, one at a time, I might capture them," he thought. "Then I could go in and do as I pleased. But that's too good luck to have happen."

It was evident that he could gain nothing by remaining where he was. He had no glimpse of his chums, and he could think of no way of communicating with them.

"If it wasn't so far, I could write a note, wrap it around a stone, and heave it into a window," he thought. "But then it might fall into wrong hands, and I'd be as badly off as before."

"Hang it all! I wonder what I'd better do?" he asked himself. "I haven't been able to think of a thing. I guess, after all, I'll have to get help. No, I won't either!" he exclaimed, a moment later. "I'll take another day or so to think it over, and then, if I haven't hit on a plan, I'll give an alarm."

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"They won't dare do much to the boys," he reflected. "They'll have to give 'em something to eat, even if it's only bread and water, such as we got when we went on strike in Elmwood Hall. Yes, I'll wait another day or so."

Vainly giving a last look, hoping for some sign, Tom quietly made his way to the skiff, and rowed down the river again and across the lake to camp.

"Cæsar's cats! but this is a lonesome place!" he exclaimed, as he looked about at the tents. "I never knew what it meant to have a jolly crowd with me before. This is like being a castaway on a desert island. Well, the only thing to do is to keep busy."

He entered the main tent, intending to get on some of his older clothes and prepare a meal. As he stepped inside the canvas house he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I've had visitors!" cried Tom. "And two-legged ones at that! Someone has been here, running about!"

Well might he say that, for the place was in confusion. The neatly-made-up cots had been pulled apart, the valises and suitcases, of himself and his chums, had been opened, the garments tossed about. Boxes and packages had been searched.

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"This is the work of that old hermit, or else Skeel and his two cronies," decided Tom. "They must have known I'd go away from camp, and they watched their chance to sneak in. Oh! if I had only known it!"

He looked about to see if anything had been taken, but there was no sign of anything missing, though it was hard to tell definitely because of the manner in which things were scattered about.

"I wonder what they could have wanted?" asked Tom aloud, and, having no one to answer it, he replied to his own question.

"It couldn't have been me," he resumed, "though they may have done this for spite because they didn't catch me. No, that would hardly be it. They would have done worse damage if they had done it just because of anger. It was something else. They were searching for something. I have it! The plan I found! That's what they want! Maybe, after all, it's the original and not a copy, and they can't go on with the search without it. That's it, I'll wager a cookie! I wonder if I have it safe?"

From an inner pocket he took the piece of paper containing the map.

"Here it is," he murmured. "I'm glad I thought to take it with me, and not leave it around here. My! but they must be desperate to take such chances for this document. That shows how valuable it is."

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Returning the paper to his pocket, Tom took an hour or so to straighten out his camp. Then, getting supper, which he ate in lonesome silence, he sat down by the fire to think.

"I'd be glad even if we had a dog," he mused. "The next time I go camping I'll take one along. Now let's see where we are at."

"Dick, Jack and Bert are prisoners in the old mill. That's my first fact. Second, I've got to rescue 'em. Third, is this plan going to be of any use to me?"

Again he took it out to look at it, but the flickering of the campfire proved too uncertain, and he decided to go in the tent and examine it by the light of a lantern.

"Maybe, now that we're not so excited over it, I can make out things on it that I couldn't before," he told himself. But the first half-hour's scrutiny did not develop anything. The plan appeared to be just that and nothing more.

"And it's here, in the third story, where the boys are held prisoners," mused our hero, as he put

his finger on that part of the drawing. "Only there's no stairway shown, as far as I can see."

He looked closely at the plan, lifting it from the table and holding it between himself and the light. As he did so he made a most remarkable discovery. He fairly shouted as he saw it. [175]

For, drawn in some such manner as are the water-marks in paper, visible only when held up to the light, so on the plan, there was marked out a secret staircase, leading from the second to the third floor of the old mill!

"By Jove!" cried Tom. "I have it. Now I see why that wall was so thick. The secret staircase is built in the thickness of the wall, and it doesn't show from either inside or outside the mill. In fact it doesn't show on the plans at first glance, and probably the old architect who drew them used a peculiar ink so that no one would know about the stairs. They must have been made so that anyone could get from the second to the third story of the mill in a hurry, and be hidden there when there was an attack by enemies. Well, I've made one discovery. Now to see how they use the stairs."

But this did not show on the plan, though Tom held it close to the light, hoping to discover lines so faint that a strong illumination was needed to bring them out. The secret staircase, plainly indicated now, seemed to begin abruptly on the second floor, at a point opposite the big stone grinders, and end on the third story. How to get to them was not shown, and, from what Tom remembered of the inside of the mill, he was sure that the interior wall at this point showed no break, and no signs of a secret door. [176]

"But that's not saying it isn't there," he said aloud. "I'm going to have another look, now that I know where to search. I'll have the boys out yet!"

He was so excited that he could hardly get to sleep, and again he was making rapid plans for the rescue of his chums.

"I'll start the first thing in the morning," he told himself. "Hurray! I'm on the right track now! And maybe I'll be lucky enough to find the treasure, too!"

By daylight he examined the plans again, holding the paper up to the sun. The secret staircase was shown more plainly, but there was nothing to indicate how it might be reached.

"It's just as if it was hidden between the thick walls," murmured Tom. "But there must be some way of getting at it, and I'm going to find that way. Let's see, now; what do I need?"

He decided to take no weapon, for he did not believe the captors of his chums were desperate enough to fire.

"But I'll take one of our pocket electric flashlights," he decided. "I may have to work in the dark if I'm looking for a secret passage."

What he would do when he got to the old mill, he never stopped to consider.

"I can't make any plans until I reach there," he decided. "I'll just have to size things up, and act on the spur of the moment. Jinks! If I only had one of the fellows with me it would be easy, but playing a lone hand isn't what it's cracked up to be. However, I'll do my best. [177]

"Now let's see. I'll need a little grub, for I may not be able to get back to-day. And a blanket if I have to stay out in the open all night. I'll take a little light axe along, and some matches. I guess that'll be all. And the plan—of course," he concluded, with a grim smile. "If they come for it again they'll find it gone."

Everything being in readiness for what he hoped would be his last visit to the mill to rescue his comrades, Tom got his lonely breakfast. It was not such a gloomy meal as the others had been, for he was very hopeful, and even whistled as he went about the camp, making things as secure as possible until he should return.

"And if I do get the boys, then for a grand final try for that treasure!" he exclaimed, as he pushed off in the clumsy skiff.

It was a perfect day, and as Tom thought of the fine weather his friends were missing he felt a wave of anger against Professor Skeel, the hermit and the two lads of Elmwood Hall.

"If those bullies come back to school in the fall!" exclaimed Tom, with a grim smile, "I'll make the place too hot to hold them, that's what I'll do!" [178]

Rowing with long, even strokes Tom propelled the skiff across the lake. Instinctively he swept his eyes along the shores for a possible sight of his motorboat.

"But it isn't likely that they'd allow her to get away from them," he argued. "Though I'll get her sooner or later."

He turned the point that hid a view of the river entering Lake Woonset, and, as he did so he uttered a cry.

"By Jove! Is it possible!" he shouted, standing up in the skiff. "It is, as I'm alive!" he added. "Oh, of all the good luck!"

For, just ahead of him, idly floating on the calm surface of the lake, was his missing motorboat!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CALLING VOICES

Tom rubbed his eyes. He wanted to be sure he was not dreaming, or seeing a vision of his lost motorboat. And yet, as his sight cleared, he knew he could not be mistaken.

"It's her!" he cried. "It's the dear old *Tag* all right! Jinks! but I'm in luck! Now, if none of those fellows are in her, I'll soon be aboard. And if she's in running order—"

He paused in apprehension. What if the hermit's crowd had damaged the machinery so that the craft would not run? Tom felt himself grow cold with fear at this possibility.

"I'll soon see," he murmured, and he settled down into a long, even stroke that quickly brought him close to the floating craft.

Now he proceeded more cautiously, for he realized that there might be a plot—an ambushade to trap him, and make him a prisoner as were his companions.

"Ahoy the *Tag!*" he shouted, but there was no answer. The boat continued to drift with the current of the river which made itself felt thus far out in the lake. [180]

"Guess there's no one home," murmured Tom. "So much the better. I'll soon be aboard."

A few more strokes put him alongside, and a quick look into the interior of the craft showed him that the machinery, at least, was intact.

"Though whether she'll run or not is another question," he said aloud. "Come, *Tag*," he went on, half whimsically, "be nice now, and start for me."

He looked into the gasolene tank, and saw that he had enough for a run of several miles, enough to get to the old mill, and back across the lake to camp again.

"That is, if I get the boys," he mused; "I shan't leave without them this time," and he shut his teeth grimly. Testing the batteries, he found that the vibration from the coil was strong, and he took out a spark plug to note the current. It jumped blue and spitefully from point to point, when he laid the plug on a cylinder head, and turned the flywheel to make the contact.

"So far so good," murmured Tom. "Now to see if she'll start. Probably because everything is all right she won't, but she ought to. Oh, if only motorboats would do as they ought to!"

The first turn of the flywheel resulted in a sort of surprised cough. The next gave forth a sneeze, as if the engine had just awakened. [181]

Then came a vigorous "chug!" at the third turn.

"Come, we're getting on!" exclaimed Tom with a laugh—his first good one since the disappearance of his chums and the boat. "As soon as she finds out I'm in her, instead of the old hermit and his crowd, I think she'll behave herself."

Tom's prophecy proved correct, for with the next turn of the flywheel the boat started off as if she had never had an intention of doing anything else.

"Hurray!" cried Tom. "Now for the mill and the boys. But I guess I'd better throttle down, for she's making too much noise. No use giving my game away in advance."

He cut down the gas at the carburetor, and proceeded at half speed, meanwhile wondering what he would do when he got to the mill, and puzzling his brains as to how his enemies had allowed the boat to get out of their possession.

"I'll have a peep at the bow line," he murmured, and when he looked at the end of it he uttered an exclamation. It was frayed and worn. "That accounts for it," he went on. "They tied the boat where the line could cut and chafe against a rock, and she worked herself loose. Good old *Tag!* I guess she knew I wanted her."

Tom actually patted the engine of his craft, as though it was a thing alive. He headed in toward the river, towing the skiff behind him. He intended to return the small craft to the place whence he and his chums had taken it, after the affair was all over. [182]

"Though we may need it in the meanwhile," he said. "And there is no use letting it fall into our enemies' hands right away. They might use it against us."

Reaching the mouth of the river, Tom slowed down his power still more, so as to make less noise, for he could not tell what minute the hermit, or some of those with him, might set out in search of the missing boat.

"And I don't want them to take me unawares," he said grimly.

He decided that he would do as had been done on a previous occasion—hide his boat some distance from the mill, and proceed the rest of the way on foot. He took particular pains to hide his craft this time, selecting a place where an eddy from the stream had followed out a miniature bay in the bank. It was well screened by overhanging bushes and trees, and as there were several others like it along the river, it would take a good guesser to pick out this particular one at first.

Tom marked the place so he would know it himself, even if he came past in a hurry, and then, having arranged the bushes so as to further screen his boat, and gathering up his package of food, the small axe, the blanket, and his light, he set out. [183]

It was nervous work, for he realized that because of the loss of the boat a searching party might be out looking for it.

"But they're likely to stick to the river," he argued, "and if I strike inland a bit, and go that way, they're not so apt to find me. I'll do it."

He had to pass near the cave where they had spent the night the time they first missed the boat, and he looked inside the cavern. To his surprise it showed signs of occupancy since he and his chums had been there.

"They have been here," he argued. "Or maybe it was the hermit, who spent a night here, instead of in the mill."

There were signs that a fire had been recently made, and food cooked, and there were portions of the latter scattered about. Tom, however, did not stay long there. It was getting on toward noon, and he had much before him.

On the top of the bank, overlooking the river, he found an old trail, which he followed. It was narrow, showing that probably only one man had traveled it in recent years.

"The old hermit," mused Tom. "This is one of his paths. It must lead right to the mill, and it'll take me there as well as if I had gone along the river, and a deal safer, too."

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He walked briskly until he judged that he was close to the ancient structure, and then he proceeded more cautiously. As he came in sight of it he crouched behind the bushes, fairly crawling on until he had a good view.

His first glimpse was at the window where he had seen the sentinel stand with a gun, and to his surprise and disappointment, he now saw the sun glinting on the barrel of a weapon.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Tom. "No chance of taking them by surprise. And they aren't out, as I half-hoped they'd be. They are still on guard. I've got to wait."

He sat down under a bush and ate some of the lunch he had brought, sipping water from a bottle he had in his bundle. Then, after a half hour, he looked again. The gun was still pointed out of the window, seeming to be aimed at whoever should advance directly against the mill.

"Still there," mused Tom angrily. "They are taking no chances." Intently from his screened post of observation, he watched the gun barrel. Then a strange thought came to him—a thought that sent the blood tingling through him.

"Of course!" he cried to himself. "Why didn't I think of it before? Now to see if I'm right."

Boldly he stood up, in plain view of anyone from the window. The gun did not move to follow his action. It remained pointing in the same direction.

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"That's it!" he exulted. "The gun is just fixed there! No one is holding it. It's just like the trick once played in some battle. It's a dummy gun. Hurray! I'm all right now. They have gone out, and left the gun pointing from the window to scare anyone who might come along."

Still Tom did not abandon all caution. He realized that though those guarding his chums might be gone from the top story, they still might be somewhere in the mill.

"I've got to be careful," our hero assured himself. "But I'll take a few chances."

Approaching until he stood close under the open window from which the gun protruded, he tossed a stone up. It fell within the casement, and Tom heard it drop on the floor.

"That ought to raise something," he said, looking warily around to see if he was observed. There was no movement, and no one appeared.

"Here goes for another," said our hero. This time his stone hit the gun barrel, and it tinkled resoundingly. But it was not moved, proving conclusively that it was fastened there and not held by hands.

"If I could only get Jack or some of the others to answer," thought Tom. "I guess I'll have to get inside and let 'em know I'm here. But how?"

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It was quite a puzzle. He knew he could not get to the third story from inside the mill, or at least he did not know the secret of the hidden staircase.

"I haven't time to hunt for a trick door," he told himself. "I've got to find a way that's plain to be seen. And I don't want to go inside unless I have to, either, for if they are hiding and playing some trick they'll nab me sure."

This thought made him look around apprehensively, and he decided to make a circuit of the mill from without, in order to make sure there was no one on the outside.

He moved away from in front, and went to one side, the place where, on the plans, the secret staircase in the thick wall was shown to be. The ground sloped away on this side, and as Tom came opposite a pile of stones, he was startled and surprised to hear a voice saying:

"Oh, if only Tom would come!"

"Yes, I don't see why he doesn't," another voice answered.

"Maybe they have him, too," spoke a third person.

Tom stood as if electrified.

"My chums!" he murmured. "Their voices! But where do the sounds come from?" He looked

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SECRET ROOM

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Tom stared uncomprehendingly at the heap of stones. As he stood there he again heard the murmur of the hidden voices. Some one said:

"I wonder how much longer we'll have to stay here?"

"Jack Fitch, as sure as I'm here!" gasped Tom.

"Hang it all," said a second voice, "I don't see why Tom doesn't do something."

"That's Bert Wilson," murmured our hero.

"Maybe he's trying to find us, but doesn't know where to look," spoke a third person.

"That was Dick," mused Tom.

"Oh, he must know we're here," came from the hidden Jack.

"They're around here, they're within talking distance, and yet I can't get at them!" thought Tom. Once more he looked at the stones, loosely heaped together. A sudden thought came to him. A flood of memory—something he had once read in a book.

Kneeling down he placed his lips close to the crevices in the stones and called:

"Fellows, I'm here! This is Tom Fairfield! Where are you? I've come to rescue you! I've been trying all the while, but this is the first chance I've had! Where are you?"

Silence followed his words. Silence, and then came a rush of voices.

"It's Tom!"

"Good old Tom!"

"Here at last!"

"Oh, Tom, get us out! We're almost starved, and we don't know what they're going to do with us. Break in and get us out!"

"But where are you?" asked our hero, much puzzled. "I can hear you. Your voices seem to come through a speaking tube. But I can't see you. Can you look out of a window and see me?"

"No," Jack Fitch answered back. "We're in some secret room in the old mill. The only window is a skylight. But where are you?"

"Near a pile of stones at the side of the mill. How were you brought in?"

"The old hermit, Skeel, and Sam and Nick. They made us prisoners, bound us, carried us off in your motorboat, and brought us here. They blindfolded us and carried us up. To the third story, I guess, though we never could find the staircase," said Jack, through some crack leading to the pile of stones.

"I found the secret stairway," answered Tom. "I saw it on the plans. It's built inside the wall, but how to get to it I don't know. Unless—hold on, wait a minute!" he called eagerly. "I've just thought of something! Oh, fellows, I believe I'm on the trail!"

Eagerly Tom began casting aside the stones of the pile. He worked feverishly, oblivious of any of his enemies who might see him. Stone after stone he cast aside, and then he found what he had suspected and sought.

Concealed under the pile of small, loose stones was a trap door and a flight of steps leading into the earth, and beyond them Tom could see a stone passage—a tunnel. It seemed to lead toward the mill.

"I'm coming boys!" he called. "I've found it! The way to the secret room! I'm coming!"

Abandoning his blanket and package of food, and taking only his electric flashlight and the small axe, Tom climbed down the steps. A damp, musty odor greeted him, but he did not halt. He had a momentary thought that he might meet the hermit, or some of his enemies, but he did not hold back. Instead he ran boldly forward, his lamp giving him light enough to see.

Now he was fairly within the tunnel, which had been hollowed out of the earth, and lined with stones to prevent a cave-in. On Tom ran, calling from time to time, but he could no longer hear his companions' voices. At first a fear came to him that he had been discovered, and his chums removed to some other part of the mill. Then he realized that, because of some peculiar acoustic property of the tunnel, he could only hear them at the heap of stones. On and on he ran.

Presently he came to an old door that closed the tunnel. The portal was locked, but a few blows on the rotting wood from the hatchet opened the way for him. He saw before him a flight of stairs leading up, and opposite the lower landing was another door.

"This is the secret staircase," decided Tom, "and that other door is the way they get into it from the second floor of the mill, but it must be pretty well concealed. I'm in between the walls now,

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and the boys are up there!"

He paused a moment to flash his light upward, and saw that the coast was clear. Then up the stairs he bounded. He listened as he reached the top, and heard the murmur of voices.

"Here I am, boys!" he cried.

"Tom! Tom!" came the answering shout.

At the head of the stairs was another door. Tom pushed on it, but it resisted his efforts.

"No time now to stop at trifles," he murmured. "I'm going to smash it!" and smash it he did. It gave way with a crash, and Tom fairly tumbled into a large room. A hasty glance around showed that the apartment was empty, and another look disclosed the gun, fixed to the window sill in such a way that it looked as if someone was pointing it. [191]

"And that nearly fooled me!" mused Tom. "But where are the boys, I wonder?"

He looked about. The room was a large one, and, opening from it were several apartments and halls. They were rudely fitted up, and in one were a stove and cooking utensils.

"Here's where the hermit has been living," thought Tom, "and I guess the others have been hanging out here with him, too. But where are my chums?"

There was no sign of them in any of the rooms, and for a moment our hero feared it had all been some dream—even the sound of the hidden voices. And yet he knew it could not be a dream.

"Jack! Dick! Bert!" he called. "I'm here! Where are you?"

He paused, listening for an answer. It came, faint and as though from afar off.

"Here we are," replied a voice. "We're in some secret room. Listen while we pound on the wall, and that may guide you."

There came a faint tapping. Tom strained his ears to listen. He advanced toward one wall, and then to another, until he had located the place where the sound was heard most plainly. [192]

"I get you!" he cried. "The secret door must be somewhere around here. Here goes for a try at it."

He looked over the wall for a sign of some secret spring, or something on which to press to make the door fly back, but he saw nothing. Then, realizing that he was losing valuable time, he raised the hatchet and began chopping. The chips and splinters flew in all directions, and at about the tenth blow something gave way.

Whether Tom hit the secret spring, or whether he broke the mechanism, he did not stop to find out. A door flew open, revealing a passage, and down this our hero ran. A second door confronted him—an ordinary door, fastened with a padlock on the outside. A few blows sufficed to break this, and a moment later Tom had burst into the secret room where his chums were prisoners.

CHAPTER XXV

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

"Tom! Oh Tom Fairfield!"

"You've found us at last!"

"Oh, we thought you would never come!"

Thus Jack, Bert and Dick greeted their chum—clasping Tom by the hands. He held them off and looked closely at them. There were marks of suffering and privation on their faces.

"You've had a hard time," said Tom gently.

"You bet we have!" declared Jack, with conviction. "We are almost starved, and worried to death."

"And those sneaks, Sam Heller and Nick Johnson, have been standing guard over us, and insulting us," added Bert. "If ever they come back to Elmwood Hall—"

"Don't worry. They won't dare show their faces there after this," declared Jack.

"But what about them?" asked Tom. "Where are they? I haven't seen a soul. Have they found the treasure and left?"

"I don't believe so," answered Dick. "They were around this morning."

"What about Skeel and the hermit?" asked Tom. [194]

"Oh, they're around too," said Jack. "They're close after that treasure, or think they are. My! but they're hot against you for getting that plan! It was the only one they had, it seems, and they've been working in the dark without it. That's why they captured us. They thought they'd get you, too, I guess, and that you'd have the plan. You managed to keep out of their clutches, but they got us."

"By sneaking up!" said Bert bitterly. "Say, that hermit is stronger than I gave him credit for. He

tackled me, and Skeel went for Jack. Then Sam and Nick handled Dick."

"They wouldn't have, only they stunned me with a blow first," declared the village lad.

"Anyhow, they got us," went on Jack, "and brought us here. We've been here ever since. What happened to you, Tom?"

"Lots of things. I've got my boat back." And Tom told his chums of his adventures. "We'll soon be out of here," he added. "I have the boat hidden, and we'll make a quick run back to camp."

"What about the treasure?" asked Bert.

"I'm willing to let it go," said Tom. "I don't believe there is any. But if there is—"

"Hark!" interrupted Jack. "Someone is coming!"

They all listened. Plainly the noise of someone ascending the stairs could be heard.

"Look out for squalls," murmured Bert.

Tom stooped and picked up the axe he had dropped, thrusting his electric light into his pocket. A moment later the old hermit, followed by Professor Skeel, appeared in the secret room, while Sam Heller and his crony Nick brought up in the background. There was a look of anger and amazement on their faces.

"Ha!" cried the hermit. "He is here! The other one! We have them all now!"

"Who is here?" asked Mr. Skeel, who had not seen our hero at first.

"I am!" cried the lad who had come to the rescue of his chums.

"Tom Fairfield!" gasped the former Latin instructor. "I—I am—"

"Yes, I'm here, and I'll see that you give an account of yourself!" snapped Tom. "You've been carrying things with too high a hand. You're at the end of your rope now!"

He faced the conspirators with the hatchet in his hand. Mr. Skeel and the two sneaking lads shrank back. Not so the old hermit. With a snarl of rage he sprang forward at Tom.

"And so you come!" he cried. "You come after my treasure that I have sought so long! You would rob me! But you shall not. You have the paper, but I will get it from you! I will yet find my treasure!"

He made a leap for Tom. Instinctively our hero stepped back, and, as he did so he tripped, and would have fallen had he not leaped to the rear. He came up against a wall with a crash, and his hatchet flew from his hand and also struck the partition. Then something happened that caused them all to stare in amazement.

There was a grinding noise, a snapping sound, and a portion of the solid wall slid down and out of sight. A recess was thus opened, and when the dust of many years had cleared away they saw in the opening through the dim light, a small brass-bound box. For a moment they stared in amazement, and then the old hermit, with a scarcely human cry, leaped forward.

"The treasure! My treasure!" he cried. "I have found it at last! The treasure of the old mill! It has given up the secret it held so long!"

He reached into the compartment, drew the box to him, and fell across it fainting.

"Help him!" cried Tom. "The shock has been too much for him! Get water, somebody!"

"Get him out of there," advised Jack. "The air is foul, and that may have caused him to faint." Indeed a damp, unpleasant, musty odor filled the room from the secret hiding place of the box.

Dick and Bert dragged the old hermit from the box, and, making a pillow from some bags, they laid him out on the floor, while Tom forced through his lips some of the water left for the boy prisoners.

"Where am I? What happened? Is my treasure safe?" the old man murmured as he opened his eyes.

"Yes, it's safe," said Tom, soothingly. The hermit's tone was very different now. He seemed to have lost his vindictive spirit. "It's safe," went on Tom, "unless—" He thought of Mr. Skeel and the two lads, but they had slipped away. They evidently realized that, as the hermit had the box, the game was up. "It's surely safe—if there's any treasure in the box," added our hero with conviction, now that he saw that the conspirators had vanished.

They gave the old man some more water, and soon he was himself again, but his wild manner had gone. It seemed to vanish with the finding of the box.

"There it is," he murmured, as he sat beside it. "The box I have sought so long. I knew it was somewhere in the mill, or about it, but I never could find it, though I hunted everywhere. When I had the plan I was sure I would be successful, but we lost it. Now it doesn't matter. Oh, I shall live in peace and happiness now!"

"Maybe we'd better open the box," suggested Tom. "It may be empty."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried the old man in agony. "It can't be empty. The treasure must be in it."

And it was, as they saw when Tom forced the case open with the hatchet. Not a very great treasure to be sure, but amounting to some thousands of dollars.

It consisted of English gold pieces, some ancient gold and silver dishes, more valuable as

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antiques and relics than for the metal in them. There was also considerable jewelry that would fetch good sums for the same reason. And there were also Bank of England notes in a large sum, as good as the day they were issued. It was a treasure indeed to the old man, and would keep him in comfort the rest of his life.

"Jove! but this is a great find!" exclaimed Jack. "And to think it came about by accident! You are all to the good, Tom."

"I wonder what has become of Skeel and those lads?" asked Bert.

"They're far enough off now," said Tom. "But shall we help you down with your box?" he asked of the hermit.

"No, I had rather stay here. I have lived here for many years, except when I was off in the woods looking for the treasure. I am sorry I was so harsh to you, but I thought you were trying to rob me."

"We intended giving you the treasure if we found it," said Tom, gently. "Of course you did not mean it, but you have treated my friends very badly."

"It was that scoundrel Skeel," murmured the old man. "He urged me to do it. I am sorry I ever trusted him."

And then he told his story. It was substantially the same as Tom had heard from his father. Years before, fearing an attack by the Indians, the early settlers of Wilden had put their wealth into the box and fled. The box was hidden in the old mill, which had been built with the secret rooms and passages as a hiding place, and one of defense against the savages.

But the fleeing settlers never returned, though the story of their hidden treasure survived for many years. Mr. Wallace was a direct descendent of one of them, and he preserved faith in the old legend, and hunted for the treasure until his mind became affected.

Then came the advent of Tom and his chums. It was merely a coincidence that Mr. Skeel went camping in the vicinity of the old mill, as did also Sam and Nick. The bullies fell in with their former teacher. The latter had heard the story of the treasure in the mill, for it was common gossip, and, being of a grasping nature, he determined to have a try for it. He enlisted the aid of Sam and Nick, and, in some way, managed to become friendly with the old hermit.

The latter had, in searching among some old papers of his ancestors, found the original plan of the mill. It showed many things, but not where the treasure was, though if he had carefully measured the real and apparent thickness of the walls he might have come upon the box itself, as he did the secret staircase.

Professor Skeel, representing that he was an expert in such matters, managed to get possession of the plan, only to lose it. Suspecting that Tom and his chums had it, he planned their capture, and did get all but our hero. This was after Sam and Nick had taken away the motorboat and hidden it. Then, when they had it, they were so careless that it floated away and Tom recovered it.

Of course the existence of the secret staircase, and the hidden room, where the boy prisoners were kept, was known to the hermit, who revealed them to the professor and the two cronies. After Jack, Dick and Bert were locked up, the vain hunt for the treasure went on, but without success until Tom, accidentally hitting the secret spring, revealed it.

There were two ways of getting on the hidden stairway. One was from inside the mill, the door being cleverly concealed. The other way was through the outside tunnel, by which Tom came, but this had not been used by the hermit in years, and he had piled stones at the egress. But the voices of Tom's chums, traveling through an old flue, and down the tunnel, had revealed it to our hero.

"Well, I don't know as we have anything more to stay here for," remarked Tom, a little later, when they had made the old hermit comfortable, and had ascertained that he had food enough to last him. "We might as well get back to camp."

"Oh, boys!" began the aged man, "I—I must ask your forgiveness for what I have done. But I—I think I was not—not exactly myself at times. I did so want that treasure! And now I have it—thanks to you. I suppose I should share it with you, and if you think—"

"Not a bit of it!" interrupted Tom heartily. "We have all the money that is good for us, I guess. You need it more than we do. I hope it will keep you in comfort."

"It will," said the old hermit. "I don't want much, now that I have my treasure."

They left him, promising to see him again, and soon they had departed from the old mill. Before they left Tom found out how the secret door worked, leading from the second floor to the hidden staircase. Part of the wall was counter-poised with weights, and worked easily, once the right spring was touched.

The motorboat was found just where Tom had hidden it, and soon he and his chums were speeding back to their camp. They looked for Mr. Skeel, and Sam and Nick, but saw nothing of them. Nor, in fact, did they meet them for some time after that.

"And now for a good meal!" cried Dick, when the crowd was back at the tents. "I guess it's your turn to cook, Tom."

"I guess so," laughed our hero. "I'll soon have some grub for you."

"We're nearly starved," added Dick. "Nothing much to eat in the old mill."

"Yes, it was almost as bad as when we went on a strike in Elmwood Hall," said Bert. "Get busy, Tom."

And, at the meal, and beside the cheerful glow of the campfire, they lived over again the adventures through which they had passed in the strenuous weeks they had spent in camp.

"And there really was a treasure, after all," said Bert. "I hardly believed it."

"I don't know whether I did or not," said Tom, "but I made up my mind I'd prove it, one way or the other."

"And you did," commented Jack, with a laugh. "You generally do what you set out to, Tom."

"Even to getting a meal up for a hungry crowd," put in Dick.

"And as good a one as I could myself," spoke Bert, passing his plate for more fried chicken.

"And now we'll enjoy camp life, without worrying about hidden treasure," said Tom. "Ho! for good times from now on!"

And they had them. They learned later, that the old hermit sold the plate and jewels, and wisely converted his treasure into cash, which he put in the bank. It was sufficient for his simple needs for many years. A distant relative induced him to leave the mill and live with him, and the old man passed the rest of his years in peace.

"Well, I wonder what we'll do this fall?" asked Jack one day about a week later, as they were out on Lake Woonset in the motorboat.

"Go back to school, of course," said Tom with a laugh, "and have some more fun." What our hero and his chums did will be told of in the next volume of this series, to be entitled, "Tom Fairfield's Pluck and Luck; Or, Working to Clear His Name."

"Well, this is certainly great!" declared Jack that night, as they stood on the shores of the lake, and watched the moon rise over the trees. "It's been the best vacation I ever knew."

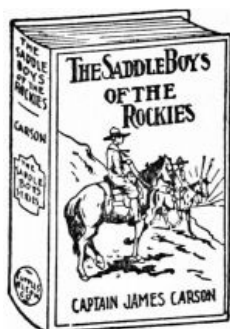
"Same here!" chorused Bert and Dick.

"Yes, it was lively enough," agreed Tom. And as they turned into their cots we will take leave of them.

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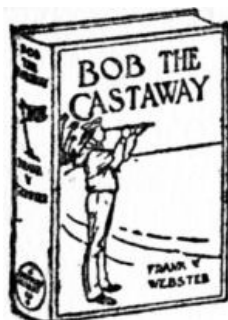
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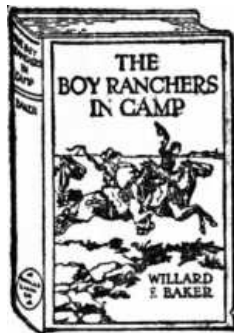
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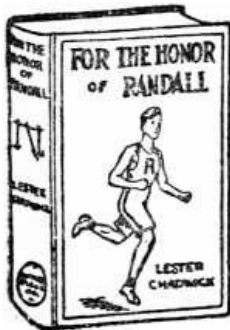
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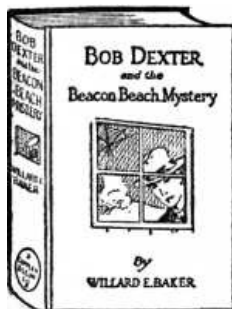
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