

Stratemeyer Edward

The Gun Club Boys of Lakeport



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The Gun Club Boys of Lakeport / Or, The Island Camp:*

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PREFACE

This story is a complete tale in itself, and it also forms the first volume of a series to be devoted to sport in the forest, on the water, and on the athletic field.

My object in writing this tale was two-fold: first, to present to the boys a story which would please them, and, second, to give my young readers an insight into Nature as presented in the depths of the forest during the winter.

The young hunters of Lakeport are no different from thousands of other youths of to-day. Although they do some brave deeds, they are no heroes in the accepted sense of that term, and at certain times they get scared just as others might under similar circumstances. They are light-hearted and full of fun, and not above playing some odd practical jokes upon each other. In the old and experienced hunter, who goes with them on this never-to-be-forgotten outing, they find a companion exactly

to their liking, and one who teaches them not a few “points” about hunting that are worth knowing.

The scene of this tale is laid in one of our eastern states. A few years ago small game of all kinds was plentiful there, and deer, moose, and even bears, could also be laid low. But some of the larger animals are fast disappearing, and it is now only a question of time when they will be wiped out altogether. This seems a great pity; but the march of the lumberman and the progress of the farmer cannot be stayed.

Edward Stratemeyer.

CHAPTER I

WHAT HAPPENED IN A SNOWSTORM

“How many miles have we still to go, Harry?”

“I think about four,” answered Harry Westmore, as he looked around him on the country road he and his brother were traveling. “I must say, I didn’t think the walk would be such a long one, did you?”

“No, I thought we’d be back home before this,” came from Joe Westmore. “I wish we could find some sort of a signboard. For all we know, we may be on the wrong road.”

“There used to be signboards on all of these roads, but I heard Joel Runnell tell that some tramps had torn them down and used them for firewood.”

“Yes, they did it for that, and I guess they took ’em down so that folks could miss their way, too. Those tramps are not above waylaying folks and making them give up all they’ve got in their pockets.”

“I believe you there. But since Sheriff Clowes rounded up about a dozen of ’em last month they have kept themselves scarce. Phew! How the wind blows!”

“Yes, and how the snow is coming down! If we are not careful, we’ll not get home at all. I hadn’t any idea it was going to snow

when we left home.”

“I’m afraid if we don’t get home by dark mother will worry about us.”

“Oh, she knows we are old enough to take care of ourselves. If it snows too hard we can seek shelter at the next farmhouse we come to and wait until it clears off.”

The two Westmore boys, of whom Joe was the older by a year and a day, had left their home at Lakeport early that morning for a long tramp into the country after some late fall nuts which a friend had told them were plentiful at a locality known as Glasby’s Hill. They knew the Hill was a long way off, but had not expected such a journey to get to it. The bridge was down over one of the country streams and this had necessitated a walk of over a mile to another bridge, and here the road was not near as good as that on which they had been traveling. Then, after the nuts were found and two fair-sized bags gathered, it had begun to snow and blow, until now the wind was sailing by them at a great rate and the snow was coming down so fast that it threatened to obliterate the landscape around them.

The Westmore family were six in number, Mr. Horace Westmore and his wife, the boys just introduced, and two younger children named Laura and Bessie. Mr. Westmore was a flour and feed dealer, and had the principal establishment of that kind in Lakeport, at the lower end of Pine Lake. While the merchant was not rich, he was fairly well-to-do, and the family moved in the best society that the lake district afforded. On

Mrs. Westmore's side there had once been much wealth, but an unexpected turn of fortune had left her father almost penniless at his death. There was a rumor that the dead man had left to his daughter the rights to a valuable tract of land located at the head of the lake, but though Mr. Westmore tried his best he could not establish any such claim. The land was there, held by a miserly real estate dealer of Brookside named Hiram Skeetles; but Skeetles declared that the property was his own, free and clear, and that Mrs. Westmore's father had never had any right to it whatsoever.

"What's mine is mine, and don't ye go for to forgit it!" Hiram Skeetles had snarled, during his last interview with Horace Westmore on the subject. "Ye ain't got nary a slip o' paper to show it ever belonged to Henry Anderson. I don't want ye to bother me no more. If ye do, I'll have the law on ye!" And Mr. Westmore had come away feeling that the case was decidedly a hopeless one.

"It's a shame mother and father can't bring old Skeetles to time," had been Joe's comment, when he heard of the interview. "I wouldn't trust that old skinflint to do the square thing."

"Nor I," had come from Harry. "But if Grandfather Anderson had any deeds or other papers what did he do with them?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Mother said she saw some papers once – years ago, when she was a young girl – but she never saw them after that," had been Joe's comment; and there the subject had been dropped.

With their bags of nuts over their shoulders the two boys continued to trudge along in the direction of home. The loads had not seemed heavy at starting, but now each bag was a dead weight that grew harder to carry at every step.

“Let us rest for awhile,” said Joe, at length. “I must have a chance to get my wind.”

“Isn’t there wind enough flying around loose,” returned his brother, with a faint grin. “Just open your mouth wide and you’ll gather in pure, unadulterated ozone by the barreland.”

“It’s the wind that’s taking my wind, Harry. I feel as if I’d been rowing a two-mile race, or just made a home run on the baseball field.”

“Or a touchdown on the gridiron, eh? Say, but that last game of football with the Fordhams was great, wasn’t it?”

The two boys had moved on a few steps further, and now, through the flying snow, caught sight of a dilapidated barn standing close to the roadway.

“Hurrah! here’s a shelter, made to order!” cried Joe. “Let us go in and take a quarter of an hour’s rest.”

“Yes, and eat a few of the nuts,” added Harry. “My! but ain’t I hungry. I’m going to eat all there is on the table when I get home.”

“Then you wouldn’t refuse a mince pie right now, would you?”

At this question Harry gave a mock groan. “Please don’t mention it! You’ll give me palpitation of the heart. If you’ve got a mince pie tucked away in your vest pocket, trot it out.”

“Wish I had. But stop talking and come into the barn. It isn’t a

first-class hotel, but it's a hundred per cent. better than nothing, with a fraction added."

Like many a similar structure, the old barn had no door or window on the road side, so they had to go around to the back to get in. As they turned the corner of the building they caught sight of two men who stood in the tumble-down doorway. The men were rough-looking individuals and shabbily dressed, and when they saw them the lads came to a halt.

"Hullo, who are you?" demanded one of the men, who possessed a head of tangled red hair and an equally tangled red beard.

"We were traveling on the road and came around here for a little shelter from the storm," answered Joe. He did not like the appearance of the two tramps – for such they were – and neither did Harry.

At the explanation the tramp muttered something which the two boys did not catch. At the same time a third tramp came forth from the barn, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Maybe they're from that farm back here," he said, with a jerk of his head over the shoulder. "I believe there was a couple o' boys up there."

"No, we're not from any farm," answered Harry. "We come from Lakeport."

"What have ye in them bags?" put in the tramp who had not yet spoken.

"Nuts. We have been out nutting."

“Humph! Thought as how nuts was all gone by this time.”

“We heard of a spot that hadn’t been visited,” said Joe. He looked at his brother significantly. “Guess we had better be moving on.”

“Oh, don’t hurry yourselves, gents,” came quickly from the tramp with the red and tangled beard. “Come in an’ rest all yer please. We’re keepin’ open house to-day,” and he gave a low laugh.

“Thank you, but we haven’t a great deal of time to spare,” said Harry. “Come, Joe,” he went on, and started to move toward the roadway once more.

He had scarcely taken two steps when the tramp with the red beard caught him by the shoulder.

“Don’t go,” he said pointedly. “Come in an’ warm up. We’ve got a bit o’ a fire in there.”

“A fire?” queried Harry, not knowing what else to say. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll burn the barn down?”

“Not much! Even if she went, the buildin’ ain’t worth much. Come on in.”

The tramp had a firm grip on Harry’s arm by this time and now the other two got between Joe and the roadway.

It must be confessed that the two lads were much dismayed. As already noted, they knew that folks in that neighborhood had been waylaid by tramps in the past, and they now felt that a similar experience was in store for them. How to get out of such a dilemma was a serious question.

“We don’t want to stop with you,” said Joe, as sharply as he could, although his heart beat violently. “Let me pass, please.”

“But we ain’t goin’ to let yer pass just yet, young feller,” said one of the tramps. “Come on in an’ be sociable.”

“We don’t mean for to hurt ye!” put in another. “So don’t git scart. If ye belong down to Lakeport we’ll treat yer right.”

“We don’t wish to stay, I tell you,” went on Joe. “Let me pass, do you hear?”

“And let me go, too,” added Harry. He tried to twist himself loose but could not, for the tramp was strong and had a good clutch.

“Peppery youngsters,” drawled the tramp with the red hair. “Got to teach ’em manners, I guess. Shove ’em into the barn, boys. There don’t seem to be nobuddy else around, an’ it looks like we had run up against a real good thing!”

“Do you mean to say that you intend to rob us?” cried Joe, as he struggled to free himself from the man who had him by the collar.

“Rob yer? Who said anything ’bout robbin’ yer? We’re honest men, we are! Come on inside, an’ behave yerself!”

And with this Joe was shoved toward the barn door. He tried to struggle, but it was useless. Using brute force the tramps almost pitched him inside, and Harry followed in a similar manner. Then the tramp with the red beard set up the broken-down door before the opening and stood on guard with a club in his hand.

CHAPTER II

THE DUGANS TO THE RESCUE

It was a situation which no boy would care to confront, and as Joe and Harry looked from one brutal face to another, their hearts sank within them. They could see at a glance that the tramps were among the worst of their class and would hesitate at little or nothing to accomplish their ends.

To one side of the barn, where the flooring had rotted away, a fire was burning, the smoke drifting forth through a broken-out window and the numerous holes in the roof. Beside the fire lay the remains of two chickens, which the tramps had probably stolen from some farmer's hen-roost. Three soda water bottles were also on the floor, but there was no telling what they had contained, since all were empty. But as the breath of each tramp smelt strongly of liquor, it is safe to say that the bottles had contained – at least one of them – something stronger than a temperance drink.

“See here, you haven't any right to treat us in this fashion,” said Joe, as soon as he could recover from the attack which had been made upon him.

“You ain't got no right to call us thieves,” was the answer, and the speaker leered in a knowing manner at his fellows.

“That's it,” spoke up another of the tramps. “It's a downright

insult to honest men like us.”

“That’s wot it is,” came from the third tramp. “Boys, yer ought to ’polergize.”

“I want you to let us go,” went on Joe.

“Right away,” put in Harry. “If you don’t – ”

“If we don’t, – what?” demanded the tramp who stood guard with the club.

“It may be the worse for you, that’s all.”

At this all three of the tramps set up a low laugh. Then the fellow at the doorway called one of the others to his side and whispered something in his ear.

“Dat’s all right, Noxy; but I don’t care to go until I see wot we strike,” answered the man addressed.

“Oh, you’ll get your fair share, Stump,” was the answer, but Stump refused to leave even when urged a second time.

“Say, just you tell us wot time it is,” put in the other tramp, who went by the name of Muley. He had noticed that Joe carried a watch – a silver affair, given to him by his father on his last birthday.

“It’s time you let us go,” answered Joe. He understood perfectly well what the fellow was after.

He had scarcely spoken when Muley stepped forward and grabbed the watch chain. The watch came with it, and despite Joe’s clutch for his property it was quickly transferred to the tramp’s possession.

“Give me that watch!”

“They are nothing but robbers!” burst out Harry. “Joe, let us get out right away!”

Unable to pass the tramp at the doorway, Harry made for one of the barn windows, and feeling it would be useless to argue just then about the timepiece, Joe followed his brother.

“Hi, stop ’em!” roared Stump. “Don’t let ’em get away!”

Instantly all three of the tramps went after the two lads. Muley was the quickest of the number and in a trice he had placed himself in front of the window.

“Not so fast!” he sang out. “We want what you have in your pockets first!”

Cut off from escape by the window, the two boys turned around. They now saw that the doorway was unguarded, and ran for the opening with all speed. Harry reached the door first and tumbled it aside, and both ran into the open.

“Stop!” yelled Noxy. “Stop, or we’ll fix ye!” And then, his foot catching in a loose board of the flooring, he pitched headlong, and Stump and Muley came down on top of him.

“Run, Harry, run, or they’ll catch us sure!” cried Joe.

Harry needed no urging, and in a minute the two lads were on the roadway once again and running harder than they had ever done in any footrace. For the moment they forgot how tired they had been, and fear possibly gave them additional strength.

“Ar – are the – they coming?” panted Harry, after quarter of a mile had been covered.

“I don’t – don’t know!” puffed his brother. “Do – don’t se –

see anything of 'em.”

“What mean rascals, Joe!”

“Yes, they ought to be in jail!”

The boys continued to run, but as nobody appeared to be following they gradually slackened their pace and at length came to a halt.

“Joe, I'm almost ready to drop.”

“So am I, but we had better not stop here. Let us keep on until we reach some farmhouse. I'm going to get back my watch and chain if I can.”

“And the nuts. Think of losing them after all the trouble we had in gathering them.”

“Yes, Harry, but the watch and chain are worth more than the nuts. If you'll remember, they were my birthday present from father.”

“Oh, we've got to get back the watch and chain. Come on – the sooner we find a farmhouse and get assistance the better. More than likely those tramps won't stay at the barn very long.”

Scarcely able to drag one foot after the other, the two Westmore boys continued on their way. The snow had now stopped coming down, yet the keen fall wind was as sharp as ever. But presently the wind shifted and then they made better progress.

“I see a farmhouse!” cried Harry, a little later.

“Not much of a place,” returned his brother. “Yet we may get help there, – who knows?”

When the cottage – it was no more than that – was reached, Joe knocked loudly on the door.

“Who is there?” came in a shrill voice from inside.

“Two boys,” answered Joe. “We want help, for some tramps have robbed us.”

“I can’t help you. The tramps robbed me, too – stole two of my best chickens. I’m an old man and I must watch my property. You go to Neighbor Dugan’s – he’ll help you, maybe.”

“Where is Dugan’s place?”

“Down the road a spell. Keep right on an’ you can’t miss it.” And that was all the boys could get out of the occupant of the cottage.

“He must be a crabbed old chap,” was Harry’s comment, as they resumed their weary tramp.

“Well, an old man can’t do much, especially if he is living all alone. I suppose he’s afraid to leave his place for fear the tramps will visit it during his absence,” and in this surmise Joe was correct.

Fortunately the farm belonging to Andy Dugan was not far distant. The farmer was a whole-souled Irishman and both boys had met him on more than one occasion at Mr. Westmore’s store.

“Sure, an’ where did you b’ys spring from?” said Dugan, on opening the door. “Tis a likely walk ye are from town.”

“We’ve been out for some nuts, over to Glasby’s Hill,” answered Harry.

“Ah now, so ye’ve got there before me, eh? I didn’t know ’twas

known there was nuts there.”

“Mr. Dugan, we want your help,” put in Joe, quickly.

“Phat for, Joe – to help carry home the nuts? Where’s the bags?”

“We met some tramps, and – ”

“Tramps? On this road ag’in?” Andy Dugan was all attention and his face grew sober. “Tell me about thim at onct!”

The boys entered the farmhouse, where were collected the Dugan family, consisting of Mrs. Dugan, who weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds, and seven children, including three half-grown sons. All listened with close attention to what the Westmore boys had to relate.

“Th’ schamps!” cried Andy Dugan. “Sure an’ they should be in the town jail! An’ was the watch an’ chain worth much?”

“Twelve or fifteen dollars. And a birthday present, too.”

“I’ll go after thim, that I will. Pat, git me gun, and you go an’ take yer own gun, too – an’, Teddy, git the pistol, an’ see if it’s after bein’ loaded. We’ll tache thim scallywags a lisson, so we will!”

“That’s the talk, Mr. Dugan!” said Joe, brightening. “But you’ll have to hurry, or they’ll be gone.”

“I’ll hurry all I can, lad. But phat about you? You’re too tired to walk back, ain’t ye?”

“Lit thim roide the mare, Andy,” came from Mrs. Dugan. “Th’ mare wants exercise annyway.”

“So they shall, Caddy,” answered the husband, and one of the

smaller boys of the family was sent to bring the mare forth.

In less than ten minutes the party was ready to set out, Andy Dugan and his son Pat with guns, Teddy, who boasted of a face that was nothing but a mass of freckles, with the pistol, and Joe and Harry, on the mare's back, with clubs.

The mare was rather a frisky creature, and both boys had all they could do to make her walk along as they wished.

"She's been in the stable too long," explained Andy Dugan. "She wants a run av a couple o' miles to take the dancin' out av her heels."

"Well, she mustn't run now," said Harry, who had no desire to reach the old barn before the others could come up.

The wind was gradually going down, so journeying along the road was more agreeable than it had been. When they passed the little cottage they saw the old man peeping from behind a window shutter at them.

"He's a quare sthick, so he is," said Andy Dugan. "But, as he is afther lavin' us alone, we lave him alone."

The party advanced upon the barn boldly and when they were within a hundred yards of the structure, Joe and Harry urged the mare ahead. Up flew the rear hoofs of the steed and away she went pell-mell along the road.

"Whoa! whoa!" roared Joe. "Whoa, I say!"

But the mare did not intend to whoa, and reaching the barn, she flew by like a meteor, much to the combined chagrin of the riders. Joe was in front, holding the reins, and Harry in the rear,

with his arms about his brother's waist. Both kept bouncing up and down like twin rubber balls.

"Do stop her, Joe!"

"Whoa!" repeated Joe. "Whoa! Confound the mare, she won't listen to me!"

"She is running away with us!"

"Well, if she is, I can't help it."

"Pull in on the reins."

"That's what I am doing – just as hard as I can."

"Hi! hi!" came in Andy Dugan's voice. "Phy don't ye sthop? Ain't this the barn ye was afther spakin' about?"

"Yes!" yelled back Joe. "But your mare won't stop!"

"Hit her on th' head wid yer fist!" screamed Pat Dugan.

"I don't believe that will stop her," said Harry.

"Perhaps it will, if she's used to it," said his brother, and an instant later landed a blow straight between the mare's ears.

Up went the creature's hind quarters in a twinkling and over her head shot the two boys, to land in the snow and brushwood beside the roadway. Then the mare shied to one side and pranced down the road, and soon a turn hid her from view.

CHAPTER III

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

“B’ys! b’ys! Are ye after bein’ hurted?”

It was Andy Dugan who asked the question, as he came rushing to Joe and Harry’s assistance and helped to set them on their feet.

“I – I guess I’m all right, Mr. Dugan,” panted Harry. “But I – I thought my neck was broken at first!”

“So did I,” put in Joe. His left hand was scratched but otherwise he was unharmed.

“Oh, father, the mare’s run away!” chimed in Teddy Dugan. “We won’t never git her back anymore!”

“Hould yer tongue!” answered the parent. “She’ll come back as soon as it’s feedin’ time, don’t worry.”

“Oh, father, are you sure?”

“To be course I am. Didn’t she run away twice before, an’ come back that same way, Teddy? Come on after thim tramps an’ let the mare take care av hersilf.”

“We’ve made noise enough to bring the tramps out – if they’re still in the barn,” was Joe’s comment. “I believe they’ve gone.”

“Exactly my opinion,” answered Harry.

Advancing boldly to the doorway of the barn, Andy Dugan pointed his gun and cried:

“Come out av there, ye rascals! Sure an’ it won’t do ye any good to hide!”

To this demand no answer was returned, and a moment of painful silence followed.

“Are ye comin’ out or not?” went on Dugan the elder. “Answer me.”

“How can they answer, father, if they ain’t there?” put in Teddy Dugan, with a broad smile on his freckled face.

To this query the father made no reply, but advancing cautiously, he gazed into the barn and then stepped inside.

“Are they there, Mr. Dugan?” queried Joe.

“If they are, they’re mighty good at hidin’.”

“Let us make a search,” said Harry. “Pat, you remain on guard outside.”

“That I will,” answered Pat. “Run ’em out here till I shoot ’em first, an’ have ’em arrested afterwards!”

The barn was speedily searched, but the tramps had taken their departure, and soon they discovered the track of the rascals, leading across the fields to another road.

“I believe they left almost as soon as we did,” said Joe. “They knew we’d come back with help.”

“Shall we follow?” asked Harry.

“Av course,” replied Andy Dugan.

“It’s getting rather dark,” went on Joe. “I’m afraid they have given us the slip.”

The matter was talked over, and it was decided that all of the

Dugans should go forward, and Joe and Harry were to follow if they could find the mare. If not, they were to tramp back to the Dugan homestead and await news.

Half an hour was spent by the two boys in looking for the runaway steed, and by that time both could hardly walk.

“I wish I was at the Dugan house this instant,” said Harry.

“Ditto myself, Harry. And I wish I had my watch and chain back. Did you notice, the tramps didn’t touch the bags of nuts.”

“I guess they were too excited to remember them. Maybe they thought we’d come back quicker than we did.”

The boys rested for awhile at the barn, and then, with their bags of nuts on their shoulders, set out on the roadway once again.

“Tired out, are ye,” said Mrs. Dugan, on seeing them. “Where are the others?”

They told their story, to which she listened with many a nod of her head.

“The ould b’y take that mare!” she cried. “Sure an’ didn’t she run away wid me wance an’ nearly scare me to death, so she did. Andy must trade her th’ furst chanct he gits.”

She had prepared a hot supper and invited the boys to sit down, which they did willingly, for, as Harry expressed it, “they were hollow clear down to their shoes.”

The meal was just finished when one of the little children, who was at the window gazing into the oncoming darkness, set up a shout:

“There’s Kitty now!”

“Who’s Kitty?” asked Joe.

“Sure an it’s the mare. She’s walkin’ in the yard just as if nothin’ had happened at all!”

The youngster was right, and by the time the boys were outside the mare was standing meekly by the barn door, waiting to be put in her stall.

“Now ain’t she aggravatin’?” came from Mrs. Dugan. “Ye can’t bate her when she looks loike that, can ye? Poor Kitty! It’s a fool thing that ye are entoirely!” And she hurried out, opened the stable and let the mare find her proper place inside. “Fer sech a thrick, ye’ll git only half yer supper this night,” she added, shaking her fist at the animal.

The boys knew that they would be expected home, and waited anxiously for news of the Dugans. Fully an hour and a half passed, before they came back, worn out and downcast.

“They give us the shlip,” said Andy Dugan. “They came around be the lake road an’ thet’s the last we could find av thim.”

“And I guess that’s the last of my watch,” added Joe, soberly.

Andy Dugan had a faithful old horse in his stable and this animal he harnessed to his family carriage, an old affair that had seen far better days.

“Ye can drive yerselves home,” he said. “An’ leave the turnout at Bennett’s stable. Tell him I’ll call for it to-morrow.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dugan,” said Joe. “We’ll settle for the keeping, and get father to pay you – ”

“That’s all right, Joe. I want no pay. Your father is a fri’nd av

mine. I'm sorry we didn't catch the thramps, that's all," was Andy Dugan's reply.

It was not until nine o'clock at night that Joe and Harry drove into the town of Lakeport. All the stores were closed, but the livery stable was still open, and there they left the horse and carriage, as Andy Dugan had directed. It was but a short walk from the stable to the house.

"I thought you would be back to supper," said Mrs. Westmore, when they entered. "I kept everything hot for over an hour."

"We've had an adventure, mother," answered Joe, and as the family gathered around he told his story.

"Oh, Joe, weren't you awfully scared!" cried Laura.

"I don't like tramps at all!" piped in little Bessie.

"This is certainly an outrage," said Mr. Westmore. "So the Dugans could find no trace of them after they got on the lake road?"

"No."

"I must have one of the constables look into this, and I'll notify Sheriff Clowes, too."

"You can be thankful that the tramps did not injure you," said Mrs. Westmore, with a shudder.

"Yes, I am thankful for that," said Harry.

"So am I, mother," added Joe. "Just the same, I'm downright sorry to lose that watch and chain."

"Perhaps we'll get on the track of it. If not, we'll have to see what we can do about getting you another," added the fond

mother.

The fact that Joe and Harry had been held up by tramps was speedily noised around the town, and for the next few days the authorities and several other people did what they could to locate the evildoers. But the tramps had made good their escape, and, for the time being nothing more was heard from them. But they were destined to turn up again, and in a most unexpected fashion, as the pages to follow will testify.

Joe and Harry had many friends in Lakeport, boys who went to school with them, and who played with them on the local baseball and football teams. All of these were interested in the “hold-up,” as they called it, and anxious to see the tramps captured.

“Glad it wasn’t me,” said one of the lads.

“I’ve got a gold watch – one my uncle left when he died.”

“Why didn’t you punch their heads?” questioned another, who had quite a reputation as an all-around athlete. “That is what I should have done.”

“Yes, and maybe got killed for doing it,” came from a third. “Joe and Harry were sharp enough to escape with whole skins, and that is where they showed their levelheadedness.”

The adventure had happened on Saturday, and Monday found the boys at school as usual. They were so anxious to get news concerning the tramps that they could scarcely learn their lessons, but as day after day went by without news, this feeling wore away; and presently the incident was almost forgotten.

It was customary at Lakeport to close the schools for about a

month around the winter holidays and all of the pupils counted the days to when the vacation would begin. At last the time came, and with a whoop, Joe, Harry, and several dozen other lads rushed forth, not to return until near the end of January.

“And now for Christmas!” cried Joe. Deep down in his heart he was wondering if he would get another watch and chain.

Ice had already formed on Pine Lake, but just before Christmas it began to snow and blow heavily, so that skating was out of the question. This put something of a damper on the lads and they went around feeling somewhat blue.

Christmas morning dawned bright and fair. The ground was covered with over a foot of snow, and the merry jingle of sleighbells filled the air.

As may be surmised the Westmore boys were up early. There were many presents to be given and received, and it was a time of great surprises and not a little joy.

What pleased Joe most of all was the new watch he received. It was decidedly better than the first watch had been, and so was the chain better than the other.

“Just what I wanted!” he declared. “It tops all the presents – not but what I like them, too,” he added, hastily.

Harry had slipped off without the others noticing. Now he came back, his face aglow with enthusiasm.

“Oh, Joe, what do you think?” he cried. “The wind has swept Pine Lake as clean as a whistle.”

“If that’s the case, Harry, we can go skating this morning

instead of waiting until after dinner. But how do you know the ice on the lake is clear?"

"Didn't I just come from there?" Harry held up a shining pair of nickel-plated skates. "Couldn't resist trying 'em, you know. Say, it was just all right of Uncle Maurice to give each of us a pair, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was," returned Joe. "But I rather think I love that double-barreled shotgun a little better. I am fairly aching to give it a trial on a bird or a rabbit, or something larger."

"Well, as for that, I don't go back on the camera Aunt Laura sent up from New York. Fred Rush was telling me it was a very good one, and he ought to know, for he has had four."

"What did Fred get for Christmas?"

"A shotgun something like yours, a big bobsled, some books, and a whole lot of other things. One book is on camping out, and he is just crazy to go. He says a fellow could camp out up at Pine Island, and have a bang-up time."

"To be sure!" ejaculated Joe, enthusiastically. "Just the thing! If he goes I'm going, too!"

"You don't know yet if father will let you go. He says no boy should go hunting without some old hunter with him."

"I'm seventeen," answered Joe, drawing himself up to his full height; he was rather tall for his age. "And Fred is almost as old. I reckon we could take care of ourselves."

"If I went I'd like to take my camera," said Harry. "I was reading an article in the paper the other day about how to hunt

game with a snap-shot machine. That would just suit me. Think of what a famous collection of pictures I might get – wild turkeys, deer and maybe a bear – ”

“If you met a bear I don’t think you’d stand to take his photograph. I’ll wager you’d leg it for all you were worth – or else shoot at him. But come on. If skating is so good there is no use of our wasting time here talking,” concluded Joe, as he moved off.

CHAPTER IV

SKATING

Lakeport was a thriving town with a large number of inhabitants. Early as it was many people were out, and nearly every passer-by was greeted with a liberal dose of snowballs, for the lads of this down-East town were as fun-loving as are boys anywhere, and to leave a "good mark" slip past unnoticed was considered nothing short of a crime.

When Joe and Harry reached the lake front they found a crowd of fully fifty men and boys, with a fair sprinkling of girls, engaged in skating and in ice-boating. The majority of the people were in the vicinity of the steamboat dock, for this was at the end of the main street, and a great "hanging-out" spot during the summer. But others were skating up the lake shore, and a few were following Dan Marcy's new ice yacht, *Silver Queen*, as she tacked along on her way to the west shore, where an arm of the lake encircled the lower end of Pine Island.

"Marcy's going to try to beat the lake record," Joe heard one boy call to another. "He says his new boat has got to knock the spots out of anything that ever sailed on the lake, or he'll chop her up for firewood."

"Well, she'll have to hum along if she beats the time made by the old *Whizzer* last winter," came from the other boy. "She

sailed from the big pine to Hallett's Point in exactly four minutes and ten seconds. My, but didn't she scoot along!"

It took but a few minutes for Joe and Harry to don their skates. As they left the shore they ran into Fred Rush, who was swinging along as if his very life depended upon it.

"Hello, so you fellows have come down at last!" sang out Fred, who was short and stout, and as full of fun as a lad can be. "Thought you had made up your mind to go to bed again, or stay home and look for more Christmas presents. Been having dead loads of fun – had a race and come in second best, got knocked down twice, slipped on the ice over yonder, and got a wet foot in a hole some fellow cut, and Jerry Little hit me in the shin with his hockey stick. Say, but you fellows are positively missing the time of your lives."

"I want to miss it, if I'm going to have all those things happen to me," returned Joe, dryly. Then he added: "Harry tells me you got a double-barreled shotgun almost like mine. How do you like it?"

"Like it? Say, that gun is the greatest thing that ever happened. I tried it just before I came down to skate – fired both barrels at once, because I didn't have time to fire 'em separately. It knocked me flat, and a snowbank was all that saved my life. But she's a dandy. I'm going to bring down a bear with that gun before the winter is over, you see if I don't."

"How are you going to do it?" put in Harry. "Offer to let the animal shoot off the gun, and kill him that way?"

“Don’t you make fun of me, Harry. You’ll see the bear sooner or later, mark the remark.”

The three boys skated off, hand in hand, with Fred in the center. The fun-loving youth was the only son of the town hardware dealer, and he and the Westmore lads had grown up together from childhood. At school Fred had proved himself far from being a dunce, but by some manner of means he was almost constantly in “hot water;” why, nobody could explain.

“Let Fred Rush pick up a poker, and he’ll get the hot end in his hand,” said one of the girls one day, and this remark came close to hitting the nail squarely on the head. Yet with all his trials and tribulations Fred rarely lost his temper, and he was always ready to promise better things for the future.

The boys skated a good half mile up the lake shore. At this point they met several girls, and one of them, Cora Runnell, asked Joe if he would fix her skate for her.

“Certainly I will,” replied the youth, and on the instant he was kneeling on the ice and adjusting a clamp that had become wedged fast to the shoe plate of the skate. Cora was the daughter of an old hunter and trapper of that vicinity, and as he worked Joe asked her what her father was doing.

“He isn’t doing anything just now,” was the girl’s answer. “He was out acting as a guide for a party of New York sportsmen, but they went back to the city last week.”

“Did you hear him say anything about game?”

“Yes, he said the season was a very good one. The party got

six deer over at Rawson Hill and a moose at Bender's, and any quantity of small game. I think pa's going out alone in a day or two – just to see what he can bring down for the market at Brookside.”

“I wish he'd take me along. I've got a new double-barreled shotgun that I want to try the worst way.”

“And I've got one, too,” broke in Fred. “I'm sure we could bring down lots of game between us.”

Cora Runnell looked at the stout youth, and began to giggle. “Oh, dear, if you went along I guess pa'd have to hide behind a tree when you took your turn at shooting.”

“Whoop, you're discovered, Fred!” burst out Harry. “Cora must have heard how you shot off both barrels at once, and – ”

“Oh, I can shoot straight enough,” came doggedly from Fred. “Just you give me the chance and see.”

“Well, you'll have to see pa about going out with him,” answered Cora, and then started to skate after her girl friends, who had moved off a minute before, and were getting farther and farther away.

“Hi, there!” came suddenly in a shout from the lake shore. “Beware of the ice boat!”

“The ice boat?” repeated Harry. “Where – Oh!”

He glanced up the lake, and saw the *Silver Queen* coming along as swiftly as the stiff breeze could drive the craft over the glassy surface. The ice boat was headed directly for the three boys, but now the course was shifted slightly, and the craft pointed fairly

and squarely for the spot where Cora Runnell was skating along, all unconscious of her danger.

“By gracious, Dan Marcy will run Cora down!” ejaculated Fred. He raised his voice to a yell. “Stop! stop! you crazy fool! Do you want to kill somebody?”

“Save my girl!” came from the shore. “Cora! Cora! Look out for the ice boat!” But the girl did not heed the warning, and now the ice boat, coming as swiftly as ever, was almost on top of her. Then the girl happened to glance back. She gave a scream, tried to turn, but slipped, and then sank in a heap directly in the track of the oncoming danger.

CHAPTER V

A QUARREL ON THE ICE

It was a moment of extreme peril, and the heart of more than one onlooker seemed to stop beating. The ice boat was a heavy affair, with runners of steel, and a blow from that bow, coming at such a speed, would be like a blow from a rushing locomotive. It looked as if Cora Runnell was doomed.

But as all of the others stood helpless with surprise and consternation, Joe Westmore dashed forward with a speed that astonished even himself. He fairly flew over the ice, directly for Cora, and, reaching the fallen girl, caught her by the left hand.

“Quick! we must get out of the way!” he cried, and without waiting to raise her to her feet he dragged her over the smooth ice a distance of four or five yards. Then the *Silver Queen* whizzed past, sending a little drift of snow whirling over them.

“Git out of the way!” came rather indistinctly from Dan Marcy. “Can’t you see I’m trying to beat the record?” And then he passed out of hearing.

“Are you hurt?” questioned Joe, as he assisted the bewildered girl to her feet.

“I – I guess not, Joe,” she stammered. “But, oh! what a narrow escape!” And Cora shuddered.

“Dan Marcy ought to be locked up for such reckless sailing.”

"I think so myself." Cora paused for a moment. "It was awfully good of you to help me as you did," she went on, gratefully.

By this time the others were coming up, and the story of the peril and escape had to be told many times. Among the first to arrive was Joel Runnell, Cora's father, who had shouted the warning from the shore. He had been out hunting, and carried an old-fashioned shotgun and a game bag full of birds.

"Not hurt, eh?" he said, anxiously. "Thank fortune for that! Who was sailing that boat?" And when told, he said he would settle with Marcy before the day was done. "Can't none of 'em hurt my girl without hearing from me," he added.

The excitement soon died down, and the skaters scattered in various directions. In the meantime, to avoid being questioned about the affair, Dan Marcy, who was a burly fellow of twenty, and a good deal of a bully, turned his ice boat about, and went sailing up the lake once more.

Some of the lads on the lake were out for a game of snap the whip, and Joe, Harry and Fred readily joined in this sport. At the third snap, Fred was placed on the end of the line.

"Oh, but we won't do a thing to Fred," whispered one of the boys, and word was sent along to make this snap an extra sharp one.

"You can't rattle me!" sang out Fred, as the skating became faster and faster. "I'm here every time, I am. Let her go, everybody, whoop!" And then he had to stop talking, for he could no longer keep up. The line broke, and like a flash Fred spun

around, lost his footing, and turned over and over, to bring up in a big snowbank on the shore.

“Hello, Fred, where are you bound?” sang out Harry.

“Where – where am I bound?” spluttered the stout youth, as he emerged and cleaned the snow from out of his collar and sleeves. “I don’t know.” He paused to catch his breath. “Reckon I’m in training for a trip to the North Pole.”

Half an hour later found the Westmore boys at home for dinner. There was something of a family gathering this Christmas day, mostly elderly people, so neither Joe nor Harry had a chance to speak to their father about the hunting trip they had in mind. Everybody was in the best of humor, and the table fairly bent beneath the load of good things placed upon it – turkey with cranberry sauce, potatoes, onions, squash, celery, and then followed pumpkin and mince pies, and nuts and raisins, until neither of the boys could eat a mouthful more. Both voted that Christmas dinner “just boss,” and the other folks agreed with them.

The middle of the afternoon found the lads at the lake again. It had clouded over once more, and they were afraid that another fall of snow might stop skating for several weeks, if not for the balance of the season.

“We want to take the good of it while it lasts,” said Harry.

Dan Marcy was again out on his ice boat, and Joe and Harry, accompanied by Fred, followed the craft to a cove on the west shore. There seemed to be something the matter with the sail of

the *Silver Queen*, and Marcy ran the craft into a snowbank for repairs.

“Say, what do you want around here?” demanded Dan Marcy, as soon as he caught sight of the Westmore boys. His face wore an ugly look, and his tone of voice was far from pleasant.

“I don’t know as that is any of your business, Dan Marcy,” returned Joe.

“Ain’t it? We’ll see. I understand you’ve been telling folks that I tried to run into you and that Runnell girl on purpose.”

“You didn’t take much care to keep your ice boat out of the way.”

“It was your business to keep out of the way. You knew I was trying to beat the record?”

“Do you own the lake?” came from Harry.

“Maybe you’ve got a mortgage on the ice?” put in Fred.

Now the year before, Dan Marcy had been in the ice business, and had made a failure of it, and this remark caused him to look more ugly than ever.

“See here, for two pins I’d pitch into the lot of you, and give you a sound thrashing!” he roared.

“Would you?” came sharply from Joe. “Sorry I haven’t the pins.”

“I’ll give you an order on our servant girl for two clothespins, if they’ll do,” put in Fred.

“Then you want that thrashing, do you?” growled Dan Marcy; but as he looked at the three sturdy lads he made no movement

to begin the encounter.

“If anybody needs a thrashing it is you, for trying to run down Cora Runnell,” said Joe. “It was a mean piece of business, and you know it as well as we do.”

“You shut up, Joe Westmore!” Marcy picked up a hammer with which he had been driving one of the blocks of the sail. “Say another word, and I’ll crack you with this!” He advanced so threateningly that Joe fell back a few steps. As he did this, a form appeared on the lake shore, and an instant later Dan Marcy felt himself caught by the collar and hurled flat on his back.

“I reckon as how this is my quarrel,” came in the high-pitched voice of Joel Runnell. “I’ve been looking for you for the past hour, Dan Marcy. I’ll teach you to run down my girl. If it hadn’t a-been for Joe Westmore she might have been killed.”

“Let go!” roared Marcy, and scrambled to his feet, red with rage. He rushed at the old hunter with the hammer raised as if to strike, but before he could land a blow, Joe caught hold of the tool and wrenched it from his grasp.

“Give me that hammer! Do you hear? I want that hammer!” went on the bully. Then he found himself on his back a second time, with his nose bleeding profusely from a blow Joel Runnell had delivered.

“Have you had enough?” demanded the old hunter, wrathfully. “Have you? If not, I’ll give you some more in double-quick order.”

“Don’t – don’t hit me again,” gasped Dan Marcy. All his

courage seemed to desert him. "It ain't fair to fight four to one, nohow!"

"I can take care of you alone," retorted Joel Runnell, quickly. "I asked you if you had had enough. Come, what do you say?" And the old hunter held up his clinched fists.

"I – I don't want to fight."

"That means that you back down. All right. After this you let my girl alone – and let these lads alone, too. If you don't, you'll hear from me in a way you won't like."

There was an awkward pause, and Dan Marcy wiped the blood from his face, and shoved off on his ice boat.

"We'll see about this some other time," he called out when at a safe distance. "I shan't forget it, mind that!"

"He's a bully if there ever was one," observed Harry.

"And a coward into the bargain," put in Joel Runnell. "Watch out for him, or he may play you foul."

"I certainly shall watch him after this," said Joe.

"We're glad you came along," came from Fred. "We want to ask you something about hunting. I've got a new double-barreled shotgun and so has Joe, and we want to go out somewhere and try for big game."

"And I've got a new camera, and I want to get some pictures of live game," added Harry.

"You can't get any big game around Lakeport. If you want anything worth while you'll have to go out for several days or a week."

“We’re willing to go out as long as our folks will let us,” explained Harry. “We haven’t said much about it yet, for we wanted to see you.”

“We thought you might like to take us out, or rather go with us,” came from Joe. “If you’d go with us we’d pay the expenses of the trip, and give you your full share of whatever game we managed to bring down.”

At this Joel Runnell’s gray eyes twinkled. He loved boys, and knew the lads before him very well. All the powder and shot he used came from Mr. Rush’s hardware establishment, and his flour from the Westmore mill, and he was always given his own time in which to pay for the articles. Moreover, he was not the one to forget the service Joe had rendered his daughter.

“I’ll go out with you willingly,” he said. “I’ll show you all the big game I can, and what you bring down shall be yours.”

“Hurrah! It’s settled!” cried Fred, throwing up his cap. “We’ll have just the best time that ever was!”

“Where do you want to go to?”

“I was thinking of camping out up on Pine Island,” answered Harry. “But of course we have got to see my father about it first.”

“Pine Island is a nice place. There is an old lodge up there – put up five years ago by some hunting men from Boston. It’s a little out of repair, but we could fix it up, and then use that as a base of supplies.”

“Just the thing!” said Joe, enthusiastically. “If we liked it would you stay out with us for two or three weeks?”

“To be sure. There is a little game on the island, and we could easily skate to shore when we wished. When do you want to go?”

“As soon as we get permission,” said Harry. “We’ll find out about it to-morrow.”

After that the boys could talk of nothing but the proposed outing and what they hoped to bring down in the way of game. Harry wanted pictures worse than he wanted to bring down game; nevertheless, he said he would take along a gun and a pistol. “Then I can snapshot my bear first, and shoot him afterward,” he said.

It was not until the day after Christmas that the Westmore lads got a chance to speak to their parents about what was uppermost in their minds. At first Mrs. Westmore was inclined to demur, but her husband said the outing might do their sons some good.

“And they couldn’t go out with a better fellow than Joel Runnell,” added Mr. Westmore. “They’ll be as safe with him as they would be with me.”

As soon as it was settled that they were really to go, Harry rushed over to Fred’s house. Fred had already received permission to go, and now all they had to settle on was the time for their departure and what was to be taken along. Christmas had fallen on Thursday, and it was decided to leave home on the following Monday morning, weather permitting. As to the stores to be taken along, that was to be left largely to the judgment of Joel Runnell and to Mr. Westmore, who also knew a good bit about hunting and life in camp.

CHAPTER VI

ORGANIZING THE CLUB

“Boys, we’ve got to organize a club,” said Joe, as they were talking the matter over, and getting one thing and another ready for the trip.

“Just the thing!” shouted Fred. “Let us organize by all means.”

“What shall we call ourselves?” queried Harry. “The Outdoor Trio.”

“Or the Forest Wanderers,” came from Joe.

“Bosh!” interrupted Fred. “We’re going out with guns. You’ve got to put a gun in the name.”

“How will Young Gunners do?”

“Gun Boys of Lakeport.”

“Young Hunters of the Lake.”

“Bull’s-eye Boys.”

“Yes, but if we can’t make any bull’s-eyes, what then?”

There was a general hubbub and then a momentary silence.

“I’ve got it,” said Joe. “Let us call ourselves The Gun Club. That’s a neat name.”

“Hurrah for the Lakeport Gun Club!” shouted Fred. “Three cheers and a tiger! Sis-boom-ah! Who stole the cheese?”

There was a general laugh, in the midst of which Laura Westmore came up.

“Gracious sake! what a noise you’re making! What is it all about?”

“We’ve just organized the Gun Club of Lakeport,” answered Harry.

“Indeed. And who is president, who is vice president, who is secretary, and who is treasurer?”

At this the three lads looked glum for a moment. Then Joe made a profound bow to his sister.

“Madam, we scarcely need so many officers,” he said, sweetly. “We’ll elect a leader and a treasurer, and that will be sufficient. You can be the secretary – to write up our minutes after we get home and tell you what happened.”

“I move we make Joe leader,” said Fred.

“Second the commotion,” responded Harry, gravely. “Tis put and carried instanter. Mr. Joseph Westmore is elected to the high and dignified office of president, etc., of the Gun Club of Lakeport. The president will kindly deliver his speech of acceptance at the schoolhouse during next summer’s vacation. He can treat with doughnuts – ”

“Just as soon as his sister consents to bake them for him,” finished Fred.

At this Laura burst out laughing. “I’ll treat to doughnuts on one condition,” she said.

“Condition granted,” cried Fred. “What is it?”

“That you make me an honorary member of the club.”

“Put and carried, madam, put and carried before you

mentioned it. That makes you the secretary sure.”

And Laura accepted the position, and the boys got their doughnuts ere the meeting broke up.

The news soon spread that the Gun Club of Lakeport had been organized. Many boys who possessed guns asked if they could join, and half a dozen were taken in. But of these none could go on the outing as planned, although they said they would try to join the others just as soon as they could get away.

“I’ll tell you one thing I am going to take along,” said Harry. “That is a pair of snowshoes.”

“Right you are,” returned Fred. “Never had so much fun in my life as when I first put on those things. I thought I knew it all, and went sailing down a slide about a mile a minute, until one shoe got caught in a bush, and then I flew through the air for about ’steen yards and landed on my head kerbang! Oh, they are heaps of fun – when somebody else wears ’em.”

It was decided that all should take snowshoes. In addition they were to take their firearms, plenty of powder and shot, a complete set of camp cooking utensils and dishes, some coffee, sugar, condensed milk, flour, bacon, salt pork, beans and potatoes, salt and pepper, and half a dozen other things for the table. Mr. Rush likewise provided a small case of medicines and a good lantern, and from the Westmore household came the necessary blankets. Each lad was warmly dressed, and carried a change of underwear.

“It is going to be no easy work transporting that load to Pine

Island,” observed Harry, gazing at the stores as they lay in a heap on the barn floor at his parents’ place.

“We are to take two low sleds,” answered Fred. “We have one and Joel Runnell will furnish the other.”

The sleds were brought around Saturday morning, and by afternoon everything was properly loaded. Joel Runnell examined the new shotguns with care and pronounced each weapon a very good one.

“And I hope you have lots of sport with ’em,” he added.

Late Saturday evening Harry was sent from home to the mill to bring over a sack of buck-wheat flour his mother desired. On his way he passed Fred’s home, and the latter readily agreed to accompany his chum on the errand.

The promise of more snow had not yet been fulfilled, and the night was a clear one, with the sky filled with countless stars.

“I only hope it stays clear,” said Fred. “That is, until we reach the lodge on the island. After that I don’t care what happens.”

“It might not be so jolly to be snowed in – if we run short of provisions, Fred.”

“Oh, old Runnell will be sure to keep the larder full. He told me that the woods are full of wild turkeys and rabbits.”

Having procured the sack of flour and placed it on a hand sled, the lads started on the return. On the way they had to pass a small clump of trees, back of which was located the district schoolhouse. As they paused to rest in the shadow of the trees they noted two men standing in the entryway of the schoolhouse

conversing earnestly.

“Wonder who those men are?” said Harry.

“It’s queer they should be there at this hour,” returned Fred. “Perhaps they are up to no good.”

“They wouldn’t get much if they robbed the place,” laughed Harry. “A lot of worn-out books and a stove that isn’t worth two dollars as old iron.”

“Let’s go a little closer, and see who they are anyway.”

This was agreed to, and both boys stole along through the trees, and up to the side of the entryway. From this point they could not see the men, but could hear them talking in earnest tones, now high and then very low.

“It ain’t fair to be askin’ me fer money all the time,” they heard one man say. “I reckoned as how I’d settled in full with ye long ago.”

“It ain’t so, Hiram Skeetles,” was the reply in Dan Marcy’s voice. “I did you a big service, and what you’ve paid ain’t half of what I ought to have.”

“It’s more’n you ought to have. Them papers wasn’t of no account, anyway.”

“Maybe – but you were mighty anxious to get ’em when – ” And the boys did not catch what followed.

“And that’s the reason,” came presently from Hiram Skeetles.

“Do you mean to say you lost ’em?” demanded Dan Marcy.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“One day when I was sailin’ down the lake in Jack Lasher’s sloop. We got ketched by a squall that drove us high and dry on Pine Island. I jumped to keep from getting hurt on the rocks, and when we got off after the storm my big pocketbook with everything in it was gone.”

“Humph!” came in a sniff from Dan Marcy. “Do you expect me to believe any such fish story? Not much! I want fifty dollars, and I am bound to have it.”

A long wrangle followed, in which the bully threatened to expose Hiram Skeetles. This angered the real estate dealer from Brookside exceedingly.

“If you’re a natural born idiot, expose me,” he cried. “But you’ll have to expose yourself fust.”

Dan Marcy persisted, and at last obtained ten dollars. Then the men prepared to separate, and in a few minutes more each was gone.

“Now what do you make of that?” questioned Fred.

“I hardly know what to make of it,” replied Harry. “But I am going to tell my father about this just as soon as I get home.”

Harry was as good as his word, and Horace Westmore listened attentively to what his son had to relate.

“It is certainly very mysterious,” said Mr. Westmore. “The papers that were mentioned may have been those which your grandfather once possessed – those which showed that he was the owner of the land at the upper end of the lake which Skeetles declares is his property. Then again the papers may be something

entirely different.”

“I think we ought to watch Dan Marcy, father.”

“Yes, I’ll certainly watch him after this.”

“You haven’t been able to do much about the land, have you?”

“I can’t do a thing without the papers – the lawyers have told me so.”

“If old Skeetles lost them we couldn’t make him give them up, even on a search warrant.”

“That is true. But they may not have been lost even though he said so. He may have them hidden away where nobody can find them,” concluded Mr. Westmore.

Sunday passed quietly enough, the lads attending church with their families, and also going to Sunday school in the afternoon. In the evening Joel Runnell dropped in on the Westmores to see that everything was ready for an early start the next morning.

“Funny thing happened to me,” said the old hunter. “I was over to the tavern Saturday night, and met Hiram Skeetles there. He asked me how matters were going, and I mentioned that I was to take you fellows up to Pine Island for a hunt. He got terribly excited, and said you had no right to go up there.”

“Had no right?” questioned Joe. “Why not?”

“He claims that Pine Island belongs to his family, being a part of the old Crawley estate. But I told him that old Crawley didn’t leave the island to him, and he had better mind his own business,” went on Joel Runnell. “We had some hot words, and he flew out of the tavern madder nor a hornet.”

“Can he stop us, do you think?”

“He shan’t stop me, and I shall protect you boys. Crawley was only a fourth-handed relation of his, and the property is in the courts, and has been for three years. At the most, Skeetles ain’t got more’n a sixth interest in it. Sheriff Cowles is taking care of it.”

This news made the boys wonder if Hiram Skeetles would really try to prevent their going to the island, but when the time came to start on the trip the real estate dealer was nowhere to be seen.

“Gone back to Brookside,” said a neighbor. “He got word to come at once.”

Down at the lake there were a dozen or more friends to see them off, including Cora Runnell, who came to say good-bye to her father. The start was made on skates, and it was an easy matter to drag the two heavily loaded sleds over the smooth ice.

“Good-bye, boys; take good care of yourselves,” said Mr. Westmore.

“Don’t let a big buck or a bear kill you,” said Mr. Rush to Fred, and then with a laugh and a final handshake the hunting tour was begun.

As the party moved up the lake they noticed that the *Silver Queen* was nowhere in sight. Dan Marcy had failed to break the record with his new ice boat and had hauled her over to a carpenter shop for alterations.

“I don’t believe he is doing a stroke of regular work,” observed

Joe. "If he keeps on he will become a regular town loafer. He has already gone through all the money, his folks left him."

There was no sunshine, but otherwise the atmosphere was clear, and as the wind was at their backs they made rapid progress in the direction of Pine Island. The lodge which Joel Runnell had mentioned was situated near the upper shore, so that they would have to skirt the island for over a mile before reaching the spot.

Inside of an hour they had passed out of sight of Lakeport, and now came to a small island called the Triangle, for such was its general shape. Above the Triangle the lake narrowed for the distance of half a mile, and here the snow had drifted in numerous ridges from a foot to a yard high.

"This isn't so nice," observed Harry, as they tugged at the ropes of the sleds.

"I'll go ahead and break the way," said Joel Runnell, and then he continued, suddenly, "There is your chance!"

"Chance for what?" asked Harry.

"Chance for wild turkeys. They've just settled in the woods on the upper end of the Triangle."

"Hurrah!" shouted Joe. "Where is my gun?"

He had it out in an instant, and Fred and Harry followed suit – the latter forgetting all about his precious camera in the excitement.

"You can go it alone this time," said the old hunter. "Show me what you can do. I'll watch the traps."

In a moment they were off, and five minutes of hard skating

brought them to the shore of the Triangle. Here they took off their skates, and then plunged into the snow-laden thickets.

“Make no noise!” whispered Joe, who was in advance. “Wild turkeys are hard to get close to.”

“Oh, I know that,” came from Fred. “I’ve tried it more than half a dozen times.”

As silently as ghosts the three young hunters flitted through the woods, each with his gun before him, ready for instant use.

Presently they saw a little clearing ahead, and Joe called a halt. They listened intently and heard the turkeys moving from one tree to another.

“Now then, watch out – and be careful how you shoot,” cautioned Joe, and moved out into the open.

A second later he caught sight of a turkey, and blazed away. The aim was true, and the game came down with a flutter. Then Harry’s gun rang out, followed by a shot from Fred. Two more turkeys had been hit, but neither was killed.

“They mustn’t get away!” cried Fred, excitedly, and blazed away once more. But his aim was wild, and the turkey was soon lost among the trees in the distance.

Harry was more fortunate, and his second shot landed the game dead at his feet. Joe tried for a second turkey, but without success.

“Never mind, two are not so bad,” said Harry, “It’s a pity you didn’t get yours,” he went on, to Fred.

“Oh, I’ll get something next time, you see if I don’t,” replied

the stout youth. "I don't care for small game, anyway. A deer or a bear is what I am after."

"Well, I hope you get all you want of deer and bear," put in Joe; and then they hastened to rejoin Joel Runnell, and resume the journey.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST DAY IN CAMP

“Got two, did you?” came from Joel Runnell, when the party came up. “That’s a good deal better than I looked for.”

“I hit a third, but it got away from me,” said Fred.

“You mustn’t mind that. I’ve seen young gunners go out more than once and not bring a thing down,” returned the old hunter.

Once more the journey up the lake was resumed, and an hour later they came in sight of Pine Island; a long narrow strip of land, located half a mile off the western shore. The island lay low at either end, with a hill about a hundred feet high in the middle. On the hill there was a patch of trees that gave to the place its name, and trees of other varieties lined the shores, interspersed here and there with brushwood. There were half a dozen little coves along the eastern shore, and two small creeks near the southern extremity.

As the party drew closer to the island they saw that all the trees were heavily laden with snow, and many of the bushes were covered.

“Pretty well snowed up, isn’t it?” remarked Joe.

“I’m going to take a picture of the island,” said Harry, and proceeded to get out his camera, which was a compact affair, taking film pictures four by five inches in size.

“Is the light strong enough?” questioned Joe. “I thought you had to have sunlight for a snapshot.”

“I’ll give it a time exposure, Joe.”

“Fred, how long do you think it ought to have?”

“About ten seconds with a medium stop,” was the reply.

The camera was set on the top of one of the sleds and properly pointed, and Joe timed the exposure. Then Harry turned the film roll around for picture number two.

“That’s a good bit easier than a plate camera,” came from Joel Runnell. “I once went out with a man who had that sort. His plates weighed an awful lot, and he was always in trouble trying to find some dark place where he could fill his holders.”

“This camera loads in daylight; so I’ll not have any trouble that way,” said Harry. “And I can take six pictures before I have to put in a new roll of films.”

It was high noon when the upper end of Pine Island was gained. All of the party were hungry, but it was decided to move on to the lodge before getting dinner.

The lodge set back about a hundred feet from the edge of a cove, and ten minutes more of walking over the ice and through the deep snow brought them in sight of the building. It was a rough affair of logs, twenty by thirty feet in size, with a rude chimney at one end. There was a door and two windows, and the ruins of a tiny porch. Over all the snow lay to a depth of a foot or more.

“I’ve got a name for this place,” said Joe. “I don’t think

anything could be more appropriate than that of Snow Lodge.”

“That fits it exactly!” cried Fred. “Snow Lodge it is, eh, Harry?”

“Yes, that’s all right,” was the answer; and Snow Lodge it was from that moment forth.

There had been a padlock on the door, but this was broken off, so they had no difficulty in getting inside. They found the lodge divided into two apartments, one with bunks for sleeping purposes, and the other, where the fireplace was, for a living-room. Through an open window and through several holes in the roof the snow had sifted, and covered the flooring as with a carpet of white.

“We’ll have to clean up first of all,” said Joe. “No use of bringing in our traps until then.”

“Our first job is to clean off the roof and mend that,” came from Joe Runnell. “Then we’ll be ready for the next storm when it comes. After that we can clean up inside and cut some firewood.”

“But dinner – ” began Fred.

“I’ll cook the turkeys and some potatoes while the others fix the room,” said Harry.

This was agreed to, and soon they had a fire blazing away in front of the lodge. To dry-pick the turkeys was not so easy, and all the small feathers had to be singed off. But Harry knew his business, and soon there was an appetizing odor floating to the noses of those on the roof of the lodge.

The young hunters thought the outing great sport, and while

on the roof Joe and Fred got to snowballing each other. As a consequence, Joe received one snowball in his ear, and Fred, losing his balance, rolled from the roof into a snowbank behind the lodge.

“Hi! hi! let up there!” roared old Runnell. “This isn’t the play hour, lads. Work first and play afterward.”

“It’s no play to go headfirst in that snowbank,” grumbled Fred. “I’m as cold as an icicle!”

“All hands to dinner!” shouted Harry. “Don’t wait – come while everything is hot!”

“Right you are!” came from Joe, as he took a flying leap from the roof to the side of the fire. “Phew! but that turkey smells good, and so do the potatoes and coffee!”

They were soon eating with the appetite that comes only from hours spent in the open air in winter. Everything tasted “extra good,” as Fred put it, and they spent a good hour around the fire, picking the turkey bones clean. The turkeys had not been large, so that the meat was extra tender and sweet.

The roof of the lodge had been thoroughly cleaned, and now the boys were set to work to clean out the interior, and to start a fire in the open fireplace. In the meantime Joel Runnell procured some long strips of bark, and nailed these over the holes he had discovered. Over the broken-out window they fastened a flap of strong, but thin, white canvas in such a manner that it could be pushed aside when not wanted, and secured firmly during the night or when a storm was on.

The roaring fire soon dried out the interior of the building, and made it exceedingly comfortable. The boys found several more cracks in the sides, and nailed bark over these.

“Now for some firewood and pine boughs for the bunks, and then we can consider ourselves at home,” said Joel Runnell. “I know cutting firewood isn’t sport, but it’s all a part of the outing.”

“Oh, I shan’t mind that a bit,” replied Joe, and the others said the same.

Several small pine trees were handy, and from these old Runnell cut the softest of the boughs, and the boys arranged them in the bunks, after first drying them slightly before the fire. Over the boughs were spread the blankets brought along, and this furnished each with a bed, which, if not as comfortable as that at home, was still very good.

“It will beat sleeping on a hard board all hollow,” said Harry.

Next came the firewood; and this was stacked up close to the door of the lodge, while a fair portion was piled up in the living-room, for use when a heavy storm was on. Each of the boys chopped until his back fairly ached, but no one complained. It was so different, chopping wood for an outing instead of in the back yard at home!

“And now for something for supper and for breakfast,” said Joel Runnell, as the last stick was flung on the woodpile. “Supposing we divide our efforts. Joe can go with me into the woods on a hunt, while Fred and Harry can chop a hole in the ice on the lake, and try their luck at fishing.”

“Just the thing!” cried Fred. “Wait and see the pickerel I haul in.”

“And the fish I catch,” added Harry.

“Will we have to lock up the lodge?” asked Joe.

“Hardly,” answered the old hunter. “I don’t believe there is anybody, but ourselves inside of five miles of this spot.”

The guns were ready, and Joel Runnell and Joe soon set off, for the short winter day was drawing to a close, and there was no time to lose. But the fishing outfits had still to be unpacked, and the boys had to find bait, so it was half an hour later before Fred and Harry could get away.

Arriving at the lake shore, the two would-be fishermen selected a spot that they thought looked favorable, and began to cut their hole. As the ice was fully sixteen inches thick this was no easy task. But at last the sharp ax cut through, and then it was an easy matter to make the hole large enough for both to try their luck.

“I’ll wager a potato that I get the first bite,” observed Harry, as he threw in.

“What odds are you giving on that bet?” came from Fred.

“I didn’t think you were such small potatoes as to ask odds,” was the quick answer; and then both lads laughed.

Fishing proved to be slow work, and both boys became very cold before Fred felt something on his line.

“Hurrah, I’ve got a bite!” he shouted. “Here is where I win that potato!” And he hauled in rapidly.

“Be careful that you don’t lose your fish,” cautioned Harry. “We can’t afford to lose anything just now.”

“Huh! don’t you think I know how to fish?” grunted Fred, and hauled in as rapidly as before. But then the game appeared to hold back, and he hardly knew what to do.

“Coming in hard,” he said, slowly. “I think – . Ah, I’ve got him now! Here he comes!” And then the catch did come – a bit of brushwood, with several dead weeds clinging to it.

“That’s a real fine fish,” said Harry, dryly. “What do you suppose he’d weigh, in his own scales?”

“Oh, give us a rest!”

“The potato is yours, Fred. You can eat it for supper, along with that fine catch.”

“If you say another word, I’ll pitch you into the hole!”

“I never saw a fish exactly like that one. Is it a stickleback, or a hand-warmer?”

Fred did not answer, and Harry said no more, seeing that his chum did not relish the joke. Both baited up afresh, and this time Fred got a real bite, and landed a pickerel weighing close to a pound.

“Now you’re doing something!” cried Harry, heartily. “I’ll give in, you are the best fisherman, after all.”

“It was blind luck, Harry. You may – You’ve got a bite!”

Harry did have a bite, and the strain on the line told that his catch was a heavy one. He had to play his catch a little. Then it came up – a fine lake bass twice the size of the pickerel.

After this the sport continued steadily, until the young fishermen had fourteen fish to their credit. In the meantime it had grown quite dark, and the air was filled with softly falling snowflakes.

“I wonder if the others have got back to the lodge yet?” said Fred.

“It is not likely, Fred. That last shot we heard came from almost on top of the hill.”

“I hope they’ve had good luck. It looks now as if we wouldn’t be able to do much to-morrow.”

“Oh, this storm may not last. The wind isn’t in the right direction. We may – Hark!”

The boys stopped short in their talk, and both listened intently. From a distance they could hear a faint cry:

“Help! help!”

“It is Joe!” ejaculated Harry. “He is in trouble. We must go and see what is wrong!”

And throwing down his line and his fish he bounded in the direction of the cry for assistance, with Fred at his heels.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT HAPPENED AT NIGHT

We must go back to the time when Joe and old Runnell started away from Snow Lodge to see what game they could bring down for the next meal or two.

“We haven’t any time to waste,” said the old hunter, as they moved along. “In an hour it will be too dark to shoot at a distance.”

“Shall we take snowshoes along?” asked the youth.

“Not worth while, lad. We’ll try those in the big forest over on the mainland later on.”

The lodge was soon left behind, and old Runnell led the way through some brushwood that skirted the base of the hill.

“There ought to be some rabbits around here,” he said, and had scarcely spoken, when two rabbits popped into view. Bang! went his gun, and both were brought low by the scattering shot.

“Gracious! but you were quick about that!” cried Joe, enthusiastically.

“You don’t want to wait in hunting, Joe. Be sure of what you are shooting at, and then let drive as quick as you can pull trigger.”

On they went, and a few rods farther scared up two other rabbits. Joe now tried his luck, Joel Runnell not firing on

purpose. One of the rabbits fell dead, while the other was so badly lamed that Joe caught and killed him with ease.

“Good enough! Now we are even!” exclaimed the old hunter.

“Do you think we shall find any large game here?”

“Hardly. If a deer was near by he’d slide away in jig time as soon as he heard those shots. The most we can hope for are rabbits and birds.”

“I see a squirrel!” cried Joe, a little later.

“Watch where he goes,” returned the old hunter. “Ah, there’s his tree.”

Joe took aim, and the squirrel was brought down just as he was entering his hole. The tree was not a tall one, and Joel Runnell prepared to climb it.

“What are you going to do that for?” asked the youth.

“For the nuts, Joe. They’ll make fine eating during the evenings around the fire.”

It was an easy matter to clean out the hole in the tree – after they had made sure that no other animals were inside. From the place they obtained several quarts of hickory and other nuts, all of which Joel Runnell poured into the game bag he had brought along.

“This is easier than picking ’em from the trees,” he remarked. “And that squirrel will never need them now.”

By the time the top of the hill was gained, it was almost dark, and the snow had begun to fall. At this point they scared up half a dozen birds, and brought down four. Joel Runnell also caught

sight of a fox, but the beast got away before he could fire on it.

“We may as well be getting back,” said the old hunter. “It is too dark to look for more game.”

“Suppose we separate?” suggested Joe. “I can take to the right, and you can go to the left. Perhaps one or the other will spot something before we get back to the lodge.”

This was agreed to, and soon Joe found himself alone. As he hurried on as fast as the deep snow permitted, he heard Joel Runnell fire his gun twice in succession.

“He has seen something,” thought the youth. “Hope I have equal luck.”

He was still on high ground when he came to something of a gully. Here the rocks had been swept bare by the wind. As he leaped the gully something sprang up directly in front of him.

What the animal was Joe could not make out. But the unexpected appearance of the beast startled the young hunter, and he leaped back in astonishment. In doing this he missed his footing, and the next instant found himself rolling over the edge of the gully to a snow-covered shelf ten feet below.

“Help! help!” he cried, not once, but half a dozen times.

He had dropped his gun, and was now trying his best to cling fast to the slippery shelf. But his hold was by no means a good one, and he found himself slipping, slipping, slipping, until with a yell he went down, and down, into the darkness and snow far below.

In the meantime, not only Harry and Fred, but also Joel

Runnell were hurrying to his assistance. But the darkness and the falling snow made the advance of the three slow. They came together long before the edge of the gully was reached.

“Hello!” cried the old hunter. “Was that Joe calling?”

“It must have been,” answered Harry. “But where is he?”

“He wasn’t with me. When we started back to the lodge we separated. I just shot another brace of squirrels, when I heard him yell.”

“I think the cry came from that direction,” said Fred, pointing with his finger.

“And I think it came from over there,” said Harry, pointing in another direction.

“I think Harry is right,” said old Runnell. “Go slow, boys. There are many pitfalls among the rocks.”

He led the way, and they came after him, spreading out a distance of several rods. Presently they reached the gully, but not at the point where Joe had taken the fall.

“Hello, Joe? Where are you?” called Harry.

No answer came back, and the call was repeated several times. Not a sound broke the stillness of the evening.

“He’s in trouble, that is certain,” said Harry, looking more anxious every minute.

“Perhaps he fell over the rocks, and broke his neck,” put in Fred.

“Oh, Fred, do you think he did?”

“Let us hope for the best, lads,” broke in Joel Runnell.

"If he wasn't badly hurt he'd answer us," went on Harry. "I wish we had the lantern."

"I'll go back for it," said Fred, and hurried for the lodge without further words.

Joel Runnell had started along the edge of a ravine, with his face close to the rocks and snow. Now he came to a halt.

"Here are some footprints," he declared. "Wait till I strike a light."

He lit a match, and with this set fire to a dry pine bough. The footprints were there plain enough.

"Joe!" he called, sharply. "Joe, are you below?"

"Yes," came faintly to his ears.

"He's here!" shouted the old hunter.

"Where?" and now Harry came up quickly.

"He's down below."

Harry bent over the dark opening.

"Joe, are you badly hurt?" he questioned.

"I – I guess not. But my – my wind is g-g-gone!"

"We'll soon have you up."

"We can't do it without a rope," said old Runnell. "Better go back to the lodge for one."

Harry caught Fred just coming away with the lighted lantern. The rope was quickly procured, and both sped back to the gully. Then Harry was lowered, taking the light with him.

He found Joe sitting on a ledge of rocks, his feet in the snow. One hand was scratched and bleeding, and there was blood on

one of his cheeks.

“It was a nasty fall, I can tell you that,” said Joe, when he felt able to talk. “When I came down I thought it was all up with me.”

“You can be thankful you didn’t break any bones, Joe,” returned his brother, tenderly.

A sling was made, and Joe was hoisted up by old Runnell and Fred, and then Harry came up, carrying the shotgun. By this time it was pitch-dark on all sides, and the snow was coming down thickly.

“It’s good we have the lantern,” observed Harry. “It is going to be no easy job getting back to the lodge.”

Joel Runnell led the way, and the boys followed, with Joe in the middle leaning on the others’ shoulders. Progress was slow, and it took the best part of an hour to reach Snow Lodge.

“Jumping bullfrogs! if I didn’t leave the door wide open!” cried Fred, in consternation.

“Well, we’ll forgive you this time,” laughed Joe Runnell. “But don’t let it happen again.”

The lodge was cold, but with the door shut tight and a good fire the temperature soon arose. Then Fred slipped down to the lake, and brought in the fish that had been caught.

“Not so bad,” said the old hunter, as he looked the catch over. “Reckon we’ll have enough to eat for a day or two.”

Before retiring that night Joe washed his bruises and bathed them with some arnica that was in the medicine case. This eased the wounds a great deal, and in a few days he felt as well as ever.

It snowed steadily the whole of the night, and toward morning the wind arose and sent the snow flying against the lodge until it was piled almost to the top of the door. The thermometer went down ten degrees, and all hands were glad enough to hug the fire.

“Phew! but this storm is a corker,” exclaimed Fred. “I’m glad we haven’t got to travel in it.”

“We needn’t stir until it clears off,” said Joel Runnell. “That will give Joe a chance to mend.”

Breakfast was late, and they took their own time in eating the fish and potatoes that had been prepared. After this they gazed out of the window for a while, and then sat down to play at dominoes and checkers, both games having been brought along by Fred for just such an emergency.

Yet with it all the day passed slowly, and the boys were not sorry when, at nightfall, the snowing ceased, and the wind also fell.

“It’s going to be a clear day to-morrow,” the old hunter predicted. “We ought to have some fine sport.”

It was not yet nine o’clock when the boys and the old hunter retired for the night. The fire was fixed with care, so that no sparks might set fire to the lodge.

It did not take long for the boys to get to sleep. Each occupied a separate bunk in the sleeping apartment, while old Runnell stretched himself on the floor in the living-room.

Fred had been asleep about an hour, when he awoke with a start. What had aroused him he could not tell, until a peculiar

sensation along one of his lower limbs attracted his attention.

“What in the world can that be?” he asked himself. “Am I getting a chill, or is it rheumatism?”

He caught his breath, and on the instant his heart almost stopped beating from fright. Something was in the bunk, something that was crawling over his lower limbs and up to his breast!

“It’s a snake!” he thought. “It’s a snake! If I dare to move it will sting me! Can it be a rattler?”

He was on the point of screaming, but could not bring himself to do it. The cold beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. In those few seconds he lived an hour of anguish. Then he made a swift clutch at the object through the blanket, and leaped out upon the floor.

“A snake! A snake!” he yelled. “Help me! Shoot him, somebody! A snake has me by the leg! He’s stinging me this minute! I’m a dead boy!”

CHAPTER IX

AT A DEER HUNT

In a moment there was a wild commotion throughout the lodge. All of the others sprang up, and reached for their weapons.

“What is it, a bear?” gasped Harry.

“A snake! a snake!” screamed Fred. “Save me, before he stings me!”

The lantern had been turned low. Now Joe turned it up, while Joel Runnell kicked the fire into a blaze. In the meantime, Fred pulled both the blanket and the reptile from him, and cast them upon the floor.

“Let me get at him,” said old Runnell, and he stepped into the sleeping room as the snake crawled from under the blanket and started across the floor for a hole in the corner.

Bang! it was a hasty shot, and in that confined space it made the ears of all the boys ring. For the time being, the smoke was so thick nobody could see, and more than one began to cough.

“Did you – you fetch him?” faltered Fred. He felt so weak in the lower limbs that he had to rest on the edge of a bunk for support.

“Think I did,” was the laconic reply of the old hunter. He held the double-barreled gun ready for a second shot.

But this was unnecessary, for as the smoke cleared away it was

seen that the snake had been literally cut to pieces by the dose of shot. The tail still whipped over the floor, and, catching it up, the old hunter threw it on the back of the fire, and a moment later the head and the bits of body followed.

“Was it a rattler?” questioned Harry.

“No, it was only an ordinary everyday snake,” answered Joel Runnell. “I reckon the heat warmed him into life. But he scared you, didn’t he, Fred?”

“Well-er – it wasn’t very pleasant,” answered the stout youth. “I don’t want another such bunkmate.”

“I guess none of us do,” came from Joe. “Ugh! it makes one shiver to think of it.”

“I’m going to search around for more,” said Harry, and took up the lantern. The others helped him, but no more snakes were to be found.

As Joel Runnell had predicted, New Year’s day proved clear, and the bright sun, shining on the snow, was fairly dazzling.

“We’ll go out after dinner,” said the old hunter. “The sun will soon make the top of the snow right for snow-shoeing,” and so it proved.

The boys were anxious to try the snowshoes, or *skis*, as they are called in certain parts of the country. They had already tried them around the yard at home, with varying success. Joel Runnell was an expert in using them, and he gave them all the advice he deemed necessary.

“Take your time, and make sure of what you are doing,” he

said. "If you try to hurry at the start, you'll surely take a tumble. Swiftiness comes only with practice."

It had been decided that they should cross to the mainland on a hunt for deer. About two miles and a half away was a cove to which the deer came regularly at certain seasons of the year. This was known, however, to nobody but Joel Runnell, and he took good care to keep the fact to himself.

An early dinner was had, and they started off about midday, after closing up the lodge and putting a wooden pin through the hasp of the door. A rough board was nailed over the open window, so that no wild animal might leap through to rummage their stores.

"Now for a nice deer apiece!" exclaimed Joe, as they made their way to the lake shore.

"I must say you don't want much," said Harry. "I guess we'll be lucky if we get one or two all told."

"Nothing like hoping for the best," grinned old Runnell. "It might be that we'd get two each, you know."

"I want a good picture of a deer as much as anything," went on Harry, who had his camera swung from his shoulder.

"Humph! that's all well enough, but we can't live on photos," grumbled Fred. "A nice juicy bit of venison will just suit me to death after such a tramp as this is going to be."

As soon as the thick undergrowth was left behind, they stopped and donned their snowshoes. Out on the lake the snow lay in an unbroken mass for miles. Over this they found snowshoe

walking to be comparatively easy.

“Snowshoes are all right on a level,” old Runnell explained. “It is going up-hill and coming down that tests one’s skill.”

“Oh, I think this is lots of fun!” cried Harry, and started to run. All went well for fifty yards, when he struck an extra high drift of snow and pitched into it headlong.

“Oh, for a snap-shot!” sang out Joe, merrily. “Harry, lend me the camera until I press the button on you.”

“Not much!” spluttered his brother. “Wuow! But that was a cold plunge!” he added, as he freed himself of the snow. “Tell you what, there is more science in using these things than one imagines.”

The edge of the cove was covered with pines and spruces, all hanging low with their weight of snow. Back of this fringe was a small opening, filled with young saplings.

“The deer have been around here, that’s certain,” said Joel Runnell, as he pointed to the saplings. “See how they have been peeling off the bark.”

He told them to look to their firearms, and they did so, while Harry made certain that his camera was ready for use. Then they continued their journey, with eyes and ears on the alert for the first appearance of any game.

It was all of an hour before the old hunter called a halt. He pointed to a track in the snow just ahead of them.

“Deer!” he said, in a half whisper. “Five of ’em. Go slow now, and make no noise.”

At this announcement the heart of each of the youths began to flutter, and they clutched their guns tightly, while Harry brought his camera around to the front.

There was a slight rise of ground in front of them, at the top of which was a belt of brushwood. To the right was a hollow, and to the left something of a cliff.

The brushwood gained, Joel Runnell, who was in the lead, motioned for the boys to crouch low. They did as ordered, and came up to him as silently as so many ghosts.

The sight that met their gaze thrilled them to the core. The five deer were just beyond, feeding on the tender bark of the young trees in that vicinity. They were knee-deep in the snow. A magnificent old buck was leader of the herd.

“Let me take a picture first!” whispered Harry, and swung his camera into position. The sun was shining directly on the game, and the grouping could not have been better. Click! and the snapshot was taken. Then, to make sure of a picture, he took a second shot from a slightly different position.

As the second click was heard, the old buck raised his head to look around and listen. The wind was blowing from the deer toward the hunters, so the buck scented nothing unusual.

“Joe, take the one on the left; Harry, try for that on the right; Fred, shoot the one near the big rock. I’ll take the buck,” whispered Joel Runnell.

All agreed, and the firearms were brought into position. Fred was trembling as with “buck fever,” and Harry was equally

excited.

“When I count three, fire,” said the old hunter. “Ready? One, two, three!”

Crack! crack! bang went the rifles and the shotguns, in a scattering fire. On the instant the old buck bounded into the air and fell lifeless, with a bullet through his left eye. The deer Joe had aimed at was mortally wounded, and fell where it had stood, kicking and plunging, and sending the snow and ice flying in all directions.

Harry and Fred had not been so fortunate, although each had “nipped” his mark, Fred landing some shot in the deer’s side, and Harry striking in the hind quarter. In the meantime, the fifth deer turned, and sped from sight with the swiftness of the wind.

“Hurrah! we’ve got two at least!” shouted Joe, and ran forward to finish his prize. This was an easy matter, and a second shot caused the deer to stop struggling at once.

“Look out for those other chaps!” yelled Joel Runnell, suddenly. “They are going to attack us!”

He was right. The two wounded deer were hurt enough to turn ugly, and now each came on with eyes that were full of fight. One sprang at Joe, and with a well-directed blow sent that youth sprawling headlong over the game he had brought low. The second charged on Fred, knocking the stout youth over likewise and then preparing to gore him with all the power of those cruel-looking prongs.

CHAPTER X

AMONG THE WOLVES

It was a moment of extreme peril, and each of the party realized it fully. A wounded deer is an ugly creature to deal with at the best, and these animals were both wounded and half starved, for the recent heavy falls of snow had cut them off from nearly all of their food supplies.

“Jump, Joe!” screamed Harry, in terror. “Jump, or you will be killed!”

“Save me!” screamed Fred. “The deer is going to bore me through!”

The words had scarcely been uttered, when Joel Runnell’s rifle rang out, and the deer that had attacked Fred fell over, paralyzed from a bullet through its backbone. Then Fred scrambled up, and ran for dear life down the slope leading to the lake.

“Come on!” he yelled. “Come on! I’ve had enough of deer hunting! Come on, before all of us are killed!”

Harry could not bear to see Joe in such dire peril, and leaping up to the side of the deer he discharged the second barrel of his shotgun with all possible speed.

The aim was none of the best, but some of the shot penetrated the animal’s hind leg, and caused it to start back limping. At this, Joe tried to scramble up, but found himself too weak to

do so. The deer then turned upon Harry, and that youth met the onslaught by hitting the game over the head with his gun-stock.

“That’s the way to do it!” shouted Joel Runnell, who was coming up as fast as he could, hunting knife in hand. “Don’t let him get away to buck you. Crowd him up!” And Harry crowded the deer that was now inclined to flee. A moment later the old hunter was at hand, and, catching the game by one prong, plunged the keen knife into the upturned throat; and then the brief but fierce fight came to an end.

“Say, but that was hot!” gasped Joe, when he at last arose. “I was afraid I was a goner, sure!”

“Where is Fred?” asked old Runnell, looking around as he reloaded.

“He ran away,” answered Harry. He raised his voice: “Fred, where are you? Come back, the fight is over.”

“Are those deer dead?” came in a trembling voice from a distance.

“Yes.”

At this news the stout youth came limping back, one snowshoe on and the other under his arm. He looked rather sheepish.

“Thought you’d leg it, did you?” said old Runnell, quizzically. “Can’t say I blame you much.”

“I – I guess I was looking for that other deer,” answered Fred, lamely. His companions could not help but smile, but they did not let the stout youth see it.

“Well, we got one apiece, after all,” said Joel Runnell, after

a pause, during which they made sure that all of the game were dead. "Boys, I can tell you that we've been lucky. It isn't likely that we'll make a better haul than this all the time we are out."

"Excepting we get on the track of a moose," said Joe.

"So far as I know, there are no longer any moose in this vicinity. I haven't shot one for four years. As for meat, there is nothing better than the deer we have just brought down."

How to get the game to the lodge was the next problem, and after a conference it was decided to pile two of the deer on a drag, and take them over at once. The others were hung high in a tree, so as to protect them from other wild animals.

"I reckon we've had sport enough for one day," said Joel Runnell. "By the time we get these two deer to the lodge everybody will be fagged out."

For drags they cut long sweeps of pine. On these the deer were tightly bound with ropes, and while the old hunter and Fred pulled one, Joe and Harry pulled the other.

As they reached the edge of the lake Joe caught sight of some game in a nearby tree. They were partridge, and he and old Runnell brought down six. The others flew away with a rush that was exceedingly noisy.

"Now we can have a potpie worth eating!" exclaimed Joe. "I'll make one just like Grandma Anderson's."

To Harry, who was tired out, the walk over the lake appeared endless, but just as the sun was setting they came in sight of the lodge.

“Home again!” sang out Joe. “Home again, and glad – Hello!”

He stopped short, and looked at the snow before him. There were prints that filled him with wonder.

“What is it, Joe?” asked Fred.

“Unless I am mistaken these marks were made by the hoofs of a horse!”

“They were,” said Joel Runnell, after an examination. “Somebody has been around here on horseback.”

“Perhaps we’ve got a visitor,” suggested Harry. “Let’s hurry up and see.”

Increasing their speed they soon reached the lodge. The hoof prints were there, and they could plainly see where somebody had leaped from the horse and entered the building.

“Hope it wasn’t a thief,” said Joe.

The door was fastened just as they had left it, and inside of the lodge nothing appeared to be disturbed. But on the table was a note, pinned down by a fork stuck in the crack of the boards. The note ran as follows:

“You ain’t wanted here, and you had better clear out before Hiram Skeetles has the law on you.

“Daniel Marcy.”

“Well, listen to that!” ejaculated Joe. “What right has Dan Marcy to leave such a message as this?”

“Evidently Hiram Skeetles got him to do it,” said Joel Runnell. “Remember, Skeetles claims to own the island.”

“But he doesn’t own it,” answered Joe, warmly. “And I, for

one, shan't budge."

"Nor I," added Harry.

"So say we all!" sang out Fred. "Just let Marcy or old Skeetles show himself, and we'll give him a piece of our mind, eh, fellows?"

"Nobody ever tried to stop my hunting here before," said Joel Runnell. "As I told you before, so far as I know, the island is under the care of Sheriff Clowes. As to who owns the island, that is for the courts to decide."

"Then we'll quit on notice from the sheriff, and not before," said Joe.

"It's a wonder Dan Marcy didn't steal something," put in Harry. "I don't think he'd be above doing such a thing."

"Oh, don't paint him any blacker than he is, Harry," returned his brother; nevertheless, all looked around the lodge with interest, to make sure that nothing was missing.

"I suppose Marcy has gone to old Skeetles to report," said Joel Runnell, later on, while they were broiling a choice cut of deer meat. "And if that's so we'll hear from him again before long."

The hunt had given everybody a good appetite, and they sat over the well-cooked venison a long time, praising the meal and talking over the prospects for more sport. There was a good deal of enthusiasm, and, in the midst of this, Marcy and Hiram Skeetles were for the time being forgotten.

It being New Year's night they did not go to bed as early as usual, but instead sat up eating nuts and listening to several good

hunting stories old Runnell had to tell. They also talked of home, until Harry grew just a bit homesick and changed the subject.

With nothing to make them get up early, all hands slept the following morning until after eight o'clock. The old hunter was the first to arise, and he had the breakfast well under way before the others rolled out.

"I've been a-thinking it over," said old Runnell. "Perhaps one of us had better stay at the lodge while the others go for that other deer meat. Then, if Marcy comes, or Hiram Skeetles, there will be somebody here to talk to him."

"I'd just as lief stay," said Fred, who did not relish hauling the load of meat to Snow Lodge.

"Supposing you and Runnell both stay," suggested Joe. "I am sure Harry and I can get the deer over without much trouble."

The matter was discussed while they were eating breakfast, and Joe's plan was adopted. A little later he and Harry set off, each with his gun, and Harry with his ever-present camera in addition. So far Harry had taken, besides the game, several pictures of the lodge and its surroundings, and had already laid away a strip of six films for development when he should get home.

"I hope we're able to bring down something on this trip," said Harry, as they trudged along over the lake.

"We can't expect to bring in something every trip we make, Harry. If we did we'd be the greatest Gun Club in the United States. Many a hunter goes out all day and doesn't so much as

see a squirrel.”

“Oh, I know that. I really think that so far our luck has been remarkably good.”

“It won’t keep up. Our shooting in this vicinity will scare the game away from the lodge. As the days go by we’ll have to go farther and farther away for something worth bringing down.”

The journey across the lake was made without incident, but scarcely had they struck the mainland when a distant howl greeted their ears.

“What is that?” came from Harry.

“It’s the howl of a wolf,” answered his brother. “I shouldn’t wonder but what he has scented the deer meat.”

“If he has we may have some trouble in getting the deer home.”

“Oh, I guess we can easily take care of one wolf.”

“But there may be more, Joe. Wolves generally travel in packs, you know.”

“Yes, but I don’t hear any others.”

“He may be calling his mates.”

They moved forward up the rise, and presently came in sight of the game. Under the tree where the deer was strung up sat two wolves, gazing wistfully at the meat.

“Two of them here, and one below!” cried Joe. “That makes three.”

“Wait! let me get a picture!” whispered Harry, and brought his camera into use without delay. It certainly made a good scene,

and he got as close as he could ere he pressed the button. Then he took up his shotgun and blazed away, and Joe did the same.

Neither of the wolves was much hurt, and both limped into the woods growling savagely. The growl was answered from a distance, and in a very few minutes four other wolves appeared, ranging themselves in a semicircle at what they considered a safe distance.

“The impudent beggars!” murmured Joe, and, bringing his shotgun up, he let drive at the nearest wolf. This time his aim was true, and the wolf leaped up, to fall dead. Instantly the other wolves fell upon their dead companion, rending the carcass limb from limb.

“I must say I don’t like this,” declared Harry, in something of a nervous voice. “It looks as if they meant business. As soon as that wolf is gone they’ll turn on us again.”

“Here comes a whole pack of wolves!” shouted Joe.

He was right, a distant yelping and howling proclaimed their approach. Soon they burst into view, at least twenty strong, and in a twinkling the two young hunters found themselves completely surrounded!

CHAPTER XI

CONFRONTED BY THE ENEMY

Fred had broken one of his snowshoes while running away from the deer, and Joel Runnell's first work after Harry and Joe had left Snow Lodge was to repair this.

"You want to be more careful in the future," said the old hunter, when the job was finished. "So far you have tumbled into nothing worse than a snowbank. If you should slide over a cliff and land upon the rocks, you might get badly hurt."

"I intend to be careful in the future," answered the youth. "I am sorry I ran away – now," he added, regretfully.

"Well, lad, as to that, it's often much safer to run than to stand your ground. I dodged an old buck once for half an hour, and then escaped only by the skin of my teeth. Something got the matter with my gun, and it wouldn't go off."

"Did you kill him?"

"Yes, two days later. I made up my mind I'd have him, and I traveled nigh on thirty miles to lay him low."

After the necessary work around the lodge was concluded time hung heavily on Fred's hands, and he decided to try his luck once more at fishing.

"It's better than doing nothing," he said.

"Well, it's all right, only don't fall into the hole, and get

drowned,” cautioned Joel Runnell. And then Fred disappeared with his outfit, whistling merrily.

Left to himself, Joel Runnell proceeded to split some more wood, and pile it up in a corner of the living-room. To his experienced eye he could see that another snowstorm was not far off, and how long it would last there was no telling.

“We’ve got meat enough,” he reasoned to himself. “And so long as we have wood, too, there will be no cause to worry.”

The thermometer had gone down once more, and he had to work at a lively rate to keep warm. He wondered how Fred was making out with his fishing, and grinned to himself.

“Wager he won’t stay there long,” he muttered. “If he does, he’ll be frozen stiff.”

The old hunter had just carried in his sixth armful of wood, when a shadow crossed the open doorway, and looking up he found himself confronted by Hiram Skeetles.

The real estate dealer was a tall, thin man, with a leathery face and broken snags of yellowish teeth. He chewed tobacco constantly, and the corners of his mouth were much discolored in consequence.

“So ye hain’t taken my warnin’, I see,” snarled Skeetles.

“Hello, Skeetles; what brings you?” demanded Joel Runnell, as cheerily as he could.

“Ye know well enough what brung me, Joel Runnell. Didn’t I warn ye not to trespass on my property?”

“I’ve told you that I don’t know as it is your property. So far I

think it belongs to the old Crawley estate, and it's in the sheriff's care."

"It ain't so; it's mine, every foot of it." Hiram Skeetles' eyes blazed. "I want for you to git out, an' be quick about it."

"And I ain't a-going," answered Joel Runnell, doggedly.

"You ain't?"

"No." The old hunter sat down by the fire, with his gun across his knees. "Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Did you see the notice I had Dan Marcy leave?"

"I did; but that counts for nothing with me."

"I'll have the law on ye!"

"Perhaps you will, and perhaps you won't, Hiram."

"Don't Hiram me, Joel Runnell. I don't put myself on a level with a vagabond o' a game stealer like you. If –"

"Hold on there, Skeetles. I am no game stealer, and if you say so –" The old hunter had leaped up, gun in hand.

"Don't – don't ye shoot me!" howled the real estate dealer.

"Then don't say such things again. Every bit of game I bring in I come by honestly."

"Where are those Westmore chaps?" questioned Hiram Skeetles, deeming it best to shift the subject.

"They have gone out to bring in some game we shot yesterday."

"Did they see the notice?"

"They did, and they care for it as little as I do."

"Think they can ride over me, eh?" Hiram Skeetles took a turn

up and down the apartment. "Must say the lot of ye are carryin' matters with a high hand."

"What did you do with Dan Marcy?" asked Joel Runnell, suddenly.

"That's my business."

"If you brought him along to worry us you did a very foolish thing," went on the old hunter. "I haven't forgotten how he tried to run down my girl with his ice boat."

"Your gal had a right to git out o' the way."

"I won't argue the point. But if Marcy worries me any more he'll get something he won't like."

"We'll see about this. I'll call on the sheriff," said Hiram Skeetles; and without another word he passed out of the lodge, and made his way toward the upper end of the lake.

Anxious to learn what would be the man's next move, Joel Runnell followed. But Skeetles broke into a run, and soon disappeared from view among a patch of woods.

In thoughtful mood the old hunter walked back to the lodge, and then toward where Fred was fishing. He found the youth safe, and surprised to learn that the real estate dealer had showed himself in that out-of-the-way place.

"He doesn't like it that Joe and Harry are here," said Fred. "I really think he's afraid they'll find that pocketbook he says he once lost."

"I hope they do find it – if it's got those missing papers in it," was the answer.

Fred had already caught several fish, and said he intended to catch as many more before he quit, no matter how cold it grew.

“I’ll show them that I can catch fish even if I’m no good at deer hunting,” he explained.

“Have you seen anything in the shape of game since you came down?”

“I saw something that looked like a black bear. But he didn’t come near here.”

“A bear? Where?”

Fred pointed out the direction, and Joel Runnell started off to see if the report was true. But he could find nothing, and in half an hour he returned.

“You must have been mistaken, Fred. Perhaps it was nothing but a shadow.”

“Well, I was busy fishing, and didn’t notice particularly,” returned the boy.

He said he wanted to catch just two fish more, and would then return to the lodge.

“All right, but don’t get frozen stiff doing it,” answered Joel Runnell.

“When do you think Joe and Harry will return?”

“They ought to be along inside of an hour. They’ll find that load a pretty heavy one.”

“I heard some shooting over there a while ago. But it has stopped now.”

To warm himself, the old hunter walked briskly in the

direction of Snow Lodge. He felt uneasy; why, he could not explain.

“Those boys may have gotten into trouble,” he thought. “Perhaps I had better slip after them and find out.”

As he came in sight of the lodge an exclamation of astonishment burst from his lips. All of their traps and stores had been tumbled in a heap on the edge of the clearing, and the door was tightly closed, and the broken-out window partly barred.

“This is Skeetles’ work!” he muttered.

“Stop where you are!” came in the real estate dealer’s voice, as Runnell walked to the door and tried it, to find it locked. “If you attempt to come in you’ll get shot.”

“That’s the talk,” was added by Dan Marcy. “Possession is nine points of the law, and we want you to take your stuff and be gone!”

“But see here – ” began Joel Runnell.

“We won’t argy with ye!” snarled Hiram Skeetles, as he appeared at the window, gun in hand. “Clear out, an’ be quick about it.”

Joel Runnell was about to say something far from complimentary to the pair, when a yell from the lake shore reached his ears. Fred was running toward him with a face full of fear.

“The bear! The bear!” he yelled. “He’s after me!”

CHAPTER XII

DRIVEN FROM THE LODGE

As soon as he heard Fred's cry, Joel Runnell forgot for the time being his trouble with Hiram Skeetles and Dan Marcy.

"A bear?" he repeated. "Where is he?"

"He's coming right after me!" yelled the stout youth. "Shoot him, or we'll both be chewed up!"

The old hunter had his rifle in his hands, and now he ran to meet Fred, who was coming up with his fishing rod and a string of fish. The stout youth was tremendously excited, and, reaching the pile of traps on the ground, he went sprawling headlong, while his catch scattered in all directions.

"I see him!" exclaimed Joel Runnell, as the bear came into view, a shaggy black fellow, weighing several hundred pounds. The animal was among the trees, and to get a fair shot at the creature was next to impossible.

Boy and beast had come up to Snow Lodge on the side upon which the partly barred window was located, so it was easy for Hiram Skeetles and Dan Marcy to note what was taking place without exposing themselves to danger.

"Is it really a bear?" questioned the real estate dealer, in a nervous voice.

"It is," announced Marcy. "And a right big fellow, too. Like as

not he'll give 'em a stiff fight. He looks hungry enough to tackle most anything.”

“Do you – er – think he can get in here?”

“Not unless he comes in by this window, and we can shoot him if he tries that.”

“Let us try to close up the opening,” came from Hiram Skeetles, and he hurried to the pile of wood to get a stick for that purpose.

In the meantime the bear had reached the edge of the clearing, and there he stood, upright, viewing the situation. The smell of fish was tantalizing to his empty stomach, but the sight of two human beings instead of one made him hold back.

Bringing up his rifle, Joel Runnell took the best aim possible and fired. When the smoke cleared away, it was seen that the bear had been hit in the front leg, but not seriously wounded. With a growl of pain and rage, the disappointed beast dropped on all fours, turned, and sped into the woods with all the speed at his command.

“Whe – where is he? Did you kill him?” gasped Fred, as he scrambled to his feet.

“No; I only wounded him,” was the answer, as the old hunter reloaded the rifle with all speed. “Wait here until I see if I can't lay him low.”

“But supposing he comes back here?”

“I'll be on his heels. You can take your shotgun and climb into a tree if you wish.”

Without another word Joel Runnell ran off in the direction the bear had taken, and soon the trees, bushes and deep snow hid him completely from view.

“It’s funny he told me to climb a tree,” mused Fred. “It’s a good deal safer in the lodge than anywhere else, and a heap sight warmer, too,” and picking up his fish, he started to go forward, when he stopped short and gazed at the traps and stores in astonishment. “What on earth made Runnell throw these things out?” he mused.

“Keep back there, Fred Rush!” came in Dan Marcy’s voice from the lodge window. “You can’t come in here, nohow!”

“Hello!” ejaculated Fred. “So you are back. Did you throw out our things in this fashion?”

“We did,” put in Hiram Skeetles. “And what is more, they are going to stay out. We’ve given you warning, and now I want the whole crowd of ye to clear out.”

“Well, I never!” gasped the stout youth. “Of all the cheeky things to do – ”

“It wasn’t cheeky at all,” interrupted the real estate dealer. “As I told Runnell, this is my land, and I won’t have none o’ ye on it.”

“Won’t you let me in to warm myself?”

“No.”

“Then all I’ve got to say, Hiram Skeetles, is that you are a brute.”

“I don’t want none o’ your talk, Fred Rush.”

“You claim to own this island, but we don’t think so, any more

than we think you own the old Anderson claim.”

This latter remark appeared to make Hiram Skeetles furious.

“Bringin’ that up again, eh?” he shouted. “I reckon as how them Westmore boys set ye up to it. But I know what’s mine, and I intend to keep it. Now you clear out, and be mighty quick about it.”

“What will you do if I don’t go?”

“I’ll make it warm, I can tell ye that!”

Skeetles showed his gun, and Dan Marcy exhibited a pistol, and, alarmed at the unexpected show of firearms, Fred dropped back to the place where the stores had been placed.

As he could not get into the lodge, Fred decided to follow Joel Runnell’s advice and take to a tree. Armed with several blankets, he climbed into a pine and made himself as comfortable as possible. The storm that had threatened now started, the flakes of snow coming down softly, and growing thicker and thicker every minute.

“This will make it bad for Joe and Harry,” thought Fred. “They’ll have their own troubles getting back to camp if it snows too hard.”

From a distance he heard a rifle shot, proving that Joel Runnell was still following the bear. But after that all was quiet for a good hour.

By that time Fred was hungry, and climbing down to the ground, he procured such things from the stores as were ready to eat. He was just finishing a cracker when Joel Runnell came

into view.

“Did you shoot him?” asked the youth, eagerly.

“No, he got away among the rocks,” was Joel Runnell’s reply. “I might have tracked him farther, but I was afraid of falling into some pit, the snow is that thick. I reckon this is going to be the banner storm of the season. How did you make out with Skeetles and Marcy?”

“I made out – and that’s all,” grinned Fred. “They won’t let me come near the cabin.”

“I thought as much, and as I came along I picked out a new spot for a shelter – providing you and the others want to stay on the island.”

“We can’t leave until Joe and Harry come back. If we do, they won’t know where to look for us.”

“Just my idee, Fred. We’ll go down close to the shore. Then they can’t miss us when they come over.”

“They ought to be here by this time.”

“Perhaps they got on the track of more game.”

Without delay the stores and traps were packed on the two sleds, and the pair started away from Snow Lodge. From the window Hiram Skeetles and Dan Marcy watched them with interest.

“Don’t ye dare to stay on the island!” shouted the real estate dealer after them. “If ye do, I’ll have the law on ye!”

“Oh, give us a rest!” retorted Fred. “Perhaps we’ll have the law on you before this affair is finished.”

“I’ve got my rights – ”

“And so have we, and the Westmores have got theirs, too. Some day they’ll find those missing papers, and then you may hear a thing or two,” and with this parting shot Fred moved off with one sled, while old Runnell moved off with the other.

“Ha! did you hear that?” gasped Hiram Skeetles, clutching Marcy by the arm. “Do you think – ”

“Oh, don’t get scared,” came from the bully. “They don’t know any more about those papers than they know about the man in the moon.”

“But they might have heard of my loss – ”

“No, I think it was only a bluff, Hiram. They’ll leave to-day or to-morrow, and that will be the end of it.”

“I hope they do leave,” sighed the real estate dealer. “I won’t feel safe so long as they are on the island.”

“Do you remember the place where you dropped your pocketbook?”

“Not the exact spot. I was all shook up by the storm, and had a splittin’ headache. I looked around for half a day, but it was no use.”

“Maybe the pocketbook and the papers went to the bottom of the lake.”

“I’d rather have that happen than that they should run across those papers,” answered Skeetles, with another sigh.

The spot Joel Runnell had chosen for a new camp was located not far from where Fred had been fishing. Here a clump of pines

overhung a hollow several yards wide, and sloping off toward the lake shore. To the north of the hollow were a series of rocks, that, along with the pines, cut off a good portion of the wind and the snow.

“I’ll cut a few saplings, and throw them over the hollow, and over them we can place a double blanket and some pine boughs,” said Joel Runnell. “Then we can clean out the place and start a fire near the doorway, and we’ll be almost as comfortable as at the lodge.”

“They kept one of the deer on us. I think that was cheeky.”

“Never mind, we have the other, and we’ll have two more when Joe and Harry get back. I don’t think they took anything else.”

But in this the old hunter was mistaken. Skeetles and Marcy had helped themselves to a little of almost all the stores, but had not taken sufficient of any particular article to make it noticeable.

It took over an hour to get the shelter into shape. Then the fire was started between two large rocks, and here they proceeded to broil several of the fish, and also set a pot of beans to baking as soon as one of the rocks was hot enough.

“It’s queer that Joe and Harry don’t show themselves,” was Fred’s comment, while they were eating. “In such a storm as this they ought to know enough to hurry back.”

“I’ll wait a little longer and see if they don’t turn up, Fred. They may have found the load heavier than they calculated on. Remember, too, it’s quite a distance to where we left those deer

hanging.”

“What do you think those shots meant?”

“I can’t say, except that they might have brought down some more small game, maybe a partridge or some rabbits.”

Having finished the repast, both set to work to chop firewood, for it was easier to do this than to drag it from the pile at the lodge.

“It galls me to think they’ll use up what we cut,” grumbled Fred. “But I’m going to get square sometime, you see if I don’t!”

“I think, according to law, we could make ’em pay for that venison,” returned Joel Runnell. “But I reckon it ain’t worth going to law about. We can decide on what’s best to do after Joe and Harry get back.”

Slowly the afternoon wore away. In the meantime the sky grew darker, and the snow came down so thickly that but little could be seen in any direction.

“I must say I don’t like this,” remarked the old hunter, with a grave shake of his head. “Reckon I had best go across the lake and see what has become of those lads. You won’t mind staying here alone, will you?”

Fred did mind – not having forgotten about the bear. But he hesitated to say so, and put on a bold front.

“Go ahead, but don’t stay away any longer than is necessary,” he said, and a few minutes later Joel Runnell departed on his search for the missing ones.

CHAPTER XIII

LOST IN A BLIZZARD

To Joe and Harry the sight of so many half-starved wolves was certainly a dismaying one. They were vicious-looking creatures, and the fact that the first arrivals had quickly devoured the beast they had brought low proved that they would stop at nothing in order to satisfy their hunger.

Without wasting words, each of the youths fired into the pack, and by good luck two more of the creatures were killed. The others retreated for a minute, but then came forward once more, to rend the dead bodies and snarl and fight over the choicest pieces.

“That was lucky,” said Joe. “But those dead ones won’t last long.”

“What had we best do?” questioned his brother. “Run for it, or climb into the tree?”

Before an answer could be given to this query three of the wolves advanced on the lads, snarling more savagely than ever. Not wishing to be attacked before he could re-load, Harry leaped up into the lower branches of the tree in which the two deer still hung. Joe followed, and both climbed still higher out of harm’s way. More wolves came up, until eight were stationed at the foot of the tree, all snarling and yelping and leaping, their polished

teeth showing plainly, and their eyes reflecting the cruelty of their natures.

“We are in a pickle now, and no error!” groaned Harry. “What in the world are we to do next?”

“Well, I reckon you can take another snap shot if you wish,” answered Joe, dryly.

“This is no joking matter, Joe. I feel like smashing my camera over their heads.”

“The best thing we can do is to stay here.”

“I’m going to kill another wolf or two if I can.”

Harry re-loaded and took careful aim at the largest wolf in the pack. But the beast was wary, and just as the young hunter pulled the trigger it leaped to one side, so that the shot flew wide of its mark, striking another wolf in the tail, causing an added howl of pain and rage, but no serious damage.

After that the wolves seemed inclined to keep their distance. Occasionally one would draw closer, with nose uplifted, sniffing the blood of the deer, but as soon as one or the other of the lads raised his gun the beast would slink back behind a tree, bush, or rock.

“I guess they are going to play a waiting game,” said Joe, after a dreary half hour had passed.

“Do you think they expect us to come down?”

“They know we won’t want to remain up here forever.”

“If we only had something with which to scare them.”

“Perhaps we can fix up something.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was thinking of those deer. What have you got in the way of powder and shot?”

Harry showed his store, and Joe looked over what he possessed.

“We’ll fix ’em,” said Joe, getting out his knife.

With great care he cut a chunk of venison, and wrapped it in a piece of the deer skin. Inside of the skin he placed a quantity of powder and shot, and to this added a fuse, a rude affair, but one that looked as if it might burn. Then he cut several other pieces of venison.

“Now feed these to the wolves, one at a time,” he said to his brother.

Harry understood, and threw one of the bits far out from the tree. A wolf came and sniffed at it, and then began to eat. Another bit brought several other of the beasts up, and then the whole pack crowded up close.

“Now then, take that, and see how you like it!” cried Joe, and, lighting the fuse, he threw the big piece down in the very center of the pack. “Now use your gun, Harry!” he cried, and snatched up his own firearm.

There was a moment of suspense, and then bang! went the charge in the venison, causing several of the wolves to fall back badly wounded. An instant later crack! crack! went the two shotguns of the young hunters.

When the smoke cleared away it was found that three of

the wolves were dead, and two others were seriously, if not mortally, wounded. The slaughter thoroughly scared those which remained, and in a twinkling they turned and disappeared into the forest, some howling and yelping as they ran.

“That is the time we did it!” cried Joe. “They’ve learned a lesson they won’t forget.”

“Will they come back?”

“I hardly think so. Runnell told me once that when a wolf is thoroughly scared he’ll run for miles before he stops.”

The wounded beasts were drawing away as fast as their hurts would permit, and in a few minutes only the dead animals were in sight. With caution the young hunters descended to the ground and looked around among the trees.

“They are gone, that’s certain,” announced Joe. “I don’t believe we’ll see or hear of them again.”

By this time it had begun to snow a little. Now that the enemy were gone each found himself hungry.

“We’ll get a hasty meal, and then start for camp,” said Harry. “I shan’t feel perfectly safe until I’m back with the others.”

But as the meal progressed they grew calmer, and even examined the dead wolves with interest.

“We’ll have a tale to tell when we get back,” said Joe.

“Let us take the tails to verify our tale,” laughed Harry, and cut off the wolves’ tails without further words.

It was not until half an hour later that they had their drags fixed, ready to start back for Pine Island. By this time the snow

was coming down heavily.

“We’re up against a regular storm now, that’s certain,” came from Joe, as he surveyed the darkening sky.

“Well, I declare, if I haven’t lost my pocket-knife!” ejaculated Harry, as he searched his pockets. “It’s the new one, too – the one Laura and Bessie gave me on my last birthday.”

Both, of the youths began a search that lasted another quarter of an hour, when the knife was found among the branches of one of the drags.

“And now don’t let us lose any more time,” came from Joe. “The wind is rising, and we’ll have all we can do to get back to the lodge before night.”

He was right about the wind. It was already moaning and sighing among the pines, and causing the snow to swirl in several directions. The increased cold also affected them, and caused Harry to shiver.

“I’d give as much as a dollar to be back to camp,” he announced. “Hauling this load is going to be no picnic.”

“Follow in my footsteps, Harry,” came from his brother, and Joe led the way out of the wood and down to the lake shore. Here it seemed to snow and blow harder than ever, and the snow was piling up in drifts that looked far from inviting.

For a moment the boys thought of turning back and going into a temporary camp until the storm should subside. But they knew that Fred and Runnell would worry over their non-appearance, and so pushed on in as straight a course as they could lay down.

The farther they got out on the lake the more the snow swirled around them. The snow was now as hard as salt, and beat into their faces and down their necks in spite of all they could do to protect themselves. Thus less than half a mile was covered, when Harry called a halt.

“I – I can’t get my breath,” he gasped. “Joe, this is fearful.”

“I guess it’s something of a blizzard, Harry. Come on, we can’t stay here.”

“Hadn’t we better go back?”

“It’s just as bad to go back as it is to go ahead.”

“I can’t see a dozen yards in any direction.”

“It’s the same with me.”

“Then how do you know that you are going in the right direction?”

“Oh, the island is over there, isn’t it?”

“I should say a little to the left of that.”

“Well, it’s between those two points, and we can’t miss the shore, even if we don’t strike the lodge. As soon as we get close enough we can fire a gun as a signal to Fred and old Runnell.”

Once more they pushed on, in the very teeth of the blizzard, for such the storm had now become. The wind roared and shrieked around them, often tumbling them and the drags over in the snowdrifts. Soon even Joe was all but winded, and he willingly enough crouched beside Harry and the drags for a brief rest.

“This is certainly fierce,” he gasped out. “I never dreamed it

would get so bad.”

“I only hope we can hold out until we reach some part of the island. If we can’t – ” Harry did not finish, but the sigh he gave meant a good deal.

“Oh, you don’t want to give up so easily, Harry,” cried his brother, bracing up. “We’ve simply got to get over, or else go back to where we came from. We can’t stay out on the lake all night. We’d be frozen stiff.”

Once more they arose and caught hold of the drags. But now the loads were much too heavy for them.

“Let us take one and leave the other,” suggested Joe.

Feeling that that was the best they could do, they dropped Harry’s deer, and both caught hold of the drag Joe had been pulling. With their burdens thus lightened, they pushed on several hundred yards farther. But that was Harry’s limit, and again he sank down, this time as if ready to faint from exhaustion.

“It’s no – no use,” he sighed. “I can’t go an – another step!”

“Oh, Harry, you must! We can’t stop here!”

“I know that, but m – m – my legs feel as if they weighed a – a ton.”

“Here, give me your hand. We’ll let the other deer go, too. Perhaps old Runnell can bring it in in the morning.”

“It’s a shame to leave the game – ”

“I know, but we have got to think of ourselves first. I don’t think we’re so very far from the island. I’ll shoot my gun off as a signal.”

Joe did so, and listened for fully a minute for an answering shot. But no sound but the roaring and shrieking of the wind reached their ears. He slung his gun over his shoulder and literally yanked his brother up.

“Courage, Harry, courage!” he whispered. “You musn’t give in this way. Brace up, old boy!”

“I’m so – so sleepy,” came back, drowsily. “I really can’t go on.”

Yet urged by Joe, Harry took a score of steps or more. But now his teeth were chattering from the cold, and he could not stand, try his best. He sank a dead weight on the ice.

Filled with a new fear, Joe caught his brother up in his arms.

“If I leave him here he’ll surely die!” he muttered, hoarsely. “I must get him to the island somehow! I must!”

Throwing the semi-unconscious form over his shoulder, he staggered on until he came to a deep ridge of snow. Here he stumbled and fell. He tried to get up, but his shaking limbs refused to hold him.

“It’s no use,” he thought. “It’s all over.”

He caught sight of Harry’s gun, and reaching for it, pulled the trigger. He listened, and fancied he heard an answering shot. But he was not sure. It might have been only the wind.

“If only the others knew!” he murmured, and then sank down beside Harry, all but unconscious from the cold and exhaustion.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ENEMY ASKS A FAVOR

As soon as he reached the lake shore, Joel Runnell realized that the snowstorm was fast turning into a blizzard that was likely to last for several days.

“It’s going to be a hummer,” muttered the old hunter to himself. And then, as he gazed out upon the storm-swept ice, he added: “It’s too bad those boys ain’t back.”

Pulling down his cap and buttoning his coat up around his ears, he stepped out on the ice and began the journey to the main shore. The wind roared and tore all around him, and his progress was necessarily slow. More than once he had to stop to catch his breath.

It was during one of those resting spells that he heard a gun shot not many rods away. Feeling it must be a signal, he fired in return, and then started in the direction with all the speed he could command.

The first he knew of the proximity of the young hunters was when he stumbled over Joe’s body, half covered with the drifting snow.

“Joe!” he exclaimed. “And Harry! This is too bad!”

He bent over Joe, and tried his best to arouse the young hunter. This was difficult, but at last Joe opened his eyes and stared

vacantly around him.

“Wha – what do you want? Why can’t you let me sleep?” he murmured, softly.

“Get up, Joe. You are close to camp. Rouse yourself, my boy. You can’t stay here.”

“Oh, Runnell, is it you? I – I – ”

“Yes, yes, I know. Get up. I’ll take Harry.”

The old hunter assisted Joe to his feet. Then he lifted Harry bodily, and with the younger lad over his shoulder, and the other by the arm, he started back whence he had come.

How they all reached shore was little short of a miracle, for the snow and wind whizzed and shrieked around them more madly than ever. Once Joel Runnell thought he would have to give up. But he set his teeth hard and pushed on, until at last he saw a flash of fire, and knew he was close to the shelter. He set up a feeble shout:

“Hello, Fred! Start up that fire, quick! And make a pot of hot coffee! I’ve found ’em, and they’re half frozen to death!”

At this cry Fred appeared. He was scared, but realizing that rapid action was necessary, he piled the wood on the camp fire and set a pot of water to boiling. Then he helped the others into the shelter and arranged the blankets afresh, that all of them might be made as warm and comfortable as possible.

Joe recovered before long, but they had to work over Harry a good half hour before old Runnell pronounced him out of danger. One of his ears had been nipped by the cold, and so had his left

foot.

“It was a close call,” said Harry, when he could talk. “I sank down just as if I was in a dream. I felt horrible just before that, but that feeling passed completely away.”

“Such a sleep is what hunters call the sleep of death,” answered Joel Runnell, with a shudder. “I had it once, when I was a young man. I was half frozen, and it took me weeks to get over it.”

The hot coffee served to warm all of them up, and as soon as he felt able, Runnell went out to cut more wood, assisted by Fred. The latter wanted to go out on the lake and bring in the abandoned deer, but the old hunter would not listen to it.

“We’ll wait until the storm is over,” he said. “No use of risking your life now.”

The wood was piled on both sides of the shelter, and this helped to protect them from the wind. Runnell also placed a big flat rock over the fire, and when his was very hot, transferred it to the center of the shelter, and put another rock to heat.

“That will make a footwarmer,” he said. “And when it is cold, we can exchange it for the one that is now getting warm,” and this was done, much to the satisfaction of everybody.

All that night the snow fell as hard as ever, and toward morning the wind increased to such a degree that they were afraid the pines would come down over their heads. Nobody could sleep, and they crouched near the shelter entrance, ready to leap out at the first intimation of danger. At a distance they heard a large tree come down with the report of a cannon. The snow sifted

in despite all they could do to keep it out, and they had to work constantly to keep from being snowed under and smothered.

“And to think that old Skeetles and Dan Marcy are having it as comfortable as you please at the lodge,” said Joe, in deep disgust. “It’s a shame!”

“Don’t say a word,” put in Fred. “For two pins I’d go over there and clear them out at the point of a gun.”

“In one way they are worse off than we are,” came from Harry. “They have nothing but deer meat, while we have all kinds of stores. They’ll get mighty sick of venison if they have to stay at the lodge many days.”

“I hope they do get sick.”

With the coming of daylight the wind went down a little. But it still snowed as hard as ever, and old Runnell advised that the young hunters remain in or near the shelter.

“I’ll go out and bring in that one deer,” he said. “The other one we’ll let go till later. We don’t really need it, anyway.”

He waited until nearly noon before starting, and in the meantime the boys banked up the snow all around the shelter and the fire, making a wall six feet and more in height.

“Now we’ve got our house inclosed in a yard,” came from Fred.

“We’ll get a good deal more of the heat than we did before,” said Harry, and he was right. With the wall forcing the heat into the shelter, the place was at last really comfortable.

Joel Runnell was out the best part of two hours, and the boys

waited anxiously for his return. At last he hove into sight, covered with snow, and dragging one of the deer behind him. He had also brought in Harry's gun, which had been lost the day before.

"No use of talking, the storm is fearful out on the lake," said Runnell. "And down on the shore there is a ridge of snow all of twelve feet high. This will block everything for a while in Lakeport and elsewhere."

"I suppose our folks will worry about us," put in Harry. "It's too bad they don't know we are safe."

The remainder of the day passed slowly. Harry had brought along a small measure of corn for popping, and they amused themselves by popping this over the fire, salting and eating it. Joel Runnell also told them a hunting story, which all enjoyed.

The next day the snow continued, and on the day following the wind again arose, sending the drifts higher than ever. Thus a Sunday was passed in the shelter. It was not until Tuesday noon that the storm passed away as if by magic, and the sun came out brightly.

"Hurrah! it's over at last, thank goodness!" cried Harry, as he leaped outdoors. "My! but doesn't it feel good to see the sun once more!"

"That's all right," returned Fred. "But if we aren't snowed in we are next door to it."

"The sun will make the snow just right for snowshoe walking," said Joe. "And we ought to be able to track down some sort of game without half trying."

They found the pines above the shelter fairly groaning with their weight of snow. But back of these the ground was swept almost bare.

“I’m going to see how the lodge looks,” said Joe, and started off.

Equally curious, the others followed him.

They found Snow Lodge true to its name. It was snowed in completely, only a small portion of the roof, an upper corner of one window, and the rough chimney being visible.

“Skeetles and Marcy are prisoners of the storm,” said Harry, with a grin. “Let’s give ’em a salute.”

He made a snowball and threw it at the corner of the window, which was open to admit the air. His aim was true, and the snow went through the opening, followed by balls thrown by Joe and Fred.

An instant later Hiram Skeetles’ face appeared, full of alarm, which quickly changed to rage.

“Hi, you, stop that!” he roared. “Stop it, I say!”

“How are you feeling to-day?” questioned Joe, coolly. “We thought we’d come over and give you a call.”

“Don’t throw any more snowballs. One hit me right in the chin.”

“And one hit me on the top of the head,” put in Marcy, who stood behind the real estate dealer.

“What do you mean by staying around this island after I ordered you away?” went on Hiram Skeetles, after a pause.

“Did you expect us to do any traveling in this storm?” asked Joel Runnell, in return.

“How far do you think you could travel, Mr. Skeetles?” asked Fred. “The snow in some places is ten and twelve feet deep.”

“Say, is it really as deep as that?” came from Dan Marcy, in deep concern.

“Yes, every bit of it.”

“Then we are booked to stay here for several days longer,” said the bully to the real estate dealer. “And I must say I am dog-tired of nothing but deer meat to eat.”

Marcy said this because all of the stores taken from the other party were gone, even to the coffee and salt pork. As Harry had surmised, they now had nothing but the deer meat, and the best of this was gone.

“Where are you stopping?” questioned Hiram Skeetles, after another pause.

“That’s our business,” answered Joe, before anybody else could speak.

“Have you – er – have you any stores you – er – want to sell?”

“Don’t be a fool!” whispered Marcy. “They won’t let us have a thing. If we want anything we’ll have to take it by force.”

“Thanks, but we are not in business here,” came from Fred.

“You – er – might let us have a few things. I’ll pay you a fair price for them,” went on the real estate dealer. It galled him to ask the favor, but he wanted the goods very much.

“Haven’t you got anything?” asked Runnell.

“We have – er – some deer meat, but that is all.”

“And that is meat you stole from us,” put in Harry.

“Don’t say ‘stole,’ my boy. We – ”

“Don’t call me your boy, Mr. Skeetles. I wouldn’t be your boy for a million dollars.”

“Don’t grow abusive, Westmore. I took the deer because I found it on my property. If I had wished to be mean I could have kept all of your stores and traps also.”

“Not without a hot fight,” came from Joe.

“Then you – er – won’t sell me anything?” said Hiram Skeetles, disappointedly.

“Wait, I’ve got a scheme,” whispered Fred to his two chums.

“What is it?” both questioned, in return.

He told them, and both grinned and then laughed outright.

“Just the thing!” cried Harry. “That will make him either eat humble pie or starve.”

“What are you going to do?” questioned Joel Runnell.

“I’ll show you,” answered Fred, and advanced a little closer to the lodge window.

“Well, what do you say?” demanded Hiram Skeetles.

“We’ll let you have some stores on one condition, Mr. Skeetles.”

“And what is that?”

“That you will start for home as soon as it is safe to do so, and will leave us in undisputed possession of this lodge until our hunting tour comes to an end.”

CHAPTER XV

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

Hiram Skeetles' surprise was great when Fred made his declaration, and for several seconds he felt unable to reply.

"You – er – want me to let you use this lodge after all?" he said, slowly.

"That is what I said, Mr. Skeetles. And let me add that it will be a good bargain for you to make with us."

"I don't see it. I came here a-purpose to make ye leave."

"Well, 'circumstances alter cases,' you know. You didn't expect to be caught in a blizzard, did you?"

"No, if I had known it was going to snow like this I'd stayed home."

"We will do the lodge no harm," put in Joe.

"Fact is, we've already mended the roof and the window, as you can see."

"Yes, I know, but – "

"But what?" came from Harry.

"Never mind now." Hiram Skeetles had been on the point of mentioning his missing pocketbook and the papers, but he checked himself. "How long do you intend to stay?"

"Not over two or three weeks at the most."

"Hum!" The real estate dealer paused and scratched his head

in perplexity. "What do you say, Dan?" he questioned of Marcy.

"I reckon we had best make a bargain with 'em," answered the bully, who thought much of good eating. "Even if they stay here they can't do much in such a fall of snow."

"Yes, but my pocketbook," whispered Hiram Skeetles.

"More than likely, if it's around, the snow has covered it completely."

"I wouldn't have 'em find that for a – a good deal."

"All right, do as you please. But I want something to eat besides deer meat. You promised to take good care of me if I came on the trip with you."

"Do you want to make terms?" shouted Joe.

"I reckon as how I might jest as well," came slowly from Skeetles. "What will ye let me have?" he asked, cautiously.

"Whatever we can spare that you need."

"Ye ain't going to charge me for it, are ye?"

"No, we'll give it to you free and clear, on the condition we have already named."

"When do you want to come to the lodge?"

"As soon as you leave it."

"And that must be inside of a day or two," added Fred.

"All right, I'll agree," said Hiram Skeetles, with something like an inward groan. "When do we git them stores?"

"You can come down to our place now and get them."

"We can't come out by the door; we'll have to climb through the window," put in Dan Marcy.

“We don’t care how you come,” answered Joe. “But you must leave your guns behind,” he added, suddenly.

“What for?”

“Because we won’t trust you with them,” put in Fred, bluntly.

This did not please Hiram Skeetles nor the bully, but the young hunters were firm, and were backed up by Joel Runnell, and in the end the pair in the lodge came forth unarmed.

“Ye ain’t going to play no trick on us, are ye?” questioned the real estate dealer, suspiciously.

“No, we’ll treat you fair and square,” said Joe.

They led the way to the shelter under the pines, and allowed those from Snow Lodge to come in over the snow wall to the side of the camp fire. Then all hands looked over the stores still remaining, and Runnell announced the articles which he thought might be spared.

“Tain’t very much,” sniffed Hiram Skeetles.

“It’s the best we can do,” came from Joe. “Take it or leave it.”

“Oh, we’ll take it,” put in Dan Marcy, quickly, and gathered up some of the articles as he spoke.

“Hold on!” cried Harry. “Before you touch a thing you must promise us faithfully to leave the lodge by this time to-morrow.”

“We will leave – unless another heavy storm comes up,” answered Hiram Skeetles.

“If you are not out, in case it stays clear, we shall consider that we have the right to put you out,” said Joe. “These goods pay for our lease of Snow Lodge for three weeks, starting from to-

morrow noon.”

“All right,” growled the real estate dealer; and then he and Dan Marcy were allowed to depart with the stores which had been allotted to them.

“I guess we’ve made a pretty good bargain with them,” said Joe, when they were alone. “Now we can move into the lodge and fix it up to suit ourselves.”

“It was like pulling teeth to get old Skeetles to consent,” came from Fred. “It gives him a regular fit to have us on the island. I must say I can’t understand it.”

“I’d really like to know if those missing papers have anything to do with it,” mused Harry. “If he lost them here I’d give a good deal to find them.”

“Did you ever hear where that boat struck?” asked Joe of Joel Runnell.

“It seems to me it struck just south of Needle Rock,” was the answer. “But I’m not certain. I might find out, though.”

“Where is Needle Rock?”

“On the other shore of the island, about half a mile from here.”

“Well, I’m going there some day and have a look around.”

The rest of the day passed quietly. Some time later Runnell went off on his snowshoes to look for the fourth deer – the one Harry had abandoned. When he came back he said he had found only the head and a few bones.

“The wolves carried off the rest,” he said. “And they ate up those dead wolves on the main shore, too.”

“Well, I don’t want to meet any more of those critters,” said Harry, grimly.

“Nor do I,” added his brother. “The only good wolf is a dead one.”

“And I don’t know that he is good for much,” laughed Fred.

Strange to say, with the going down of the sun the wind came up again, a steady breeze, gradually increasing to little short of a gale.

“We are going to have another wild night,” said old Runnell. “We’ll have to watch the fire.”

“By all means,” cried Fred. “We don’t want to burn up.”

All hands sat up until after nine o’clock, listening to the wind as it whistled through the trees and hurled the snow against the shelter. Outside the stars shone brightly, but there was no moon.

“Hark! I hear a bark!” said Fred, presently. “Can there be a dog around?”

“Marcy owns a dog or two,” answered Joe. “But I didn’t know he had them here.”

“That was the bark of a fox,” came from Joel Runnell. “It’s a wonder to me we haven’t heard them before.”

“Perhaps the wolves have made them keep quiet,” suggested Harry.

“More than likely, or else they have been snowed up.”

The young hunters were sleepy, and it did not take any of them very long to sink into slumber after retiring. Then Runnell fixed the fire for the night, and laid down close to the opening of the

shelter.

A half hour went by and the fire began to die down. The wind kept on increasing, and some of the stars went under a cloud, making the night quite dark.

From the direction of Snow Lodge a form crept into view. It was Dan Marcy, with his coat buttoned up to his ears, and his slouch hat pulled far down over his brow.

With cautious steps Marcy reached the wall of snow and peered over into the inclosure. By the faint firelight he saw the feet and lower limbs of Joel Runnell, and, listening intently, heard the old hunter snoring.

“All asleep,” he murmured to himself. “Good enough. Now we’ll see if we can’t have the stores we want, and a little more besides.”

As silently as a cat he climbed over the snow wall and approached the fire. Beside the large shelter was a small one, and here rested the various traps and stores of our friends.

Dan Marcy had brought with him a large but thin blanket, and this he now spread on the ground, and began to place in it such articles as he wanted, and which the young hunters and old Runnell had denied him. There was a tin of coffee and another of sugar, and a fine, thick slice of bacon that made his mouth water.

“I’ll have that bacon out of the way before they get up,” he told himself. “And a cup of strong coffee will be just the thing for washing it down with.”

He had these articles and several others in the blanket, and

was on the point of making a bundle of them, when there came a sudden and unexpected interruption. From the top of the wall of snow came a short, sharp bark, that caused him to jump.

“A dog!” he thought. “I didn’t know they had one.” And then, as the bark was repeated, he leaped back in alarm.

It was only a fox, but Marcy did not know this, and felt sure he was on the point of being discovered.

“Shut up!” he whispered. “Shut up, do you hear?” And then, as the fox barked again, he ran for the other side of the wall of snow and began to climb to the top.

The barking of the fox aroused both Runnell and Harry, and each leaped up, reaching for his gun as he did so.

“What is it?” asked the young hunter.

“A fox – and he’s pretty close,” was the answer. “Reckon as how I had best give him a shot to scare him off.”

Running outside, Runnell looked around, but in the semi-darkness could see but little. Aiming high, he fired his gun. As he did this he heard a yell some distance away.

“Don’t shoot me! Don’t shoot!”

“Who’s there?” he demanded, but this question was not answered.

The discharging of the gun aroused the others of the party, and all came rushing out to the fireside.

“What did you fire at?” asked Joe.

“Well, I thought I fired after a fox,” came dryly from old Runnell. “But I kind of reckon he was a two-legged one.”

“Do you mean some person was around here?”

“Exactly.”

“But I heard a fox bark,” came from Harry.

“So did I, lad, and after I fired I heard somebody yell, ‘Don’t shoot me!’ ’Pears to me it was Dan Marcy’s voice, too.”

“What could have brought him over this time of night?” asked Fred.

“Here is what brought him over!” ejaculated Harry, who had stirred up the camp fire. And he pointed to the blanket and the things lying in it.

Joe gave a low whistle.

“Going to rob us, eh? It’s lucky we scared him off.”

“Well, that is what I call downright mean,” said Fred. “And after we let them have those other things, too! We ought to go over and have it out with them right now.”

“Don’t do anything hasty,” interposed Joel Runnell. “I reckon Marcy feels mean enough at being caught in the act.”

“Oh, he hasn’t any feelings,” growled Harry. “He’s a wolf in man’s clothing.”

The matter was talked over for some time, and it was decided to let the affair rest until morning.

“And then we can all give Marcy and Skeetles a piece of our mind,” said Joe.

“Do you think they’ll come back?” asked Fred.

“Not a bit of it,” answered old Runnell.

And satisfied of this, all turned in again to get what sleep they

could ere the sun came up.

CHAPTER XVI

BACK TO THE LODGE

But the excitement of that night was not yet at an end.

As mentioned before, the wind had increased steadily, until it was blowing as fiercely as it had during the blizzard. It tore through the tall pines and other trees, swaying them viciously, and causing them to creak and groan as if in pain. It hurled the snow in long drifts and sent every living creature for miles around into cover.

But the young hunters and old Runnell were too tired to listen to the wind, and it was not until an extra heavy blast caused one of the trees directly back of the shelter to split apart, that Runnell and Fred awoke.

“What a wind!” cried the stout youth. “Never heard it blow so in my whole life!”

“Thought I heard a tree snap,” returned the old hunter. “Listen!”

The others were now awake, and all listened as directed. Then came another gust, and all felt the back end of the shelter move as the roots of the biggest of the pines were loosened.

“Creation! I think the tree is coming down!” ejaculated Joe. “Perhaps we had better – ”

“Run, boys, run!” shouted Runnell, leaping up. “Run for your

lives!”

They needed no second warning, but leaped from the shelter with all the alacrity of which they were capable. They did not stop at the camp fire, but, led by Harry, leaped the wall of snow and scattered to the right and the left.

They were not an instant too soon, for the next gust of wind brought down, not one tree, but two, smashing the shelter flat, and scattering the burning sticks of the fire. The end of one limb hit Fred, and hurled him on his breast, and old Runnell had his left ear badly clipped.

“Oh, my! Sa – save me!” spluttered Fred. “Take the tree off of me, somebody!”

Joe and Harry ran forward, and assisted him to arise. Then they yelled to old Runnell, who was in the midst of the pine branches.

“I’m all right,” was the answering cry. “Got my ear pretty badly scratched, but that don’t count in such a smash-up as this.” And then the old hunter joined the others.

The two fallen trees had loosened a third, so they did not dare to go into the branches to rescue their traps and stores. The branches lying over the camp fire soon caught, and then the trees began to blaze up like huge torches.

“Our traps – ” began Joe, when, with a crash, the third tree came down. This hit the fire a heavy blow, and for the moment it was partly extinguished.

“Now it’s safe enough to go in!” came from old Runnell. “Put

out the blaze with snow, boys, or everything will be burned up.”

They came closer, and began to pile in all the snow they could, taking huge chunks from what was left of the wall for that purpose. By working steadily for five minutes, they got the fire under control, and then went in and kicked out what little remained.

“Well, this is the worst yet!” groaned Fred, after the excitement was over. “Here we are, homeless, in the middle of the night, and with the thermometer about ten degrees below nothing at all.”

“We can be thankful that we are to have the lodge to-morrow,” came from Harry. “It would be no fun building another shelter in such a wind as this.”

“And we can be thankful, too, that the fire didn’t get the best of us. Our stores, traps, guns and everything might have been burned up, and then we would have been worse off than old Skeetles and Dan Marcy.”

“It’s almost morning,” said old Runnell. “I’ll try to get out a few blankets, and then we can make ourselves as comfortable as possible among the tree branches.”

This was agreed to, and with an ax that Joe picked up, they cut out a small shelter, throwing some of the pine brush down as a flooring, and placing the rest over their heads. This made a place not as comfortable as that which had been wrecked, but something which, as Harry declared, “was a heap sight better than nothing at all.”

With the coming up of the sun the wind died down, and by eight o'clock all of the party felt quite comfortable once more. A fire was built in a safe place, and while Harry prepared the morning meal the others chopped their way through the tree branches to where their traps and stores lay, half buried in the snow. Only a small portion of their things had suffered injury, which gratified them exceedingly. Even Harry's camera remained intact.

"We might as well move over to the lodge at once," said Fred, while they were eating. "There is no sense in staying out in the cold, and, besides, we want to tell Marcy what we think of him before he goes away."

"I think one of us had best stay here and watch the things," said Joe.

Lots were cast, and it fell to Harry to remain at the spot. A little later the others put on their snowshoes and journeyed to the vicinity of Snow Lodge, a tiresome walk, for the snow now lay in all sorts of drifts.

"We won't be able to do much hunting for a few days," remarked Joel Runnell. "We'll have to wait till the sun puts something of a crust on the snow. Then snowshoe walking will be much easier."

When they came in sight of the lodge they were surprised to find the door and the one window wide open. There were tracks around the doorway, showing that Hiram Skeetles and Dan Marcy had left not a great while before.

“They are gone!” burst out Harry.

“They were afraid we would kick up a row over the attempt to steal our stores,” said Joe.

“It was mean of them to let the snow come in through the door and the window,” was old Runnell’s comment. “But neither of them know the meaning of fairness.”

Going inside the lodge they saw that all was in confusion and very dirty. Skeetles and Marcy had had an early breakfast, and had left the bones and other scraps lying where they dropped. The fire had been put out with snow and the smoke hung thick under the roof.

“It will take us the best part of a day to straighten out things again,” said Joe. “But never mind, I am glad they are gone. I hope they don’t come back.”

“They’ll have a rough journey to Lakeport or to Brookfield,” said Joel Runnell.

“Do you suppose they’ll walk the whole distance?”

“It isn’t likely. They probably came as far as Paley’s farm on horseback.”

By noon time they had shifted their traps and stores once more, and cut some additional firewood. The sleeping-room of the lodge was also cleaned out, and fresh boughs placed in the bunks, and directly after dinner they cleaned up the living-room, until it looked almost as tidy as a room at home.

“My daughter Cora ought to see this,” said old Runnell. “It would please her. She thinks a hunters’ camp is the dirtiest place

on earth.”

“I wish she was here,” said Joe. “Then she could keep house for us, and we’d feel quite at home.”

“She can’t come, lad. When I am away she stays with her Aunt Mary Case, who needs help. But if she was here, she could do some fine cooking for us, I can tell you that.”

After the general cleaning up, the whole party were content to rest. It was pleasant to sit in front of the genial fire, especially after the sun had sunk behind the trees on the western shore of the island.

They had taken account of the stores on hand, and found they would have to economize with certain things to make them last even ten days.

“But we won’t starve,” said old Runnell. “We have plenty of deer meat, and we can get a good supply of small game and fish.”

“I feel safer in the lodge,” said Fred, on retiring. “It would be a hard matter for the wolves or foxes to get at us here.”

“How about snakes?” laughed Harry.

“Ugh! don’t mention them! I can feel that thing crawling on me yet!” And the stout youth gave a shiver.

Now, that they had gotten rid of their enemies, the lads felt particularly light-hearted, and the mention of the snake set Harry to thinking. Unknown to Fred, he called Joe to one side, and both procured a bit of rope from one of the sleds, and to this tied two long threads, one at each end.

Fred occupied a bunk between that of Joe and that of Harry,

and the two threads were run across the stout youth's resting place in such a fashion that the bit of heavy rope could be moved back and forth at will.

Soon Fred was sleeping, and then the two others threw the bit of rope on his breast and began to move it back and forth. No sooner had it touched Fred's face than he roused up with a start.

"Oh!" he cried, and tried to sit up, when the rope glided over his breast and his shoulder. "A snake! A snake! Oh, I'm a dead boy!" And he leaped up, yelling like a wild Indian. Then the rope got twisted between his legs, and he danced around more madly than ever.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Harry, sitting up. At a signal Joe had let go of his thread and his brother had jerked the rope out of sight.

"A snake! It crawled right over my face!"

"Where is it?" questioned old Runnell, and grabbed up his gun.

The lantern was lit, and also a torch, and they looked around; but, of course, no reptile could be found.

"I guess you were dreaming," said Joe, innocently. "You were talking about that other snake, you know."

"I – I don't think so," answered Fred, sheepishly.

"There is no snake here," said Joel Runnell, after a long examination. "Joe must be right; you dreamed it, Fred."

"Well, if I did, that dream was mightily life-like," said Fred.

He took the lantern and examined his bunk closely. But

nothing was wrong, and after a while he followed the others and laid down again.

Harry and Joe waited a reasonable length of time, and then Harry crawled forth to adjust the rope and threads once more. Again the rope slid over Fred's face, and once more he set up a howl.

"It's a snake! I felt it again!" he yelled. "He's right here in the bunk!"

"Step on him!" cried old Runnell, and got his gun a second time.

Harry tried to jerk the rope away, but before he could do so Fred came down on it with his bare foot. Then the threads broke, and the rope remained on the floor in front of the bunk, while Fred leaped away, as if he had stepped on a hot plate.

Lantern in one hand and gun in the other, Joel Runnell ran to kill the snake. But when he saw the object on the floor he gave a loud laugh.

"Call that a snake," he roared. "It's only a bit of rope."

"A – a rope?" repeated Fred. He bent forward. "Well, I never!" Then he caught sight of the broken threads, and like a flash realized the joke that had been played on him. "Oh, you – you rascals!" he cried, and catching up the rope, he went first for Harry, and then Joe, and belabored them soundly. Both were laughing, and this made Fred really angry.

"All right, laugh all you please!" he burst out, suddenly. "It was a mean thing to do. To-morrow I'm going to leave you and

go home.”

And then, without a word more, he retired for the night.

CHAPTER XVII

A SEARCH AND A BEAR

“Do you think he’ll really go?” whispered Harry to Joe.

“I guess not, Harry. But he is mad, no doubt of that.”

“I didn’t want to make him mad, Joe. And he hit me a pretty hard one over the shoulders, too.”

“Fred hates to be fooled. Perhaps we had better talk to him about it.”

“No; that will make him madder than ever.”

The two boys retired, but it was a long while before either of them could get to sleep. They hated to be on the “outs” with their chum, and could not bear to think of Fred leaving them.

The stout youth *was* angry, and showed it even at breakfast, when he scarcely replied to the questions put to him. The bit of rope still lay on the floor, and picking it up, he gave it a vicious toss out of the window.

“There, Fred, let that end it,” said Joe, kindly. “It wasn’t just the right thing to do, and Harry and I are ready to acknowledge it.”

“Oh, yes, after it’s all over,” grumbled the stout youth. “If I had played that joke on you, what then?”

“We’d have to put up with it,” answered Harry. “Come, call it off.”

“I will – after I have squared the account,” replied Fred. But after that he seemed to feel better.

The weather had moderated considerably, and where the sun struck the snow the latter sank rapidly.

“There will be a good crust by to-morrow,” said Joel Runnell, and so it proved. All put on snowshoes and found walking excellent.

“What are we going to do to-day?” questioned Harry.

“I’ve been thinking that I would like to try for that bear,” answered the old hunter. “That is, if I can get on his track.”

“I’ll tell you what I’d like to do,” put in Joe. “I’d like to pay a visit to Needle Rock and take a look around for that missing pocketbook.”

“You won’t find much with the snow as deep as it is now,” came from Fred.

“We might tramp around that way just for fun,” said old Runnell. “We may bring down some game on the way.”

“Will you leave the lodge alone?” asked Joe. “Is it safe to do so? Skeetles and Marcy may come back.”

“I’ve got an idea, boys. Let us fasten the door up from the inside, and then come out through the window. After that we can nail that strip over the window, and then the place will be as tight as a drum.”

This was agreed to, and a little later found them on their way around the shore of Pine Island. The weather was all that could be hoped for, and the boys felt so happy that they were inclined

to whistle, until Joel Runnell stopped them.

“You can’t go on a hunt whistling, unless you want the game to know you’re coming,” he said, quizzically.

“Oh, I forgot that,” said Joe, and stopped at once, and the others did the same.

Harry had his camera with him, and took several time exposures, using a very small stop or opening, so that the negatives would be sharp and clear. Then he took a snap shot of Joel Runnell shooting at a flock of birds – a picture which, later on, proved to be all that could be desired. He also took pictures of Fred and Joe aiming at an imaginary rabbit, said rabbit being a fur cap propped up on a bit of brushwood.

“I’ll have a famous collection by the time I get home,” he said. “And I’ll print two sets of pictures, so that Fred can have one set.” And this promise caused Fred to forget the last of the ill feeling he had had over the “snake” joke.

On and on they went, occasionally slipping down an incline with their snowshoes and landing in a heap at the bottom. Then Fred, who was a little to the left of the others, suddenly set up a shout.

“Hi, Joe and Harry, come here, quick! I want to show you something!”

Both ran forward to see what their chum had discovered, and a moment later went headlong into a hollow several yards in diameter and equally deep. There had been some brushwood over part of the opening, but this gave way with them, and let

them down so rapidly that they could not save themselves. Then Fred pushed on a snowbank and that followed, all but burying them.

“Great Scott!” spluttered Joe. “What a tumble!” And he scraped the snow from his face.

“What did you call us here for?” asked Harry. “Don’t you think we ever saw a hole before?”

“I wanted you to see if there were any snakes down there,” answered Fred, with a grin.

“Of all things!” gasped Joe. “Just you wait till I get out.”

“We’ll put him down into the hole,” said Harry, as he scooped some snow from his ear.

“Not much you won’t!” answered Fred, and ran off to rejoin old Runnell.

Joe and Harry had all they could do to get out of the hole, and even then the snow got down their sleeves and collars in a fashion that was far from comfortable. They ran after Fred, intending to at least “wash his face,” but the stout youth took good care to keep out of their reach.

“Come, boys, you must keep quiet, or else we won’t bring down a thing,” remonstrated old Runnell, and after that they followed his advice and moved on as noiselessly as possible.

A little ahead of them was a tiny brook which, in the summer time, flowed from the hill into the lake. Here some of the rocks along the bank were swept bare of snow.

Without previous warning Joel Runnell held up his hand for

the others to halt. On some of the rocks, several small weasel-like creatures were sunning themselves. He brought his gun up and the others did the same.

“Fire!” said old Runnell, and the four firearms rang out almost simultaneously, and two of the game fell dead where they sat.

“Hurrah! that’s a haul!” cried Harry, enthusiastically.

“What are they?” questioned Fred. “They look something like mink.”

“They are what we call mountain brook mink, Fred,” answered the old hunter. “The best kind to bring down, too, so far as the fur is concerned. Those furs are quite valuable, as you must know.”

“I know mink is valuable,” answered the stout youth. “My mother has a collar made of it.”

Having secured the game, they moved on once more. Joe was now slightly in advance and brought down a rabbit he saw scooting over the snow.

After this nothing was sighted for a long while. Then Fred, who was growing hungry, proposed that they stop for dinner.

The others were willing, and a halt was made in the shelter of some hemlock trees and elderberry bushes. Not far away was a hickory tree, and the wind-swept ground was full of nuts which even the squirrels had failed to carry off.

The stop lasted for fully an hour, and then, thoroughly rested, they pushed on. Only a few birds were sighted, however, and these were so far away that to bring any of them down proved

impossible.

“There is Needle Rock,” said Joel Runnell, at last, and pointed out to where a rock arose about fifty feet from the lake shore. It was a tall, sharp-pointed affair, and the wind had swept it entirely free from snow.

“And where was that boat wrecked, do you think?” questioned Joe, with interest.

“Just about over yonder, Joe. Of course, I can’t tell the exact location, but it wasn’t over fifty yards from that point.”

The young hunters all moved down to the lake front and tramped up and down, over the rocks and among the snow-laden bushes. Here and there they shoved some of the snow aside, but brought nothing of interest to light.

“I guess it’s a wild-goose chase, looking for that pocketbook or those papers,” said Harry at length.

“It’s a good deal like looking for a pin in a haystack,” returned Fred.

“We’ll stand more chance of finding something after the snow clears away,” put in Joe, with a sigh. “That is, if it is really here.”

“And if it is here the melting snow may carry it out into the lake,” said his brother.

They took another look around, Joel Runnell prying up some old brushwood and dead tree limbs, and by that time the descending sun warned them that if they wished to return to Snow Lodge before nightfall they had better start without delay.

“Yes, let’s get back,” said Harry, who was tired out. “And then

we can have a bit of roast rabbit for a change.”

“And I’m going to make some biscuits for supper,” put in Joe. “We haven’t had fresh biscuits since we were at the lodge before.”

Somewhat downhearted over their failure to locate the missing pocketbook or papers, they turned toward home. All had known it was rather a forlorn hope at the best, yet each had secretly hoped that something would be brought to light.

“But I suppose Hiram Skeetles looked high and low for it before he gave the hunt up,” was Joe’s comment. “And his eyes are as sharp as those of a hawk.”

The tramp to the lodge seemed a long one to the tired young hunters, and Harry felt inclined to rest half a dozen times. When they at last came in sight of the snow-clad building, it was quite dark.

“Now to jump through the window and open the door!” exclaimed Joe, and, throwing down his gun, he rushed forward. Then he uttered an ejaculation of astonishment: “The window is wide open. Did we leave it that way?”

“Certainly not,” answered Joel Runnell.

“Somebody has been here, after all,” put in Harry.

“Must have been old Skeetles and Marcy. What will we do if they have cleaned us out?”

“I’ll soon find out,” continued Joe, and leaped through the window into the living-room of the cabin.

The fire had died down until there was little or nothing left of it. Stumbling across the floor, he kicked it into a blaze and

threw on a few extra sticks of wood. After this he reached for the lantern and lit it.

“Well, what have you found?” asked Harry, looking in at the window.

“Nothing, so far,” answered his brother. “Everything seems to be all right, although the bench is overturned and – yes – somebody has carried off that piece of venison I hung up near the window!”

“That looks as if some wild animal was around, Joe.”

“Creation! I didn’t think of that. Do you see anything outside – I mean footprints?”

“No, it’s too dark now to see anything. Better open the door.”

Joe started to do so. But as he crossed the floor a sound from the sleeping apartment caused him to halt.

“Who’s there?” he cried.

The only answer was a soft pat-pat of feet, and a moment later a big, black bear came into view. The beast stared at Joe in astonishment, and then arose on its hind legs and came for him, uttering a low, savage growl as it advanced.

The youth did not know what to do. He was unarmed, and Harry had left the window, so he could not obtain immediate assistance. He leaped close to the fire and as he did so the bear leaped after him.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FIRE, AND WHAT FOLLOWED

“Get back there!”

Joe uttered the words mechanically, and as he did so he crouched close to the fire, and snatching a burning brand from the side, held it up in front of him.

As is well known, all wild beasts dread the fire, and at once the bear paused. Then it arose again on its hind legs and uttered a roar that almost shook the lodge.

“Hello! what does that mean?” cried Fred and Harry, in a breath.

“It means there’s a wild animal in the lodge,” answered Joel Runnell, and leaped toward the window, gun in hand.

In the meantime the bear continued to stand in front of Joe, as if meditating an attack in spite of the fire. Once it raised a fore paw as if to strike the brand from the young hunter’s hand, but Joe did not permit this, and now the boy caught up a second stick, which was blazing at one end, and threatened the bear.

Again there was a roar of commingled rage and fear, and the bear leaped back, wrecking the table as it did so.

It must be confessed that Joe was badly alarmed. He felt that he was in close quarters, and unless somebody came to his help very quickly, the bear would, in some manner, get the better of

him.

Glancing toward the window, he saw a dark object there. It was the head of Joel Runnell, and next followed the glistening barrel of the old hunter's rifle.

"Hold up the light, Joe," called old Runnell, and at the sound of his voice the bear wheeled around and stared toward the window with interest.

Crack! It was the rifle that rang out. But just as Joel Runnell pulled upon the trigger the bear turned to one side, so that the ball merely grazed its neck and side. Then came another roar, and, leaping over the wrecked table, the beast dove through the doorway leading to the sleeping apartment of the lodge and disappeared.

"Where did he go to?" cried old Runnell, as he lost no time in reloading.

"Into the sleeping-room. I don't think he is hurt very much."

The doorway was not far from the chimney, and with the firebrands still in his hands, Joe made his way to the door. Then the fastening was removed and he plunged outside.

"Good!" cried Harry. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch. But it was a close shave," and Joe heaved a sigh of relief.

"What is the bear doing?" asked Fred.

"I don't know."

"Fasten the door from the outside," said Joel Runnell. "We don't want to lose that animal."

A stout stick of wood was handy, and this was propped up against the door, so that it could not be budged unless torn from its hinges.

While the young hunters were doing this Joel Runnell watched the window, with his rifle ready for use, should the bear make its appearance.

“You don’t expect to go in there after the bear, do you?” questioned Fred. “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.”

“I shan’t go in there yet,” answered the old hunter. “I know a trick worth two of that.”

“What will you do?” asked Harry.

“Let us try smoking him out. While I continue to watch the window, you get a damp tree branch and set it on fire. Then chop a small hole in the side of the lodge close to the ground, and let the smoke drift inside.”

“That’s a good plan,” said Joe.

The damp branch was procured without difficulty, and soon it was burning slightly and smoking thickly. While Fred and Joe held the branch, Harry cut a small hole as directed. In answer to the sound of the ax came a growl from the bear, proving that the beast was on the alert within.

“Now, Joe, come alongside of me with your shotgun!” called out old Runnell. “We’ll make sure of him if he does come out.”

Both stood almost facing the window and about twenty feet from it. Then Fred and Harry let down the branch in the snow, so that the thick smoke could drift directly into the hole that had

been cut.

In less than half a minute they could hear the bear moving around the inside of the lodge. They heard the beast give a snort, followed by a sneeze.

“He’s catching it,” whispered Joe, with his gun raised. “I don’t think he’ll stand it much longer.”

An instant after there came a savage growl, and then straight through the window shot the black bear, landing at the very feet of those standing to receive it. Crack! went the rifle, and bang! came from the shotgun, and the beast tumbled over and began to claw at the air and the snow, sending the chunks of the latter flying in all directions.

“Hurrah, we’ve got him!” ejaculated Joe, and discharged the second barrel of his gun close to the bear’s head. This finished the beast, and it soon stretched out and lay still.

“What a big fellow,” was Harry’s comment, as he came forward to inspect the game. “Joe, you can be glad he didn’t get his paws around you. He might have hugged you to death.”

“I am thankful,” was the answer. “But, say, won’t we have fine bear steaks now! We’ll have all the meat we want, and some to take home in the bargain.”

“Not to say anything about the skin,” put in Fred.

“Oh, that is to go to Runnell,” said Joe, quickly. “I’m sure he deserves it,” and the others said the same.

All were so interested in looking the big prize over that the burning tree branch was, for the time being, forgotten. All had

also forgotten the fire in the lodge and the burning sticks Joe had dropped on the floor. The wreck of the table was near the sticks, and in a few minutes Snow Lodge was blazing inside and out.

“Hello, the place is on fire!” shouted Harry, who was the first to notice the condition of affairs.

“So it is!” added old Runnell. He ran to the door and threw it open. “Quick, boys, or the lodge will be burnt to the ground!”

With the door and the window open, the fire obtained a good draught, and of a sudden a blaze shot up, inside and out, that quickly mounted to the roof.

“This is worse than I supposed,” said old Runnell, and ran in to stamp the blaze out. But the smoke was blinding and he soon had to retreat. Then Joe went in, but when some sparks touched him on the cheek he fell back also.

“The lodge is doomed!” groaned Fred. “And everything inside will be burnt up!”

“My camera films!” cried Harry. “They are on the shelf! I don’t want to lose them,” and before anybody could stop him he had leaped into the burning structure.

“Harry! Harry! come out of there!” yelled Joe. But the younger brother paid no attention to the warning. On the shelf were all the pictures he had taken since coming on the outing, and he thought more of these than he did of the traps and stores.

The flames were now curling all over the roof of the lodge, and with no water at hand it was easy to see that the structure could not be saved. Joel Runnell ran in, and in the smoke felt

around for Harry and found him clinging to the shelf, with the rolls of films clutched tightly in one hand.

“Come out,” he said, in a choking voice. “Come,” and he led the half-suffocated boy, into the open air. The water was running from Harry’s eyes, and it was fully a minute before he could get his breath to talk.

Finding they could do nothing to stop the fire, they set to work to save what stores they could. This was not an easy task, and they recovered little more than a couple of blankets, a tin can of coffee, a bag of salt and a large box of matches. One of the blankets was burnt along the edge.

Once having gained headway, the flames roared and crackled merrily, lighting up the clearing and the forest for a goodly distance around. As the fire increased, they dragged their sleds, the bear and other game, and the saved stores to a safe distance.

“Do you think it will set fire to the trees?” questioned Fred.

“No, there isn’t wind enough for that,” answered Joel Runnell.

“I guess I am responsible for that fire,” came from Joe. “I remember now that I dropped those burning sticks on the floor when I opened the door.”

“And we left the branch at the hole,” said Harry. “Hiram Skeetles will make us pay for the damage done, I suppose.”

“The lodge wasn’t worth much,” put in Fred. “Not over twenty or thirty dollars at the most. The back end was almost ready to fall down.”

“Well, if the courts decide that this island and the lodge belong

to Skeetles we'll pay for the building," said Joe. "But you can be sure I won't pay him any fancy price."

In less than half an hour from the start of the conflagration the roof of the lodge fell with a crash, sending the sparks flying in all directions. Then one side after another followed, and soon all that remained of the building was a heap of smoldering timbers and the red-hot stones of the rude chimney.

"That's the end of Snow Lodge," said Joe. "We didn't have very much good of the place, after all."

"The question is, where are we to go next?" put in Fred. "The other shelter was wrecked by the wind. We seem to be unfortunate, no matter where we stay."

"Let us have something to eat first," said Harry. "I'm as hungry as a – a bear."

"Then you can dine on bear," answered Fred, and this caused a laugh in spite of their downheartedness over the loss of the lodge.

Supper was cooked over the smoldering ruins and on the hot rocks, and each ate heartily. They talked matters over and decided to remain in that vicinity until morning.

"Then we can rake the ruins and see if we can find anything of value," said old Runnell.

The night was far from being as cold as other nights had been, and they easily made themselves comfortable among the trees close by the lodge, propping up the sleds and covering them with branches and bushes and chunks of snow. Nothing came to disturb them, and all slept soundly until sunrise.

Immediately after breakfast the ruins were raked over as the old hunter had advised, and they found several articles of more or less value. But everything else had been burned up clean and clear.

“And now for new quarters,” said Joe. “I have an idea. Why not camp out near Needle Rock? We can find a good spot among the rocks, and that will give us a chance to look for that pocketbook during our off hours.”

“I’m willing,” answered Fred.

So were the others, and soon preparations were made for their departure. Inside of an hour they were off.

“Good-by to Snow Lodge!” cried Harry. “Perhaps we’ll never see this spot again.”

“We can build a new shelter,” said Joe. “It needn’t be so big, but I’m sure we can make it just as comfortable.”

And then they moved on, never dreaming of the surprises that were in store for them.

CHAPTER XIX

A GATHERING OF YOUNG HUNTERS

Having the two sleds with them, they did not tramp through the woods, but took to the lake, where the wind had swept the ice comparatively free from snow.

Despite what had happened, all were in a light-hearted humor, and Joe began to whistle merrily, and soon Harry and Fred joined in.

“Well, we can’t complain of lack of adventures,” remarked Harry, as they trudged along, Joel Runnell in advance, looking for some signs of possible game.

“I should say not,” returned Fred. “We’re getting our full share and more.”

“Wonder if any of those other fellows are going to join us?” put in Joe. “Bart Mason said he would be sure to come, and Link Darrow said the same.”

“Oh, lots of fellows think they can get away, but at the last minute their parents say no, and that’s the end of it.”

They were moving around a small arm of the island when they saw Joel Runnell come to a halt.

“Guess he has sighted game,” said Harry. “Wait; we don’t want to spoil a shot.”

"I'll go up and see what's doing," said Joe, and hurried forward, with his gun ready for use, should there be more game ahead than the old hunter could handle.

"Gun Club ahoy!" suddenly rang through the clear air. "Hullo, you fellows? Where are you bound?"

And then, around the bend, appeared the forms of three youths, dragging a long, low sled behind them. The trio were dressed for hunting and each carried a shotgun or a rifle. The sled was piled high with traps and provisions.

"Whoop! here are some of the other fellows now!" burst out Fred, and rushed forward. "Hurrah!" he yelled.

"Hurrah!" came back instantly.

"Link Darrow, Bart Mason and – yes, it's Teddy Dugan," came from Harry. "What can Teddy be doing with those other chaps?" he went on, for he had not expected to see the Irish boy anywhere in that vicinity.

"How are you making it?" asked Link Darrow, as he came closer. He was a youth of Joe's size and age.

"First rate," answered Joe. "When did you leave Lakeport?"

"Yesterday. We expected to locate you a couple of hours ago, but Teddy Dugan stopped us."

"Sure an' I have news for you," put in Teddy Dugan. "I've been up the lake, a-visitin' me Uncle Michael, and who do you think I saw?"

"Those tramps," cried Joe, quickly. "Oh, Teddy, did you really see them?"

“I saw three tramps, and by the look of ’em I think – yes, I’m sure – they are the same that took your watch and chain. I knew you were over to this island, so I told me uncle I’d come over and tell you.”

“And you ran into Link and Bart?”

“I did – but not until I had lost me way, and I reckon they had lost theirs too. Ain’t that so, Bart?”

“Well, I’ll admit we were a little off the trail,” answered Bart Mason, who was very large for his years and correspondingly lazy. “But we weren’t lost like the babes in the woods.”

“I don’t see how a big fellow like you could get lost,” put in Fred, slyly. His head hardly came up to Bart’s shoulder.

“Tell me about those tramps,” said Joe, impatiently. “Where are they now?”

“The last I saw of them they were walkin’ on the lake.”

“The lake!” came from Joe, Harry, and Fred simultaneously.

“Yes. That’s why I came over to tell you.”

“Do you think they came over to this island?” asked Harry.

“Either that or they crossed to the other shore.”

“Tell me exactly how they looked,” went on Joe. “We don’t want to make any mistake.”

Teddy Dugan had had a good look at all three of the tramps and he described their features and dress in detail.

“The very same rascals, beyond a doubt,” said Harry. “I wish you had had them locked up, Teddy.”

“Sure and I couldn’t do it when I was all alone, Harry. I

watched them walk to the lake and out on the ice – heading this way, – and then I ran back to my uncle’s house and told him. But the snow was too deep to go to town, an’ so me uncle did nothing.”

After this Teddy Dugan told the particulars of the meeting between himself and the three good-for-nothings.

“I heard through me uncle that a house had been robbed near where he lives,” added Teddy. “More than likely they were the thieves.”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said Fred. “A rascal who will take a watch and chain will take more.”

Link Darrow and Bart Mason had been bound for the lodge, thinking that the camp of the club was located there. Both readily consented to turn and move toward Needle Rock.

“You must have had a fearful time with old Skeetles,” said Link, as the whole party moved off. “Our family know him well, and my father doesn’t want anything to do with him.”

“What a pity Dan Marcy can’t act like other fellows do,” was Bart’s comment. “He might be a real nice fellow if he wasn’t so overbearing.”

“It’s in the breed,” came from Joel Runnell. “His father and his grandfather were that way before him. Why, I can remember his grandfather well. He was a boss on the railroad, and he hounded the Italian workmen so much that one night several of them almost stoned him to death.”

“In that case, Dan is scarcely to blame for his disposition,”

said Harry.

“I think he is. He ought to work to overcome it,” replied Fred. “But he just makes himself as ugly as he can. Why, even the little boys and girls get out of his way when they see him coming.”

The three boys who had been on the island since the beginning of the outing were anxious to hear all the news from home and this was told to them by Bart and Link, who had also brought along several letters.

“I don’t know what we can do about those tramps,” said Joe, after thinking the matter over for some time.

“Let us get settled down in our new place first,” returned Joel Runnell. “After that we can go on a still hunt for them.”

At this all of the boys looked at Teddy Dugan, who blushed through his many freckles.

“Teddy, what had you in mind to do?” questioned Joe.

“I dunno,” was the slow answer. “I ain’t got nothing to do for the next few days. Father said I could go and visit me uncle, or go huntin’, just as I pleased. I know what I’d like to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, I reckon I hadn’t better say. You’ve got your club all made up, an’ – an’ – ”

“Would you like to stay with us?” asked Harry, quickly. There was something in Teddy’s manner which was very attractive to him.

“Yes, I would,” was the blunt response. “But, but – ”

“Let’s take Teddy along,” said Joe.

“All right,” came from the others.

“But I ain’t a member of the club?”

“That don’t matter, Teddy. You’re a member of the ball team, and that’s enough.”

“Especially after that home run you made in the game with the Silver Stars,” added Link, who was a great ball player himself.

“Then you really want me along?” And the Irish lad’s face lit up in a broad grin.

“Yes, – but you have got to do your full share of camp work,” said Joe.

“I’ll do more than my share.” Teddy did a few steps of a double shuffle on the ice. “Say, this just suits me to death! Come on!” And he began to pull on one of the sled ropes with great vigor.

The breeze on the lake was so keen that nobody cared to stay out in it longer than necessary. Where the snow was loose the wind often caught it up and whirled it into their faces.

“Only a little further to go,” said old Runnell at last, and in a few minutes they turned in and came to a halt not far from where there was a cliff twenty to twenty-five feet in height. Against the rocks rested two immense pine trees which the gales of the previous winter had partly uprooted.

“Here is where we can fix up a real good shelter,” said old Runnell. “We can trim off the under limbs of the trees and use them for the sides. Then we can roll up some big snow balls and put ’em right on top of the pine branches, leaving a hole for a doorway. Back in the cliff is a split in the rocks, so it will do for

a chimney.”

“Then we can have a fire inside instead of outside,” said Harry. “That will be jolly. I was afraid we’d have to put up with a cold sleeping place.”

“I’m cold now,” came from Link Darrow. “Guess I’ll have to do a dance to get warm.”

“You can get warm chopping some firewood,” said Joel Runnell. “Don’t waste any of your strength. There is plenty of work to do before we can settle down to enjoy ourselves.”

CHAPTER XX

BUILDING THE NEW SHELTER

The young hunters soon found out that what Joel Runnell said was true. At first glance it looked easy enough to put the necessary shelter into shape, but when it came to clearing and leveling the ground, cutting off a great many tree branches and placing them as desired, and then covering the whole with snow, the work was hard and long lasting, and it was not until the evening of the second day that the task was completed.

Yet all worked with a will, deeming it no labor at all, since they were doing it for their own comfort and amusement.

“Say, Fred, if you had to cut wood like this at home, what would you think of it?” whispered Harry, while both were doing their best to trim away an extra heavy limb of one of the pines.

“I’d think it was ha – hard work,” panted Fred, who was almost out of breath.

“And wouldn’t you like to do it some Saturday afternoon, when there was a football match on, or fine skating?”

“My gracious! don’t mention it, Harry. It would make a fellow’s heart drop to his shoes.”

“No laying off there!” sang out Joe. “This gang has got to keep at work until the job’s finished and I blow the whistle.”

“Better ring the dinner bell,” put in Bart. “I’m almost hungry

enough to chew – oh!”

Bart broke off with an exclamation, for just then a soft snowball hit him directly in the back of the neck. He turned swiftly, to catch sight of Fred working away, with an extra innocent look on his chubby face.

“Oh, you needn’t play off on me!” he cried. “I know you did it, Fred.”

“Did what?” asked Fred, continuing his work. “I’m cutting tree branches. What are you doing?”

“This,” continued Bart, and let drive with a snowball that took Fred on the shoulder.

“Hi! hi! stop that!” was the cry, and then Fred aimed another snowball. But it flew past Bart and hit Link in the left ear.

“Oh, my ear!” came with a roar, and Link began to dance around. “Fred Rush, I’ll wash your face for that!”

He made a drive for Fred, but the latter scrambled to the top of the cliff, where Joe was at work. In another moment the young hunters were having a lively snowball fight. By chance one ball hit Joel Runnell in the stomach.

“Hi! I’m not in this!” cried the old hunter. “Stop it, boys, stop it!”

But nobody would listen to him. Fast and furious flew the snowballs in all directions, and almost before he knew it Joel Runnell was hit again. Then he joined in the sport. As he was at the top of the cliff and used only huge chunks of loose snow those below had to steer clear of being buried alive.

“Want to snowball me, do ye!” he cried cheerily. “All right, come along! But take care or the old man will go ye one better! Stand from under!” And down came a chunk of snow as big as a feather bolster. It struck Link’s head and hurled him flat on his back. But Link soon rallied and hit old Runnell in the leg and in the back.

Those at the bottom of the cliff soon sought to get at the top, while those above did their best to keep the others down. It became a battle of three on one side and four on the other. The excitement made Teddy Dugan fairly wild and he let out whoops like an Indian, as he danced around, delivering one snowball after another as if he was in a baseball game.

“Whoop! There’s one for first, and another for second!” he shrieked. “There ye are, shortstop, and, I say, third base, don’t miss the liner!” And bang! Joe caught the snowball in the waist, which doubled him up for the moment. “Here’s fer killin’ the umpire!” And at this last speech old Runnell caught a stinger in the ear. But the old hunter was quick to retaliate, and Teddy went down with a chunk of snow completely covering his head and neck. “Wurra!” he spluttered. “Please don’t throw the whole cliff at me to onct!”

The fight was growing hotter and hotter and in the excitement Joe stepped close to the edge of the cliff. Then, of a sudden his feet slipped, he made a clutch at the pine branches before him, and shot out of sight.

“Hurrah! the enemy is capitulating!” came from below.

“Joe! Joe! where are you?” cried Harry.

“I’ve retired, thank you!” came from under the pines. “I say, let us call it off!” And then the snowballing came to an end. Joe was not hurt, nor had anybody else suffered during the exciting contest.

The boys worked so hard the first day building the shelter that in the morning every back was stiff. When Harry arose it was all he could do to straighten up.

“I’ll be glad when the job is finished,” he grumbled. “A little of that sort of thing goes a great way.”

“Think of how our forefathers used to build their log cabins,” said Bart. “We can be thankful we don’t live in such days.”

“And don’t have any Indians hanging around ready to scalp us,” put in Fred.

“Sure, an’ I’d run for me life if I seen an Indian,” said Teddy, and this caused a laugh.

Bart and Link had brought a fair supply of provisions with them, but Teddy had brought nothing, so it was felt by all in the camp that they must be sparing with their things.

“We’ll have to go out on another hunt to-morrow,” said old Runnell. “We don’t want to live on just deer and bear meat.”

The split in the rock had been cleaned out, and on the evening of the second day a fire was started in the rear of the new shelter. There was a fine draught and every bit of the smoke went up the split without any trouble.

“This looks more like home,” said Harry, after the fire had

begun to warm them up. “A camp isn’t a camp at all unless one has a good fire. Even in the summer time a fellow likes to look at the blaze.”

“Right you are, lad,” answered old Runnell. “I’ve been out many a time all alone, and I always found a fire the most friendly thing I could think of to drive away the blues. Even in the hottest of weather I start up some kind of a little blaze between the rocks.”

While the others were sitting close to the fire, Harry drew Link aside.

“Did you hear what Teddy said about Indians,” he whispered.

“Of course I did,” answered Link. He gave a knowing wink.

“I guess I know what you are up to.”

“Give him a scare?”

“Exactly, Harry. But how can we do it? We haven’t any Indian costumes.”

“Haven’t we though? That’s all you know about it. Haven’t we blankets, and plenty of birds’ feathers, and some turkey feathers, too, come to think of it. And we can rub a little red dirt on our cheeks.”

“Good! That’s worth remembering. But we can’t do it right away.”

“Not to-night. I’m too tired.”

“What are you fellows whispering about?” demanded Joe.

“I just said I was tired,” answered Link, innocently. “I’m going to turn in.”

"I'll wager you are up to some mischief."

"Say, if anybody plays a trick on me to-night I'll – I'll shoot him," came from Fred.

"No tricks to-night, boys," said old Runnell. "Everybody needs a good sleep after such work as we've had."

On each side of the shelter inside fresh pine boughs had been spread. The heat made the boughs give forth a delicious odor, which was as healthy as it was pleasing. So far none of the lads had taken cold and old Runnell sincerely hoped that all would continue to remain well.

"Teddy, you want to keep one ear open for bears," said Link, just before retiring.

"I don't want to see any bears to-night."

"But one may come in, you know, and try to sample your foot or your hand."

"Do you think any bears will be around?" questioned the Irish lad in quick alarm.

"Oh, not more than six or seven, Teddy."

"Then I'll not go to sleep at all, at all!"

"Teddy, don't let them fool you," remonstrated Joel Runnell. "If a bear comes I'll take care of him."

"I met a bear once," said Teddy, after a pause. "I was that close to him," and he measured off a distance of but a few feet.

"Oh, Teddy, what did you do?" questioned Bart.

"I'll wager you was scared half to death," came from one of the others.

“Did he try to bite you, or hug you to death?” questioned still another.

“Were you armed?”

“Where was this, out around here?”

“No, it wasn’t. It was over to Dackerville.”

“Dackerville?”

“That’s what I said. I can tell you that bear was a lively one. Me father was along, but he wasn’t as close to that bear as I was.”

“Well, what did you do to him?” asked Link, impatiently.

“Do? Didn’t do nuthin’.”

“You didn’t! What did the bear do?”

“Rolled over on his head, and walked off.”

“Teddy, are you going crazy? A bear wouldn’t do that.”

“He did, I tell you.”

“He couldn’t have been very savage.”

“I don’t know about that. He had a leather muzzle on, and a chain around his neck.”

“A tame bear!” screamed Harry, and began to laugh. “Oh, that’s the best yet. Link, I guess you are sold.”

“Was it a tame bear?” asked Link, weakly.

“Sure. He could dance, and roll over on his head, and do lots of stunts,” went on Teddy, and now a broad grin crept over his freckled face.

“Teddy, you’re the worst I ever met,” groaned Link, and then after the laughter had subsided he added: “I’ll get square for that. Just you wait and see!”

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIGHT OF THE PINE MARTENS

“Now, boys,” said Joel Runnell on the following morning, after all of the young hunters had enjoyed a good night’s rest, “I’m going to get you at something new.”

“What is it?” queried several, in chorus.

“So far all the game we have had has either been caught by a hook and line or brought down with a gun. Now I’m going to show you how to set traps for rabbits and other small animals, and also how to spear some big fish through a hole in the ice.”

“That’s the talk!” cried Joe. “I’ve been wanting to know something about traps for years.”

“Well, a small trap isn’t much of a thing to make,” answered the old hunter.

“I know how to make one kind of a rabbit trap,” came from Bart. “My uncle showed me how to make it.”

“There are a good many kinds of traps, aren’t there?” asked Fred.

At this Joel Runnell smiled.

“I should say so, my boy. I can make at least a dozen kinds, and I once knew a hunter from Canada who boasted of being able to make forty-six different kinds of traps and death-falls.”

“Gracious! that man hadn’t much use for a gun,” was Harry’s comment.

“It’s a good thing to know something about traps,” went on the old hunter. “There might come a time when you were out in the woods and mighty hungry, without a single charge of powder left. In such a case a trap may keep you from starving to death.”

The old hunter told them that he would first set a few rabbit and squirrel traps, and after that a death-fall for larger animals.

“I think I can locate the run of the rabbits on this island pretty well,” said he.

A good hot breakfast was had, and as soon as it was over Teddy insisted on washing up the few dishes which had been used. Then off they set in a crowd, satisfied that nobody would come to disturb their new shelter during an absence of only an hour or two.

Joel Runnell led the way around the cliff and then into a thicket where the pine trees fairly touched the ground.

“Here are hundreds of traps fairly waiting for us,” he said.

“I don’t see any,” said Teddy, gazing around vacantly.

“You’ll see one in a few minutes.”

Finding a spot that suited him, Joel Runnell cleared away some of the snow, which was but a few inches deep. Then, with a hatchet he had brought along, he cut two short sticks and near the top of each cut a sharp notch, the opening pointing downward.

“Now I’ll drive these two sticks into the ground, about eight inches apart,” said he; and put them down until the notches he

had cut were less than a foot from the soil. "Joe," he added, "you cut a strong, flat stick that will reach from one notch to the other."

While Joe was doing this, old Runnell put down another stick, this time with a sharp upper point. The three sticks in the ground formed a triangle. Then a stick was cut, sharp at one end and blunt at the other. This the old hunter called the catch stick.

Several feet away was a sapling and this was readily bent down in the direction of the imperfect trap. To the sapling Joel Runnell tied a stout cord and to the lower end of the cord fastened a bit of wire in the form of a running loop.

"Now we'll proceed to set our trap," he said, and taking the catch stick he placed the blunt end under the stick Joe had put in the two notches and balanced the sharp end on the equally sharp end of the stick in front.

The sapling was now bent over until the loop, or noose, was low to the ground, between the two sticks in the ground and that in the notches. Then the string, just above the noose, was fastened to the blunt end of the catch stick.

"Now all we've got to do is to bait our trap and it will be ready for business," went on Joel Runnell, and around the sharp stick in the ground fastened some extra tender twigs of brushwood he had found on the way. "You see, the minute Mr. Rabbit begins to eat the twigs, he'll shake the stick. That will make the catch stick slip down at the sharp end. Up will fly the blunt end and so will the noose, with Mr. Rabbit dangling in it by the neck or by the body."

“But he may go at the bait from the back,” said Bart.

“The trap is done, but we’ve got to persuade Mr. Rabbit to go at the bait from the front,” said the old hunter, and banked up the snow and dead brushwood around the three sides, leaving only the spot by the loop clear.

When the trap was completed they walked off and at a distance set another. By this time all the young hunters were at it, and in less than two hours nine traps, large and small, had been set and baited in various ways.

“If we wanted to, we could make some box traps for birds,” said old Runnell. “But I guess you won’t care for them this trip. It’s better to catch birds in the summer.”

“I’d rather not catch them at all,” said Fred. “They are not much good for food – that is, they don’t go aground like rabbits, or turkeys, or a deer. I don’t believe in killing them just for the fun of it.”

“What is a death-fall?” questioned Link.

“A death-fall is simply a heavy trap, for killing big game,” answered the old hunter. “Some are made simply of a heavy log, so placed that when the bait is disturbed the log comes down and crushes the beast. Others are made with a tough stick and a big rock.”

“Some hunters dig pitfalls for bears, don’t they?” asked one of the boys.

“Yes, but it’s not likely we’ll catch a bear in any such hole – they are too scarce around here. Besides, pitfalls are dangerous.

Some years ago a hunter I knew fairly well fell into a pitfall dug the season before by some other hunters, and he broke his leg and two ribs.”

“It was mean to leave the pitfall unmarked,” said Joe.

“When you are in the woods there are several things worth remembering, lads. One is, never leave a fire without you’re certain it won’t do damage.”

“Yes, we’ve learned what fire can do,” said Fred, grimly.

“Another thing is, don’t fool with your firearms, and don’t point a gun at the other fellow just because you think the gun isn’t loaded. And another thing, never point your gun at yourself or at anybody else when you are climbing a fence, or crawling through the brushwood. The hammer may catch on something and somebody may be killed.”

“Yes, I knew of a boy who was killed that way,” said Harry. “He was climbing a rail fence and the charge nearly took the top of his head off.”

“And finally,” said Joel Runnell, “when you leave a camp, don’t break up everything in sight just for the sport of it, thinking you’ll never come back that way again. You may want to come back the very next season, or, if you don’t, somebody else may happen that way and it will be a pleasure for that party to find things in shape for use, just as we found Snow Lodge ready for use.”

By the time the young hunters had returned to the shelter the wind was rising once more, and they were glad enough to sit

around the fire and get warm. While they ate their midday meal Joel Runnel explained many traps and their workings to the boys, and told of what animals he had caught from time to time by such means.

They were just preparing to go out for the afternoon when Link, who was at the doorway, called softly to his companions.

“Don’t make any noise,” he said. “I think there is some kind of an animal around.”

“Is it a bear?” queried Bart.

“I don’t know what it is.”

“Where did you hear it, Link?” asked Joe.

“Down near the lake. It made a very odd sound.”

By this time all had reached for their guns and were coming forth from the shelter.

“Come with me, Link,” said old Runnell. “You others hang back a little. We’ll find out what it is that is prowling around. I don’t believe it’s a bear.”

With extreme caution Joel Runnell led the way in the direction Link had pointed out. The snow covered the rough rocks so that walking was extremely difficult.

Just as they were to pass from under some pine trees into the open there came a cat-like cry from a tree to their right. Wheeling around, the old hunter caught sight of two animals facing each other on a sloping tree limb. Each animal was rather larger than a good sized house cat and had a long, bushy tail and short, stout legs.

“What are they, cats?” whispered Link.

“No, pine martens,” returned the old hunter, in a low voice. “Get back and perhaps we’ll see some fun.”

He caught Link by the arm, and both drew back a few paces. Then the others were motioned to keep silent.

The two pine martens soon began to growl and spit at each other exactly as do two house cats when on a back fence to settle a long-standing dispute. They were so much in earnest that neither noted the approach of the hunters, although usually a pine marten is very shy and quick to detect danger.

“What a battle!” remarked Joe, when each had made a savage claw at the other. “You’d almost think they were two old Toms, wouldn’t you?”

“Perhaps you’d better heave a boot-jack at them,” came dryly from Bart.

“Hush, lads,” put in Joel Runnell. “Be prepared to fire the minute they try to run away. Remember, they may disappear like magic.”

“Let me shoot one,” pleaded Link. “I haven’t had any chance at game yet.”

“And let me try for the other,” came from Bart.

“All right. But take careful aim, or the martens will get away from you.”

CHAPTER XXII

TEDDY MEETS "THE INDIANS"

In order to get a better view of the pine martens, who had shifted slightly from where they were first fighting, Link and Bart moved cautiously along among several big pine trees.

"I'll take the lighter one," said Bart.

"All right, I'll try for the darker," said his chum. Both of the martens were brown, but there were several shades of difference between the pair.

"Are you ready?" came a few seconds later.

"Yes."

"Then fire!"

Crack! crack! went the two guns in rapid succession and up into the air leaped both of the animals. Then they came down into the snow and whirled over and over. One was mortally wounded and quickly expired, but the one shot by Bart, tried to crawl away.

"He's going to get away from ye!" cried Teddy Dugan, in strong excitement. "Let me give him a shot, won't ye?"

"Yes," answered Bart, and no sooner had he spoken than the Irish boy blazed away, and over on its back went the pine marten, as dead as a stone.

All of the young hunters rushed up to inspect the prizes. They found the pine martens of a strong odor, but with beautiful furs.

“Those pelts are worth something,” said Joel Runnell.

“Can we eat the meat?” asked Bart.

“I don’t think you’ll care particularly for the flavor. But you want to save the furs.”

“We shall certainly do that,” said Link, and then old Runnell showed them how to skin the game so that the fur would not be damaged.

Now that they were out with their guns they continued the hunt until sunset. During that time they were lucky enough to get three rabbits and two squirrels and also some more nuts out of the hole of one of the latter creatures.

It was growing colder steadily and by sunset all of the young hunters were more than glad to get back to the shelter.

“Oh, but this night is going to be a stinger!” predicted Joe, and he was right. They brought in a large quantity of firewood and set the blaze to going as hard as they dared. The pine trees leaning against the cliff were getting dry and they had to be careful that no sparks should set them ablaze.

“We’ve burnt down one shelter, we don’t want to burn down another,” said old Runnell, and Joe, Harry and Fred agreed with him.

By midnight it was so cold that several of the boys could not sleep. Wrapped up in their blankets they huddled so close to the fire that one of them, Bart, had one corner of his wrap badly singed.

“Look out, you’re on fire!” came from Joe, in a warning, and

Bart leaped up and did a war dance in an effort to brush away the sparks which had reached him.

Some water had been brought into the shelter for drinking purposes, but long before morning this was frozen into a solid chunk, which Teddy Dugan surveyed with a comical look on his face.

“Sure an’ nobody will be after drinkin’ that,” he said. “If you want water you’ll have to chew it!”

“This is the banner cold snap so far,” observed Harry. “I trust the thermometer doesn’t go much lower.”

“If it does the bottom will drop out sure,” added Link, with a grin.

“I don’t feel much like stirring from the fire,” came from Fred.

“See Fred, doubled up like a squaw,” cried Bart. “Fred, are you toasted yet?”

“Never mind, I noticed you grumbled as much as I did, during the night,” returned the stout youth.

“Did I?”

“Did you? Well, I just guess. You wanted all the extra blankets, you did.”

“Never mind, boys,” said Joel Runnell. “We’ll have a good hot breakfast, and that will warm us all up.”

Pancake flour had been brought along by Link and Bart, and that morning they had coffee, pancakes, and fried rabbit. They did full justice to the meal, and as old Runnell had said, all felt warm and in better humor after the repast was finished.

It remained cold all day, and the boys spent the time around the shelter, cutting more firewood, and fixing the place up so that the wind could not get in quite so freely. Link started another snowball fight, but it did not last.

Yet Link was out for some fun, and at supper time he reminded Harry of the trick to be played on Teddy.

“I’m willing,” came from Harry, readily. “But I think we ought to let the others know, so they can enjoy the fun.”

“I shouldn’t tell Runnell. He might want to stop us.”

So it was agreed to tell the other boys. All were much interested and did what they could to make Harry and Link look like Indians.

First some reddish dirt was dug up and thawed out, after which it was mixed with a little rabbit grease and smeared on their faces. Then some feathers were put in bands and stuck around their heads, and each wrapped himself in a camp blanket, in true Indian style.

“You’ve got to have weapons,” said Joe. “Here, each take a hatchet.”

“I brought along a bow and some arrows,” said Bart. “Link can take that.”

“And I’ll take my gun,” put in Harry.

“See that it is empty first,” said Joe, warningly. “We don’t want any accident.” And the weapon was discharged on the spot.

All these preparations were made in secret, while old Runnell was out looking for game. The boys had persuaded Teddy to go

out, too.

When Joel Runnell and the Irish lad returned to camp Link and Harry were missing.

“They went up the north shore,” said Joe. “Teddy, they wanted to know if you wouldn’t follow them up. I think they have something they want you to help carry home.”

“All right,” answered the Irish lad, willingly, and set off at once, whistling merrily as he trudged along.

As luck would have it, Joel Runnell was busy skinning some rabbits found in the traps. Consequently he did not notice the actions of the boys and inside of a minute after Teddy left the camp they were following him up.

“Don’t let him see you,” whispered Joe to the others. “If he does the game will be spoilt.”

“You keep out of sight yourself,” returned Bart.

“And don’t talk so loud,” came from Fred. “Remember, it’s so quiet just now a fellow’s voice carries further than you imagine.”

After that they remained silent and took good care that Teddy should not see them.

All unconscious of the trick about to be played upon him, the Irish lad trudged on and on, until he was quarter of a mile from camp.

“Hello, boys!” he called out. “Where are you?”

No answer came back, and he continued to move on, until a sudden stir in some bushes caused him to halt. It was after sunset and the woods appeared dim and ghostly.

"I say, where are you?" he went on. "Link! Harry!"

Again there was no answer, but now he saw two forms moving silently from the bushes to a spot behind him.

Joe had seen to it that Teddy did not take his gun along, so the Irish lad was totally unarmed. He watched the figures in considerable alarm.

"Sure an' they can't be the boys," he told himself. "Link! Harry!"

Slowly the figures drew closer and as they did so Teddy's hair almost stood on end.

"Indians!" he cried. "Indians! Oh, I'm a dead b'y now!"

"Pa-wa! Pa-wa!" cried one of the advancing figures. "Bunk-a-bunk a busta-bust! Pa-wa!"

"Nunk-a-nuck!" came from the other. "White boy Injun prisoner!"

"Mercy on me!" shrieked poor Teddy. "Don't touch me! Don't touch me, Mr. Indian!"

"White boy big chief's prisoner," came from the second figure. "Maybe scalp white boy!"

At this Teddy clasped his hands in terror.

"Don't ye do it!" he yelled. "Help! somebody, help! The Indians have come to murder us all in our beds! Don't touch my hair! I nade it, I do!"

He wanted to run, but one of the wrapped-up figures caught him by the arm, while the other raised his hatchet threateningly.

"White boy be silent!" was the command. "No speak a word."

“Fer the sake o’ me family!” groaned Teddy. “Please let me go!”

“White boy good to eat maybe?”

“To eat is it! Oh, my! just to hear o’ that now! No, I’m no good to eat! I’m tough, terribul tough! If ye try to eat me ye’ll break yer teeth!”

At this came a snicker from behind the trees.

“Say, but he’s scared right enough,” murmured Bart.

“Down on your knees – your Japanese,” went on Harry, giving his hatchet a wild flourish.

“Oh! oh! Don’t sca – scalp me!” groaned Teddy, and fell on his knees.

“Injuns let white boy go on one condition,” said Link, who had a wild desire to burst out laughing.

“What is that?” was the eager question.

“White boy stand on head and sing big song.”

CHAPTER XXIII

PIKE SPEARING

THROUGH THE ICE

“Well, did you ever hear the beat of that?” asked Fred, in a whisper, after Link had made his outrageous request.

“Hush, we may miss something,” came from Joe.

“Stand on me head, is it?” asked Teddy, thinking he had not heard aright.

“Yes. Sing big song.”

“What shall I sing?”

“Sing, De Wacht am Rhine.”

“Eh? I can’t sing a Dutch song.”

“Did you hear that?” came with a suppressed laugh from Joe. “De Wacht am Rhine of all things for Teddy!”

“No sing Dutch song, sing Chinese song – Chow Chow Chippy Chow!” went on Link.

“Sure an’ I can’t sing Chinese ayther!” said poor Teddy. “I’ll sing The Wearin’ o’ the Green, if ye want me to.”

“White boy sing French song – La Loopa de Loopa,” came from Link.

“Sing Russian song – Tvitsky Smoultskyitvalitz,” put in Harry. At this there came a distinct snicker from behind the nearby trees.

“What a name for a song!” murmured Fred. “His teeth will

fall out if he don't take care!"

"Don't know Frinch, or Russian," said Teddy.

"Too bad, big Injun weep much tears," sighed Link. "White boy sing Mary Has a Little Ox?"

"Eh? Do you mean, Mary Has a Little Lamb?" queried Teddy, in perplexity.

"No. Injun no like lambs – bad for Injun complexion. White boy sing What is Home Without Um Alarm Clock. Sing nine verses and can go home."

"Sure an' I niver heard o' the song," said Teddy. "Tell ye what I'll sing," he added, brightening. "I'll sing ye a song me father made up."

"Good!" shouted both "Indians." "But must stand on head," added one.

"Oh, dear," groaned Teddy. "I never sang standin' on me head before. Are ye sure you'll let me go if I do it?"

"Yes, white boy run to bosom of family."

With a great effort Teddy managed to stand on his head, balancing himself on his hands, a feat he had learned after visiting a circus which had once stopped at Lakeport. Then with even a greater effort he began to sing:

"Me father had an old blind mule,
An' he was very frisky,
To git upon that muley's back
He said was very risky.
The mule was swift upon his feet,

Could run a mile a minit!
He beat the hosses at the track —
Not wan of thim was in it!”

“Fine song! Make Injun heap laugh!” cried Link and began to dance around as if greatly pleased.

“White boy sing more such song,” put in Harry. “Injun learn ’em.” And almost out of breath poor Teddy went on, wobbling from side to side as he did so:

“Me father’s mule he loved to eat
Green grass and ripe pertaters,
But niver cared a single cent
To swallow ripe termaters!
Wan day that mule stood on his head,
A-facin’ two big Injuns,
The Injuns roared to see him there —

“But he got up and walked away, fer he saw it was all a joke an’ he wasn’t goin’ to stand fer such nonsense any longer,” concluded Teddy, and arising to his feet, he squinted comically first at Link and then Harry. “Yer fine lads to play such a trick on me,” he added. “Supposin’ I’d had me gun an’ shot off both yer heads?”

The end of this speech was lost in a burst of laughter from behind the trees, and Joe, Bart and Fred ran into view.

“Hullo, Teddy, how do you like Injuns?” queried Fred.

“Teddy, your voice is fine when you stand on your head and

sing,” came from Bart.

“Oh, stop yer foolin’,” said the Irish boy, calming down. “Sure, didn’t I know it was a joke all along.”

“Oh, Teddy, did you know it?” asked Harry.

“To be sure I did.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“All right then,” and the Irish lad tossed his head into the air. “I wasn’t goin’ to spoil – ”

“Teddy, you’re drawing on your imagination,” burst in Link. “But we’ll let it pass.”

“Wait till I’m after gettin’ square,” said Teddy, and put up one finger warningly.

“Never mind, the song was O. K.,” said Fred. “Did your father really make it up?”

“And what’s the end of the second verse?” queried Link.

“No, me father had nothin’ to do wid it. I got it out of an old joke book, an’ I’ve forgotten the end of it. That’s the reason I made up an endin’.”

“Three cheers for Teddy, the acrobatic songster,” cried Fred, and the cheers were given with a will. The cheers put the Irish lad in a better humor; but it was a long time before he forgot how they had played Indian on him.

“What’s all the cheering about?” asked Joel Runnell, as they came back to camp, Link and Harry having first wiped the red mud off their faces and hidden away the feathers and blankets.

“We’ve been initiating Teddy into a secret society,” said Link.

“Didn’t know you had a secret society.”

“This is the Forest Wanderers,” put in Harry. “Teddy is now Head Chief of the Royal Frying Pan.”

“You’ve been cutting up high jinks,” said old Runnell, with a smile. “Well, it’s all right, but don’t none o’ you git hurt, that’s all,” and there the affair ended.

Joe and Harry had not forgotten about the three tramps, and were anxious to make a hunt for the rascals, but the next morning Joel Runnell asked all hands to go down to the lake front with him and help erect a shelter on the ice, from which they might spear some pike and other fish.

“It’s too cold to stay out there without a shelter,” said he, and directly after breakfast they set to work.

The fishing-wigwam, as the boys named it, was a primitive affair, built up of long tree branches, set in a circle of snow. The branches were fastened together at the top, like the poles of an Indian wigwam, and then snow was packed around on the outside to a point just above their heads.

“Now this will make a comfortable place to fish in,” said Joel Runnell, and with a sharp axe began to chop a hole in the ice about a foot and a half square. “Of course this hole will freeze over from time to time, but once we are through the main ice it will be an easy matter to cut away whatever forms later.”

The tree branches made the fishing shelter rather dark inside. On this account they could look down into the water with ease, for the latter was lit up by the light on the outside of the shelter.

“This is great!” cried Joe. “Why the water is almost as bright as day!”

At last the hole was cut and finished off to old Runnell’s satisfaction. In the meantime the boys had prepared a fishing bait which the old hunter approved. The bait was nothing but a little imitation fish, made of wood and a bit of tinfoil.

“Now, wait till I have my spear ready,” said Joel Runnell, and brought out the weapon mentioned, which was fairly long and with a razor-like point.

In a few minutes he was ready for the test, and he showed Joe how to drop the bait into the hole and jerk it around in the water below.

For quite a while Joe jerked the imitation fish around in vain. Once a lazy looking fish came fairly close, but not close enough for old Runnell to use the spear.

“Perhaps we had better try a line and hook,” said Harry.

“Be patient,” said the old hunter. “You’ll never have any success at fishing if you are not patient. You must – ah, I guess we’ll get something now.”

Joel Runnell bent directly over the hole. A good-sized pike had shown himself. He darted off, but soon reappeared. Then, as Joe gave the bait another jerk, the pike came directly under the hole and sniffed at it.

It was a splendid chance and old Runnell was not slow to take advantage of it. His spear was up, and down it came with force and directness, taking the pike directly through the back. There

was a twist and a short struggle, and in a twinkling the pike lay on the floor of the fishing shelter, breathing its last.

“Oh, but that’s a prize!” cried Bart, enthusiastically. “He must weigh three pounds!”

“You’d have a fine time bringing him in on a line,” was Joe’s comment. “He’d tire you out sure, or maybe break the line on the edge of the ice.”

All inspected the pike with great interest, and then Joel Runnell passed the catch over to Teddy to be cleaned.

“Can we get another one, do you think?” asked Bart, who was anxious to try his luck.

“Perhaps, although a big pike like this usually keeps his territory to himself. More than likely his home was under yonder overhanging tree.”

This time Bart took the spear and Link the bait, and nearly half an hour went by. But then a pike larger than the first appeared.

“Oh, my, what a chance!” murmured Link. “Now, Bart, don’t miss him!”

“I’ll do my best,” answered Bart, who was quivering with excitement.

All of the others were interested and drew around the hole hardly daring to breathe. Three times the pike came fairly close and then swam away. Once he passed directly across the opening, but so swiftly that Bart did not take the chance to hit him.

“He has gone,” said Fred, after a few minutes more had passed, but just as he spoke the pike reappeared and came up

directly under the hole, where he began to turn around.

“Now!” cried old Runnell, and down went the spear, in something of a sideway fashion. But it passed through the pike near the tail, and with a whirl and a great splashing, he came up to the surface and out of the hole.

“Hurrah, you’ve got him!” cried Link, as he wiped the cold water from his face. “Say, he gave me a regular shower bath, didn’t he?”

“Oh, you mustn’t mind that,” put in Fred. “Why such a pike as that is worth a dip into the lake.”

“Not in this freezing weather,” came from Joe. “But he’s a beauty and no mistake. Four inches longer than the other and at least half a pound heavier.”

“There are a great many kinds of pike, aren’t there?” asked Link.

“Yes, a great number,” answered old Runnell. “The big muskalonge, the pike-perch, the pickerel, the wall-eye or glass-eye pike, and the gray pike, and half a dozen other varieties. The pike-perch of the Great Lakes sometimes grows to three feet and weighs fifteen or eighteen pounds.”

The fishing was continued for over two hours longer and one more small pike was obtained. Then Fred tried his hook and line and very soon brought in several small fish.

“Now, we’ll have fish to last us for awhile,” said Joel Runnell. “What we don’t use at once we can let freeze in the ice.” And this was done by simply throwing the fish in a hollow and pouring

clean water over them.

The party had used up a good share of their deer meat, but the best part of one of the halves still remained – or rather, had been left at the camp when they went fishing. But now, when they got back, strange to say, the deer meat was gone.

“Hullo, what does this mean?” cried Joe. “Have we had another visit from Dan Marcy and old Skeetles?”

“Somebody has taken the meat, that is certain,” put in Bart.

Joel made a careful examination. The meat had been left hanging on one of the pine trees.

“An animal took that meat,” said the old hunter. “And I am pretty certain I know what kind of a beast it was.”

CHAPTER XXIV

A BATTLE WITH A WOLVERENE

All of the young hunters listened to Joel Runnell's words with deep interest.

"An animal took the meat?" questioned Joe. "What sort of an animal?"

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, lad, it was a wolverene."

"A wolverene!" cried several in chorus.

"Oh, do you think it was really a wolverene?" came from Link. "Why, they are very fierce, aren't they?"

"About as fierce a beast as you can bring down in these parts, Link, and just about as hard to track, too."

"I've never seen a live wolverene," came from Harry. "I saw a dead one once at my father's store – Jerry Daley brought it down. It was about as long as a wolf, but a good deal heavier, and was black, with a lightish streak running around each side toward the tail. It had a sort of cat head, with the ears laid low, and an awful savage looking mouth."

"Yes, and Jerry Daley was almost killed by the beast, too," put in Joe. "It ripped up his arm and gave him a fearful scratch on one knee. Jerry put two bullets into it and then cut its throat with his hunting knife."

"I've heard a lot of stories about wolverenes," said Fred. "A

good many hunters fight shy of them.”

“And the wolverenes fight shy of the hunters,” put in old Runnell. “Can’t blame ’em either.”

“Maybe we had better not go after this beast,” put in Teddy. “I don’t want to be chewed up.”

“Oh, yes, let us go after him,” came from Bart. “I’m not afraid. Remember, he stole our deer meat.”

“Better let that meat go,” went on Teddy.

“Oh, I don’t want to eat the meat after a wolverene has chewed on it,” added Bart. “But we ought to teach the beast a lesson.”

“Wolverenes are great for stealing hunters’ meat,” said Joel Runnell. “And not only that, they soon learn how to get at rabbits and other animals that have been trapped. I once heard tell of how a hunter went out to look at his traps and he discovered a wolverene watching ’em. He kept out of sight, and pretty soon a rabbit got into one of the traps. As soon as the rabbit was a prisoner, Mr. Wolverine came out of hiding and pulled the rabbit out of the trap, and just then the hunter killed the beast.”

The matter was talked over, and it was decided that two of the boys should go with old Runnell after the wolverene. Lots were cast, and the choice fell upon Joe and Bart.

“Bart, that ought to suit you,” said Fred.

“And it does,” was the quick answer.

“It suits me, too,” came from Joe. “Sorry you can’t go, Harry,” he added to his brother.

“Well, such is luck,” was the reply. “Perhaps next time I’ll go

and you'll have to stay home.”

A hasty lunch was had, and in less than half an hour old Runnell, Bart, and Joe were on the way.

The track of the wolverene was plainly to be seen, and they followed it with ease over the rocks where the wind had blown a good deal of the snow away.

“Are your guns ready for use?” questioned old Runnell. “It may be that we may fall in with some other kind of game besides the wolverene.”

The weapons were in proper condition and both were held in such a fashion that they could do no harm as the party traveled along. They had now to enter the woods, with thick pines on one side and a variety of small hemlocks and scrub bushes on the other. They were going uphill, and walking at every step became more difficult.

“Here are the marks very plainly,” said Joe. “The wolverene got tired of carrying the meat and dragged it.”

“Make no more noise,” said Joel Runnell. “We may be closer to the beast nor you think.”

After that they proceeded in utter silence. The trail led around a number of pointed rocks and then among the pines.

Suddenly Joel Runnell came to a halt and motioned for the others to do likewise. Looking ahead, Joe and Bart saw a spot where the snow was much disturbed, and there lay the best part of the deer meat which had been stolen.

Crouching low, Joel Runnell began to look in among the pine

trees, for he felt certain that the beast he was after could not be far away. Evidently the wolverene had been disturbed while devouring a portion of the game and had leaped out of sight among the pine branches.

The wolverene is well called the glutton, for it loves to gorge itself upon any meat which it can obtain. When it has such meat in its possession to give it up is almost out of the question, and it becomes maddened to the last degree.

All this Joel Runnell knew, and he also knew that if he advanced to where the meat was lying more than likely the wolverene would leap upon him.

But it was not the old hunter who first caught sight of the beast. Happening to glance over his shoulder Bart saw a sight which filled him with sudden terror. The wolverene was there, in a high branch, ready to leap down upon his head!

“Oh!” yelled the boy, and then, more by instinct than reason, he swung his gun around and fired. The firearm held a fair charge of shot, and this took the wolverene partly in the breast and left foreleg. There was a fierce snarl, and down came the powerful creature at Bart’s very feet.

As the wolverene landed both Joe and old Runnell wheeled around. The latter would have fired, but Joe was in his way.

“Look out, boys!” yelled the old hunter. “Back for your lives!”

He spoke none too soon, for the wolverene was now ready for a second leap. Bart sprang back, and the beast caught sight of Joe, who was trying to get a shot.

Bang! went Joe's weapon, but the wolverene leaped as he fired, and all that was hit of the creature was the bushy tail, which was knocked completely to pieces at such close range.

Dazed and bewildered, the wolverene now backed to the nearest tree, and leaped out of sight among the low-hanging branches. The pain of its wounds made it snarl and growl viciously, and had it been able to reach one or another of the hunters it might have done great damage.

"Look out," cried Bart. "Guess he's trying to come up behind us."

"I've got my eye on him now," answered Joel Runnell. "Both of you stay where you are, and reload."

Neither had thought of reloading, but now they did so with all possible speed. In the meanwhile Joel Runnell was moving down among the pines. They listened and heard the wolverene make a leap from one branch to another, then all became suddenly silent.

"Oh, I hope Runnell don't get hurt," muttered Bart.

There followed a short spell of silence, and then the firearm of the old hunter rang out. The report was followed by a cat-like screech, loud and of short duration. Then from one limb to another tumbled the wolverene, striking the ground with a whirl and sending the snow flying in all directions. But the shot was a fatal one, and in a few minutes the savage beast gave a shudder, stiffened out, and lay still.

"Is he – he dead?" asked Bart, almost in a whisper.

"Dead as a door nail, boys," answered Joel Runnell. "He was

a fighter right enough, wasn't he?"

"I never want to go after another wolverene," declared Joe.

"You are right; one is enough," returned Bart. For once his face was strangely white.

"What shall we do with the animal?" went on Joe.

"May as well keep the hide," answered the old hunter. "That will pay us back for our deer meat. You can make a mat of it when you get home."

"I believe now some of the stories I have heard about wolverenes," declared Bart. "Why, this creature is about as bad to meet as a bear."

"Worse than some bears."

"Do you boys know what the wolverene is sometimes called?" asked the old hunter.

"I don't know. What?" asked Joe.

"The skunk bear, on account of its peculiar colorings. Yes, after this, fight shy of wolverenes if you can help it."

CHAPTER XXV

TEDDY EVENS THE SCORE

“You must have had a close call,” said Harry, when the others returned to the camp and told their story. “I am mighty glad that wolverene didn’t get a chance at me.”

“Sure an’ if I see wan of them bastes I’ll run for me life,” came from Teddy. “It’s worse nor a – a tiger they must be.”

“Worse than Injuns, Teddy,” said Link, dryly.

“Ah! Go run after your own shadow,” growled Teddy, in deep disgust. And then, as he turned away there was a merry twinkle in his eyes. “Sure an’ I’ll fix ’em to-night,” he murmured to himself.

Link and Harry had employed their spare time in making for themselves two pillows of pine needles. This was easy, for they had brought along some bags for nuts and had merely to fill these and then sew up the open ends.

Watching his chance, Teddy got hold of the two pillows and also the box containing pepper. Into each pillow he poured some pepper and also sprinkled the outside liberally.

It had been decided that an early start should be made the next morning in a search for the three tramps, and Joel Runnell advised that all hands turn in early.

“I’m willing,” said Fred, and was the first to lie down and go to sleep. Then the fire was fixed for the night and the others

followed his example.

The silence in the shelter did not last long. Suddenly Link gave a terrific sneeze and Harry followed suit.

“Boys, get out of the draught or you’ll take cold,” came from Joel Runnell.

“I’m not in any – ker-chew! – draught,” answered Harry.

“I am – ker-chew – I think – ker-chew – ” spluttered Link, and ended with a series of sneezes that brought all in the shelter to a sitting position.

“Hullo, what’s the matter?” sang out Bart.

“I-ker-chew! I think I’ve got the – ker-chew!” spluttered Harry.

“I think so myself,” went on Bart. “Got ’em bad, too.”

“Ker-chew!” exploded Link. “Ker-chew! Oh, my! Ker-chew!”

“Well, I never,” came from Fred. “Is this a sneezing match?”

“I’ll bet on the feller that wins,” piped up Teddy. “Now then, both start together.”

“Ker-chew!” began Link.

“Ker-chew!” came from Harry, directly afterwards.

“Didn’t start together,” went on Teddy, calmly. “Try it over again and see – ”

“Ker-chew!” came from both.

“Teddy Dugan, did you – ker-chew!” began Harry.

“No, I didn’t ker-chew,” answered the Irish lad, with a wink at the others. “I don’t chew at all. My father won’t let me use tobacco, and so I – ”

“Ker-chew!” broke in both of the sufferers.

“This is certainly queer,” said Joel Runnell, seriously. “What set you to sneezing?”

“Perhaps they tickled their noses wid straws,” suggested the irrepressible Teddy.

“I – I – ker-chew! – think there is pepper on my – ker-chew! – pillow,” spluttered Link.

Harry caught up his pillow and smelt of it.

“Sure as you – ker-chew! ker-chew! – are born,” he cried. “Now, who did this?”

He and Link looked at first one and then another of the party. All but Teddy looked perplexed. The twinkle in the Irish lad’s eyes was brighter than ever.

“Teddy Dugan, you did – ker-chew – this?” stormed Link, and made a dive for him.

“It’s snazin’ Injuns ye are now,” returned Teddy.

“Oh, I’ll fix you for this!” roared Harry, and catching up his pillow he hurled it at the Irish boy’s head. Link did the same, and down went Teddy flat on his back.

“Oh, stop!” he yelled. “I – ker-chew! Oh! Oh!”

He threw one of the pillows at Link. It struck Joe instead, and Joe sent it at Fred. Then the stout lad hurled it into the crowd. But it sailed too high, struck the fire, and the pillow burst open.

“Hi! hi!” called out Joel Runnell. “Take that out of the fire!”

“Can’t – it’s bursted,” answered Joe. He bent forward over the blaze. “Oh, what a smell! Ker-chew!”

The pepper was now burning, and the smell speedily became so strong that everybody had to sneeze and rush for the doorway. Into the open tumbled the boys, one on top of the other.

“Watch out; the shelter may get on fire!” said Fred.

“Oh, don’t say that,” groaned Teddy, becoming frightened on the spot. “Sure an’ I didn’t mane to carry the joke so far.”

“Then you did do it after all?” murmured Fred. “Well, it was a good joke all right enough.”

From the doorway Joel Runnell watched the progress of the fire. The pine needles soon died out, and the camp-fire became as before. But it was some time before they could stand the smell of the burnt pepper. The unburnt pillow was thrown out into the snow.

“It was only to git square for the Indian trick,” said Teddy. “Won’t you call it off now?”

“Yes, Teddy,” said Harry, promptly, and shook hands, and then Link did the same.

All would have overslept on the following morning had not old Runnell called them up ere it was daylight. He had already started the breakfast, and soon some of the others were helping him.

“Oh, must I get up so soon,” sighed Harry. “I could sleep three hours more.”

“No lazybones in this camp, young man,” cried Joe. “Remember, we are going to try to locate those tramps.”

It was a perfect day, with the sun shining brightly over the long stretches of ice and snow. There was no wind, and on every

side all was as silent as a tomb, saving for the occasional cry of a winter bird, or the distant barking of a fox.

“This is genuine life in the open,” said Joe. “I tell you what, boys, we couldn’t have a finer outing.”

“I must try for some more pictures,” said Harry, and before he left the camp he loaded his camera with films, so that he would be prepared to “shoot” whatever struck his fancy.

From Teddy they had obtained all the information possible concerning the three tramps, and as soon as they were well on the road to the shore Joel Runnell allowed Teddy to go in the lead.

“Mind ye, I don’t say I can spot the rascals,” said the Irish lad. “But I’ll do me best.”

“That is all anybody can do, Teddy,” answered Joe. “Even if we don’t catch ’em it won’t be such a terrible disappointment, although I’d like to see the fellows brought to justice.”

“They ought to be brought to justice,” put in old Runnell. “Nobody in these parts will be safe with such rascals at large.”

“I wonder what has become of Dan Marcy and Hiram Skeetles,” mused Harry. “It’s a wonder they are not watching us, isn’t it?”

“Guess the cold snap was too much for them,” answered Fred. “I don’t believe old Skeetles cares much for an outing anyway. He’d rather stay in town and make money.”

“I’ve heard that he has been very mean to a great many persons,” said Link. “There was one old Irish washerwoman that owed him ten or fifteen dollars and he pestered the life out of

her trying to get it.”

“That’s right,” came from Teddy. “It was the Widdy O’Rourke, an’ my folks and a lot of others made up a purse for her, so she could buy a railroad ticket to Caleville, where her married daughter lives. The daughter was too poor to pay for the ticket, but she wrote that if her mother would come on she would do the best she could to give her a home.”

“And did old Skeetles get the ten or fifteen dollars?” asked Bart.

“Sure he did. He wouldn’t let her leave town till she had paid. Oh, he’s a skinflint, he is,” concluded Teddy.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS

They reached the shore at a point where a long stretch of pines bent down heavily with their weight of snow. The scene was so beautiful that Harry stopped long enough to get two time exposure pictures, using very small stops, so that the outlines might be extra sharp.

“There must be a whole lot about photography,” observed old Runnell. “Those men that are in the business take fine pictures without half trying, while on the other hand I’ve been out with amateurs, as they called themselves, and they’d take picture after picture, but none of ’em seemed to amount to much. Some would be crooked, some wouldn’t be sharp and clear enough, and some would be printed too light or too dark.”

“Well, I just guess there is a good deal about it,” came from Bart. “I have a cousin who is learning the business in Boston, and he writes that I can’t imagine how many details there are. First one must have the right light and shade and the proper focus, and then, after the picture is taken, the plate has got to be developed just so, to bring out the negative to its best point, and then one must take great care in printing the paper. He tells me that sometimes a single drop of a certain kind of chemical will spoil everything.”

“Reckon, lad, it’s a good bit like hunting, after all,” said old Runnell. “Some folks think they can put a gun over their shoulder, run to the forest, and shoot down jest what they want to. Well, they can’t at all – you know that already. They have got to learn to shoot straight, and keep cool, and have lots of patience, and then they have got to learn about the habits of their game.”

“And some folks never become good hunters any more than they can become good photographers,” said Joe. “I guess one has got to have a strong fancy for it, in the first place.”

“Yes, and a strong fancy for anything that he really wants to succeed in,” said Joel Runnell.

When they went into a temporary camp for dinner Harry took a picture of the group, and then Joe took another, with Harry in the middle, holding a coffee pot in his hand. Nearly every young hunter had something – a gun, or a hatchet, or some kitchen utensil, and this photograph caused a great deal of laughter when it was shown around after they got home.

By moving slowly along the shore, and making a close examination of every sheet and drift of snow, Joel Runnell at last found the tracks of three persons who had come from the lake. The tracks were those made by three pairs of boots or shoes of good size.

“Those must be the tramps’ tracks,” declared Joe. “Teddy was right; they came almost directly across from the opposite shore.”

“And now the question is, How far have they gone since they crossed the lake?” put in Harry.

“That’s the worst of it,” said Fred. “For all we know, they may be miles and miles away from here by this time.”

“Tramps are great for stealing rides on freight trains,” ventured Bart. “How far is the railroad from this point?”

“At least four miles,” answered Joel Runnell, “and a very rough road at that. The nearest station is six miles. They couldn’t very well board a freight train that was moving.”

“I don’t believe tramps like to ride much in such freezing weather,” came from Link. “More than likely they have found some sort of a hangout around here, and are living off of what they can pick up, by honest or dishonest means.”

The matter was discussed for a short while, and it was concluded to follow up the footprints until nightfall if no longer.

“We may run across them sooner nor you expect,” said old Runnell.

The tracks led directly through the woods and then toward a rise of rocks which was swept almost clear of snow. Beyond the rocks was level ground, and here was a country road, connecting two small villages of that vicinity with Lakeport.

“We’re getting into civilization,” said Joe. “This feels almost as if we were going home.”

“I don’t want to go home yet,” said Harry.

“Nor I,” came in a chorus from the others.

The tracks led along the roadway for perhaps half a mile, and then turned still further from the lake.

“Well, I declare!” cried Joel Runnell. “Wonder if those chaps

went over to Ike Slosson's house."

"Where is that?" asked Fred.

"About half a mile from here."

"Who is Ike Slosson?" asked Link.

"He is a very peculiar man, who lives by himself up in yonder woods. Some folks say he is very rich, while others have it that he is poor."

"Do you say he lives all alone?"

"Yes, and has for years. He used to have a son live with him, but the boy died and that kind of made the old man queer in his head. But he isn't a bad sort by any means. Once, when I was caught in the woods in a blizzard he took me in and treated me well. But he don't care for company."

"He would be just the sort of man those tramps would rob," put in Joe.

The tracks of the feet in the snow were plainly to be seen, and as they continued on their way Joel Runnell became more and more convinced that the three tramps had gone to Ike Slosson's house.

"When we come in sight of the house, I want you to halt," said the old hunter. "For all we know it may not be safe to show ourselves."

On and on they went. In spots the way was very rough, and they had to help each other over the rocks. At one point they could see where the tramps had halted for a meal, and here in the snow lay an empty liquor flask.

“That is evidence to me that the persons are the tramps we are after,” said Joe. “They were all drinking men.”

They had now to force their way through some short undergrowth and then cross a small stream, which in the summer time flowed into the lake. The stream was now a solid mass of ice.

“The house is just beyond yonder belt of trees,” said Joel Runnell, at last. “You had better stay here while I investigate.”

“Let us go a little closer and hide behind the nearest trees,” suggested Joe, and after a few words this was done.

With his gun over his shoulder Joel Runnell continued to advance until he was crossing the small clearing directly in front of the house, which was an old affair, a story and a half high, and containing but four rooms. The place looked to be closed and deserted.

“Hullo, Ike Slosson,” sang out the old hunter, when within fifty feet of the doorway. “Hullo, I say!”

Scarcely had he called out when there was a commotion in the house. He heard a shuffling of feet and some excited talking.

“Go away!” cried a high-pitched voice. “Go away, I say! I want no strangers around my house! Go away!”

CHAPTER XXVII

A PLAN FOR A CAPTURE

The words used were those which Ike Slosson had often uttered when folks of that neighborhood came around his house and he did not wish to entertain them. As Joel Runnell had said, the old man was very peculiar and at times he refused utterly to see even those he knew to be his friends. For strangers he had no welcome whatever. He knew old Runnell, however, and had treated him better than he had many another man. The hunter had once given him some fine rabbits and a partridge, and this had won Ike Slosson's heart.

Joel Runnell halted, but did not retreat. The shuffling of several pairs of feet had not escaped his sharp ears, and now those ears told him that it was not Ike Slosson who was speaking, but somebody who was trying, in a crude manner, to imitate the hermit.

"I say, go away!" came in the same voice. "I want no strangers here."

"Whose place is this?" asked old Runnell, calmly.

"It is my place, and I want you to go away, or I'll set the dog on you."

This reply made Joel Runnell smile to himself, for he knew very well that Ike Slosson despised dogs and would never have

one near him.

“Who are you?”

“Never mind who I am. I want you to go away.”

“Won’t you sell me a supper?”

“No. I have hardly enough for myself.”

“I’ll pay you well.”

“Can’t help it. I have nothing to sell. Now go away, or I’ll put out the dog.”

“Don’t send out your dog; I’ll go,” cried Joel Runnell, in pretended alarm, and then turning, he made his way to the shelter of the trees.

“How did you make out?” whispered Joe.

“Hush! don’t speak,” said the old hunter, warningly. “Crawl back, or somebody may see you.”

The boys moved to a safe place, and then clustered around the old hunter for information. Joel Runnell was chuckling quietly to himself.

“Thought they’d play a joke on me, didn’t they?” he said. “But I’ll soon have the boot on the other leg.”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

The old hunter then told of what had been said. “It wasn’t Ike Slosson who was speaking at all,” he added. “It was some other man, and his voice was thick with liquor. I’ve a notion those fellows have done something to Slosson and taken possession of his house and all of his goods and money.”

“Can they have killed the old man?” asked Link, in quick

alarm.

Joel Runnell shrugged his shoulders. "There is no telling."

"Let us rush out, surround the house, and capture the rascals," came from Bart.

"Hurrah!" shouted Teddy, enthusiastically. "Sure an' we'll have a regular Donnybrook Fair, such as me father often tells about."

"No! no!" answered old Runnell. "Some of you would be sure to get shot or hurt in some way."

"But we came for the express purpose of catching those tramps," cried Joe. "I'm not afraid to tackle them."

"We are seven to three," said Fred. "Perhaps they'll surrender, when they see how many there are of us."

"Not if they have done something to Ike Slosson, lad. They'll fight hard to get away. I have another plan. Five of us can watch the house while the other two tramp to the nearest village and get some officers. Then we can pounce on 'em while they are asleep."

This was considered excellent advice, and it was speedily decided that Harry and Bart were to go to the village of Bralham, two miles away. The others were to surround the house and keep a close watch so that none of those inside could escape.

The sun had now set and it was quite dark by the time Harry and Bart struck the road leading to Bralham, a place consisting of half a dozen houses, a store and a grist mill. What help they could muster at such a place was still a question.

“Perhaps nobody will care to take hold with us,” observed Harry, as they trudged along. “Some of these country constables are mighty afraid of their hides, when it comes to catching a criminal.”

There was no moon, but countless stars shone in the dear sky, making the path fairly light. All was very quiet, until directly over their heads an owl let out a mournful hoot.

“Oh!” cried Bart, and leaped back several feet. “What was that?”

“An owl,” answered Harry, with a laugh.

“How he scared me.”

They could not see the owl, or Bart might have taken a shot at the creature. The scare made the lad nervous, and he trembled a little as they continued on their journey.

“I don’t know as I should care to walk this road alone at night,” he said. “I am glad we live in the town and not out in the country or in the woods.”

“I fancy it is what one gets used to, Bart. I’ve heard it said a countryman can’t sleep in the city for the noise, and some city folks can’t sleep in the country because it’s too quiet.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that, too. But I think – Oh, my, what was that?”

Both boys halted as some dark object passed across the road a couple of rods in front of them. What the object was they could not discern.

“I guess it was a rabbit or else a fox,” said Harry, as lightly as

he could. "Come on."

"Could it have been a – a bear?"

"No, it wasn't large enough for that. Come on," and now Harry urged Bart along. A little while after this they came within sight of the light in a farmhouse kitchen, and then both boys felt much relieved.

Going up to the door of the house they knocked, and a burly farmer answered their summons.

"Good evening," said Harry, politely.

"Good evening, lad, what can I do for you?" questioned the farmer, gazing at both boys curiously. He saw that they had guns, but no game, and concluded they were hungry and wanted supper.

"Will you tell us where we can find a constable, or some other officer?"

"Want a constable, eh? Did somebody steal your game?" And the farmer smiled, quizzically.

"No, we want the constable to arrest three tramps who are wanted for stealing."

"Shoo! You don't say!" Farmer Libby was all attention. "Where are the tramps?"

"Over to Ike Slosson's house. They have taken full possession."

"Where is Slosson?"

"We don't know. The tramps must have done something to him."

“I always said somethin’ would happen to Ike,” put in the farmer’s wife. “It hain’t human for him to be a-livin’ alone as he does. Samuel, you must help in this.”

“Guess I must,” said Samuel Libby. “But I’ll have to tell Constable Peabody, and big Jim Bowman, too. Jim’s a powerful fellow when there’s trouble to be met.”

The farmer wanted the two boys to tell their tale, and they did so without delay. While they talked he put on his overcoat and got down his shotgun; and five minutes later all three were on their way to where Constable Peabody resided, in the center of the village.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST OF THE TRAMPS

The constable was found in the village store, comfortably fixed on a soap box, and narrating for probably the fiftieth time how he had once caught two lumber thieves on the lake single-handed. The crowd had heard the tale many times, but as the constable always added fresh particulars at each telling, they were willing to listen again.

“So you want me, do you?” he said to Samuel Libby and the two young hunters. “All right, I’m your man. What is it, fire away?”

When he was told what was desired he looked grave.

“This ain’t no ordinary case,” he argued. “Them tramps must be des’prit characters. I’ll have to take a posse along.”

“No posse needed, Peabody,” said Farmer Libby. “Take Jim Bowman and myself. Remember, old Joel Runnell is a-watchin’ ’em with four young fellows. Ten men and boys ought to be enough to capture three good-for-nothing tramps.”

“Are you going back with us?” asked the constable of Bart and Harry.

“Certainly we are,” answered Harry. “My brother and I want to learn what became of his watch, if we can.”

It was not long after this that big Jim Bowman was found, a

lumberman reputed to be the strongest fellow for miles around. He said he would go willingly, and took with him a stout club.

“Don’t much need it,” he said to the young hunters. “When I get in a mix-up I like to use my fists.”

“Well, it’s a good thing to know how to use your fists sometimes,” answered Bart.

The late moon was now coming up, so the roadway was lighter than it had been. Both Bart and Harry were tired because of all the tramping they had done, yet they did their best to keep up with the others. Jim Bowman led the way, taking strides that no one could have equaled.

“He must know how to handle lumber,” whispered Harry to Bart. “Just notice how muscular he is.”

“It is the constant outdoor life that has made him so strong, Harry.”

On they went until the bypath was gained. The constable had brought along a lantern, but this was not lit, for the rising moon was making it lighter every minute.

At last they halted and Harry gave a low whistle – a signal which had been agreed upon. A low whistle came in return, and almost immediately Joel Runnell came into view. He knew the constable by sight and Samuel Libby personally and nodded to them.

“Haven’t heard anything more out of ’em,” he said. “I’ll guess they think I went away.”

“Any light in the place?” asked the constable.

“Yes, a candle light in the kitchen. I wanted to crawl up and take a peep inside, but thought I wouldn’t risk it, for fear they’d spot me and try to dust out.”

After this the others were called up and a regular council of war ensued. Constable Peabody took charge, and he asked all to march up with him and surround the house. Then, taking Jim Bowman with him, he knocked loudly on the back door.

“Who’s there?” asked a rough voice, and then the voice was changed to an imitation of Ike Slosson’s and the speaker continued: “Go away! I want no strangers here. Go away!”

“Look here, this Tom-foolery won’t do!” cried the constable. “Open the door, or I’ll have it broken down.”

At this there was an added commotion in the house. Two men came to a window and peeped out.

“Hullo! there are half a dozen men out there,” muttered one.

“And they have got guns,” growled the other. “Muley, I reckon de jig’s up.”

“Who are you?” asked Noxy, the man at the door.

“An officer of the law, and I demand that you surrender,” shouted Constable Peabody, pompously.

“Boys, we must skip,” whispered the tramp called Stump. “If we don’t we’re sure to do time.”

“Are you going to open up or not?” demanded the constable.

To this there was no answer.

“Jim, I reckon you had better try your strength,” went on the officer.

The big lumberman was only too willing. He put his shoulder to the door and it went in with a crash.

“Now come out of that, one at a time,” sang out the constable. “And remember, we are ten to three, so it won’t do you any good to fight.”

“Are there ten o’ ’em?” gasped Noxy.

“Shouldn’t wonder,” growled Stump. “That feller who was here before must have told the sheriff. Say, wot are we goin’ to do?”

“Hang me if I know.”

The three tramps stared blankly at one another. They were caught like rats in a trap. They tiptoed their way to the next room, and looked forth from the windows.

“I see four men and boys,” said one.

“An’ three on this side,” came from another. “There must be ten o’ ’em after all. Boys, our goose is cooked.”

“Are you coming out, or have we got to fire on you?” continued Constable Peabody.

“I’ll give ’em a dose of buckshot,” put in Joel Runnell, although he had no idea of firing for the present.

“That’s it,” sang out Joe, who was likewise fooling.

“No! no! don’t shoot!” howled Stump, who was the most cowardly of the trio. “Don’t shoot!”

“Will you come out?”

“Yes.”

“Then come, and put your hands over your head.”

Looking decidedly sheepish the tramp marched out of the house, holding both hands over his head. In a moment Constable Peabody was behind him and had the rascal handcuffed.

“Now you other fellows come out, too,” said the officer. “One at a time, and with your hands up. If you try any funny work I’ll order my men to fire.”

There was a pause for a moment and then Noxy slouched out. He was quickly followed by Muley, who looked as if he wanted very much to run away. But the tramps were given no chance to escape, and soon all were tightly handcuffed.

“Well, how do you like the situation?” asked Joe, as he faced Muley. “Can’t you tell me what time it is?”

The tramp looked at the young hunter and then fell back a step.

“You!” he gasped.

“I say, can’t you tell me what time it is? If you’ll remember, you have my watch and chain.”

“Say dis beats de nation,” murmured Muley. “Did youse fellers follow us up?”

“We did.”

“What have you done with my brother’s watch?” asked Harry.

“I ain’t got de watch,” growled the tramp. But later on, when he was searched, the watch and chain were found in his pocket, he having no chance to sell or pawn the articles.

While this talk was going on Constable Peabody was questioning Stump and Noxy about what had been done to Ike

Slosson. At first neither of the tramps wanted to talk, but at last Stump confessed that they had gotten the old man away from home by delivering to him a bogus telegram, stating that a rich relative had died in Springfield and that there was much money awaiting him. The hermit had been just simple-minded enough to go away, and as soon as he was gone they had taken possession of his house, where they had expected to remain until it was time for Slosson to get back.

“Well, you’ll not stay here any longer,” said Constable Peabody, grimly. “You’ll spend a good part of the future in the lockup, if I know anything about it.”

“I reckon I missed it when I took dat young man’s watch an’ chain,” said Muley, with a hitch of his shoulders. “But I never t’ought he’d follow us like dis, never.”

Another conference was held, and as a result it was decided that the constable, assisted by big Jim Bowman and Farmer Libby, should march the prisoners to a temporary lockup and later transfer them to the Lakeport jail, there to await the action of the court. It may be added here that this was done, and the three tramps received sentences which kept them from doing further harm for some time to come.

“Well, we won out that time,” said Joe, as the young hunters and Joel Runnell started, the next day, for the camp on Pine Island. “I am glad we went after those tramps before they had a chance to leave Ike Slosson’s house.”

“We’ll have to give Teddy credit,” said Harry. “He’s the one

who made this capture possible.” And the Irish lad was warmly praised, much to his satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXIX

A GREAT MOOSE CHASE

All were anxious to learn if the shelter on the island had been disturbed during their absence. When they arrived at the spot they found everything as they had left it, much to their satisfaction.

“I’m going to take it easy for a day,” said Joe. “I think we all deserve a rest.”

“Second the commotion,” said Fred, and so they rested.

“I’ve got to go home,” said Teddy. “I’m sorry to leave you all, but it can’t be helped.” And he left them that noon, all hands giving him a rousing cheer as he departed. He carried with him four rabbits taken from the traps and also a very fat turkey which Joel Runnell managed to lay low for him.

The boys all felt that their hunting tour must soon come to an end, and having rested, they resolved to make the most of the time that still remained to them.

“We may never get another chance to go out like this,” said Harry. “One thing I’d like to bring down before we leave. That is a moose.”

“I guess a moose would suit all of us,” cried Link. “But I don’t think we are going to get any. Moose are mighty scarce around here.”

“Link is right,” put in Joel Runnell. “But for all that we may spot one before we go.”

“Oh, have you seen any signs of a moose?” ejaculated Harry.

“I’ve seen some signs that may have been made by a moose, although a big deer would leave the same marks.”

The shelter was now a very cozy place, for all of the boys spent their leisure time in fixing it up. They had long ago named it Two-Tree Lodge, and Fred had cut out a sign with his jackknife and this was hung over the doorway.

“If folks only knew what a fine camping-out spot this island is, I dare say there would be many more people here,” declared Bart.

It must not be imagined that Joe and Harry had forgotten about Hiram Skeetles’ missing pocketbook, that which contained the papers of so much value.

“We must hunt for those papers, Joe,” said Harry, and they went out not once but several times. But, although they hunted high and low, among the bushes, rocks, and in the snow, the pocketbook and the valuable papers failed to come to light. The most they found was the real estate dealer’s business card, which Joe picked up late one afternoon.

“Hullo! I’ve found old Skeetles’ card,” he sang out, and Harry rushed to his side to look it over.

“Anything else, Joe?”

“No. But this card shows that we are on the right track.”

“That is true.”

After the card was found they hunted around until long after dark, but nothing else was discovered, much to their disappointment.

“Perhaps the pocketbook was washed into the lake after all,” said Fred, who was very much interested, and who had hunted some on his own account. “If you’ll remember, we had some pretty hard rains before winter set in.”

One day all of the boys went gunning deep into the woods back of the shelter. They went on their snowshoes, and managed to scare up eight rabbits, four squirrels, and seven partridges. It was a beautiful day for such sport, and in addition to bringing down his share of the game, Harry procured several photographs, one showing Joe in the act of bringing down two partridges with one shot.

“That will prove that you are an out-and-out hunter, Joe,” said Harry, after the snap shot was taken. “They can’t go back on a picture.”

“Oh, you must remember, there are lots of trick photos,” said Joe, with a laugh. “Don’t you remember that one we saw of a man shooting at himself?”

“Yes,” put in Link, “and I once saw a picture of a man riding himself in a wheelbarrow. But we can all testify that this is no trick photo.”

Sunday the boys took it easy, and it was a rest well earned and well needed.

“Now for the last of our outing,” sighed Harry. “This week

will wind it up.”

“Let us look at the traps,” came from Bart, and he and Link and Fred did so, and found in them two rabbits and a squirrel. There were also signs of a wolf around two of the traps, but they did not catch sight of the beast.

“I fancy that wolf wanted to get one of our rabbits,” said Link. “Perhaps we scared him off just in time.”

“I want nothing to do with wolves,” said Bart. “If they’ll let me alone, I’ll let them alone.”

A couple of days later old Runnell came in somewhat excited. “Unless I am greatly mistaken, I have seen the track of a moose,” he said. “I am going to follow up the tracks. Who wants to go along?”

Who? All of them, and they said so in chorus, while each reached for his gun. Old Runnell made them put on their snowshoes and fill their game bags with provisions.

“We may be gone until to-morrow,” he said. “Running down a moose is no easy thing, even if the snow is deep.”

The route lay along the shore and then across the lake to the mainland. They struck the shore at a point where the pines were heavy, and Joe Runnell showed the young hunters where the moose had stopped to feed.

“He’s after some tender bark,” said the old hunter. “See how he nosed around in the snow for it.”

After a brief rest they continued their journey, but night found the game still out of sight, and they had to go into camp in the

best shelter they could find.

“Never mind,” said Harry. “A moose isn’t to be found here every day.”

“No, nor every week, either,” added old Runnell. “So far I haven’t heard of a single one being brought down this winter.”

They were up again before sunrise and following the tracks as before. These now led up a rise of ground and Joel Runnell went in advance.

“The tracks are getting fresher,” he announced. “I don’t think he’s a mile off at the most.”

They went on for a short distance farther, and then Joe put up his hand.

“Hark!” he said, in a low voice. “What sort of a noise is that?”

They listened, and from a distance heard a scraping and sawing that was most unusual.

“We’ve got him!” said old Runnell. “That’s the moose rubbing himself on a tree.”

He crept forward, with the others close behind. Soon they came to a little opening in the forest. Here were several rocks backed up by a clump of hemlocks. Against one of the hemlocks stood a tall, magnificent moose, with wide-spreading antlers. He had been scraping his back on the rough bark, and now he proceeded to repeat the operation.

“You boys can all fire at the same time,” whispered Joel Runnell. “I’ll wait and see what you can do.” And giving them time to take aim, he gave the signal.

The guns rang out together almost as one piece, causing a tremendous report to echo throughout the forest, and filling the little opening with smoke.

“You’ve got him!” shouted Joel Runnell, with as much joy in his voice as if he had brought the game down himself. And when the smoke lifted they saw the moose totter and pitch headlong. Once, twice the animal tried to rise up, then over he went with a thud on the rocks, gave a kick or two, and lay still.

With loud shouts of triumph the young hunters rushed in. But old Runnell held them back.

“Beware,” he cried. “He may give a last kick that will split some one’s head open. Wait!” And they waited until they were certain that life was extinct.

“What a beautiful haul!” came from Bart. “And see, every one of us hit him in the neck and breast.”

“I’m glad we didn’t hit him in the face,” said Joe. “We can mount that head and it will be something fine.”

“Yes, but who is to keep it?” asked Harry.

“We can take turns,” was the answer, and this caused a laugh.

To get such large game back to the camp at Needle Rock was not easy, and it took them until long after nightfall to cover the distance, and then all were thoroughly exhausted. The moose was placed in a safe place, and they retired without taking the trouble to cook a regular supper.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FIND – END OF THE OUTING

Noon of the next day found Joe walking along the lake shore some distance below the camp. On the outing the day before he had lost a glove and he was trying to locate it in the snow.

“I’m pretty sure I dropped it somewhere along here,” he told himself. “I know I had it on just before we came to those bushes yonder.”

He was still some distance from the bushes when he espied a dark object hanging from one of the branches, among some dried leaves. Thinking it was either the lost glove or the remains of an old bird’s nest, he went over to investigate. The next instant he set up a shout of joy:

“The pocketbook! The pocketbook at last!”

He was right; the pocketbook was there, hanging down from the long string which had been wrapped around it – a dingy, brown affair, well worn at all of the corners and containing two pockets.

With a heart that thumped wildly in his breast, Joe took hold of the pocketbook to examine it. Scarcely had he done so when he gave a groan and his hopes fell as rapidly as they had risen.

The pocketbook was empty. It contained absolutely nothing at all.

“Sold!” he muttered, laconically. “Sold, and just when I thought I had it!”

“What have you found, Joe?” came in Harry’s voice, and a moment later his brother came up.

“Here is Hiram Skeetles’ pocketbook – but it is empty.”

“You don’t say!” Harry looked at the object a moment. “Was it hanging like that when you first saw it?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps the contents dropped out, or was shaken out by the wind.”

“To be sure.” Joe went down on his knees at the roots of the bush and began to scrape away the snow. “I hope we do find something.”

Harry began to assist, and soon the snow was gone and they began to dig in among the dead leaves and sticks. Then Joe hauled up several cards with Hiram Skeetles’ name on them and a memorandum of some property located near the lake.

“Here is something belonging to old Skeetles,” said he.

“Here is another paper,” said Harry. “It’s a bill of sale for a town lot,” he added, looking it over hastily.

An instant later Joe came across a large envelope containing several legal-looking documents. He brushed the dirt from the covering and tried to make out some handwriting on it.

“The papers!” he shouted, joyfully. “Grandfather Anderson’s papers as sure as you are born!”

“Let me see!” ejaculated Harry, and bent over the find. They

hauled the papers from the envelope and looked them over. Their grandfather was mentioned in a number of places, and also two plots of land they had heard their parents discuss. Clearly these were the papers that were so much needed.

“We’ll take them to camp and read them over carefully,” said Joe. “And if they are what we want we had best go right home with them.”

“Won’t mother and father be astonished when they get the news,” added Harry.

They were soon back to camp, and here sat down to look over their find. They had just concluded to their satisfaction when Fred, who was outside cutting firewood, set up a shout:

“Here comes old Skeetles and Dan Marcy!”

“Quick, Joe, put the papers out of sight,” whispered Harry, and this was done.

In a few minutes Hiram Skeetles and Dan Marcy reached the shelter.

“So ye burnt the lodge down!” exclaimed the real estate dealer. “I’ll have the law on ye fer that!”

“The lodge was burnt down by accident,” answered Joe. “We are willing to pay a fair amount for the damage done.”

“Humph! And what made ye come over here to camp out?” asked Skeetles, anxiously.

“Because we felt like it,” answered Fred.

“I said ye could stay over to the lodge, not here.”

“Well, we came here,” put in Joe. “But we are not going to

stay very long. I and Harry are going home, and I guess the rest will go with us.”

The real estate dealer looked at the Westmore boys sharply.

“Did ye find – er – anything belongin’ to me around here?” he asked, suspiciously.

“We did – a pocketbook and these cards and papers,” answered Joe, boldly, and handed over what belonged to the miserly man.

“What!” Hiram Skeetles turned first red and then white. “Did ye – er – find anything else?”

“Nothing belonging to you, Mr. Skeetles.”

“Nothin’ belongin’ to me, eh? What else did ye find?”

“You’ll learn about that later,” said Harry.

“Ha! you’re keepin’ something back! I can see it in yer faces! Give it up, I say, give it up!” And Hiram Skeetles took a savage step forward.

“Leave the lads alone,” came sternly from Joel Runnell. “What they’ve got belongs to them.”

“He’s got them papers!” screamed Skeetles, losing all self-control. “Take ’em from him, Dan!” And he pointed at Joe.

Marcy took a step forward as if to catch hold of Joe, but a well-directed blow from old Runnell’s hand sent him sprawling in the snow.

“Clear out,” said the old hunter, wrathfully. “If you don’t – ”

He tapped his gun, but it was unnecessary. The bully staggered to his feet and retreated without delay. Seeing this, Hiram

Skeetles also fell back, glaring angrily at our friends as he did so.

“What are ye goin’ to do?” he asked, after a pause.

“I am going to help my folks get back the property that belongs to them,” answered Joe. “Hiram Skeetles, you are found out, and the less fuss you make the better off you’ll be.”

“Those papers ain’t no good.”

“That remains to be seen. What I want to know is, how did you manage to steal them?”

“Steal ’em?” Hiram Skeetles’ lips quivered. “Didn’t steal ’em. Dan Marcy got – ”

“Don’t you lay it off on me,” howled the bully. “Skeetles told me they belonged to him, and that’s why I got ’em. If I had known – ” He stopped short.

“My opinion of it is, you are both a precious pair of rascals,” came from Joel Runnell. “And that being so, I want you to leave these boys alone.”

A wordy war followed, but old Runnell and the young hunters were obdurate, and at last Hiram Skeetles and Dan Marcy withdrew, the former trembling for what the future might have in store and the bully like a dog that has been thoroughly whipped.

“I move we start for home at once,” said Joe, and Harry seconded the motion. The others were willing, and they started less than an hour after, dragging their diminished stores and the balance of the moose after them.

The coming into Lakeport with such big game attracted considerable attention, and they were loudly congratulated on the

success of their hunting tour; but the majority of the people did not know the full extent of their success until some time later, when the truth concerning the missing papers was announced.

“They are the real papers,” said Mrs. Westmore. “It is wonderful how you managed to locate them.”

“We will start proceedings against Hiram Skeetles without delay,” said Mr. Westmore, and this was done. The real estate dealer put up a feeble fight, but the evidence was all against him, and in the end the property came into the Westmore possession. Then it was also decided that Skeetles had no claim upon Pine Island. The real estate dealer grew so unpopular in that neighborhood that soon he moved to another section of the country and that was almost the last seen or heard of him.

“I guess Dan Marcy feels rather mean,” said Joe. “He knows he didn’t treat us right.”

“Oh, Marcy has a thick hide and wouldn’t feel mean over anything,” answered Fred. “As soon as this affair blows over he’ll go around bullying folks just as much as ever.” And this proved true, although Marcy, for a long while to come, gave the Westmores, Fred, and old Runnell a wide berth.

The young hunters never tired of talking of the grand outing they had had.

“It was a dandy,” said Fred. “I declare, I feel like a regular hunter now.”

“I guess we all do,” said Link. “Although Bart and I weren’t out as long as you fellows.”

“Never mind – I had my share of the fun,” put in Bart.

“We had our sports and hardships pretty well mixed,” came from Joe. “But as everything came out as it should in the end we needn’t complain.”

“Complain!” cried Harry. “I’d like to have another outing just like it next winter.”

The others said the same. And here let us for the present say good-bye to the Gun Club Boys of Lakeport. More good times were in store for them, and what some of these were will be told in another volume, to be called, “The Baseball Boys of Lakeport; or, The Winning Run.” Baseball is our great national sport, as all my readers know, and when clubs play each other the rivalry is of the keenest.