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BY

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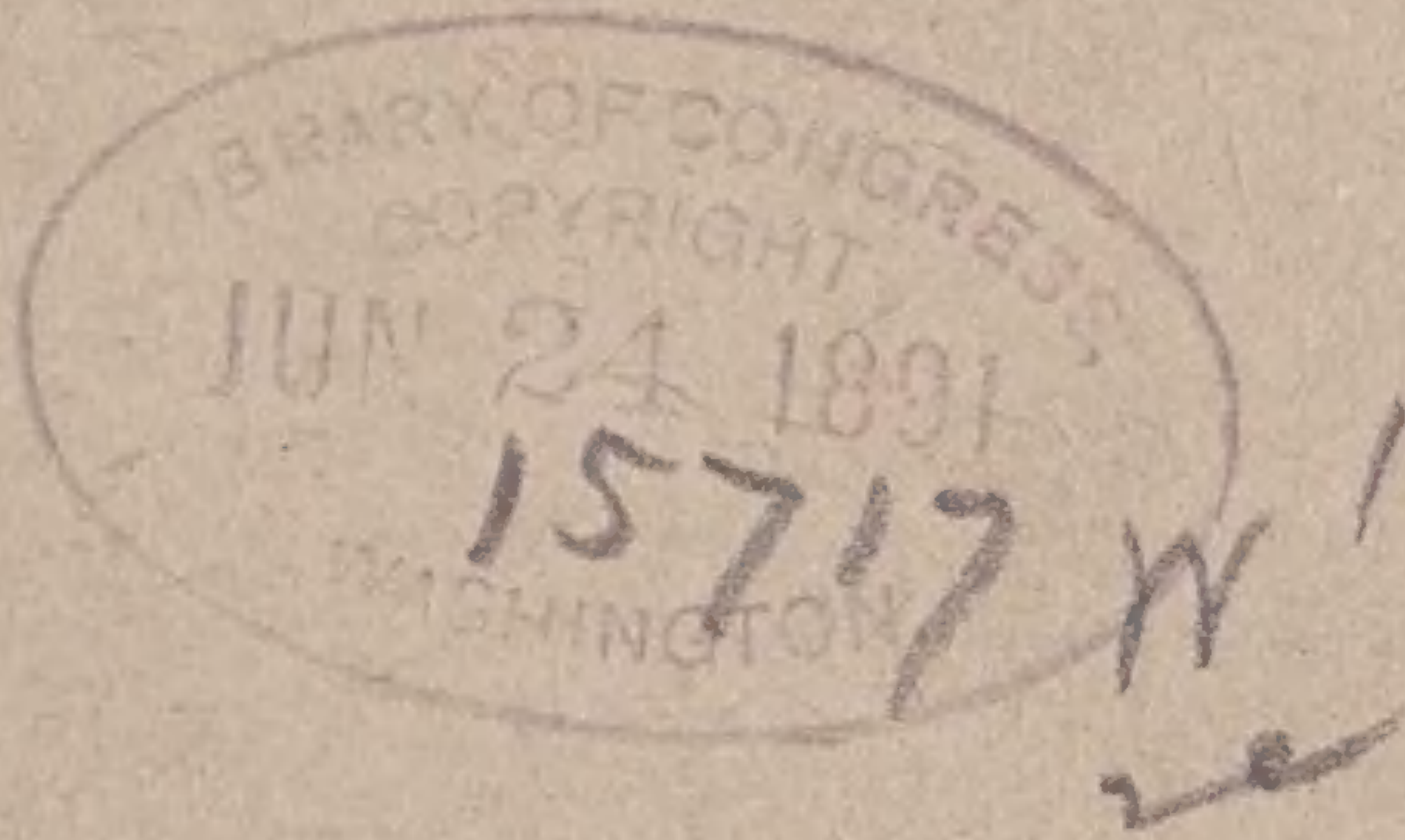
PLYING THE AXE, WAS A TRIM LITTLE FIGURE IN LEATHER AND VELVET.

IN THE SUNK LANDS

BY ✓

WALTER F. BRUNS

*40
Leather
clad*



NEW YORK

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY

150 WORTH ST., COR. MISSION PLACE

1891

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IN THE SUNK LANDS;

OR,

THE ADVENTURES OF THE X. T. C. QUARTETTE.

CHAPTER I.

THE PROPOSITION.

“STEVE!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Expect Jimmerson this morning. Keep him till I get back—important—Johnson’s.”

And crusty Mr. Roberts, sole proprietor of the establishment of I. J. Roberts, hide and fur dealer, caught up his faded umbrella and darted through the door bound on his business errand.

Hardly had he disappeared, when the wareroom door was burst open with a suddenness that caused me to spring six inches off my high stool, and a young gentleman

of seventeen launched himself into the office.

“Hi, Steve! I’ve got it!”

“What? Saint Vitus’s dance?”

“No, sir-ee! A great scheme! We’re going hunting!”

“We are?” I asked, in surprise, this being my first intimation of such a proceeding. “Where?”

“Oh—why—somewhere.”

Then dropping his voice to an awe-struck whisper, as he glanced cautiously around, he continued irreverently :

“Where’s Robby?”

“Just gone out.”

“Oh,” with a sigh of relief. “Forgot all about him; was so excited. Run all the way down here. Glad I came through the wareroom, though I nearly fainted. Why don’t you throw some disinfectants around out there? Me and the old codger don’t hitch since he caught me boring holes with his gold pen. Strange.”

“Very,” I replied. “But what about this hunt? Have you told the boys? What did they say? Where do you intend to go?”

“ Here, hold on ! One thing at a time. I’ve told Joe and Treve, and they’re wild over it. As to where we’ll go, I haven’t decided. Somewhere where there’s big game—no more snipe shooting for me ; got to give those Winchester rifles and our dogs an airing. Now, Steve, if you know of any place, I, Robert Cross, president and general manager of the Ecstasy Quartette, will be delighted to receive any suggestion——”

“ Why, of course I do ! ” I interrupted, a bright idea striking me. “ The very thing. Jimmerson will be here this morning——”

“ Here ! What’s the matter ? ” cried Bob in alarm, as I waltzed around the small office, knocking over three stools and the coal bucket. “ Who is Jimmerson ? ”

“ Why, don’t you know Jimmerson ? ”

“ Never having seen him, can’t say that I have met him,” was the prudent reply.

“ Neither have I,” I admitted. “ He’s our agent in the sunk lands——”

“ Where’s the sunk lands ? ”

“ Great Scott ! Can’t you give me a chance ? These sunk lands are in the southeastern part of Missouri and the

northeastern part of Arkansas. They are gloomy swamps, chuck full of game from a deer to a swamp rabbit, and—er—well, for farther particulars I refer you to Mr. Isaac Jimmer——”

I finished with a flourish of my arm, but inadvertently stepping on a lump of coal, sat down with great rapidity and violence in the scuttle.

“Gad! What a head you have,” said Bob, admiringly. “Don’t you ever part with it or you’ll lose something.”

I treasured this information accordingly.

“And now for Jimmerson,” went on Bob, after I had extricated myself.

“Jimmerson lives somewhere in the sunk lands. Buys pelts from the hunters and trappers and gets a certain per cent on the profit of the lot. By buying with powder, shot, etc., and very little money, he manages to make a pretty large income. Comes up here just before the season opens for money and orders.”

“Well,” said Bob, rising, “then I had better go around and tell Judicial Joe and Treve that you’re going and that they had better ask for a vacation?”

“ Yes.”

“ All right.”

He closed the door, but quickly opened it to call back :

“ You attend to Jimmerson and I’ll——”

“ Not jess now you won’t !” I heard a gruff voice exclaim.

Then came sounds of a struggle, and the next moment Bob was shoved violently back into the office, followed by a stranger, who shut the door and placed his back against it.

He was a tall man, straight as a plumb line, with a straggling beard, hair persuaded to retain the semblance of a part by a liberal coating of yellow soap, and a pair of snapping black eyes peering out of a nut-brown countenance. One calloused, brown hand, resting suggestively on a singular protuberance in the region of the coat tails of his coarse tweed suit, filled me with alarm.

Under the impression that he was an escaped maniac, I promptly placed the stove between us, and, judging from Bob’s ineffectual attempts to get behind the vault

door, that stood close to the wall, he was of the same opinion.

“I’m onto confeedence men,” said the stranger, eying Bob’s neat business suit suspiciously. “Y’all never kotch a weasel asleep.”

We agreed with him.

“Nur you-uns kain’t me. It’s nigh on a year since I been up yere, an’ I reckon I’m kinder turned around. This I. J. Roberts’s?”

“Are you Mr. Jimmerson?” I asked, beginning to understand the situation.

“Mebby I am,” he replied, cautiously, looking curiously at me.

“We were just speaking of you,” said Bob, coming from behind the vault door.

“I heered you,” was the dry reply. “An’ now, afore I get my hat, which same drapped outside when I kotched this yere feller, mebbby you-uns’ll tell me what you want?”

“We’re going down in the sunk lands,” I replied promptly.

“You air? What fur? I tell you hit won’t do!” he cried, bringing his fist down on a desk with a force that shook the office

and made two boys jump. "The fellers don't know you down there, an' you'd git your haid knocked off'n less'n a week!"

"Our heads knocked off!" gasped Bob.

"Is that what I said?" asked Mr. Jimmerson, turning suddenly on him.

"Wh—why, yes."

"Then that's what I meant.' Sides that, you don't know the kentry, an' as fur tradin', why, they'd cheat you-uns outen your eye teeth afore you could say 'Jack Robinson' with your mouth open. Nusser! Don't go meddlin' in my affairs; I kin hold my end o' the business up."

"Oh-o-o!" I exclaimed, a sudden light breaking on me. "We don't want to deprive you of your position. All we want is a good place to hunt."

"Jerusalem crickets!" ejaculated Mr. Jimmerson, a broad smile splitting his weather-beaten countenance. "Why didn't you say so afore? Kim down where I live, an' I kin show you more game'n you kin shake a stick at!"

"What kind of game?" we asked breathlessly.

"Well, there's b'ar, deer, swamp rabbits,

squirrels, 'possums, coons, wild cats, cat-amounts, turkeys, ducks, geese, swans, brants an' wild hogs. You kin have some fun a-trappin' the mink, otter, muskrat an' weasels. 'Sides that, there's moughty good fishin' in the bayous."

"Just the place for us," I cried, enthusiastically, as Mr. Jimmerson paused.

"And mud and mosquitoes," observed Bob.

"Yes, plenty o' that in the spring an' summer; but this late in the fall the ground's purty firm, an' the first good cold snap sends the skeeters higher'n Gilroy's kite," replied Mr. Jimmerson.

"What caused these sunk lands?" asked Bob.

Mr. Jimmerson first went out and secured his hat. Then, assuming an easy position with his feet against the stove, he began:

"As near as I know, hit was caused by evolutions o' natur'. Along between the years o' 1811 an' '13 we had a lot o' earthquakes down our way—by which I mean the southeastern part o' Misery an' the northeastern part o' Arkansaw—an' what was good land sunk down, an' what was

swamps ris up. Whole plantations went down ; the old Mississippi boomed in an' filled 'em up, an' there she stands to this day, kivered with heavy timber, bogs an' 'casional patches o' firm land. People who lost their land, an' all they had with hit, was so destertute that the Government made a 'propriation an' deeded 'em new land fur what they lost. No one lives in the swamps but a lot o' trappers an' hunters, who make their livin' trappin' fur skins. I know a right smart lot o' them. Each one holds his claim by an unwritten law,' an' his rifle, an' any feller as tries to jump hit, or trap hit 'thout permission, runs a pow'ful good chance o' gettin' a bullet in his maw !”

I looked at Bob, and he looked at me. Already the conversation had a ring of excitement.

“ Are there any claims left ? ” I ventured to ask.

“ I don't reckon you-uns could find a likely one, 'thout runnin ag'in some o' them, or ag'in somebody as purtends to be one o' them, fur there's a heapin' big lot o' scoundrels down there ; but I've got a shanty

on Muddy Run, about eight miles from Maumelle Lake, that you kin have, an' I don't reckon any one'll pester you-uns there. If they do, warn 'em off, an' ef they don't go, send a charge o' buckshot into 'em !”

Mr. Jimmerson finished this cold-blooded suggestion with a careless air that froze our blood.

“ And now, as to the best way for us to go ? ” hinted Bob, who was business clear through. I would not have thought of half that he did.

“ I ginerally ride across to Jonesboro—that's about twenty-five mile from where I live—an' take the Scott R. R. up yere to Kansas City. Hit's about a hundred an twenty mile. Now, if I was in you-uns' place, I'd git off at Jonesboro, an' hire a hoss an' waggin to ride across the kentry. You kin always use a hoss in camp. I might meet you-uns there ; but I wouldn't know when you was comin'.”

“ We could write,” said Bob.

“ 'Twouldn't do me any good. Nary one in our family kin read or write. We have to go to Jonesboro once'n a while to stock

up ; but we don't go more'n once in two monts.

“ You-uns'll want somebody along to kinder keep you from gettin' lost,” continued Mr. Jimmerson, after several moments of silence, “ an' I reckon my boy Sammy'll about jump outen his hide at such a chance. He's a mighty peart boy, Sammy is.”

So, by mutual consent and without a word, Sammy Jimmerson was admitted into the company of the Ecstasy Quartette, pending our arrival at the Jimmerson mansion.

A quick step on the platform outside, and the high, raspy voice of Mr. Roberts giving directions about some hides, brought the conference to a close.

I was again bending over a heavy column of neglected figures. Bob had disappeared through the wareroom. Mr. Jimmerson, noting the sudden change, brought his feet down off the stove with remarkable dexterity, and stood twisting his straggling beard nervously when Mr. Roberts came in.

He was taken into the private office, and the rest of the day, when I was not busy with the books or thinking about the great

hunt, I heard the faint hum of their conversation.

At last Mr. Jimmerson went away, bestowing a very knowing wink on me as he was shown through the office by Mr. Roberts.

“ Steve ! ”

“ Yes, sir. ”

“ I’m going home now, ” continued Mr. Roberts, drawing on his shabby overcoat. “ Jimmerson will be back about five. Give him this package of money, and tell him by all means, to use it sparingly. ”

And with a tight grip on his umbrella and a groan at the thought of paying out so much, Mr. Roberts departed.

I placed the money, which was inclosed in an old envelope—Mr. Roberts was too parsimonious to use a new one—on the desk, by the side of a set of old books that had been taken from the vault to look up an old account.

Mr. Jimmerson did not come.

After waiting until patience was exhausted, I closed the books, put them away in the vault, donned my overcoat and went home, forgetful of the fact that the envelope

containing the money lay in plain view on the desk.

I awoke in the night and happened to think of it, but consoled myself with the thought that the envelope bore too battered an appearance to be confiscated as an article of value.

And that very "battered aspect," coupled with Mr. Jimmerson's non-appearance, started the X. T. C. Quartette on their hunt in the sunk lands a great deal quicker than they anticipated.

CHAPTER II.

THE QUARTETTE, THE DEN, AND THE ARSENAL.

Now, before I go any farther, perhaps I had better introduce you to the X. T. C. Quartette and its members.

In the first place, it was composed of four as mischief-loving youths as ever grouped themselves together. They did not follow the antics of a great many of the city clubs, by congregating at different places to exchange a lot of worthless conversation, but turned their views to another direction. A large front room on the second floor of our house was utilized as a club room, and here, in the cold winter evenings, could be found the four members, with perhaps, occasionally, friends.

And what a room that was !

On the left, as one entered, was a large,

glass-doored gun-case, containing our arsenal. The drawers underneath were filled with shot, empty and loaded shells, and the paraphernalia for loading the same. Powder we bought as we needed it, being strictly prohibited from keeping it in the house. On the right a young library sprouted out, reaching from the floor to very near the ceiling, and from one end of the room to the other. It had already reached nine hundred and forty volumes, and numerous hints were thrown out to the household that another room would be acceptable.

Mineral and coin collection cases found places between the windows. A large, green baize table had the center of the room, and from the ceiling above it hung a low swinging lamp. Magazines and periodicals filled the rack underneath, and the cards and boards of different games crowded the drawers. Easy-chairs occupied the rest of the available space. A ferocious looking wild cat and a sage hen looked down from above the gun-case. The cat had lost an eye, and the sage hen a great many feathers ; but Treve refused to take them down, as they were a present from an uncle a

number of years before, and so they were allowed to remain on sufferance. Joe's taxidermic collection occupied the top shelf of the library.

And now that I have described the "den," I will turn to its inhabitants.

The first on the list, from his commanding position of president and general manager, is Bob. He was introduced to us as Robert A. Cross ; but ten minutes after we called him Bob, and Bob he has remained ever since. Just imagine an airy, breezy youth of seventeen, with a face like a girl's, dark eyes and brown hair, and a disposition that no one could ruffle, and you have a picture of Bob. A good shot with a rifle or gun, head and heels in anything like fun, courteous and pleasant in address ; do you wonder that he was a favorite with the boys, and that people called him "clever?" He owns a pair of pointers that, for that class of dogs, cannot be beat.

The next is Treve. Of course you know that Treve is my twin brother ; but unless you have known us half our lives, you cannot distinguish us apart—he either looks so much like me, or I so much like him. This

same resemblance is sometimes embarrassing for me, for Treve possesses a terrible tendency for getting into mischief, and it is an ordinary occurrence for me to be collared by some irate citizen and read a lecture a yard long for something Treve has done. He is a big, blue-eyed, black-haired boy, with a countenance that is continually smiling. He is a little over seventeen, and forty-five-minutes younger than I am ; but this priority on my part, somehow, he fails to recognize. Treve owns an Irish setter over which he makes big pretensions, but which, notwithstanding, flushes the game before you could hit it with a rifle.

Joseph B. Miller is the third member of the X. T. C. Quartette. Judicial Joe, we sometimes call him, one reason being that he is studying law, and the other that he carries a very solemn countenance—a direct contradiction to his disposition, for a more lively and amiable companion cannot be found. Joe can get in, and get out—by means of his countenance, mentioned before—of more mischief in a given time than any person I know, not excepting Treve. He is the crack shot of the quartette,

and owns a small water spaniel of remarkable intelligence, and an English setter.

As for myself, being naturally modest, I will say very little, although I take a back seat for no one. Having described Treve, and stated that he was my twin brother, a pen picture of myself is unnecessary. I am the secretary of the quartette, and it is from the statistic reports and a good memory that I write this story. I am a fair shot, and own two of the best dogs in the quartette. They are Gordon setters, Dave and Dan, and have won prizes at shows.

Now for the "arsenal."

Throwing open the glass doors, the first three guns belong to Bob. The first is a heavy breech-loader, gauge 10, choke bore, good for long range and duck shooting, and nothing else. The second is a light gauge 12, fine for field shooting. The third is a Winchester rifle, 45 caliber, 15 shot. The next three belong to me. They are the same as Bob's with the exception that the 10 is not a choke bore.

Treve delights in the possession of the next three. His are the same, with the modification of the heavy 10, one barrel of

which is rifled for ball. Joe has the largest. He has the customary heavy 10, light 12, Winchester, and boasts the farther possession of a little German rifle that throws a bullet thirteen to the pound sewed in greased buckskin.

The latter has its drawbacks with the rest of us, being a muzzle-loader, but it suits Joe. One shot is all he wants, except on rare occasions, and anything he shoots at is as good as dead before the buckskin covered bullet strikes it. The Winchester rifles that each one of us possessed were a present from Bob's father, a banker of some note.

Thus far our shooting had been confined to clay pigeons, snipe, squirrels, rabbits, and occasionally a go at ducks and quail; but to go where there were bear, deer, panther, and other large game—well, I might say what Treve did—“geewhiz !”

CHAPTER III.

IN THE SUNK LANDS—HELD UP.

My first move the next morning was for that package of money. My heart went down into my shoes when I found it gone!

I ransacked the desk, explored every corner of the office, thinking a draft might have wafted it off; but it was useless. No money. I examined windows, which were fastened, and the door, to which there were three keys. One I had, one belonged to Mr. Roberts, and the third to the watchman and janitor, Mike O'Connor.

Mr. Roberts was already in his office when I arrived. Might he not have seen it lying carelessly on the desk and removed it? I would investigate before interrogating Mike. So I called forth a light smile, which I am afraid was rather sickly looking, and tripped in.

“ Good-morning,” he said gruffly.

I responded, and immediately launched forth on my errand.

“ Mr. Jimmerson did not call last night,” I began. “ I neglected to put the money in the vault, and left it on the desk. Have you seen it ? ”

“ Have I seen it ! ” he repeated, still bending over his desk. “ No, sir.”

“ Then it’s gone ! ” I gasped.

“ Eh ? ” he cried, swinging around. “ Gone where ? ”

What a question ! I was about to say that if I knew I would go after it, but, realizing the difference in our positions, I replied :

“ I don’t know, sir.”

“ Were the windows fastened when you went home ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Door ? Yes, I know, I unlocked it myself. Maybe Mike found it and put it in a safe place.”

“ Maybe he did,” I acquiesced. “ I’ll call him.” Mike was sent for.

“ Did you clean the office this morning ? ” asked Mr. Roberts, with a severe frown, as Mike stepped in.

“ Oi did,” said Mike, looking at us both and scratching his head.

“ Find anything unusual ? ”

“ No, sorr.”

“ Didn’t you find an envelope containing money, on the desk ? ” I broke in.

“ Wor it a yaller wan ? ” asked Mike, suddenly beginning to get red as he twisted his hat and shuffled from one foot to the other.

“ Yes.”

“ Oi did.”

“ And what did you do with it ? ” demanded Mr. Roberts.

Mike hemmed and hawed several times, and then replied :

“ Oi *burned* it, sorr ! ”

“ You what ? ” yelled Mr. Roberts, grabbing his desk and trying to lift it off the floor, while I slid into the nearest chair.

“ Oi burned it, sorr,” repeated Mike stolidly.

“ Burr-r-r ! ” spluttered Mr. Roberts, tearing at his collar and trying to get hold of a paper weight at the same time. “ And it contained fourteen hundred dollars! Waugh! Why, you infernal third cousin to a chim-

panzee, you're greener than the shamrock you're continually singing about! What did you do it for?"

"Yez told me to," replied Mike, calmly.

"I told you to! Hold him somebody; I'm liable to hurt myself! I'll have you in a lunatic asylum before night. When did I give you any such a hare-brained order?"

"The other day. Yez kim to me, an' ye sez, sez ye, 'Moike,' an' Oi sez 'Phat?' an' thin ye sez, sez ye, 't'row all the old paper you foind scribbled over in the foire; it looks bad,' an' Oi sez 'all right.'"

Mr. Roberts was crushed.

Mike was getting in a talkative mood, and wanted to exonerate himself.

"How did Oi know," he demanded, "that the dirthy ould invelope had fourteen hundred dollars in it? Oi'm no moind rader! Phat do ye take me for; a double jinted, copper riveted, brass bound pace av walkin' dictionary?"

"I took you for a dollar and a half a night and a man of common sense," replied Mr. Roberts, faintly.

"An' ye wor not cheated," said Mike, loftily. "Oi draw me pay an' a long breath

ivery Saturday night, an' can't tell which does one the most good. Av Oi——”

“That'll do,” interrupted Mr. Roberts. “You may go.”

And Mike went out, humming something like,

“Och, hone!
Give him a bone,
An' lave him alone.”

I wandered aimlessly out to my desk, and tried to work. The statements of a consignment were missing. At last I was compelled to go to Mr. Roberts.

“Have you seen Davis's consignment?”

“No. Were they on the desk?” he asked, grimly.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I suppose Mike has burnt them. Write for new ones.”

A few moments later he called out:

“If Jimmerson has gone home and forgotten his money, how am I going to get it to him?”

Here was an opportunity. I almost dreaded to ask for a vacation after the morning's calamity.

“I can't send him a check or draft,” he

continued, "for he wouldn't know what to do with it, and can't write his own name."

"If you have no objections, I'll take it to him," I returned.

"Railroad fare both ways would make it a rather expensive method of transmitting," said Mr. Roberts, sarcastically.

"I would like a vacation of about a month," I went on eagerly. "Mr. Jimmer-son's domicile will be one of our stopping places, and I can take it to him just as well as not."

"Hem," muttered Mr. Roberts. "Fourteen hundred dollars gone up in smoke, and the entire office force struck for a vacation. If the Provident Association confiscates my business for charitable purposes, I don't suppose I should be surprised."

Then he swung hastily around, knocked over his ink-stand and broke his pen. I waited patiently until the storm blew over, and then put in mildly :

"I did not take my summer vacation."

"All right," he returned. "Boys will be boys, I suppose. How long will you be gone?"

"A month."

“ Very well. I’ll get an urchin to watch the office and attend to the books myself. I’ll give you a check for the draft. Start to-night ? ”

“ To-morrow morning. ”

And so it was settled.

The telephone acquainted the rest of the Quartette with the state of affairs. Treve had no trouble in getting off, and Joe could do as he pleased.

I purchased a draft on Jonesboro, and put it carefully away. And what a day that was. There were suits to be overhauled, both rubber and canvas. Owing to Joe and Treve’s mischievous propensities, Bob and I made a thorough examination of our rubber boots to find if any holes had been punched through them. To go on a hunt to an out of the way region with a poor outfit would be worse than staying home.

Bob, as business manager, had his hands full. I was so preoccupied, thinking of the loss of the fourteen hundred dollars, that I put the shot in my shells before the powder, and had the pleasure of taking it out amid much chaffing.

Then the dogs were brought around, to

be handy next morning. We took three ; my setter Dan, Bob's pointer Maje and Joe's spaniel Sam.

A few hurried "good-byes" and we were off for the train. Tickets purchased and trunks checked, we found some amusement in listening to the animated discussion between the baggageman and Bob, who held the three long-eared dogs by their chains, each doing their best to go in as many different directions.

At last we were off. And nothing to do for the rest of the day and night but lounge in that Pullman section and play pranks on one another. I have a large bump, which the phrenologist designates as curiosity, and at the first five minutes' stop I went out to interview the trainmen.

I went for the engineer. He must have expected me ; at least he introduced himself the moment I walked up to where he was oiling the engine.

"My name is Jack Sanders."

"Is it?" said I, calmly.

"It is," said he, fiercely. "I've run on this road for seven years off'n on. Been in fourteen smashups an' never was killed!"

“ Indeed ! ”

“ No ; in Missouri. We’re on this sidin’ for No. 4. Five minutes late an’ liable to be an hour late before we git to the end of the division. Is there anything else you want to know ? ”

I thought not.

“ Then wiggle back, an’ ef any one asks you, say you’ve seen me. ”

His quick perception of what I intended to ask him nonplussed me. I followed instructions and “ wiggled ” back, but I did *not* inform any one that I had seen him.

A little before five o’clock the next morning, the porter, as per instructions, shook the curtains, and bawled :

“ Jonesboro ; ten minutes ahead ! ”

Then pandemonium reigned supreme. Treve, with a sudden lurch of the car, fell from the upper portion and nearly broke his neck. The satchels were reposing under the lower end. The porter perspired like a street sprinkler getting them out. No doubt the other occupants of the car wished we were in Halifax, or some other obscure place.

The train had stopped. We surged out

on the platform, just in time to see our trunks delicately tossed out. They landed with a force that would have smashed anything but sole leather. Then three whining dogs were pulled out and tied to the trunks.

“Where’s the manager?” called Treve.

“I’m here,” responded Bob, rubbing his head and gazing at the barking dogs, who nearly pulled the trunks around in their frantic endeavors to reach their masters.

“What’ll you have?”

“Breakfast,” said Joe, soberly.

So we made an invasion on a restaurant, took the edge off our appetites, and, after securing food for the dogs, came back to the starting point.

“You two hold down those trunks and see that no one steals the dogs, and Steve and I will hunt up a conveyance,” said Bob, briskly.

“And cash that draft,” I added.

The others assenting, we started out.

We had to wait three hours for the bank to open. No trouble was experienced, and we started in search of a horse and wagon.

Inquiry at a livery stable failed to secure

a horse for a period of thirty days. Indeed we were looked upon with suspicion.

“A feller could get clean outen the State in thirty days,” said the owner.

We bottled our indignation and went on.

A pedestrian, to whom we applied, after persistently referring to the weather, told us :

“Jim Mills lives jess round the corner. He’s got a hoss. Too tarnal lazy to use hit, an’ I reckon y’all kin git hit fur a year ef y’all want to.”

We found Mr. Mills lounging on the front gate, and made known the object of our visit.

“Yes ; I got a hossy’ kin have,” he drawled. “He’s in the stable. Y’all kin look at him. Ef he’ll do we’ll make a dicker.”

Mr. Mills did not offer to go to the stable with us ; but time was precious, so we stumbled out alone.

His “hoss” was a big, neglected looking creature. Its ears were frozen off, which gave it a wicked look, and you could count every bone in its body. The harness was in but little better condition ; but the wagon was sound and strong, and we decided to take it.

“How much for the use of it for about a month?” asked Bob.

“Twenty dollars,” replied Mr. Mills promptly.

“He’s joking,” said Bob, looking at me. “How much did you say?”

“Fifteen.”

“How’s a ten?”

“Take y’ up.”

“Here’s a five. That squares us.”

Mr. Mills pocketed the bill, evidently satisfied. We harnessed up, drove to a feed store and laid in some provender for the animal, and pulled up before our weary companions a few minutes later.

“Look at the ten thousand dollar beauty!” exclaimed Joe.

“What’s his gait?” Treve wanted to know.

“Look a-here, fellows,” said Bob, earnestly. “We’ve got twenty-five miles to go between now and dark, besides crossing a five mile lake. So stop chaffing, buckle in, and let’s get started.”

The dogs were unchained and allowed to run alongside, and off we started.

But we soon stopped.

“ Who knows in which direction lies Maumelle Lake ? ” asked Bob.

Not one of us did, so we applied to a gentleman leaning against his fence. He came out to the wagon to examine our equipment before replying :

“ Y'all air on the right road. Hit's nor'-east about twenty mile. Goin' huntin' ? ”

We replied in the affirmative, thanked him and drove on before he could ascertain our age and the place in which we were born. More inquisitive people I have yet to meet.

The air was raw and chilly, with a heavy fog lifting as the sun came out. It was weather we did not expect to find, and it was not long before a halt was called, to enable us to extract our heavy duck coats from the trunks.

“ Hold on, my boy,” cried Treve, patronizingly, as Bob was about to start up. “ Wait till I get out my gun. I always eat my dinner, even when traveling, and a quail or chicken will come in handy.”

“ Well, look at those dogs ! ” cried Joe, admiringly.

Two of them were standing with fore paw

uplifted and backs as straight as a plumb line from the tip of their nose to their tails. The third—Joe's spaniel, Sam—was sitting on his haunches regarding them with curiosity.

“It's a quail or a prairie chicken!” ejaculated Treve.

Then he got carefully out of the wagon, the dogs trembling with excitement.

Four quail got up with a hum. Twenty feet was as far as two got, the quick reports of the double barrel stopping their earthly career. That was but a starter. Long before noon enough quail and chickens reposed in the bottom of the wagon to satisfy double our number.

Away in the east a hazy cloud, lifting above the trees, told of the proximity to the marshy sunk lands.

Our quadruped being without a name, we contributed one. He answered to Loafer both by disposition and hearing. And that was about all he would do. To get him out of a walk was out of the question. Noon found us about twelve miles from the starting point, and camped by the side of a cane brake.

Loafer munched his hay and oats and seemed contented. Fried quail and prairie chicken formed the main feature of our repast, washed down with water from a small spring that seemed to rise from nowhere and flowed to the same place.

During the afternoon Loafer plodded along, the road becoming wilder and little more than a trampled path—just wide enough for the wagon—winding around trees and stumps in a dense wood. Squirrels barked as they skipped about the trees, and some of them went into the wagon.

The sun had set and it was growing darker every moment when we pulled up on the bank of Maumelle Lake. Nothing to be heard but the sounds of the forest behind, and the solemn croak of the frogs on the edge of the water. A fish hawk sailing along over the willows, that covered the lake, except where the currents made lanes. The willows were about fourteen feet high. Nothing could be seen but their yellow, waving tops, and the faint marks of a boat landing a little below us.

Perhaps the boatman lived within hailing distance. We shouted singly and together. It was useless.

“ Well, this is a pretty note,” said Treve, petulantly.

“ Isn’t that some one moving in the bushes to the right ? ” I asked.

The next moment came a hail :

“ Hallo thar ! ”

“ Hallo ! ” we returned, not to be outdone in courtesy.

“ Be you-uns them city chaps as come up yere in a waggin ? ” asked the same voice.

We replied in the affirmative.

The figure came slowly on until it reached Loafer’s head. It carried a gun under its arm.

There came two sharp clicks as the fellow cocked both barrels, and then :

“ Dump that gun out ! ”

He evidently meant what he said. There was no disobeying orders when looking down the barrels of that gun. Treve promptly tossed his weapon over.

“ That’s right. Now, shell out y’all’s watches, money an’ jewelry. I’ve got the drap on you, my friends, an’ mean what I say. See that y’all air quick about hit, too, fur I’ve got two charges o’ buckshot in this yere gun as will clean y’all outen that waggin at the first ’spicious move ! ”

CHAPTER IV.

THE TABLES TURNED.

My heart seemed to rise into my throat and choke me, then sank to the region of my heels. And the fourteen hundred dollars in my inside pocket! I thought I would wilt.

“Kim, hurry up,” said the highwayman, as we began to gather our small change. “Don’t think I don’t know how much y’all got. Didn’t foller you-uns all the way from Jonesboro fur nothin.” That feller on the front seat better hand out that pile o’ money, stead o’ fishin’ fur his nickels an’ dimes!”

I suppose I jumped about six inches at that.

“Come and get it,” said Bob.

“Not much I don’t!” he exclaimed with a coarse laugh. “Y’all kin dump it out on the ground. I’ve been in this yere business afore, my friend, an’ don’t let no feller git

me off my guard. Has that pocket-book hit the ground yit ? ”

It hadn't, but it did the next second. I did not propose to stop a charge of buckshot for being backward, when I would probably lose it in the end.

“ It might injure these watches to be thrown on the ground,” pleaded Treve.

“ Ef they're valuable I'll run the risk.”

“ But they ain't.”

“ Then I guess hit ain't any great loss. Toss 'em out ! ”

How galling it was to sit there and be told what to do with our own property ! And the only barrier against insubordination was the fear that we would have to stop the contents of that gun.

The dogs were inclined to interfere ; but we ordered them under the wagon to prevent them from getting shot.

“ Has that fellow on the last seat sent his watch out yit ? My finger's on the trigger ! ”

Joe's watch followed immediately.

“ Quite a little haul,” said the gentleman who commanded the situation, stepping to the side of the wagon and picking up the

pocket-book, still keeping his gun pointed at us.

Joe nudged me in the back.

“Keep still about the money in the trunk,” he whispered hoarsely, just loud enough for the gentleman with the gun to hear.

There was no money there, I knew, but the ruse was successful.

“Got some more, have y’?” he said, with a broad grin. “Well, yank out your trunk an’ haul hit out. Don’t be long about hit, either!”

Of course Joe was reluctant, and needed considerable urging.

He unlocked the top trunk. It did not make much difference which trunk he went into; they were packed about the same. If the stranger could have seen the gleam in Joe’s eye he would have stopped him.

“Hurry up,” he called. “I hain’t got much more time. Yank it out!”

And Joe did yank it out. It was not money. It was a Winchester, and it went up to his shoulder like a flash. He had experienced some trouble in getting the cartridges and shoving a couple in.

If the stranger had been in that "business afore," he had certainly made a mistake this time. His gun was pointed a little below us, and he dared not raise it with that black tube staring him in the face.

"Don't raise your gun," was Joe's first command. "We were never in this business before, but no doubt you recognize the fact that I have got the drop on you."

"Well?" he snarled.

"Yes; pretty well for us," Joe acquiesced. "Steve, will you jump down and relieve him of that pocket-book and gun? Don't you try to stop him, mister, or you will get a 45 through your head, and never be of any good afterwards!"

It was not a commission I liked; but, being called upon, I did not stop to think about any danger.

I clambered down, and, stepping across the six feet of intervening ground, prepared to carry out instructions.

"Which pocket did he put it in?" I asked, thinking more of getting possession of the money than his gun.

"Find out!" he snapped out.

"Short and sweet," laughed Bob.

“So are you,” growled the man. Then, as I shoved my hand in his coat pocket he wheeled, planted his fist with stinging force in my face, and darted back through the brush before those in the wagon had become fully aware of what had happened.

I saw stars and brilliant flashes of light. They were forked and otherwise, and all highly entertaining.

I staggered to my feet just in time to see two flashes of light that were not imaginary, and a perfect hail of buckshot flew around us. Half a dozen pierced the wagon bed, one scraped Loafer's rump, making him prance in a way we thought him incapable of, but none struck the quartette.

Hardly had the flashes disappeared when the Winchester sang out twice, the last shot bringing a howl of pain,

“Don't go into the brush,” Joe cried quickly, as Bob and Treve jumped down. “It may be only a ruse. If that's a breech-loader you'd be in a pretty fix.”

And then he dived hastily into the trunk for more cartridges.

Although I rejoiced heartily with the rest in the fact that the fellow had not secured

our watches and small change, I felt keenly the loss of the package of money.

“ We can't do anything more to-night,” said Bob, decidedly. “ I move that we go a little farther down and camp out.”

This motion was carried unanimously.

Loafer was led to an open space and unhitched. The trunks were unpacked of what articles we needed, such as blankets, coats, guns, and frying-pan, and then placed in a circle to form a shelter in case of an attack. A fire was built, Loafer fed, and Joe and I were cleaning the squirrels when Bob said suddenly :

“ I wonder if there is any danger of our friend paying us a visit while we are asleep ? ”

“ I guess not, if he was hit as hard as his yell indicated,” replied Joe.

“ I propose that we take a look at the place where he was hit. For all we know he may be dead, or lying there unconscious, and the money——”

“ Got a lantern ? ” asked Treve.

“ No ; but a few brands out of this fire will do just as well. If he wasn't hit at all, and his yell was only a ruse, we'll have to

stand watch to-night. It may be better to do it any way."

Then he selected three of the blazing pieces of pine, and gathered several more to be used when the others went out, saying :

"If he's lying over there waiting for just such a party to hunt him out, he'll have the finest kind of a mark with these bonfires to light us up."

"In view of which case," said Joe, "we'll take our rifles along, if only to convince him that we know how to use them."

"We'll buckle on our cartridge belts," I put in. "Of course we don't expect to make a siege of it ; but it's better to have them along."

"Well, if we are going to have a parade, I suppose we had better take the hunting knives," added Joe.

"Keep on, and we'll have to carry the trunks," laughed Bob.

Then he valiantly led the way with the dogs, Joe and Treve following, and I bringing up the rear. The blazing torch threw a lurid glare on the surroundings, and made the forest beyond the limit of light seem more black.

“Sure you’re going in the right direction?” asked Joe, as Bob plunged fearlessly through a tangle of vines and creepers.

“It ought to be right ahead,” was the reply. “Isn’t that the tree?”

We halted around a large, shellbark hickory. A faint parting in the shrubbery leading toward the lake told where the stranger had plunged through.

“I don’t see any blood,” said Bob, after a careful examination of the leaves and grass on the ground.

“But here is where he stood,” exclaimed Treve, pointing to two large footprints in the damp soil at the foot of the tree. “And here is where one of the bullets struck,” laying his finger on a place where the bark had been plowed off in a deep ridge. “I bet you didn’t miss him very far. I’ve got my opinion of a man who hollers before he is hit.”

“Now that we know he wasn’t wounded, we can look out for him,” said Bob solemnly.

“And we’ve left camp without leaving any one to guard it!” broke in Treve ex-

citedly. "He can carry off half we've got while we're up here looking for him."

"Good gracious! Why didn't we think of that before!" I cried.

"Wait till I get this pine knot lit," and Bob's fingers were all thumbs. "We'll break our necks falling over logs."

The dogs commenced to whine and bristle their backs; but we paid no attention and started back, proceeding as before.

Hardly had we taken a dozen steps, when there was an unearthly yell from above, and a heavy body struck me between the shoulders, knocking me upon those in front, and down we all went ingloriously.

The torch was sent flying. There was a snarling, biting growl from above, and the terrible claws of some beast sank into my shoulder, burning like red hot irons.

We were in total darkness. I could feel the saliva from the thing's jaws dripping on my neck as I wrenched my arm free, and, turning on my side, gripped the thick hide of its neck. Even as I did so, I realized that I was in the clutches of a wild cat or panther.

Then the dogs jumped on.

My hunting-knife was under me, as was also Treve. To one side I caught sight of Joe and Bob staggering to their feet; but I knew they dared not shoot for fear of hitting us in the dark.

I got hold of the handle of my hunting-knife and plunged it into the snarling body above me, where it stuck. Something warm trickled down, and the claws sank deeper.

Just then the torch, which had been smoldering where it fell, ignited some dead leaves, and a tiny flame shot up, gradually growing brighter.

By its feeble light I saw Joe lift his rifle to his shoulder; then came the report.

For one brief second I thought he had missed; then the claws relaxed and the body rolled off.

I staggered to my feet. By the light of the rapidly spreading fire I saw the tawny body of a panther stretched out beside Treve, who was not yet certain that it was time to get up.

“Put out the fire before it gets beyond control,” cried Joe. “Are you hurt, Steve?”

“Not very much,” I responded; “but my coat’s torn to pieces.”

“We’ll leave his body where it lies and skin it in the morning. I’ll feel a great deal better when I get back to camp. Our selfish friend may get there before we do.”

We tramped out the fire, and plunged through the brush to the open space on the bank of the lake, where walking was easy.

“I don’t see the camp fire,” whispered Bob. “I’m sure I left enough wood on it to burn an hour.”

The dogs began to growl.

“Halt there!” came the hoarse command from ahead in a tone we instantly recognized.

We strained our eyes and managed to discern the faint outlines of the wagon and Loafer.

“I’m a-runnin’ this yere camp an’ outfit,” went on the hoarse voice. “You-uns better find another place to sleep. I put a couple loads o’ buckshot into you-uns awhile back, an’ I kin do hit ag’in ef you-uns try any shenanagan games!”

CHAPTER V.

OUTWITTED.

“WELL, this is a pretty go,” whispered Treve, as he backed rather precipitately, after learning that the stranger had taken possession of our camp and intended to hold it.

“This is a little too much,” cried Joe angrily. “I’ve half a notion to walk down on him, and if he tries to shoot fill him so full of holes that a good wind would blow him off!”

“And the other half notion,” said Treve, tantalizingly, “which is a great deal stronger, says you won’t do anything of the kind.”

“We’ll get behind trees and open communication with the gentleman,” said Bob. “We’ve got him just where we want him, and if we act right we’ll get that money

back. You fellows seem to have forgotten all about that. If we can't persuade him to look at it as we do, we'll put a few bullets as close to him as we can without hitting him."

"And find in the morning that they've lodged in Loafer," put in the irrepressible Treve.

"If you can't shoot better than that you better keep out," replied Bob.

Bob's suggestion was acted upon. We thrashed around through the underbrush, locating our trees, until the besieged thought it about time to interfere.

"You-uns out there think you're blamed smart, don't you?" he called savagely, "Ef I hear any more furse I'll open up both bar'ls an' let y'll dodge buckshot! Y'hear me?"

"Look a-here," shouted Bob. "The best thing you can do, my friend, is to give up. We've got you surrounded, and you're in a pretty tight place. Hand over that money and your ammunition, and we'll let you go."

This seemed to throw him in a paroxysm of rage. We could hear him uttering im-

precations loud and deep. Possession did not seem to be the best position, and yet we thought he had the best of us a few moments before.

I made my way carefully along to the next tree, where Bob was stationed, carefully keeping as many bushes between me and the camp as possible, for our enemy had sharp eyes.

“What do you suppose he took such a position for, to be caught like this?” I asked.

“He didn’t expect to be caught,” replied Bob, grimly. “He was probably lying in the bushes watching us. When we came off so foolishly together, he slipped in to carry off the guns, got interested in overhauling the traps and we surprised him.”

“But he had plenty of time to get away,” I protested.

“I don’t know about that. Didn’t the dogs scent him first?” demanded Bob. “He’s no doubt formed a different opinion of us since he held us up and Joe shot at him. Possibly he thought we’d hunt him down with the dogs—we’re four to one, you know—and a stand behind those trunks is as

good as he'll find, and no exertion. Then again, he was on the ground and could see us, and thought we could see him, and to move would be rather dangerous."

"It'll be dreadful hard standing guard all night," I whispered.

"And there is no moon. He could almost crawl between us and we wouldn't know it. Keep your eyes and ears open, and if you see anything moving put a bullet over it, and if it keeps on put the next one into it. There is no use in letting him get away, and a bullet will have to cut his clothes before he'll stop, if he thinks we're chicken-hearted."

Bob was getting as heartless as Ike Jimmerson.

During the conversation, the gentleman ensconced behind the trunks reviewed his vocabulary of imprecations, and finally ended by shouting :

"Ef y'all wait out there till I s'render y'all be so old your teeth'll drap out. I got friends, I have, an' hit won't take long to call 'em up yere, neither. You-uns better haul off while you kin."

"That won't wash," called Treve.

“Won’t hit!” yelled the besieged.
“Mebby this will.”

There was a flash and a rattle of the shot among the leaves and bushes as he fired in the direction of Treve’s voice. One of the dogs whined a little, as though it had been scratched, then silence reigned, broken by Bob’s asking softly if Treve was hit.

“No,” replied my plucky brother. “He’ll have to shoot through a three foot pecan before he hits me.”

Joe fired twice, taking care to shoot high.

The other laughed derisively and called out:

“You’re wastin’ powder, pardner. Y’all’ll have to shoot through two loaded trunks afore y’ll kin hit me, an I reckon there hain’t a shootin’ iron among y’all as kin do that.”

Both parties subsided. It was too dark to see anything but the faint outlines of objects outlined against the sky, while anything close to the ground was invisible. By lying down I could see the top part of the wagon.

Occasionally we would call to one another, which never failed to bring a response from

the wagon. It let both sides know that the other was there and vigilant.

That was the longest night I ever put in. Just before the gray dawn of morning, our friend failed to respond when anything was said ; but we concluded that he had realized what a precarious position his would be in daylight, and was trying to draw us out for a shot. So we remained very quiet.

With the gradually increasing light I thought I detected something moving along the bank. Remembering instructions I put the first bullet over it and it stopped.

“ What are you shooting at ? ” called Bob, softly.

Before I could reply a voice, coming seemingly from the wagon, answered :

“ He’s practicin’ on a ground hog out there on the bank. Save your shot, sonny ; he hain’t no good.”

“ Where is it ? ” Bob asked, a moment later, coming up softly behind me.

I half turned as he touched my shoulder. When I turned to point it out to him it was gone.

“ Never mind,” he said. “ Maybe it *was* a ground hog. We’ll have our man by the

hip when it gets a little lighter. I've talked with Joe and Treve, and unless you have a better plan we've decided to do this: you, Treve and I will rivet his attention in this direction, and Joe is going to try to creep around to the other side. Then we'll have him between two fires, and if we can't make him come to time we better go back home. Do you know of anything better?"

"No," I replied promptly.

"Then it's settled. Joe is going to start right away, so as to have the advantage of the poor light. Say—look quick—ain't that his hat?"

"That's what it is! He's holding it pretty steady, too."

A hat was plainly discernible, projecting a few inches above one of the trunks.

"Maybe he is aiming at Joe and Treve," whispered Bob anxiously. "I better get back."

He disappeared quickly in the undergrowth.

The hat remained exactly as before.—I failed to detect even a tremor.

Joe started on his rather dangerous mission. We walked back and forth, made

detours to one side, in the opposite direction to which Joe had gone, and did everything we could think of to attract his attention. The result was most satisfactory. The hat never changed its position.

He had arranged the trunks in the form of a crescent, with the opening towards the lake.

The most dangerous part of Joe's journey, was the crossing of the open space between the woods and the water. To do this he was obliged to lie flat on his face, and wiggle along like a snake. We almost held our breaths until the feat was accomplished, and he disappeared over the bank, which was about four feet high.

Now that he was out of our sight our anxiety increased and I suppose our antics were ludicrous.

Then Joe's head bobbed up above the bank behind the breastworks.

He arose slowly to his feet. My heart almost stopped beating when I saw him stride toward the camp without even carrying his rifle at a "ready."

He stopped, looked in, and motioned for us to come on.

With a whoop, and the dogs leading grandly, we charged.

But where was our enemy?

The charred remains of the fire he had put out, and the fragments of bones lying around told that he had enjoyed our supper. But what we saw first, and felt most like kicking ourselves over, was a stick leaning against the foremost trunk, on the top of which reposed a dilapidated felt hat!

CHAPTER VI.

THE HIGHWAYMAN AGAIN.

“SOLD!” we cried in one voice, as we took in the deserted camp and the decoy.

“And pretty cheap, too,” was Joe’s highly disgusted addition.

“We better climb down and soak our heads in the lake,” advised Bob.

“But it is not so bad,” I objected. “Of course it seems foolish to have let him get away when we had him cornered so nicely; but when you take into consideration how dark it was last night, you have a pretty good excuse.”

“I am going to take that hat,” said Joe, grimly, “and I bet that when I find the owner there is going to be ground torn up!”

“Well, you won’t find him around here,” replied Treve, decidedly. “With fourteen hundred dollars in his pocket, I am surprised



“THAT’S RIGHT. NOW SHELL OUT Y’ ALLS’ WATCHL., MONEY AN’ JEWELRY.”

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that he should have even tried to steal more from us. I don't doubt but that it was he Steve fired at on the bank, and with the start he's got there's two or three miles between us by this time."

"Then I am to chalk the fourteen hundred up to profit and loss, am I?" I asked.

"And Jimmerson must certainly need the money," added Bob, dejectedly. "This is the second time it's been lost."

"What are we going to do?" demanded Joe. "Shall we go back to Jonesboro and draw on Roberts for the amount, or shall we go on to Jimmerson's and get him to help us?"

"Roberts would have an epileptic fit if I drew on him," said I, solemnly.

"If he was going north when he heard of it he would turn inside out and be traveling south!" added Bob, gravely.

"Then on to Jimmerson's!" was the decision.

After a breakfast on squirrels, Joe suggested:

"If Steve will swim across and get the boatman, who I feel sure is over there, we can proceed."

“No, thanks,” I returned, sincerely. “I never bathe in November, especially when there is a wind blowing from the north that is growing colder every moment.”

“Form a line, shoot off both barrels in succession, and shout for all you’re worth. If that don’t bring some one from the other side—if there’s any one over there—I’ll swim across myself,” said Bob.

The roar that followed would have done justice to a Gatling gun, while our yells would have made a Sioux bilious with envy.

“There !” said Bob, as we panted from our exertions.

“That ought to be enough to raise the dead.”

We listened a few moments, then the sonorous notes of a cow horn floated across the water.

“There ought to be some printed instructions tacked on the trees if this is a boat landing,” said Joe. “How do we know but what that is some fellow calling in his hounds ?”

“I’ll risk it,” replied Bob, as a few short toots came from a point considerably nearer.

Half an hour later, after much blowing

of a horn, a flat boat grounded at the edge of the lane where we had stopped the night before and had been held up.

In the stern, with a pole in his hand, stood the owner. He was also owner of an old smooth bore rifle that lay conveniently at his elbow, a cow horn and two lean, miserable looking hounds, who bristled their backs and challenged our dogs to fight.

He had a shock of coarse, red hair that fringed the edge of his worn coon-skin cap, and a mustache of the same hue with long, drooping ends. A pair of overalls that had once been blue, held up by a single suspender, and a dirty calico shirt, were the extent of his wearing apparel.

“Wanter go across?” he shouted.

“Yes,” replied Bob. “What do you charge?”

“My name’s Sol Dunlap,” said the boatman, seemingly oblivious to Bob’s question. “What mebbly y’alls?”

Has that got anything to do with taking us across?” demanded Joe.

Mr. Dunlap was surprised.

“Sho!” he exclaimed. “Y’all air

moighty peart, hain't ye? Them air 'bout as scrumptious lookin' dorgs as ever I seed! Where mought you-uns stay when you air to home? Goin' very fur? I 'low y'all air goin over to Simpson's, as lives on Blue Creek?"

"No. We would like——"

"No? Well, I d'know; thought mebb'y y'all wus. Them air Simpsons air a moughty mean lot. Put on heaps o' airs over us common folk. Scaly set. Drapped down on us one night; dunno where they kim from. Seems to have plenty to yeat, but don't do a lick o' work. It do make me scandlous mad to think o' them loafin' around over there an' me a-havin' to work this consarned old scow!"

Here he savagely jammed the pole down in the mud to keep the boat from sliding off the bank.

His miserable hounds, interpreting this as an aggressive action, flew toward the bank, intending to make short work of us and our dogs.

"You—Tige—Boose!" he yelled. "Kim back yere!"

The hounds dropped their ears and tails

and slunk back on the boat, dexterously avoiding a heavy kick he aimed at them.

“Them air dogs hain’t got no manners ’tall,” said Mr. Dunlap, apologetically, as he stepped off the boat. “You-uns have got a whoppin’ big load,” pointing to the four trunks on the wagon that we had repacked, leaving out the heavy guns and rifles. “Now that’s about as purty a weepoon as ever I seed,” and he picked up Joe’s that leaned against the wheel. “Y’all won’t mind if I try hit?”

We realized by this time that it was useless to say anything about crossing the lake until Mr. Dunlap had satisfied himself concerning our business, and Joe nodded negatively.

Two crows flying over the willows formed the mark. With the crack of the rifle the last one suspended his exertions, poised nerveless, and then dropped lifeless, turning over and over, out of sight.

Mr. Dunlap was loud in his praise of the weapon, while we were no less so with the marksman. We formed a new opinion of Mr. Dunlap.

“It was a gilt edge shot and no joking,”

Treve said afterward, and we agreed with him.

The mournful howl of a dog interrupted the conversation.

Sitting on the bank with his nose elevated in the air, was one of Mr. Dunlap's hounds. It was the largest and best looking, and answered to the name of Boose.

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed Mr. Dunlap. "There's been a critter prowlin' around yere as didn't have no business yere, an' hit wuz a two-legged critter, too!"

The quartette exchanged glances.

"You-uns been pestered by anybody?" continued Mr. Dunlap.

"Why?" asked Joe, evasively.

"Cause Boose allers does that when he runs 'cross the trail o' a feller as is tryin' to sneak out o' sight. Don't know how he tells; but Boose air a mighty smart hound. Hain't any around this yere lake as kin kim up to him. I reckon hit wuz a Simpson. Simpson's the only mean man I know. I'd like to git a clinch on Simpson once!"

"Perhaps Boose could find him!" I exclaimed.

“ Couldn’t track him no further than where he got in his dugout. Simpson lives on t’other side of the lake,” observed Mr. Dunlap.

“ But this fellow says he followed us from Jonesboro,” broke in Treve.

“ Which feller ? ” demanded Mr. Dunlap quickly.

We explained. He listened to the story of our night’s adventure, and then said :

“ I ’low hit wuz Simpson. Mebby he wuz down to Jonesboro. He’d have to kim ’cross the lake, an’ he jess hid his dugout sommers ’long yere, so he’d have hit to go back in. I thought I heered shootin’ over yere last night, but the old woman ’lowed I was looney.”

“ How many of the Simpsons are there ? ” Bob asked.

Mr. Dunlap admitted there were but two ! father and daughter.

“ The sooner we get to Ike Jimmerson’s place the better,” said Bob briskly. “ I don’t believe we had better tackle the gentleman alone again, after letting him slip away as we did last night, and we’ll get Ike to go along. Now, Mr. Dunlap,

we'll get our wagon and horse on board."

We managed to do this after half an hour's desperate struggle, for Loafer absolutely refused to step on the boat, so we obligingly dragged him on.

"Do you know Ike Jimmerson?" asked Joe, as Mr. Dunlap commenced to pole the boat away from the shore.

"Well, I should articulate!" exclaimed Mr. Dunlap. "Known him for ten year. He lives about four miles from t'other side.

"There's a road over there that'll take you-uns right to his place."

"And where is Blue Creek?"

"That's about four miles, too, only hit's further down. It's sommers nigh two miles from Jimmerson's."

We were moving slowly along what might be termed "streets" through the willows. Similar openings appeared on both sides until it seemed little short of instinct that told Mr. Dunlap which direction to go. And he had informed us that the lake was about two miles wide at that place.

"This would be a great place to get lost," observed Bob.

"Yes, an' fellers that goes out in yere

'thout taking some one along as knows the kentry ginerally gits lost, too. Durin' the war some fellows funder south sent a lot o' niggers up yere to keep 'em from jinin the army. I'll be durned ef the hull blamed lot didn' git lost, an' hit wuz three weeks afore they found 'em."

A little later we grounded on the other side. The wagon and Loafer was run off and Loafer hitched up. Mr. Dunlap received his modest sum of three dollars for ferrying us over.

Just as we were about to start, I became possessed of a remarkable resolution, and, turning to Mr. Dunlap, asked :

“ What will you take for Boose ? ”

The latter was so thrown out by the suddenness of the question that it was some time before he could reply. Then he said in consideration of our not being “ namby pamby ” boys, as was his first impression, he would make us a present of him.

So we thanked him and drove on. Boose transferred his affections from Mr. Dunlap to ourselves with the latter's kick and “ git out o' yere,” and led the other dogs ahead of us down the little-used road.

This ran through heavy timber. Large trees stood so close together that two rods away was the limit of vision. The road grew more swampy, and we were continually crossing small streams, while the ground became soft and yielding. Swamps appeared on all sides.

Occasionally we would come out on the edge of some dark, silent lagoon, where gigantic sycamores stood up white and clear out of the dark water like sentinels.

It was late in the afternoon when we drew up before the largest building in a settlement of five houses. It was a store, with a large front porch, on which were piled large stacks of pelts, and around which were grouped several men, among them Ike Jimmerson.

He came out to the wagon with a cordial "howdy!" and outstretched hand. He was immediately introduced to the two members of the X. T. C. Quartette whom he had not met, while the men on the porch snorted disdainfully at such a proceeding.

While the others were unhitching Loafer and unloading the trunks, Jimmerson drew me to one side and asked :

“ Did you bring that money ? You know I went up town an’ bought some things an’ my ticket, an’ I done clean furgot all about stoppin’ at your place. Never thought o’ hit till the keers had me ten miles in the kentry, an’ ’twas too late then. I thought the old man would fix up some way o’ send-in’ hit.”

I told Mr. Jimmerson our story, ending with :

“ The money counted out for you was burnt. I bought a draft on Jonesboro, cashed it, and a gentleman supposed to be one Simpson, held us up on the other side of Maumelle Lake and robbed us.”

“ Simpson—robbed you-uns ! ” gasped Mr. Jimmerson. “ Well, I’ll be dodswog-gled ef that hain’t——”

On the opposite side of the clearing a man stepped out. He was covered with mud from head to foot, bareheaded, and carried a heavy double-barrel under his arm. His face wore a satisfied smile that changed to one of terror as his eyes rested on Loafer and the trunks.

“ There he is ! there he is ! ” I shouted. “ That’s him ! Head him off, somebody ! ”

The man gave one wild look and sprang back into the woods, while every one looked at me as though they thought I had gone crazy and wondered what I was yelling about.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTURED.

I GESTICULATED wildly as I danced around, trying to call the dogs, who lay panting under the wagon, and at the same time inform the amazed spectators that I had seen the man who had robbed us appear and disappear in the timber.

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Bob in surprise.

“Somethin’ bit ye?” questioned Mr. Jimmerson, anxiously examining the ground in search of the cause of my strange behavior.

“It’s him!” I panted. “He came right out of the woods over there, and when he saw the wagon and trunks took leg bail for security.”

The men on the porch came up to the wagon. They were a rough-looking set,

and each carried a rifle or gun as his taste dictated.

“What’s the furse?” demanded the foremost, a short, heavy set man, with black eyes and unkempt hair. He wore a suit that was half cloth and half buckskin, and three thirds dirt, and seemed an important personage.

“Hanged ef I know,” growled a second. “I didn’t see nothin’.”

“Me, neither,” affirmed a third, who, from his looks, I judged to be half Indian and half rascal. He was tall and straight, with a sallow, greasy countenance, and the rifle he leaned on was a long, old-fashioned affair.

“Now, who wuz hit?” demanded Mr. Jimmerson, holding me against one of the supports of the porch until he should be answered.

“Why, the man who held us up on the other side of Maumelle Lake, and has got your fourteen hundred in his pocket!”

“Jehosaphat! Why didn’t you say so afore you spoke? Scatter out, men; we got to ketch him!”

But the men never moved.

“I don’t ketch no man till I know what I ketch him fur !” said the half-breed insinuatingly.

Mr. Jimmerson stopped.

“Take your time, boys,” he said slowly, turning to us. “I forgot I wuz talkin’ to the pizenest, laziest crowd in these yere parts. Our man has got a good distance by this time, ef he goes as fast as I think he will ; but we kin find him in an hour from now jess as easy as we kin now. As fur these fellers, ef they don’t do what I want ’em to, they kin pack their pelts over to the Pine Bottom agency.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t go, did I ?” whined the short man, who seemed appalled at the threat implied.

“Nur me, neither,” chorused the rest, with the exception of the half-breed. The latter drew himself up like a pampered tragedian, and said loftily :

“I kin pack my pelts over there, even ef hit’s twenty mile.”

“O’ course Miggy kin,” laughed the short man, derisively. “He hardly ever has any to tote. He’s too tarnal lazy to skin a mink.”

“No lazier’n you air, Bill Morris!” retorted Miguel.

“Leave hit to the crowd,” said Mr. Morris, carelessly. “Now, sonny, ef you’ll pint out the place you seen him, we’ll hunt him up.”

Miguel darted an angry glance at him and walked to my side.

“Hold on!” interrupted Mr. Jimmerson. “I’m in this yere deal, an’ I don’t intend that we all air goin’ calawwhoopin’ into them woods ’thout leavin’ someone yere to tend to things.”

Then he stepped to the door of the store and called :

“Sammy!”

A tow-headed boy of fifteen, whose face I had seen framed in the window when we drove up, came to the door.

He came out awkwardly with his hands in the pockets of a pair of buckskin trousers. His face was the exact counterpart of his father’s even to the solemn look of age, and Sammy, as we afterward learned, spoke in a droll and slow way, and walked accordingly. He wore a pair of cowhide boots and a canvas hunting-jacket.

“Sammy,” said Mr. Jimmerson, with fatherly pride. “Kinder keep an eye on things ginerally, fur I’m goin’ to take a stroll through the timber. Ef that feller Simpson sneaks in yere, hook onto him! D’ y’ hear me shoutin’?”

“I reckon I do,” drawled Sammy, in no way visibly impressed. “I hain’t deaf!”

“An’ Sammy’ll do hit,” went on Mr. Jimmerson, turning to me. “Tie you-uns, dogs up; we got enough ’thout ’em, an’ I don’t reckon they air any good in this business.”

So we chained our dogs to the wagon, with the exception of Boose, who accompanied me.

“Now lead on,” said Mr. Jimmerson.

We started.

Miguel brought up the rear. There were ten of us all counted, with four dogs of uncertain lineage and Boose to lead, and about twenty to get in our way to be kicked out.

I led the way to the place where I had seen the highwayman make his exit. The bushes were trampled down. The broken stems and disturbed sticks told in which

direction he had gone ; but it required better eyes than ours to trace him.

The men huddled together for a consultation, and the dogs, scattering, started up a couple of rabbits and were away in a jiffy.

“ Have you got that hat with you, Joe ? ” I whispered.

For a reply he pulled it from his pocket and handed it to me, then was again absorbed in the various methods of conducting the hunt discussed by the men.

I called Boose, and letting him smell the hat, ordered him to “ Go find ! ”

He wagged his tail, trotted around with his nose to the ground until he struck the place where the man had gone through, and then dropping on his haunches he gave utterance to that doleful wail we had heard before.

He had found the scent.

I glanced at the men. They were too deeply interested in their plans to hear anything short of a gun, and the rest of the quartette were in the same state.

I gripped my rifle and started toward Boose. He uttered a faint yelp and started

off with his nose to the ground, and I followed.

In a second we were out of sight.

It was growing dark, and in the dense wood the gloom was magnified. But my only thought was for Mr. Roberts's money, and I paid no attention to anything else.

Boose quickened his pace when he became aware that I was following, and soon I was compelled to run to keep him in sight.

Around trees, through bushes and vines and over the trunks of fallen trees he led the way.

My heart leaped high as he steered for the houses. Could the fellow have taken refuge in any of them after we left? But no; Boose halted but a moment for me to catch up, at a place where I saw the bushes were trampled as though a person had walked back and forth where the settlement could be seen through the trees, and then the trail led off to the left.

Evidently the man had stopped to watch what had taken place. In which case it was probable that he was not far ahead!

Boose ran silently. Nothing could be heard but the rustling leaves as some fright-

ened rabbit skurried away, and the noise of my own body tearing through the underbrush. Quite enough commotion, though, I assure you, to have been heard a dozen rods in the silent forest.

We came to shallow sloughs of water, where of course Boose lost the scent, but he showed remarkable reasoning by plunging through to the other side, where the trail was again taken up.

Regardless of the fact that I did not have rubber boots on I hung close to his heels.

The ground grew lower and more damp, and Boose followed the scent easily. This, I suppose, was due to the dampness and close proximity of the pursued, and I should have proceeded more cautiously ; but being without experience, I plunged recklessly on, until Boose began to bristle his back and growl.

Before I could stop, the black muzzle of a gun was shoved through the bushes by the side of a tree directly ahead, and a hoarse voice called commandingly :

“Halt, there !”

Boose sprang fiercely forward, and the man fired.

The heavy charge cut off all but three inches of his tail. I did not blame him a bit when he gave several sharp yelps, and then dropping his ears and the injured member, took the back track at astonishing speed.

“Walk up yere slow, an’ mind you keep the muzzle o’ that weepoon pinte t’other way !” brought me to my senses.

Knowing the character I had to deal with I complied.

“You air a moughty peart young feller,” said the owner of the brawny hand that took my rifle from my halfreluctant grasp. “Got any more shootin’ irons about you ?”

I had not.

“But you air not half so smart as I took you to be,” went on the man, stepping out of the bushes, “air you wouldn’t have kim sailin’ down yere behind what’s now a bob-tailed dorg like you did !”

I know I blushed.

He was our friend of the night before, but his appearance was entirely changed.

His face, hair and clothes were covered with mud, and the way he looked at me was little short of ferocious.

“Didn’t ’spect to see you so soon,” he continued sarcastically. “Nur I didn’t think when you-uns druv me outen your camp with nothin’ but my gun that I’d ever be able to get ahold o’ one of yours!”

And he patted the stock of my rifle affectionately.

“It won’t do you any good,” I said boldly. “Do you think you can hold people up and take their money and guns, and by taking to these woods escape justice?”

“Don’t think nothin’ about it!” he said, doggedly. “I know hit! Now we’re done blarneyin’; so git ready fur a good old tramp o’ about three mile. Will you go lamb-like, or shall I have to hang onto your collar?”

“I’ll go lamb-like,” I hastily assured him.

He gave a terrible grin, and then stepping behind me ordered me to “hoe hit lively!”

He stated only the truth when he said it was a “good old tramp.” I never want to have another like it. At times we had to wade through water and mud nearly to our waists. But no matter how difficult the

progress was, he never allowed the "wee-pons" to leave his hands.

It was dark when we came to a stream about twenty feet wide, running between low banks. A fallen tree served as a bridge, and on the other side was a small clearing with a cabin standing in the center.

It suddenly struck me that the stream was Blue Creek, and, therefore, my captor was Mr. Simpson.

He threw open the door, and I saw a sight that caused me to start back in surprise.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT WENT ON WITHOUT STEVE.

“ Now, this yere chase’s got to be kerried on scientific like,” said Mr. Jimmerson. “ I, fur one, don’t ’pose to run agin a charge o’ buckshot, an’ I reckon there hain’t one among y’ll hankerin’ after sich a dose, neither.”

“ Simpson, he bad man,” said Miguel, decidedly.

“ I ’low there air jess as pizen a one in this yere crowd now,” replied Bill Morris, with a meaning glance at Miguel.

Miguel started to say something, but checked himself.

“ There’s been a heap o’ fur taken from my traps,” went on Bill, helping himself to a liberal chew of tobacco and seemingly addressing no one in particular, “ an’ I ’low

Miggy there mought be able to tell where some o' hit went. Every mother's son o' us knows he don't own nary a trap, yit he brung in three otter an' a mink last week."

Mr. Morris looked conclusively at the rest, and the rest looked at Miguel.

"I—I shoot him," stammered the latter.

"Pelts taken off head an' all, warn't they, Ike?" asked Bill.

Mr. Jimmerson reflected a moment, and then replied:

"Clean to the nose."

"No holes 'cept the eyes?"

"Nary a hole."

"I reckon Miggy jumped the truth this yere time," went on Bill Morris. "Cleared hit so durned fur he never tetched hit. I wanter say right yere, that ef I ketch any one foolin' with my traps, he's goin' to git a bullet through him afore he kin let go! Y'all hear me?"

Everybody did.

Mr. Morris looked at Miguel, who turned a sickly yellow, and retreated behind Ike Jimmerson. Just how what was promising to result in a quarrel would have ended, is

doubtful, for Bob at that moment turned the tide of the conversation by interrupting :

“ Mr. Jimmerson, while your friends are rehearsing their personal injuries, our man is getting farther away. We had better be starting, for it's growing darker every moment. Have you decided on a plan of procedure ? ”

He could not help adding the latter rather sarcastically, for they had consumed considerable time in listening to various methods proposed and tales of similar happenings in years gone by.

“ Any which ? ” asked Mr. Morris, scratching his head.

“ Where's the dogs ? ” demanded Ike Jimmerson.

“ Skeered up a cotton tail,” volunteered one of the men, loquaciously.

“ Oughter have them dorgs,” said Bill Morris, recovering his equanimity. “ Be so dark afore long we kaint see the trail.”

Several of the men who owned dogs blew lustily on their hunting horns. Strange as it may seem, a well trained dog could distinguish his master's horn among all others,

and if within hearing, would respond immediately.

Two or three had straggled in, when Bob made a startling discovery.

“Where’s Steve?” he asked.

“He was here awhile ago,” replied Joe. “He borrowed that fellow’s hat——”

The three remaining members of the X. T. C. Quartette looked at each other in astonishment.

“Did Boose go with the other dogs?” demanded Treve, the first to break the silence.

No one could say positively as to that.

“What’s up?” asked Mr. Jimmerson, seeing they were looking at each other in a dazed kind of way.

“Why, Steve’s gone!” explained Treve.

“Did you-uns call him?”

The three looked at each other in chagrin.

“Skeered afore you wuz hit,” laughed Mr. Jimmerson.

With a common impulse they scattered, and commenced calling my name. Of course there was no response.

“Shore he didn’t go back to the house?”

questioned Ike, as they once more stood looking at each other.

“No. I’ve been standing where I could see in that direction ever since we’ve been here,” replied Treve.

“Well, that gits me !” ejaculated Ike.

Then he stepped along the trail, scanning the ground searchingly.

“Yere he is !” he shouted.

They rushed toward him.

“That is—I meanter say—he went past yere,” he explained, breathlessly. “Got them dogs ready, somebody ?” he shouted.

The rest of the men had gathered in their dogs, and a fight had already been projected.

But Mr. Jimmerson’s question put an end to any such proceeding.

“That yaller coon dog o’ mine kin whop anythin’ standin on four laigs not over his size,” one of the men was saying as they came up in a body.

“You don’t mean to say that Steve has started after that man alone ?” demanded Bob, clutching at Mr. Jimmerson’s sleeve.

“That’s jess what I do,” replied the other. “Leastways he’s started. Kain’t say how fur he’ll go. - Y’all see there’s

been two persons went over yere, an one left a heel mark in the ground that don't b'long to no boot in these yere parts, 'cep-tin' in you-uns crowd."

"What y'll got to start 'em on?" asked Bill Morris.

"Don't need nothin' to start my dorg," said a tall, loose jointed man on the edge of the crowd, who rejoiced in the name of Sandy. "He uster be a nigger dorg, an' I reckon he won't notice much difference 'tween them an' the feller we're after."

"Haul your dog in yere, then," commanded Mr. Morris.

A lank, black dog, a species of fox-hound was pulled forward.

His master retained a hold on his collar, and, shoving his nose to the ground, ordered him to :

"Hunt 'im up, Bulger !"

Bulger, the moment his master released the grip on his collar, sat down on his haunches and basked in the gaze of the interested spectators.

"He's too indolent," said Treve, in disgust.

"No, sir. He's too blamed lazy ; that's

what's the matter with him," explained Bulger's owner.

Then he gave Bulger a couple of cuffs that awakened him with remarkable suddenness.

The dog's nose went to the ground, he caught the scent, and then away he went, giving tongue in a way that stirred his hearers' blood, with the rest of the dogs following grandly, and the men bringing up the rear, stumbling over each other and shouting like mad.

High above them all could be heard the voice of Bulger's master, shouting:

"He's a pow'ful dorg! Go hit, Bulger! Whoop! Waugh! Waugh!"

It seemed to the three members of the X. T. C. Quartette as they hurried along beside Mr. Jimmerson that Bulger's deep-toned baying, coupled with the other dogs' barks and yelps, and the men shouting, could be heard anywhere within a mile.

They went over the same ground I had gone over a short time before. When they reached the trampled spot within sight of the settlement, Sandy called Bulger to a halt with a few short blasts of his horn.

The rest immediately pulled up also.

“What’s up?” demanded Mr. Jimmerson.

“Trail turns to’ards the east,” explained Sandy, laconically.

“What about hit?”

“Reckon you-uns know what kind o’ kentry lays yander. Ef any o’ you got gum boots y’ better git ’em on afore we go any further.”

“You-uns better git on your boots ef y’all got any,” advised Ike.

So the rest waited until Mr. Jimmerson, the three members of the X. T. C. Quartette, and Sandy—who lived in the settlement—went back to don protection against mud and water.

The trunks provided the boys with rubber suits throughout. Mr. Jimmerson appeared in a pair of rubber boots that reached to his waist, and Sammy’s duck coat. Sandy discarded boots and coat, and came back barefooted and breathless.

“I ’low he’s on this side o’ the Big Bayou,” he panted.

“Reckon he is,” replied Bill Morris, dryly, “onless he wants to swim with a fourteen pound gun an’ his boots. Air y’all

ready? Turn your dog loose, Sandy!”

Before Sandy could comply, a dark streak flew along the ground toward them.

It stopped in their midst, panting, bleeding, and covered with mud, and every one recognized—Boose!

“Well, I’m dodswoggled!” ejaculated Ike Jimmerson.

“His tail shot plumb off!” echoed Bill Morris.

“Fellers,” said Mr. Jimmerson, solemnly, “I guess he found him. Ef there’s a ha’r injured hit’s a case to stretch hemp.”

“Jesso!” assented the others.

“Bill,” said Ike significantly.

Mr. Morris immediately departed for the store, returning with a rope about thirty feet long.

The others watched him gravely.

“Turn your dorg loose!”

Again Bulger’s deep baying made the forest ring.

Boose followed behind reluctantly. Miguel had disappeared.

Through vines and thorn bushes, with occasional patches of foxtails, they went, one moment wading across a shallow

slough, the next springing from bog to bog.

Never once did Bulger waver or lose the scent.

By the time they reached the place where I had met our highwayman it was so dark that they could scarcely see each other's faces.

Bulger turned south, when Sandy called him off.

Mr. Jimmerson examined the ground with great minuteness, and, after assuring himself and the others that I was not dead, said :

“ I 'low hit were Simpson. He kotched the boy yere an' made a break straight fur his cabin. He darsn't go back to'ard the settlement fur fear o' meetin' jess sich a gang as this, so he pushed through one o' the swampiest places we got in these yere parts.”

“ Hit's too dark fur to do anythin' more,” said Bill Morris, decidedly. “ I 'pose we go back to Ike's place, sleep over hit, an' swoop down on him 'arly in the mornin'. He darsn't hurt the boy.”

An animated discussion followed, in

which the boys were for pushing on ; but majority ruled, and they were compelled to return with the others to pass a sleepless night at Jimmerson's.

Most of the men slept on the floor in the store, and seemed well pleased at the luxury.

Mr. Jimmerson had them out before the gray dawn of morning.

The boys will never forget that early walk through the mists arising from the sloughs. Under Mr. Jimmerson's guidance, the party stopped before a cabin in a clearing beside Blue Creek.

No one responded to Mr. Morris's heavy knock.

“ Kick in the door,” some one suggested.

This suggestion was acted upon, and the entire party, wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement, rushed into the small cabin.

It was empty !

“ Skipped ! ” arose as one voice.

The man who had so thoughtfully brought along the rope allowed it to slip to the ground floor, while he attempted to cover it by standing on it.

“Jesso !” said Mr. Morris, calmly, expectorating in the open fireplace. “I allers thought as how Simpson wus a pizen sneak, an’ now I know hit.”

The rest expectorated in the fireplace and replied :

“Jesso !”

CHAPTER IX.

PATTY—ABANDONED.

A FLOOD of light streamed forth when my captor threw open the door of the little cabin in the clearing.

I had good cause to be astonished, for before me was a sight that seemed little less than a vision.

Directly opposite the door was a huge fireplace, piled high with great hardwood knots, that threw a bright glare on every nook and cranny in the cabin. Standing before it, with her hand resting on a rough pine table, was a girl of perhaps fifteen.

Her hair was a gold color, curly, but reached only to her shoulders. She had blue eyes, rather brown complexion, fine features, and was dressed in a skirt composed of doe-skin and a zouave jacket of

yellow, embroidered with something like gold. A white sombrero hung above the mantle, which, from its clean appearance, I rightly judged belonged to her.

I saw all this—and nothing else—in one glance, then my observation was interrupted by a strong hand gripping my collar, and it shoved me quickly inside.

“Don’t be skeered, youngster,” he grinned. “She won’t bite you.”

“Oh, pap, is it you?” cried the feminine portion of the trio. “I was afraid it was some of them rowdies from Jimmerson’s, the way you threw open the door.”

“You wasn’t skeered?” asked “pap,” solicitously.

“Why, pap! What could I be skeered for?” she returned, in astonishment.

“Pap!” Could this human resemblance at my side be the father of such a pretty girl? I felt like knocking him down on suspicion, but I quietly changed my mind when I recollected that he still held the “weepons.”

Pap did not know why she should be “skeered,” and winked knowingly at me, as much as to say that it would take con-

siderable more than a "rowdy" from Jimmerson's "to frighten this young lady."

"Kim, Patty," he said, coaxingly, "what we got to yeat?"

"Is *he* goin' to eat?" asked Patty, turning those large blue eyes on me.

I felt myself grow red. Unconsciously I glanced down at my mud-covered garments, and tried nervously to scratch a part in my hair.

"Of course," replied my captor, promptly. "He's comp'ny, Patty, though he did kim down yere agin his will, an' I reckon we got to treat him white."

"Well, then, there's 'possum," began Patty, holding up a small brown hand and enumerating the various dishes on her fingers, "with flour gravy, an' potatoes, an' biscuits—oh! they're just lovely!—an' coffee—an', oh! I got some sweet milk!"

"No!" ejaculated Mr. Simpson.

"Certain!"

"Where?"

"I walked clean over to Dunlap's on the edge of the lake. They've got cows, you know. I knew you'd be tired after comin' all the way from Jonesboro, so I got up a

scrumptious old supper, you dear old pap !”

Mr. Simpson looked at me again, something glittering in his eyes.

Then he thrust his hand into his inside pocket.

My heart jumped into my mouth. Was he about to restore the fourteen hundred dollars ? But no ; he simply coughed once or twice and then said :

“ Tote out your grub, Patty.”

I had another desire to knock him down, but desisted for the same reason as before.

Mr. Simpson stored my rifle and his gun on a rack formed of deer antlers over the fireplace ; then, backing up to the fire, he motioned for me to join him.

Patty had thrown a table-cloth over the table and was producing her tempting viands with all the pride of a young house-keeper.

“ If you don't mind,” I said hesitatingly, “ I would like to make my toilet.”

“ Couldn't think o' hit,” said he, decidedly. “ Took too much trouble totin' you down yere to let you give me the run. But ef you wanter wash there's a basin an' a bucket o' water in yan corner.”

Patty produced a towel that I will wager was equal to any rasp ever invented.

I had finished my ablutions and was standing before the fireplace where the hot fire rapidly dried the mud on my clothes, when Patty said something to her father in a low tone, to which he replied :

“ I’ll be blamed ef I’m goin’ to foller any sich——”

“ Sh ! ” she whispered. “ There, now, that’s a good pap ! ”

Mr. Simpson reluctantly advanced on the wash basin, from which I inferred that he considered such a luxury unnecessary.

While supper waited on him I finished my survey of the interior of the cabin.

A “ shake down ” occupied one corner. A ladder ascended to a loft above, and the floor was simply the earth packed hard, but swept so clean that this formed no objectionable feature. By the fireplace stood a dresser, with a small cupboard above containing the tin dishes. Besides the table before referred to, there were three chairs of uncertain age and stability. Everything was diminutive, but neat.

And wasn’t that a supper ! It was my

first experience with stewed 'possum, and although Sammy afterwards made untiring efforts to compete with Patty, in my estimation they were futile. Perhaps I was prejudiced.

As for the biscuits, they were not hard enough to knock a man down with, nor did they taste of saleratus. The coffee was delicious; but to be able to have cream—whew!

Mr. Simpson arose and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Patty began to clear off the table and wash the dishes. I retired to one corner and, using my knife, scraped some of the real estate from my clothes.

The weather grew colder and the wind whistled through the trees with an ominous sound.

“Goin’ to have a cold snap,” volunteered Mr. Simpson.

Patty looked up but did not answer. Neither did I.

Mr. Simpson arose, yawned, and lit his pipe. Then he took his gun down from the rack, broke it, and after ascertaining that the cartridges were still there, turned to me with :

“I hate to kimpel you to leave the warm fire, but I reckon you’d better peramble up that ladder. Patty, you kin sleep down yere to-night.”

“Why——” began Patty, opening her blue eyes in astonishment.

“The young gentleman unnerstands why,” interrupted her father. “He also unnerstands that I mean what I say,” he continued, significantly.

I did, thoroughly.

I don’t suppose I ever went up a ladder more awkwardly in my life. And simply because I knew I was watched by a decidedly pretty girl.

“What are you goin’ to do, pap?” asked Patty, in rather an awestruck tone as I scrambled to the upper floor.

“Goin’ to take down that ladder,” was the reply.

He went to work vigorously, lifted the foot of it from the floor, and then ensued a lively wrestle, which ended in the ladder getting the best of it and landing on top.

I looked down through the scuttle-hole.

Patty, instead of securing a safe position and screaming—according to my ideas of a

girl's action in a case of this kind—promptly took hold of the ladder, and with a strength I did not think she possessed, pulled it off her prostrate parent.

His first act was to bark his shins in trying to kick it to pieces ; his second to grab his gun and start for the door.

“ You're not goin' out to-night, pap ? ” she cried, interrogatively.

“ Yes,” he returned, half fiercely. “ I'd like to know how much fur there is in Morris's traps.”

“ Oh, pap,” she said, tremulously. “ It'll be a 'run out' if you're caught, an'—an'—mebby a hempen collar ! ”

“ Never you mind, little girl. I kin take keer o' myself.”

Then the door opened, closed, and he was gone.

She stood a moment irresolute, then attacked it fiercely ; but it resisted her efforts to open it.

I glanced about my apartments. The floor was of rough hewn plank. A small bed stood on the chimney side, with a piece of carpet before it. The rafters were covered with strings of sage, peppers, etc. Parti-

tions on the floor separated walnuts, hickory nuts, pecans and hazel nuts.

“ Hello, up there ! ”

“ Hello ! ” I returned, looking down.

She was standing beneath the hole looking up.

“ If we had a rope you could come down. ”

“ I—I—don’t want to come down, ” I stammered.

“ You don’t ! Thought mebbby you’d like to sit up till pap gets back. He’s locked the door on the outside. ”

“ Kind in him, ” I admitted, “ but I don’t think I’m infatuated enough with your father to sit up to see him come in. Good-night. ”

“ Say, have you got a sister ? ”

“ Yes. ”

“ Is she purty ? ”

“ You bet ! ” I returned, emphatically.

A few moments of silence.

“ Can you read ? ”

“ Yes. Can you ? ”

“ No. Pap says ’tain’t any use for girls learn to read. ”

“ You tell your father he’s a chump and don’t know what he’s talking about. Will

you—that is, after I'm gone?" I added hastily.

"Mebby."

It was some time before I ventured to ask:

"How old are you?"

"About twenty!"

I lost my balance and nearly fell through the floor.

"You're not positive?" I asked, anxiously.

"No."

I felt relieved, although I could not say why.

"Lived here long?" I ventured again.

"Not very."

"Where did you come from?"

"Way off somewhere."

"Definite."

"Eh?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, say!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"Pap's got a lot of papers stuck away in the Bible down here that I'm jess dyin' to know what's in 'em. Great thick ones with a big daub of red paint on. Will you——"

"Trot 'em out," I interrupted with interest.

She went to the commode, took out a medium sized Bible, but quickly replaced it.

“Pap’s comin’!” she cried, “an’ he told me never to touch it!”

I waited long enough to hear the door unfastened, then got back out of sight.

Two persons entered. Both were excited.

“Kim, Patty,” said Mr. Simpson, hurriedly. “Gather up your traps! We got to git outen yere, an’ be moughty peart about hit, too! Take all you kin kerry, but for Heaven’s sake, be quick! No time fur talkin’!”

I was so astonished at the change in his tone that I looked down to see what had happened.

In the center of the room stood Miguel!

Patty and Mr. Simpson were hastily gathering a few articles which they tied up in a table-cloth. Mr. Simpson took the Bible from the commode and shoved it into his pocket; then shouldered his load.

“Take rifle?” asked Miguel, pointing to my gun above the fireplace.

“No. Let ’em have hit. I wish I’d

never seen them nur their blamed guns, neither. Got your furs on, Patty?"

"Yes."

"Help me kerry this ladder out, Miggy. The youngster'll break his neck ef he tries to drap, an' I reckon we kin make 'em hunt fur somethin' to git him down."

Then they went away, closed the door after them, and left me to my own reflections.

CHAPTER X.

RESCUED.

“WE’LL do a little snoopin’ around, an’ ef he hain’t yere we’ll have to foller up till we find him. An’ I don’t reckon hit’ll be so tarnal easy to d’cide where he went with all them trails leadin’ from yere.”

“Perhaps Simpson turned him loose before he got here, which he would probably do if he thought we didn’t know who he was, to hide his identity.”

That was Bob’s voice. I looked around in bewilderment.

A few faint streaks of light straggled in through cracks under the eaves, and the air was decidedly raw and chilly.

I rose awkwardly to my feet. My limbs were stiff and sore. I must have fallen asleep.

I looked at my watch. It was still going,

although I had forgotten to wind it the night before, and pointed to eight o'clock.

“Hain't that a hole up there?” asked a voice from below.

“Reckon hit is.”

“Mebby he's up there!”

The sharp clicking as a number of hammers were drawn back sent the cold shivers down my back. Suppose they should fire a volley through the floor!

“I 'lowed I heered somethin' movin' up there,” said another voice. “Who'll go up?”

Every one was silent.

“Wait till he moves agin an' I'll put a piece o' lead through the floor so close that I reckon he'll kim to time,” said a voice in a hoarse whisper, that I recognized as belonging to Mr. Jimmerson.

“Hello, down there!” I cried, tremulously. “Don't shoot!”

“Thought that'd fetch him. Put your picture out over that hole there purty quick or fix to dodge bullets!”

It is needless to say that I was not slow in following instructions.

A strange sight was presented.

Standing in half a circle, with their guns pointed at the hole, was an assembly of men, led by Mr. Jimmerson and backed up by the three members of the X. T. C. Quartette.

“Why, it’s Steve!” came up in a regular chorus.

“Of course it’s me,” I replied, calmly, now that there was no danger of being shot by mistake. “Who’d you think it was?”

“We ’lowed mebbby hit wuz Simpson,” replied Mr. Jimmerson. “Sling up the end o’ that rope, Jim.”

Jim, who was a fair sample of the rest in appearance, and who was standing on a rope, promptly separated half of the coils and sent them whirling up through the hole.

“Put hit over the rafter an’ send the end down, so we kin haul hit back, an’ slide down yere.”

I did as directed.

The next moment I was shaking hands with Bob, Treve, Joe and Mr. Jimmerson all at the same time. The rope was drawn down and then Mr. Jimmerson said :

“I don’t see how Simpson kim to leave

your rifle, onless he furgot hit. We found hit hangin' on them deer horns."

"He told Miguel——"

"Miguel!" they cried.

"Why, yes. He came here last night with Simpson. I wouldn't be surprised but what he warned Simpson that you were after him."

"Where'd they go?" asked Ike quickly.

"I don't know. They took what they could tie up in a table-cloth and got out as quickly as possible."

"What time was it?" asked Bob.

"About half-past eight last night."

"Oh," said Mr. Jimmerson, disgustedly. "I reckon we mought jess as well quit now. They've struck the Big Bayou, an' ef they could rake up a dugout, which no doubt they did, they're safe an' fast in the swamps by this time."

"Y' kaint track over water, 'specially when there's so many sloughs an' bayous leadin' into one another, as there is around yere," remarked Mr. Bill Morris. "I reckon Miggy's got sense enough to know that the climate won't be healthy fur him around yere now."

I heaved a heavy sigh. According to public opinion, then, the fourteen hundred dollars intrusted to me was lost.

“I reckon we mought jess as well be travelin’ to’ards home,” hinted Mr. Morris.

It was a solemn procession that wended its way among the trees single file. I brought up the rear, stumbling along after the others through mud and water soaked grass, clinging to my rifle and a vague hope that it would end all right.

What would Mr. Roberts say? I asked myself that question on an average of twice a minute. Twice the money had been in my charge, and both times it had been lost.

“Never mind,” I thought. “They say there is a charm connected with the figure three, and if I ever get hold of it again, I’ll keep it till I can hand it over to Mr. Jimmerson.”

But what if Mr. Jimmerson needed the money? I resolved to ask him at the first opportunity.

Loafer was contentedly chewing the supports of the porch when we arrived.

Mr. Jimmerson finished the driving of a sharp bargain with Bill Morris and another

trapper, that had been interrupted by our arrival the night before. The rest looked on with profound interest until the deal was closed and then sauntered off with the two trappers.

Mr. Jimmerson ran over the pelts lying on the porch to make sure that he had not miscalculated them, then, turning to us, he said :

“ Y’all better unload your trunks an’ make yourselves to home. Y’ll won’t want to start out afore to-morrow mornin’. I reckon y’all want some breakfast by this time.”

We replied that a little would be acceptable.

“ The old woman’ll fix y’all up somethin’. Sammy !”

The sound of an axe that could be heard at regular intervals in the rear suddenly ceased. Sammy came around the house, with his hands in his pockets, as usual, and a very bashful air.

“ Sammy,” said Mr. Jimmerson, “ you help the boys kerry their trunks into the side room, an’ then see that they don’t git lonesome.”

We protested.

“We can unload them,” said Bob, quickly, “and if you don’t object, we’d rather leave them in the store than carry them anywhere. They’re not light by a long ways!”

“Any way,” acquiesced Mr. Jimmerson; “but remember what I told you, Sammy!”

We carried the trunks into the store. This was a roomy affair, with shelves and counters on three sides containing at least a dozen different stocks. You could get anything from a shingle nail to a gaudy scarf pin; but dry groceries and ammunition were the most in demand.

A large box stove stood in the center, surrounded by an assortment of three-legged stools and empty boxes. There was a cellar underneath, so Sammy told us, where Mr. Jimmerson stored his pelts until the season closed, when they were packed and carted to Jonesboro for shipment.

Sammy proved a veritable shadow, and was very precise in his explanations. Whether this was due to his father’s command or to the fact that he had outgrown his bashfulness, I could not determine. His odd and solemn ways drew us to him irresistibly.

“I reckon maw’s got y’alls breakfast ready,” he said, after we had explored the premises.

We adjourned, under his guidance, to the L in the rear, wherein we found Mrs. Jimmerson and seven other little Jimmersons.

“Why, land sakes! hit’s no trouble ’tall,” she said, in reply to Bob’s apology. “Jess make yourselves to home an’ yeat all you kin. I reckon y’all mought have a purty peart appetite after chasin’ old Simpson? Yes, I thought so. He’s a mean man, is Simpson. I uster to tell Ike——”

A prolonged wail and the clatter and splash of water in the kitchen told that one of the Jimmersons was into trouble—and the washtub. Mrs. Jimmerson flew to the rescue, so we failed to learn what “she uster tell Ike.”

How we did demolish that breakfast of bacon and eggs, with potatoes, coffee and white bread! And six little Jimmersons perched themselves around the room and watched every mouthful disappear, notwithstanding the fact that they were chased out every alternate five minutes by their mother and a towel.

In the afternoon Sammy piloted us to a nice secluded spot, where we made sad havoc among the squirrels, and just before dusk I managed to corner Mr. Jimmerson and inquire about money matters.

“ I did need hit pow’ful bad,” he replied ; “ but I’m goin’ to git along ’thout hit. No use to tell Roberts an’ have him worryin’, so we’ll jess keep mum. Sooner or later some one’s bound to run across Simpson, an’ I reckon ef I git my hands on him he’ll know what’s what ! ”

That evening the members of the X. T. C. Quartette joined the miscellaneous crowd that occupied the stools and boxes in the store. There were some who lived by trapping and some who did not ; but they all managed to get into “ Ike’s store ” whenever such a thing was possible, to pass away an evening.

Smoking and story telling seemed to be the order of the occasion. Some of the stories were prodigious ones, and are no doubt tendered to each new arrival, with more or less embellishment, according to the prevaricator’s conscience.

At last it came Mr. Bill Morris's turn to pour forth his fabrication. He drew off his coat, and we gripped our seats in expectation of hearing how he slew seventeen panthers inside of four minutes by the watch in his hand ; although why he should have held a watch in his hand at such a critical moment was one of the unexplained problems that was passed over in dead silence.

“ Hit wuz down on Dunlap's claim,” began Mr. Morris, “ Y'all know where Dunlap's claim is. I wuz a-goin' over to see the old man, who wuz down with the shivers, an' jess as I got along by the little bayou that runs through there, I noticed an old sycamore that had been snapped off about forty feet from the ground. I wuz a-lookin' at hit when I seed a coon run outen a hole in the bottom, shin up the old tree an' go in over the top. Hardly had his tail disappeared when out he kim at the bottom, shins up the tree, jess same's afore.

“ I kinder pinched myself to make shore I hadn't taken too much an' wuz still kickin' when out he kim ag'in, gen'lemen,” said

Mr. Morris, impressively, "I watched that coon do that jess seventeen times!"

"What wuz the matter with hit?" asked one of the men.

"There warn't nothin' the matter with hit. I shinned up that air tree myself, an' blamed ef hit warn't so full o' coons that every time one went in at the top he crowded one out at the bottom!"

Everybody looked at everybody else, expectorated in the fire and said solemnly:

"Jesso!"

After a painful silence, I was about to ask what he did with them, which no doubt would have confused him, when a gentleman named Sandy, whose acquaintance I had made during the day, chimed in:

"That reminds me o' what I seed once. Hit wus the bigges' tree I ever seed, an' there wuz a line o' bees makin' fur one o' the branches. So I gits a couple o' fellers to help me cut hit down. We cut most o' that day; but hit never trembled. So I walks round to t'other side, jess to see how big hit wus."

"Well?" asked Bob, impatiently, as the other paused.

“ Mebby y’all won’t b’lieve hit : but jess’s shore as y’all hear me talkin’, there was four men a choppin’ on t’other side an’ I never knowed hit ! ”

“ That was pretty close to the coon tree, wasn’t it ? ” asked Joe, sarcastically.

Sandy “ disremembered ” whether it was or not.

“ Speakin’ o’ coons,” said Mr. Jimmerson, abruptly, “ gives me an ’igee. Ef you-uns’ll stay till day after to-morrow, we’ll have a rousin’, old-fashioned coon hunt to-morrow night ! What d’y’ say ? ”

“ We’ll stay ! ” cried the X. T. C. Quartette with one voice.

CHAPTER XI.

A COON HUNT.

“ I ’low every one yere is in fur a coon hunt ? ” interrogated Mr. Jimmerson.

“ You bet ! ” chorused the rest.

“ We’ll git all the dogs we kin, ” pursued Mr. Jimmerson, “ an’ I reckon y’ll better tie yourn up to-morrow so we’ll be shore o’ em. ”

“ Jesso ! ” acquiesced the others.

“ I’m goin’ to bed, ” announced Mr. Jimmerson.

At this gentle hint the men stretched, lit their pipes and tried to introduce another topic. But Mr. Jimmerson threw some more wood on the fire, and then opening the door told the assembly to “ cl’ar themselves.

At this inhospitable command they straggled out. I should have thought they would have cut his acquaintance ; but they seemed

to bear no ill will and were around as usual the next day.

“We’re goin’ to have a frost afore mornin’,” predicted Sammy, as we tramped into the little room next the store.

“How do you know?” asked Treve.

“Feel hit,” was the sage reply.

That was the only reason the rustic young gentleman would give, but he prophesied rightly, for everything bore the marks of Jack Frost’s breath the next morning. If Sammy knew of any indications whereby to foretell the state of the weather, he was profound enough to keep silent and lead us to believe that he possessed a barometer in his body.

“Hit’ll be a good mornin’ fer rabbits,” he said, as we looked out of the solitary little window a few moments after being aroused by Mr. Jimmerson’s stentorian voice. “They taste better after a frost.”

We stumbled out of the room and out to a well in the rear. The latter was but six feet deep, but contained plenty of water, owing to the nature of the country.

“I don’t know what you-uns wanted to bring dogs down yere fur,” said Mr. Jim-

merson, as we were seated at the breakfast-table. "They're too valuable dogs fur coon huntin', an' I don't reckon they know anythin' about b'ars."

"No," replied Bob; "but for quails and chickens two of them can't be beat, and the spaniel Sam is worth a fortune for bringing in ducks."

"Sallright," said Mr. Jimmerson, by no means convinced; "but you kin shoot quail in the timber yere 'thout no dog, an' as fur ducks, ef you shoot from a blinded dugout you kin pick 'em up yourself."

"But you surely can't find any fault with Boose," I interrupted.

"Hain't findin' fault with any o' 'em. They're all fine dogs. I jess remarked that you could a-saved the money hit cost to cart' em down yere; but I reckon y'all kin find use fur 'em."

"Certainly," replied Treve, promptly. "And they'll work a great deal better than strange dogs will."

"Well, you wanter tie 'em up to-night. A yaller cur'll do jess as well to hunt coons, an' ef he gits chawed up you don't lose so much."

And having ventilated his views on the dog question, Mr. Jimmerson changed the subject.

We waged war on the cotton tails that morning. For two hours the woods rang with the reports. Sammy carried a long rifle of uncertain age and small bore. He seemed to think that a rabbit killed with shot was not worth carrying home, and accordingly punctured each that he brought down through the head.

“Gum boots an’ axes to-night,” said Jimmerson, after supper had been properly discussed.

“And plenty of fun,” Joe added.

“More’n y’all kin shake a stick at,” replied Sammy.

“Don’t you intend to take any guns?” I asked, in surprise.

“Nixy. Torches will be enough.”

The men began to congregate early. They came by twos and threes, each with from two to half a dozen dogs hanging to his heels.

Great pine knots were lighted. They flared up over the heads of the crowd gathered in front of the store, and lighted

up the surroundings within a radius of ten rods.

The dogs issued challenges and a dozen fights were in progress at one time. The men yelled, the dogs howled and fought, and pandemonium reigned supreme.

“Hurry up,” cried Mr. Jimmerson, coming in for the fourth time to where we were hauling on our boots, to find that Treve had put burrs in the bottom. “Ef we wait much longer we won’t have a dog left!”

Mr. Jimmerson gave several toots on his hunting horn and led off. The dogs ceased fighting and quickly took to the front. The five men who carried axes gripped the handles of their implements, while the rest hitched up their trousers and shouted to the dogs, probably from the fact that they had nothing else to do but to keep up.

But I soon found that keeping up was no easy task. The Quartette and Sammy kept close together at the start, but when the dog’s sharp yelps took a more definite direction as the prolonged bay of one or two denoted that they had “somethin’ treed,” we caught the infection and shouted,

whistled, jumped and ran just like the rest.

We soon came to where a confused mass of dogs surrounded a large pecan tree. They were baying and leaping up and making ineffectual efforts to climb the tree. The men walked around with the torches, peering into the dense branches above.

“ There’s three o’ em ! ” shouted some one.

Three pairs of glistening green eyes peered out of the darkness.

“ Shin up an’ push ’em off, won’t y’, Sammy ? ” requested his father.

“ Naw, I won’t. The fork’s too high up an’ the tree’s too big. ”

“ Then down she comes. ”

The dogs were kicked away and the crowd stood back to make room for the men with axes. The chips began to fly, and in a remarkably short time the huge tree tottered, and amid a general scramble to get out of the way, came down with a rush.

Three little animals bounded out from the branches almost before it touched the ground ; but before they had gone three feet the dogs were on them.

But they managed to get their backs to a tree, and then they fought as I had never seen anything fight before. The dogs pressed them hard, but without avail. Their snaps were like lightning and their teeth sharp as needles. Every now and then there would be a yelp louder than the rest and a poor dog would limp out and lie down, licking the place where the sharp teeth had penetrated. No one could help the dogs for fear of hitting a dog instead of a coon, so they stood back and cheered them on.

The dogs realized they were making no headway, and slacked up a trifle, and the coons, taking advantage of this, tried to climb the tree.

That was exactly what the dogs wanted. The struggle then was brief, but some of the bites inflicted in the death struggle were fearful.

“Where do the dogs start them up?” I asked of Sammy, who was standing near, as everybody stopped for a breathing spell and to light fresh torches.

“They git some o’ ’em along the edge o’ the water fishin’ fur frogs. Ef the coon

kin make his hole he'll do hit, but ef he kain't, he goes up the first tree he kin make."

"Call up the dogs an' start 'em agin," shouted Mr. Jimmerson.

The hunting horns rang out lustily.

Soon the pack assumed formidable dimensions, and then they were started with whoops and yells.

We plunged along after them, with the wounded limping in the rear, as though, although disabled, they were bound to be in at the death.

The ground grew more boggy, and as we tore along the many feet splattered the mud until we were covered. But we shouted and whistled just as loud as before when the dogs treed another coon, and thought it great fun.

We realized the inconsistency of this fun the next morning, when we scraped the fox tails, Spanish needles and mud from our garments.

Seven coons had been secured, and the fun was growing dull and seemed more like work, when the dogs made another rally and "treed somethin'." The men began

chopping and we watched the glowing eyes in the branches of the old hickory.

The torches fluttered with the draught caused by its descent ; the dogs barked and crowded around the trunk, and almost before we realized it there was an ear-splitting shriek, and something larger than a coon bounded right in among the dogs.

It seemed to strike only twice and two dogs dropped, cut to pieces by the terrible claws, while the rest turned and fled.

The men dropped their torches and scrambled back. I ran with the rest.

Two of the torches spluttered on the ground, and, as I gave one hasty glance over my shoulder, I saw the animal jump, strike somebody and both went to the ground.

The next instant I heard a cry :

“ Help ! help ! Steve, Bob, Treve ! It’s a wildcat ! ”

It was Joe’s voice !

CHAPTER XII.

TROUBLE.

I STOPPED the moment that appeal rang out. So did two others, but the rest kept on until they reached a perfectly safe distance.

And not a rifle or gun in the crowd.

“Hurry up,” shouted Joe, in a muffled tone.

The other two came forward. They were Treve and Bob.

“Don’t move, and try not to breathe,” cried Bob, encouragingly. “We will have you up in a jiffy.”

“Let’s have some light on the subject,” called Treve, as coolly as though there was not a boy lying under a wild cat within fifteen feet of him.

Both of the torches that remained lit

were lying close to the two figures on the ground.

I walked softly toward them as Bob did the same on the other side.

The wild cat was standing with its forepaws on Joe, who was lying very quiet, with his head covered with his arms, and his face close to the earth to protect his eyes.

It was about the size of my setter Dan, but a great deal heavier, with shorter legs and a bushy tail.

What we did would have to be done quickly, for, if it began to scratch, work must be speedy to save poor Joe's back. I knew about how the claws felt after being pinned down by a panther, and had heard how they hang on with their forefeet while they work their hind ones. The latter being supplied with claws about two inches long, you can imagine how they would cut a person up. Butcher knives would be no rival.

The beast eyed me furtively as I approached. Just then, by the feeble light of the torches, I caught sight of something glistening on the ground.

My heart leaped high. It was an axe, dropped in the hurried rush. All this transpired in less than a minute.

Bob gave an exultant cry and caught up a torch. Treve got the other one, and, with the flaming brands outstretched, they charged at the same moment that I pounced down on the axe.

But the wildcat, instead of taking off, construed it as a help to his work, and, with a spiteful yowl, swung around and commenced to use its claws with terrible effect.

There was not a second to be lost. I swung the axe around my head and ran forward.

There came cries of pain, and Joe tried to stagger to his feet. This made it doubly dangerous. Suppose I should strike Joe!

I swallowed pretty hard, and then, as they rolled toward me, I saw the cat was on top.

Once around my head, and then, driven by every ounce of strength I possessed, the axe descended, struck something hard, and sank in like a knife into a water melon.

There was a feeble wail, and the cat roll-

ed off, shaking like an aspen. It stiffened, its limbs moved once or twice, and it was dead!

Mr. Jimmerson ran up just then with an axe, followed by Sammy, Mr. B. Morris, and two others.

“Well, I’ll swap—” he explained, as he took in the situation, and then stopped.

“Positions with me?” asked Joe, faintly, as Treve and Bob helped him to his feet.

His clothes above the waist were literally cut to pieces, and three large and a dozen small cuts showed what a wildcat could do in thirty seconds.

“I’ll make you a wash soon’s we kin git home an’ you’ll be all right in a day or two. You uns air makin’ a good start; got a good pelt already.”

None of the Quartette took any interest in the pelt, although Mr. Morris promptly whipped out a knife and had it off in no time.

Mr. Jimmerson gave several encouraging toots on his horn, and the others came straggling in, with any number of excuses for running away. Bob pulled off his coat

and wrapped it around Joe, and then the homeward march was begun.

We had strayed farther away than we thought, and it was over an hour afterward before we came out in the clearing. Mr. Jimmerson, true to his word, made some preparation from herbs which was applied to Joe's back with such good effect that that young gentleman declared himself perfectly able to start for Muddy Run the next morning.

But the remaining members of the Quartette refused to see it in that light, so we postponed the departure until another day.

“Two coats clawed up,” said Joe rather ruefully. “If we run against any more such animals we won't have any clothes to take home. As the damaged party in this transaction, I put in a petition for his hide.”

“Granted,” agreed the rest.

“You're luckier than I am,” said I. “The panther that clawed up my coat we forgot to skin.”

“A person would be excusable if he forgot he had a head after passing such a night as we did,” put in Treve.

“I'll run over your grub an' fixin's with

you," said Mr. Jimmerson, coming up at that moment, "an' see ef I can't add somethin'."

"I don't believe you can," said Bob, "unless it is the 'grub.' We brought only what we needed on the train, intending to purchase here a few staple articles, such as sugar, coffee, flour——"

"Flour," interrupted Mr. Jimmerson. "Better take corn meal. Y'all kin make more use o'hit and hit's a great deal easier to handle."

"Corn meal goes," said Bob, promptly, throwing open the trunks and beginning to extract our equipments for Mr. Jimmerson's inspection.

"Each of us have one pair of woolen blankets, one of rubber, a pair of rubber boots, short, another pair with tops, rubber coats and hats, two hunting jackets, an overcoat, gloves, tin cup, a rifle and two guns—Joe has an extra rifle—six hundred pounds of ammunition, assorted, a set of reloading tools, fifty pounds of shot, assorted, and ten of powder and a chance to replenish it.

"Besides this we have two frying pans and a coffee pot, hermetic match cases,

hunting knives, a good supply of clothing, and—and—I guess that is all. No; here is a pocket glass, comb and brush, and some fish lines.”

And Bob dived into the trunks to see if he had missed anything.

“An’ you got all that truck in ’em?” ejaculated Mr. Jimmerson, leaning against the door casing and staring at the huge pile before him.

“Yes,” grumbled Treve, “and it is funny to me that we were not charged with excess of baggage.”

“But the most important thing you haven’t got.”

“What is that?”

“Not a scrap o’ grub in the whole outfit.”

“Oh, we’re going to buy some from you,” said Bob, confidently, “and we intend to live on game most of the time.”

Mr. Jimmerson scratched his head a moment, and then said:

“Here’s what I’m a-going to give, an’ I don’t want no pay fur hit, neither, fur Sammy’s a-goin’ along, an’ I reckon y’all will bring everything back so there’ll be no loss:

a hatchet, three axes, some nails, corn meal, coffee, sugar, salt, pepper, some chain an' a hundred an' fifty traps fur small game. Ef y'all need any more, Sammy kin make some figure-fours an' downfalls. Anythin' else you want?"

"Yes," replied Sammy. "We want five o' your dogs, an' them with their four will make hit kinder rusty fur anythin' we tackle."

"And Loafer," reminded Joe.

"He kin eat cane leaves an' grass," Sammy replied.

"It's cold day and a high wind blowing when we get left," said Treve, jubilantly, and with that the conference ended.

The Jimmersons were early risers. We had scarcely swallowed our breakfast the next morning, and could hardly see a dozen feet for the fog, when our recognized guide, Mr. Samuel Jimmerson, gave the order to load up.

"Hit's a purty bad road," he explained, "an' I reckon hit'll be nigh onto noon afore we git there. The shanty'll need fixin', ef the Swamp Angels have left any shanty 'tall, an' we'll need daylight to do hit."

“The Swamp Angels?” said Bob, interrogatively.

“Yes. Hit’s a gang that have got an igeer they run the Sunk Lands. They run a feller off paw had trappin’ over there last season.”

The Quartette exchanged glances.

“Do you suppose we will have trouble?” asked Joe.

“Mebby a little fracas,” replied Sammy, coolly. “They won’t pester us long.”

And that was all he would say on the subject.

A large sack containing the corn meal and other articles was loaded into the wagon with the trunks. Next came the hundred and fifty small traps, axes, etc., and when the Quartette and Sammy mounted, Loafer had all he could draw.

The dogs were allowed to run loose, and Sammy volunteered the information that they would pull down a rabbit when they got hungry.

The blind road leading to Muddy Run was a trifle worse than the others we had traversed, but the scenery was about the same. The ground grew higher and more

firm when within half a mile of it. A dozen times we got stuck, but by pulling at the wheels and giving Loafer a rest we managed to sight the cabin at three o'clock.

It stood in the midst of a number of tree stumps, fronting on a good sized bayou, with a sway-back roof and the door partially gone.

Sammy took the lead and we worked like beavers.

The old chimney of mud and sticks was repaired. We cut down tall saplings and fixed the door by nailing them upright, as close together as possible, and built a cosy little L for Loafer. Sammy was for turning him loose to find his own food, but Bob reminded him that we should be held responsible if he was lost, and would not hear of it. We plastered the cracks in the cabin with mud, cut a large quantity of firewood from a fallen tree, and had a large fire roaring in the fireplace and no game when darkness settled down.

“Hit'll be all right,” said Sammy, as we stood in the centre and surveyed our handiwork. “We'll git a panther skin an' tack hit inside the door to keep the cold out ;

but we hain't got nothin' to yeat onless I kin knock over a turkey. Howsomever, I'll try hit."

He took his rifle and went out. We fed Loafer and then sat down to wait.

The minutes went by slowly, then came the peculiar "whang" of his rifle, and a few minutes later he came in with a turkey dangling at his side.

We pounced upon that turkey, had it cleaned in no time and frying over the coals. One was detailed to keep the dogs away, while the others hauled out the blankets and spread them on the floor.

Sammy took some of the corn meal, mixed it with water and plenty of salt, and molding it into cakes, buried it in the glowing coals. It was extracted later on, slightly burnt, and we indulged for the first time in "ash cake."

"I wish we had a better way o' lockin' that door 'sides the chain," said Sammy, between mouthfuls. "I'll fix up a bar to-morrow."

That was a gay party in the cabin that night. After supper we fed the dogs, and lying at full length on the blankets before

the fire listened to Sammy's wonderful stories.

I fancied, however, that it was not the relating of perilous escapes that caused Sammy to keep looking at the door, while he stopped every now and then to listen. But he said nothing concerning his actions, and thinking that perhaps it was his custom to indulge in such movements while camping out, I refrained from asking.

"We'll leave the dogs inside," he said, just before we rolled up in our blankets to go to sleep, "an' keep our rifles handy."

Then he loaded his carefully, made a circuit of the cabin, came back, rolled up, and went to sleep.

I lay watching the fire quite awhile before I dropped off. It seemed as though I had scarcely closed my eyes before I was awakened by a terrible clatter.

I rose to a sitting position. The dogs were barking like mad and trying to get out the door, while from Loafer's stable came the thump and crash of the wood as he kicked out blindly. Sammy was already on his feet.

“ Grab y’alls guns an’ kim out ! ” he shouted.

Then with his rifle in one hand he threw open the door and disappeared in the darkness, preceded by the dogs.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SWAMP ANGELS.

“WHAT’S the trouble?” demanded Bob, raising himself on his elbow.

“I hit him!” cried Treve, half asleep, staggering to his feet and nearly falling in the fire.

“Sammy said to bring our rifles and come outside,” I replied excitedly, grabbing my rifle and running to the door.

It was extremely dark without.

I waited until my eyes grew accustomed to the blackness, and then started out, just in time to stop one of the flying saplings from Loafer’s stable, that knocked me over on my back.

I saw more stars in two seconds than have ever been discovered since the world began.

The rest of the Quartette came out in time to lift me to my feet.

Amid flashes of lurid light I saw the form of Sammy run a few feet, lift his rifle and fire at something running toward the timber. A cry of pain came out of the darkness, and the dogs sprang away in that direction.

For a moment everything was still. Even Loafer ceased to kick.

“Bring a light out yere,” called Sammy.

Treve ran into the cabin and came back with a blazing fagot.

“What did you hit?” asked Bob, as Sammy began to load his rifle.

“The critter that was in the stable.”

“What was it—a panther?” I asked.

“No. Hit wuz a two-laigged critter. I ’low hit wuz one o’ them Swamp Angels prowlin’ around. He thought he’d walk off with Loafer; but the old hoss fooled him. When I got out yere there warn’t nothin’ movin’; but when y’all kim sailin’ out he broke from behind a stump an’ I let him have it afore I knowed what hit wuz.”

“Is—is he dead?” I asked, hesitatingly.

“Goin’ to see. One o’ you-uns stay an’

see that they don't lug off what we got while we're gone. Mebby some more hangin' around. We won't let 'em git a cinch on us like that feller did on Mau-melle Lake with y'll."

We bit our lips and decided that Bob should remain.

"Keep your eyes open," cautioned Sammy. "There's—hup—oh, hit's the dogs kem back. Didn't think they'd go very fur 'thout some one behind 'em. You better keep 'em fur there's enough o' the Swamp Angels to clean you out afore we could git back."

Sammy took the torch and swung it around his head to make it blaze up, and then watching the ground closely he started toward the timber, while Bob called the dogs and retired to the cabin.

We followed closely behind Sammy, gripping our rifles nervously. I half expected a shot from any direction.

"Hit wus a man," said Sammy, pointing to a broad footprint in the moist earth. "An' there is blood," he continued, pointing to a line of dark spots on the dead leaves. "I reckon he understands now

that we don't 'low any foolin' around us !”

“ Goin' to follow it up ? ” asked Joe.

“ Not by a long shot ! He might be layin' fur us a leetle further on. I don't reckon they'll pester us any more.”

Hardly were the words out of his mouth before a shot rang out, followed by the barking of dogs, a confused murmur of voices, and then :

“ Help ! help ! They're down on me ! ”

“ That is Bob's voice,” cried Treve, as we stood aghast.

“ Jupiter and Mars ! ” ejaculated Joe.

“ Run for it, boys ! ”

Sammy dashed the blazing fagot to the ground and extinguished it with his heel. Then we turned and ran toward the cabin.

Before the shanty were the shadowy forms of a crowd of men. Standing before the door, out of which the light shone between the saplings, was a man a head taller than the rest, who seemed to be the leader.

With one accord we stopped.

“ Git down behind a stump,” whispered Sammy, quickly.

We crouched down behind our respective stumps and listened.

The big man pounded on the door with the butt of his gun, which was followed by the barks and snarls of the dogs.

“Open up !” he shouted, “or we’ll break the door down. We’ll l’arn you-uns what hit means to shoot ’spectable people !”

“Guy ! He means business,” whispered Joe.

“The man that breaks that door down gets the contents of a Winchester !” came in Bob’s clear tones from within. “I’ve got to protect myself, so take warning !”

They stepped back from in front of the door at this, and engaged in an animated discussion. Finally the big man raised his voice so that we could hear, and said :

“Well, we got to do somethin’ purty quick, or them fellers ’ll be back, an’ we’ll have our hands full. I don’t wanter shoot any o’ ’em, even if they did put a bullet into Bill.”

“Look’s like they respected us,” said Treve softly. “Suppose we charge on them.”

But Sammy shook his head.

“’Twouldn’t do,” said he. Then, raising his voice, he called :

“ Hello’ there ! ”

There was a commotion in the crowd, and then the big man shouted interrogatively :

“ Well ? ”

“ Reckon you-uns air on somebody’s claim, hain’t you ? ”

“ Mebby we air an’ mebby we hain’t. ”

“ I ’low hit mought be healthier fur you-uns ef you moved. Y’all air on our claim, an’ I reckon you-uns knows what the law is. There’s four rifles panted at you now, an’ three o’ ’em kin shoot a heap o’ times. Ef you hain’t movin’ when I count three, or ef there’s a gun raised in the crowd, we turn loose ! Y’ hear me shoutin’ ? ”

The man laughed.

“ One ! ” warned Sammy. “ The law in these parts’ll back us up. Two ! Air you movin’ ? ”

“ We’ll see you-uns agin ! ” shouted the man, as his party began to slink out of sight.

“ Yes, ” drawled Sammy ; but whether this was meant as an acceptance or as a derisive reply I do not know.

We waited several moments after they

had disappeared, and then walked bravely to the cabin.

“Don’t let the dogs out,” said Sammy, as Bob unfastened the door. “Nothin’ would suit ’em better than a chance to shoot ’em.”

“Are you sure they won’t come back?” asked Bob, as we stood looking at each other, with our hands in our pockets, wanting to go to sleep, and afraid to.

“No, I hain’t,” replied Sammy, dubiously; “at any rate we’ll stand watch.”

“It is two o’clock now; four hours before morning,” said I, looking at my watch. “Sammy and I will stand the first for two hours, and then we will oust two of you out.”

This was agreed to, and the others turned in.

Sammy waited until the regular breathing of the boys denoted that they were asleep, and then said, softly:

“I kinder thought we’d have a pow-wow to-night. I seed one o’ ’em sneakin’ around jess after I shot that turkey; but I thought I wouldn’t say nothin’. To-morrow we’ll fix up Loafer’s stable an’ the door, set the

small traps, an' do a leetle snoopin' around for that dugout the fellow told paw he hid in a holler tree near the bayou. We oughter have that to set the traps. I don't reckon we kin do much more."

As I was too drowsy to make a reply, Sammy subsided, and we sat and blinked at the fire until our watch was up, and then called Bob and Treve and turned in.

Neither watch was molested.

We turned out early, performed our ablutions in the bayou, and while Bob, Treve and Sammy, accompanied by the dogs, went after our breakfast, Joe and I cut a day's supply of food for Loafer and rebuilt his stable.

"I never saw so much to shoot at in my life," cried Bob, half an hour later, dropping half a dozen young rabbits and squirrels and three mallard ducks just outside the door.

This pile was trebled by the other two.

"But Sammy wouldn't let us shoot any more than we needed," added Treve, regretfully.

"No use," replied Sammy, philosophically. "Y'all 'll git plenty o'shootin'

afore ya'll goes home, an' there won't be nothin' wasted."

We discussed a breakfast composed of rabbit, squirrel, duck and ash cake, washed down with black coffee sweetened with sugar, and found it very substantial.

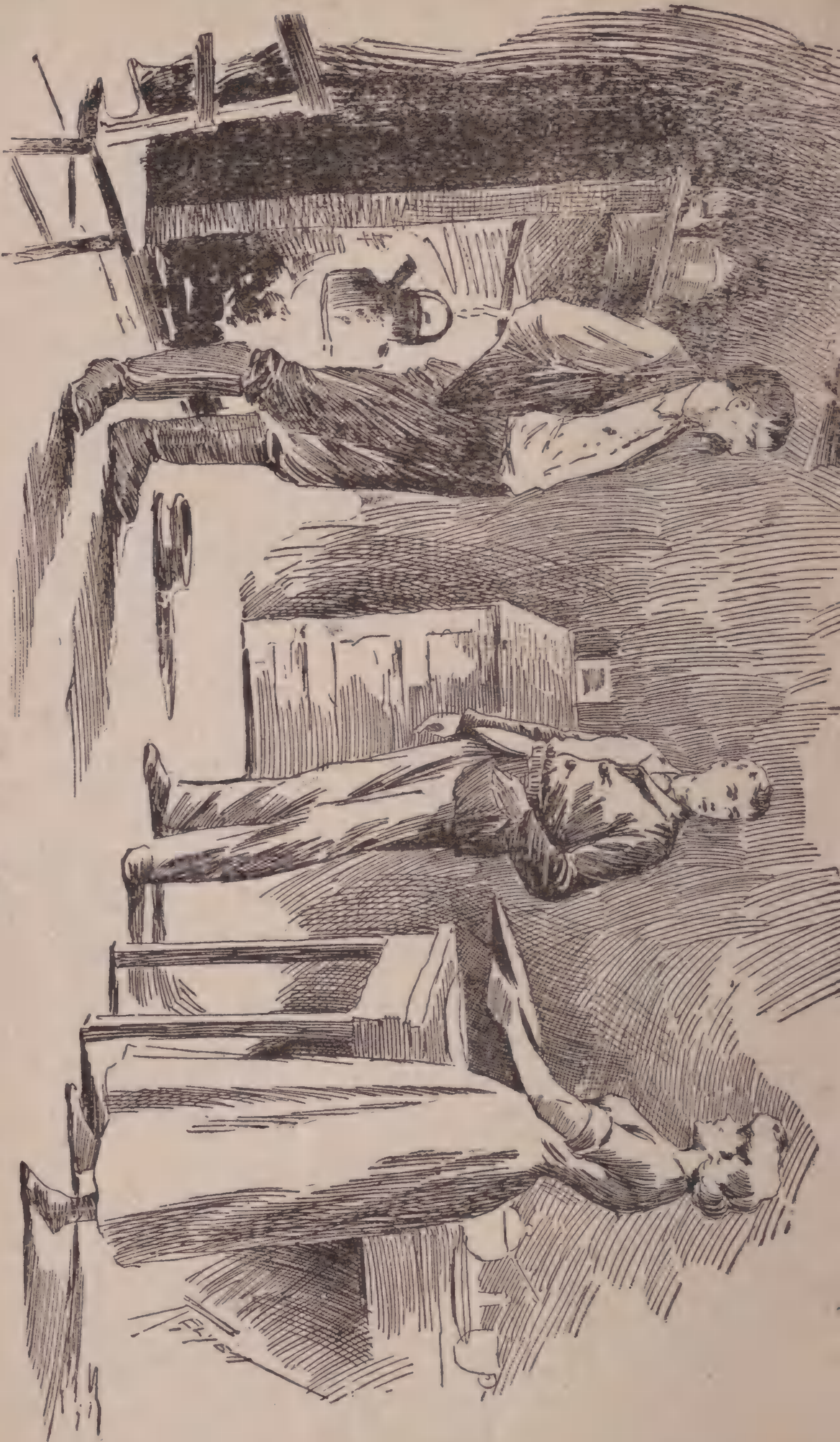
Sammy easily found an old blazed sycamore, that proved to be hollow and held the dugout propped up perpendicularly inside.

"I know these parts a leetle better than you-uns," he said, "so I'll take most o' the traps an' the dugout an' Steve, an' set 'em fur otter an' mink.

"You-uns kin take the rest, with your rubber suits, an axe an' your rifles, an' set 'em wherever you-uns think they'll ketch fur; but don't forgit to blaze the path so we kin find 'em again. Better take the dogs with you-uns, too. The rest o' the guns we'll chuck in a trunk an' cover up in a corner where they won't see 'em. We'll have to keep things shady till they l'arn who we air."

Then he threw most of the traps in the dugout, with our two rifles and an axe, while the rest of us locked one of the trunks

“IS HE GOIN’ TO EAT?”



and covered it up with blankets in one corner.

The boys shouldered their traps, rifles and an axe, and taking the dogs started into the timber.

Sammy held the dugout until I scrambled down the steep bank and stepped gingerly in. It was about like sitting on the point of a pin for balancing, and we nearly capsized before we got three feet from the bank.

But Sammy was used to them, and after assuming an easy position I kept it, while he manipulated the paddle.

“There’s an otter slide!” exclaimed Sammy, after paddling quite a distance up stream. “That’ll be a scrumptious place fur a trap.”

And with one sweep of the paddle the boat was sent to the bank. Hardly had the prow touched the shore when there was a crashing of bushes a short distance above us, and some heavy body pressed through.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIGHT WITH A BUCK.

SAMMY and I looked at each other in consternation and gripped our rifles firmly.

The crashing of the bushes came nearer and nearer, until the antlered head of a large buck pushed through and the animal stood on the bank not more than ten feet above us up stream.

He stamped his feet, snorted and listened, but did not see us sitting quietly in the dugout below him.

“The other fellers started him up,” whispered Sammy.

The faint baying of Boose and the other dogs came to our ears. The buck seemed undecided whether to cross or go up or down the bayou. Finally he swung around and faced the direction from which he had come.

“Goin’ to make a stand!” whispered Sammy, excitedly, as I brought my rifle carefully to my shoulder. “Put the bullet right behind his foreleg.”

I was shaking as with the ague. One second the rifle was pointed at the bayou, the next at the tree tops. I felt cold and hot and nervous by turns, and possessed every symptom of the “fever.”

Inadvertently my foot touched the traps, and one rolled down with a clatter. Like a flash the buck wheeled and was starting straight at us.

I was afraid he would go, and aiming hastily between the eyes, I pulled the trigger. But he tossed his head the moment I fired, and the heavy forty-five glanced off.

He dropped to his knees; but was up again in a second. He was dazed. He whirled round and round, just as you’ve seen a dog do when after his tail.

“Look out!” screamed Sammy.

It was too late.

The buck had spun around until he was directly over us, and then, missing his footing, he plunged down the twelve foot

bank, and landed with a smash right in the dugout. In an instant we were struggling in the cold water.

“Bl-r-r-r!” spluttered Sammy, as he came up.

The dugout floated serenely down the stream, bottom up.

“Waugh-waugh!” I stammered, expectorating several mouthfuls of by no means clear water.

The buck tossed his head viciously and swam directly for us.

“Don’t let him hit you with his feet!” shouted Sammy; “they’ll cut like knives.”

I am a good swimmer, but burdened with rubber boots that I could not shake off, my movements were laborious. He was almost on me when I dived, and, with a few strokes under water, came up below him and near Sammy, blowing pretty hard with the exertion.

“This is fun,” he growled. “We kain’t climb these muddy banks with wet clothes on afore he’ll git us, an’ the rifles air at the bottom o’ the bayou. I wished the dogs were y——”

The buck charged on us again and we

thrashed off in opposite directions. The buck came on after Sammy, and although the little fellow swam valiantly, it was right upon him, and he suddenly dived.

The buck waited until he came up a few yards away, and then started for him again. Sammy was so exhausted by this time that it would have gone hard with him, but just then the whole pack of dogs—with the setter, pointer and spaniel bringing up the rear—came through the underbrush giving tongue grandly. It was the most welcome music I ever heard.

They never hesitated an instant, but led by Boose came down the bank like an avalanche into the water. They swam like a streak for their prey, and soon the buck had all he could do defending himself.

He fought like a hero for a few moments, trying to strike down the dogs who would *not* get in front of him, but persisted in chewing the back of his neck, and then finding that his efforts were unavailing, he turned and swam down stream with the dogs trailing out behind.

Sammy and I swam to the bank and, after an exhausting scramble, we managed,

by taking advantage of every twig within reach, to reach the top. Then, after pouring the water out of our boots, we ran along the bank after the game, and also toward the cabin.

By hard running we passed the deer and dogs, and almost breathless we tore into the shanty. Hastily tossing aside the blankets I unlocked the trunk.

Sammy selected the little German rifle, which was loaded but not capped, and slipping on a cap, was ready. I took Treve's 10, shoved a ball cartridge into the rifled barrel, and we ran out to the bayou just as the deer and dogs got there. The dugout was floating just in front of them. The shots rang out, and the victory was ours ; but the body sank.

We were not going to be cheated out of it after such an exciting chase, so we captured the dugout, made a long line by using the chain and pieces of Loafer's harness, and carrying it out in the dugout, Sammy dived and fastened it to the horns.

Then we carried the end ashore, and by main strength hauled it out and up the bank.

“That is the toughest tussle I ever had with a deer in all my life,” panted Sammy.

“An’ we’re the first ones to bring one in.”

“They ought to be here by this time,” said I, “if they followed the dogs.”

“Don’t b’lieve they ever seed the deer,” replied Sammy. “The dogs wus runnin’ around, started hit up an’ they thought likely it wuz a rabbit an’ let ’em go.”

“Well, I’m freezing in these wet clothes,” I chattered. “Let’s go back and dive for the rifles and traps and get back here and dry out.”

So we paddled back in a half frozen condition, and after repeated efforts managed to bring up the rifles, axe and most of the traps.

“Now let’s go back to the fire,” chattered Sammy, his teeth rattling like castanets. “Hit hain’t no fun goin’ in water in November, even down yere.”

I agreed with him.

We returned to the cabin, rolled on a couple of logs, but not until the temperature rose to blood heat were we satisfied. The dogs dried themselves at the same time we did. Then we had a great feast on venison

steaks, and to while away the time waiting for the others to return, we fitted double bars to the door, with latch strings. The latter could be drawn inside, and thus prevent the door from being opened from without, but this could be done only when there was some one within—unless we wanted to batter the door down, or descend through the chimney.

“The old trappers don’t have to lock their doors,” said Sammy, “an’ I reckon we won’t when they l’arn who we air.”

“When they do learn,” I muttered, “there’ll be a cyclone on a cold day in Georgia.”

Sammy refused to argue.

“Seems to me,” he remarked, looking out the door, “that they’ve had time to set the double traps they had. Half the arternoon’s gone ; they oughter be showin’ up. Reckon anythin’s happened to ’em ? ”

“Not unless they’re lost,” I replied, beginning to feel uneasy.

“Couldn’t be ef they blazed the way like I told ’em to. We’ll hide the trunk an’ wait awhile longer, an’ ef they don’t kim we’ll have to hunt ’em up.”

We covered the trunk up in the corner. An hour went slowly by.

“Oughter go afore dark,” Sammy said. “We’ll leave the dogs yere an’ the latch strings out, so ef they git yere afore we do they kin git in. I reckon the dogs’ll tend to things.”

So we took our rifles, closed the door, and, after seeing that Loafer was well provided for, and the deer’s carcass secured in the branches of a small hickory, stepped out lively over the route traversed by the boys.

“There’s the first one,” said Sammy, pointing to a tree, the bark of which had been pealed off about a foot long and six inches wide.

A little farther on could be seen another blaze. This had a cross cut below it,

“They’ve set a trap near here,” I volunteered.

“Let’s find it,” suggested Sammy.

We searched carefully around. I found it, but not until after I had put my foot into it. It was placed in a narrow path, adroitly covered with leaves.

Mr. S. Jimmerson laughed boisterously as

he pressed down the stout spring and allowed me to extract my foot from the painful grip. I limped along after him, but failed to see anything to laugh at.

The crosses on the blazed trees began to count up. We came out on the banks of a small bayou, when Sammy said:

“They seem to have gone in a big circle. Consequently, they ought to bring up nigh the cabin. There’s another otter slide!”

I looked at the smooth, slick place on the bank. It reached from the top of the bank to the water, and looked as though the animal had slid down a great many times.

“I’m blamed ef they didn’t see hit an’ set a trap,” he exclaimed, pointing to the faint outlines of one just below the surface. “Some o’ ’em’s got eyes.”

“It must be Joe,” I replied. “He’s trapped before.”

We went on for a quarter of a mile farther, when suddenly the blazing ceased.

We looked all around, but could see none.

“They either run out ’o traps an’ started fur home, or——”

He began to scan the ground.

“Look yere!”

I looked.

The imprint of their rubber boots could be plainly seen, and mingled with them were others made by moccasins and heavy shoes!

“I reckon the reason they didn’t kim in,” drawled Sammy, “wuz because they had a pressin’ invite to go with some o’ the Swamp Angels!”

“Then you mean—” I began.

He nodded.

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTURED BY SWAMP ANGELS.

FOR obvious reasons it is best to follow Bob, Joe and Treve when they started out with their traps, axe and rifles. The Quartette's custom of relating what happened during a separation makes me as familiar with what transpired on this trip as though I were along.

They went into the timber on the north side of the cabin. Joe took the lead.

“We'll blaze the trees,” said he, “so we won't have any trouble in finding our way back, and wherever we set a trap we'll make a cross.”

“Exactly,” said Bob, as he sliced a piece of bark off a tree. “There is a starter.”

A little farther on, in sight of the first, they blazed another, and here Joe thought

it would be a good place for a trap. So they placed one in the place referred to in the preceding chapter, driving the blade on the chain into a convenient log.

“Maybe it will catch a fox, coon or weasel,” Joe explained. “We’ll set them in a circle, so as to get through somewhere near the cabin.”

“I imagine it will be great sport to take a tramp like this every morning,” grumbled Treve, “and if I understand it right, that is what we ought to do. For my part, I prefer to shoot.”

“So do I,” replied Bob, “but you don’t get so many, and unless you use a bullet the shot will spoil the pelt. Then trapping is less expensive.”

“Oh, I know all that,” acquiesced Treve, “but there is more sport in hunting. Give me a gun every time.”

“There go the dogs,” broke in Joe. “After a rabbit I expect, so let them go.”

As the reader knows it was rather a savage kind of rabbit.

They kept on, blazing the trees and setting the traps wherever the prospect looked promising, until the fifty-four had dwindled

down to ten and they stood on the bank of a small bayou.

“Must be past noon,” said Bob.

“I feel as though it was,” said Treve, taking up the slack in his vest. “We’ve been going in a circle, and should be somewhere near the cabin. Let’s postpone dinner until we get home.”

“I’m willing,” agreed Bob. “Why, look here, fellows, something’s been sliding down the bank here.”

“Must be an otter slide,” observed Joe.

“Fur is good, ain’t it?” asked Treve.

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll have him. Trap ought to be set just under the surface of the water.”

“I suppose so.”

“Give me a trap.”

Treve hauled up the gossamer leggings of his boots, set the trap and laid down his rifle. Then with the trap in one hand and grabbing at the shrubs growing on the bank with the other, he half rolled, half slid into the water.

He placed the trap just under the surface, and tied the chain to a root.

“There’ll be a surprise party down here

for Mr. Otter next time he comes down," he remarked grimly, floundering up the bank. "And just think! We'll have to go down every time we set the trap!"

"That is where the fun of trapping comes in," responded Joe.

"Sammy was pretty slick, sending us out this way while he went in a dugout," murmured Bob. "We'll bring him over this route to-morrow and see how it pleases him."

"Oh, you couldn't get the best of him," responded Treve. "He'd slide through mud up to his neck, but what he'd convince you it was the height of fun to trap in the sunk lands."

"Nine more traps to set," broke in Joe, with a sigh. "Well, come on."

"I wish we could have a tussle with a bear or wildcat. If something exciting doesn't turn up pretty soon, I'll die of despondency!"

Hardly had his yearning been expressed, when from behind the trees on all sides emerged a crowd of men.

With one impulse the boys halted, and involuntarily gripped their rifles.

The body of men was composed of one third half breeds and full breeds, and two thirds the typical vagabond of the woods. Their movements were stealthy; they carried rifles and shotguns in the hollow of their arms, and, as they approached in a circle, hemming the boys in, they glanced cautiously about as though expecting something.

“Howd’y!” exclaimed a tall man, whom Treve and Joe instantly recognized as the one in command the night before, when the cabin was attacked. They also recognized the feasibility of being civil, especially as they were outnumbered ten to one.

“Quite well, thank you,” answered Bob, in a well assumed voice of cheerfulness.

“I reckon you-uns air glad to see us agin!” went on the other.

“Certainly!” replied Treve briskly—telling a downright whopper.

“Hum! My name’s Lacy—Jim Lacy!”

“Indeed!”

“Well, that’s what I said! You-uns air moughty peart, you air; but I reckon we’ll take some o’ the uppishness outen you afore you-uns git shet o’ us! We wuz on our

way to you-uns' place to give you-uns another serenade when Smoky Bill seed you a-loomin' up, so we squatted down yere an' waited."

That there might be no mistake as to whom he meant, Jim Lacy pointed a dirty finger at the yellow rascal. Smoky Bill, thus brought into prominence, shuffled his feet, scowled and finally grinned horribly.

"Well," said Joe, absently.

"Well!" said Jim, fiercely. "I reckon sarcumstances *do* alter cases, sometimes. Last night you-uns had the upper hand an' could talk shabby; but I 'low now you'll howl on t'other side o' your mouth! Whare's the rest o' you!"

"Find out!" snapped Treve, who lost his temper.

"Commenced sarsin', eh? Well, we kin find 'em! Drap them guns on the ground you afore I feed more lead'n you kin chew in six months! That's right! Allers obey your s'perior ossifer. Now, stick your elbows out behind your back, an' Smoky Bill'll stick a club through an' tie you up real nice—so! We don't want any back talk!"

The boys were compelled to do as they were ordered—for the crowd fingered their guns in a manner very trying to one's nerves—and Smoky Bill tied their arms securely with strips of buckskin and an inane smile.

“Now, face to'ards the sou'west an' step out lively!” commanded Jim Lacy. “Six o' us'll go on an' git the cinch on t'other two. Ef they don't move fast enough, prick 'em up with a bowie knife!”

“We'll stick it clean through 'em!” said one of the men, with a cheerfulness that sent the cold shivers chasing each other up the trio's back.

“Oh, no; an inch or so will be enough,” replied Mr. Jim Lacy, carelessly.

If Jim Lacy intended to frighten them about the depth they would be pricked if inclined to loiter, he succeeded; for, although knowing it was simply a bluff, they did not know what interpretation the guards would make.

Jim and five of his followers set out towards the cabin, while the others, giving the boys a violent push, started in the opposite direction.

Gall and wormwood would have been

sweet compared with the boys' feelings as they trudged along behind their captors, who construed every stumble—and bound as they were, these were many—as the first principles of loitering, and promptly jabbed their knives into their backs until they howled.

“ I would give ten dollars if these fastenings were off for two minutes ! ” said Treve, grimly.

“ Here, too ! ” was Bob's dismal rejoinder.

They skirted a canebrake that seemed to run for miles, and then, switching off, they crossed some low ground, where the marshy earth made travel trebly difficult.

But their captors were as unrelenting as ever, and hurried them on, and when they came in sight of a settlement of a dozen houses the boys were by no means sorry.

A great pack of dogs ran out to meet them, growling savagely at the captives—to the amusement of the others—while a dozen women possessed of irritable tempers, calico dresses, angular features and shrill voices, stood in the doorways of their respective domiciles with their arms akimbo, and stared in open-mouthed amazement.

The boys were steered to the dirtiest and most prominent house, the mistress of which, after gazing at them a moment, exclaimed :

“ Good land o’ Goshen ! What fur you brung ’em yere, Smoky Bill ? ”

“ Jim said so,” replied the gentleman with the obscure name, who evidently respected the lady before him.

“ He did, eh ? Well, the Lord knows I got all I kin do to feed him an’ the chillun, ’thout fillin’ three extra mouths. Why don’t you-uns divide ’em up ? ”

“ We object to that,” interposed Bob.

“ Oh, you do ! ” she cackled. “ Much good’ll hit do you. I’ll take one o’ ’em ; tote the rest off.”

“ Jim said put ’em all in the back room an’ give ’em somethin’ to yeat till he kims,” said Smoky Bill stolidly.

“ Good land o’——”

“ An’ them bein’ orders, in they go ! ” said a fierce looking fellow.

The woman stormed, tore her hair and screamed ; but the men pushed by her, and, thrusting the boys in a back room, closed the door.

“ I can't say whether I feel glad or sorry,” said Joe, as the scuffling of feet in the other room ceased, although the cries of the woman could be heard, trying to induce the feminine portion of the settlement to take her part.

“ We're going to have trouble; mark my words !” said Bob gravely. “ I can't think why they should bring us down here ; but unless Sammy and Steve can manage to get us out it looks to me as though we were going to stay, and there is no knowing what they're going to do with us.”

“ I wonder if this is the first principles of a ' run out ' ? ” murmured Treve.

Before the others could ventilate their views on the subject, the door was opened and a flood of golden hair and a pair of blue eyes peered in. The next moment their owner followed.

“ Gee-whitaker ! Ain't she pretty ? ” whispered Bob.

“ Hello ! ” said the young lady.

The boys stared a moment in astonishment, and then, for want of something better, said “ Hello ! ” too.

She looked at Treve a moment, and then asked :

“ How did you get out ? ”

Here was Greek ! The boys looked at each other, their first intimation being that she was poking fun at them, and Treve asked sarcastically :

“ Do I look as though I was out ? ”

“ Well, I should say not ! It was a shame to tie you up that way ! ”

“ Of course it was,” replied Treve, quick to take advantage of her sympathetic nature. “ Please get a knife and cut these bonds ; they hurt awfully.”

“ Oh, I darsn't ! They'd kill me ! Mis' Lacy said I could only take a peep an' must come right away.”

“ What do you——”

But she was gone, and Treve ground his teeth and said some very uncomplimentary things about Mrs. Jim Lacy.

Night came on, and the wind entering through the chinks between the logs chilled them to the bone, while, bound hand and foot as they were, sleep was well nigh impossible.

Jim Lacy returned during the night, and,

judging from his angry tone, the boys concluded that he had not found Sammy and me. Then they dozed off toward dawn, to be awakened by Jim Lacy's voice in the next room.

“Hit wuz a blamed sight funder from where we nabbed the three o’em to the cabin’n I thought ; but when we got there, there warn’t nothin’ but an old ragged hoss an’ a lot o’ yellin’ hounds in the shanty. We’re goin’ up there agin’ this mornin an’ git the other two an’ the old hoss—the dogs kin take keer o’ themselves ; I hain’t got no hankerin’ to let’em out.”

Afterward “Mis Lacy,” accompanied by six other women, all armed with clubs, came in, and unfastening the boys, bonds, placed some venison and ash cake before them.

Their arms were so stiff and lame, from being tied so long, that they could hardly convey the food to their mouths. To have tried to escape would have ended in being promptly knocked down.

The women watched every mouthful disappear, and finally Mrs. Lacy began :

“The ige e o’ us pore wimming a-workin’

ourselves to death to keep body an' soul together, an' these yere fellers with plenty o' money doin' nothin' !”

“ Tighten the rein on your husbands and make them work,” advised Bob.

“ I don't wan't none o' your sarse !” she cried, shrilly, and it was plain to see all she wanted was an excuse for pitching in.

“ Hit's bad enough to yeat our grub, 'thout givin' any back talk. I've a good notion to crack your haid, an' would, ef it warn't fur Jim !”

“ I'd do hit any way,” said one of the women. “ Ef Jim thinks he's got to pitch onto any one fur it we'll give him the same sarse !”

The women glanced at each other wickedly, and then raised their clubs. In their helpless condition the boys would prove easy victims !

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SWAMP ANGELS IN A TIGHT PLACE.

SAMMY and I gazed at the footprints on the ground long and earnestly, and then Sammy looked up and said, sharply :

“ We’re kinder foolish a-standin’ out yere starin’ at them tracks, when fur all we know the whole gang o’ ’em mebbly air layin’ fur us behind some o’ these trees ! ”

I swallowed quickly, and glanced around apprehensively.

“ What’ll we do ? ” I asked, trying to conceal the helpless inflection of my voice.

“ The first thing,” said Sammy, “ is to remember that we’re not to be kotched. Ef they git us, the chances o’ rescuin’ the other three is moughty slim ; so we’ll skirmish around an’ see ef there’s any danger. ”

I recognized the truth of this logic.

“ You walk off to that side,” continued

Sammy, "an' I'll take this. Ef you see any one, hold him up an' holler fur me, an' I'll do the same."

I cocked my rifle and started toward the east, stepping carefully to avoid making a noise ; but every dry twig seemed to get under my feet, and snapped like a pistol shot.

A hundred yards I went, and then, turning to the southwest, came upon the trail a few yards from Sammy.

"I didn't see nothin'," said that young gentleman.

"Neither did I," I responded.

"Now we'll foller along the trail an' keep our eyes open or we mought run on 'em——"

"In ambush," I finished.

"Which ?" he asked, looking puzzled.

I repeated what I had said.

"Never heered o' that kind," said he.

"I've seed hazel bushes an' thorn bushes, but never ham bushes. What grows on em—hams ?"

"No such luck," I replied, when I could control myself ; and then I proceeded to explain what I meant. It made him angry.

“ Look a-yere ! ” he exclaimed. “ Don’t sling none o’ your high falutin’ talk at me ; speak United States. I hain’t got no book l’arnin’, an’ don’t reckon I ever will have, chucked away in these yere parts.”

Here he gulped down something like a sob, and then went on :

“ Next season I ’low on doin’ some trap-in’ fur myself, an’ ef I kin git money enough I’m goin’ over to Jonesboro to school—but then, hit’ll take a heap fur board an’ books, an’ every one’ll laugh at me.”

“ No, they won’t,” I hastily assured him. “ I’m sorry I laughed just now, but I couldn’t help it. Come up where I live, and it won’t cost you a cent but railroad fare.”

“ Do you mean hit ? ” he asked, his face lighting up.

“ Of course I do ! I haven’t a doubt but what Joe, Bob and Treve would pay *that*, and willingly, too, to be out of the hands of the Swamp Angels.”

“ I don’t want money fur what I do fur you-uns,” he said, quickly ; “ but ef you’ll kinder give me a boost when I git there, hit’ll be all I ask.”

We shook hands solemnly, and for some time journeyed on in silence.

Rabbits and quail got up before us, and squirrels barked and frisked about the trees, but we dared not shoot for fear of betraying our presence.

“ We’ll kim down to this canebrake some time,” said Sammy, finally, as we trudged along by the forest of poles, “ an’ stir up a b’ar.”

“ Are there bears in them ? ” I asked.

“ Yes, an’ wolves. Sometimes a b’ar don’t find a good tree when the cold sends him in, an’ then he gits in a canebrake an’ makes a nest. When there’s cattle in ’em, you’ll find wolves. They hamstring the horses an’ slit the throat o’ the calves.”

The darkness came down rapidly ; but happily we came to the place where the trail turned off on marshy ground, and where we could follow it more easily. And when it grew so dark that the trail at our feet was invisible without getting on our knees, Sammy pulled several yards of dried bark off a fallen tree, and, with the aid of a match, we soon had a flaring light.

“ I don’t think they’re layin’ fur us now,”

said Sammy. "I reckon they've kept on fur home ; so we kin use the torch till we're purty nigh there."

"And where is their home?"

"I 'low we're about a mile from there."

We stumbled on until the baying of a hound caused Sammy quickly to extinguish the torch.

"We've got to be keerful now," he whispered. "No knowin' but what some o' em's prowlin' round, an' ef we git the dogs onto us, we're goners!"

I shivered.

"And that means——"

"Torn up or treed. Ef they tree us, the Swamp Angels kin come out an' git us any time they want to."

We proceeded cautiously, and soon a light could be seen gleaming through the trees.

"You stay right yere," said Sammy, "an' I'll sneak up an' see how the land lays. Ef the dogs git me, don't try to help, fur ef one o' us is loose we kin allers do some-thin'."

I would have protested, but as I turned to do so he was lost in the gloom.

shivered and waited, expecting every moment to hear the baying of the hounds denoting he was caught. Everything was so still that the watch ticking in my pocket sounded strangely noisy.

The moments passed rapidly, and still no sound from the direction of the light.

“Could some one have caught him?” I asked myself.

The next moment Sammy glided up to me like a shadow.

“I’m afraid hit’s a bad go,” he whispered. “There’s twelve houses, an’ I don’t know which one the boys air in. Everybody seems to be inside ; but they’ve left about three score o’ dogs out, so that settles our peekin’ in.”

“What would you propose ?”

“I ’low we’d best sneak off half a mile, an’ build a fire to take the chill off. Sorry now we didn’t shoot some o’ them squirrels an’ rabbits.”

So we moved carefully off to the right until out of hearing from the houses, and then we walked briskly for nearly half a mile.

“This’s fur enough,” said Sammy, coming

to a halt and glancing around. "Now we'll git some dry sticks an' leaves an' break off some o' the limbs o' that old sycamore lyin' yere, an' have a rousin' old fire."

"Gobble, gobble, gobble!" came out of the darkness.

"A turkey!" I gasped. "He must have got separated from the rest."

"An' he'll never see 'em agin," said Sammy dryly. "Ef you'll build the fire, I'll git him. I don't b'lieve they'll hear my rifle."

He dropped on his hands and knees and crawled off in the darkness, while I ran my fingers over the ground and gathered sufficient sticks and dead leaves to start the fire. As I struck the match the report of Sammy's rifle rang out.

"That's the second time the turkeys have been accommodatin' enough to serve us with a late supper," said I, as he came out of the gloom with the fowl slung over his shoulder.

Sammy promptly skinned and cleaned it, and soon the brown meat was roasting over the red hot coals on the end of Sammy's ramrod.

“ We’ll lay round the settlement to-morrow till the men goes away,” said Sammy, after the turkey had been placed where it would do the most good, “ an’ then we’ll swoop down an’ haul the boys out.”

“ And the dogs,” I reminded him.

“ Hum. You’ve got a rifle that shoots fifteen times, an’ I’ll git one.”

And with that he rolled over and went to sleep. I tumbled a couple of big branches on the fire, and followed suit. Mother earth is not the softest or driest bed to lie on; but we were too tired with the day’s tramp to gather leaves to sleep on.

I awoke once in the night to hear the wolves howling, and replenished the fire, and again dropped asleep.

We turned out early. Two young rabbits formed our breakfast, and then we started back to the settlement.

We were walking along, when the sound of voices came from somewhere ahead, and Sammy quickly pulled me down to the ground. The next moment a crowd of men passed by, accompanied by a lot of dogs,

some of which stopped and sniffed in our direction, but were called on.

We afterwards learned this was Mr. Jim Lacy, on his way to our cabin.

“That was a close shave!” exclaimed Sammy, as the voices died away in the distance. “I reckon they’ve got all the dogs with ’em.”

We soon came in sight of the houses. As we stood looking at them from behind a tree, several women came out picked up clubs, and then disappeared in the largest.

“I wouldn’t be s’prised,” said Sammy, “but what the boys air in the house them wimming went into.”

“Same here,” I said, trembling with excitement; “but what are those clubs for?”

“We’ll go an’ see,” replied Sammy. Then he walked boldly toward the building, and I followed.

Several curs snarled from under the edge of a house, and, as we drew nearer, we could hear the shrill tones of a woman. The next moment there issued sounds of a struggle, and Joe staggered out of the door with two women close behind.

Their clubs were uplifted to strike the

defenseless youth, when I threw my rifle to my shoulder involuntarily as Sammy shouted :

“ Hi, there ! Drap them clubs, or I’ll put a bullet through you-uns quicker’n I would a mad dog ! ”

They gave one startled glance in our direction, and the clubs fell to their sides.

“ Mag, Mag ! Mis’ Lacy ! ” they shrieked. “ Here’s some more o’ ’em ! ”

The struggle inside ceased, and four more women piled out of the door, with Bob and Treve after them. They ranged up beside the other two, while the three boys ran behind us.

There was no time to exchange greetings.

“ Yere, Cute ! Yere, Cute ! ” called one of the women.

A great blear-eyed hound scrambled out from under the house.

“ Sic him ! Sic him ! ” they shouted.

He came toward us with open mouth. There could be no mistaking his object, so I moved my rifle until it covered a spot between his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The sharp crack of the Winchester was almost drowned by a howl from the dog,



LOAFER CAME BOUNDING OUT OF THE TIMBER.

as he rolled over once or twice, kicked faintly, and lay dead. The women yelled and brandished their clubs, but the fear of the rifles pointed toward them kept them back. Doors were thrown open, and more women and a crowd of children crowded out and backed up the six.

“We’ve got to git outen yere purty quick,” whispered Sammy hurriedly. “Ef there’s any guns around yere, them wimming know how to use ’em. Walk backwards till we git to the timber, an’ then break!”

Some boys of ten began to throw sticks and pieces of dried mud, and soon the air was filled with flying missiles. Seeing we were retreating, they became bolder, and pressed us hard, yelling like savages.

We reached the edge of the timber, and, turning, took to our heels. This left the women out of the fight. The boys we did not fear. We could hear them still shouting when a quarter of a mile away.

“That was another close shave,” said Sammy. “Now, we got to go kinder keeful, or we’ll run agin the rest o’ ’em. Never mind talkin’ till we git back to the cabin.

There'll be plenty o' time to swap stories then."

We had reached the canebrake, when the faint sound of hogs squealing reached our ears.

"What is that?" asked Joe.

"Wild hogs, I reckon," replied Sammy. "They've treed somethin'. Mebby hit's a panther, an' mebby hit's—well, we'll sneak up an' see."

As we proceeded, the squealing grew louder, until it seemed pandemonium had broken loose this time, sure. Now and then we could catch sight of a hog running toward the sound, and Sammy cautioned us to give them a wide berth.

Then, as we drew nearer, we saw a vast sea of moving backs.

"Better tie your rifle to you," said Sammy. "Don't know what minute we'll have to take to a tree."

The boys donated their handkerchiefs, which were knotted together, and made quite a serviceable string, with which Sammy and I tied our rifles to our backs in the best manner we could.

We pushed on a little farther, and a

ludicrous sight we saw. Perched in every available tree was every one of the men who had passed Sammy and me that morning. Their faces were pallid, they had no guns, while below them surged a mass of gleaming tusks and bristling backs.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BEAR HUNT.

“ I RECKON they’ve done gone an’ done hit this time sure,” yelled Sammy, with difficulty making himself heard above the squealing of the hogs.

The men occupied six trees, the trunk of each, as high up as they could reach, being totally devoid of bark and deeply furrowed by the tusks of the enraged porkers. The hogs were of the “ razor back ” species, with long snouts, legs and lank bodies, and possessed of more rage and voice than meat. They would leap up and snap viciously at the dangling feet of the men in the young pecan trees, in a way that left no doubt as to what they would do if their prey was on the ground.

“Let’s climb a tree,” shouted Bob, looking uneasily at the hogs beginning to congregate and watching us out of their narrow black eyes.

“Go up one at a time,” replied Sammy, pointing to another pecan at our back.

The three boys’ arms were yet lame, and it took them some time to accomplish the task, while Sammy and I unslung our rifles ready to stop any outbreak.

“Ef you have to shoot don’t kill him,” cried Sammy, as I raised my rifle twice at a too presumptuous hog.

The men in the other trees watched us closely.

At last the others managed to reach the branches, and quickly tossing up our rifles we scrambled up after them, and not a moment too soon, for just as we did so a detachment of hogs charged. The next moment they were squealing and tearing at our tree as they did at the others.

“I can’t see as we’ve done a very wise thing,” yelled Joe, as the concert beneath us quieted a trifle. “This comes of being inquisitive.”

But Sammy shook his head.

“Ef I’ve calculated right,” he replied, “hit’s goin’ to be the luckiest thing could a-happened.” Then, when the squealing moderated, which it did every little while, he shouted lustily to the men.

“Oh hit’ you, is hit?” called the tall man, surlily.

“Yes,” answered Sammy. “I reckon you-uns air glad to see us hain’t you? You said you’d see us again.”

“Hold your yawp, or I’ll kim over there an’——”

“Oh, no you won’t,” laughed Sammy. “What’ll you give us to drive ’em away?”

“Won’t give you nothin’.”

“All right, you-uns kin stay up there!”

“So kin you!”

Then the hogs began to exercise their vocal powers again, which stopped the conversation and gave credence to the tall man’s words.

“We can drive ’em off an’ git away,” shouted Sammy, patting the stock of his rifle; “but if we do they kin git away, too.”

This seemed a selfish speech; but when he again opened communication with the

gentlemen in the opposite trees we understood his meaning.

“ You-uns have got three rifles as belong to us, hain’t you ? ”

“ Mebby. ”

“ Tell you what we’ll do : ef you-uns’ll promise never to pester us again we’ll drive the hogs off an’ take our rifles an’ let you go. What d’ y’ say ? ”

“ We will ! ” they shouted clamorously.

“ They’re too ready, ” said Bob, as Sammy looked at us for approval.

“ I reckon you’d be too, ef you’d a set up there three hours an’ had the chance o’ settin up there all day ; but I’ll stop any o’ their tricks. ”

Then he added another proviso by shouting :

“ Remember none o’ you-uns air to kim down till we air gone. Ef a man o’ you moves a foot he kivers a bullet. We mean what we say, an’ I reckon one o’ you’s got a bullet fur tryin’ to steal our hoss. ”

“ That was Smoky Bill, ” volunteered the tall man. “ He’s got the hole in his arm now. ”

“ You kin shoot the most,” said Sammy, turning to me. “ Pick a hog out nigh each tree ; but whatever you do, don’t kill him. Ef you do we’re good fur all day.”

I did not ask why ; but aiming at one near our tree put a bullet into his ham. Instantly the hog changed his tune and commenced to squeal like—well, like a stuck pig. Another moment and there was one in each group in the same predicament.

They ran among the others making for the edge of the drove, the rest redoubling their efforts for a moment and then following their wounded companion, probably to inquire into its strange behavior.

A few minutes later the only hog in sight was a dead one, lying nearly trampled to pieces near the tall man’s tree.

“ I told Smoky Bill not to shoot that shoat,” said the latter, apologetically, as Sammy and I stood with our rifles cocked while the other three hunted for theirs among the guns lying in the bushes.

“ S’pose you-uns don’t find your rifles ? ” he added, apprehensively.

“Then we’ll shoot you for lyin’,” returned Sammy, cheerfully.

But the boys did find them, and uninjured, so we promptly left for the cabin, leaving the men watching us from their elevated positions.

“Great Spooks ! There’s a deer !” cried Treve, as we came in sight of our domicile. “Won’t we have a feast !”

Loafer was all right, as were the dogs ; so we built a fire and had a sumptuous dinner of venison, during which time Bob related what has already been told. When it came our turn Sammy said :

“Steve kin tell our story, while I take the dugout and set them traps. Ef you-uns feel like hit, hit would be a good igeer to run over yourn.”

Which we did with the result of securing one otter, four weasels, three foxes, a coon and an idea that trapping was not bad after all, but the latter was demolished after Sammy had initiated us into the science of skinning them.

A misty rain began just before dark, and with Sammy’s return came the information that it was snowing.

“ We won’t git much,” he said, “ mebbby a couple o’ inches. To-morrow we’ll take a b’ar hunt ! ”

In the morning the snow had stopped, but the air was frosty and keen, while about the cabin and in the timber ran a myriad of tracks.

“ Good mornin’ fur rabbits,” said Sammy, as we locked up our three dogs, fed Loafer, and with the dogs and rifles started for the canebrake. Joe carried his little German.

“ But we’re after larger game,” I objected.

“ An’ rougher,” added Sammy. “ Our dogs have hunted b’ar afore, an’ I reckon the five o’ ’em will give him work enough. Yours would likely git ripped open or squeezed to death the first thing.”

We were in the zenith of excitement when we came in sight of the canebrake.

Have you ever seen a canebrake ? If you haven’t, try and imagine canes the size of the fish poles you see at a hardware or sporting goods store, and larger, growing as close together as the hair on your head, and varying in height from your shoulder to fourteen feet, and you have a brief description.

“We kain’t run through yere,” said Sammy, “so we’ll have to be keerful. We’ll find the b’ars in the thickest parts, where the tops of the canes lap on each other.”

Then he pressed into the canes and we followed, while the dogs scrambled and tore on all sides. We had to keep pretty close to Sammy, for the canes close up behind so quickly without leaving a trail, that we would be compelled to stop and listen to locate him if we allowed him to get out of sight.

Three hundred feet we went, when we came to where a young growth was springing up, reaching only to our shoulders and rising like a mountain ahead. Along these we went comparatively easily.

“When do we change cars?” asked Treve.

“Soon as we find a bear,” I replied.

“An’ we got him right yere!” exclaimed Sammy, crowding through a tall growth and coming out in an open space, in the center of which arose a mound of canes ten feet high.

“What on earth is that?” demanded Joe.

“ B’ar’s nest,” answered Sammy, gleefully.

“ Have we got to pull it down ? ” I wanted to know.

“ Hit would take a man a week to pull that down. Them canes air wove in tight, I tell you ; but they’re dry, so we’re goin’ to burn him out. There hain’t a dog in these yere parts as could go in an’ kim out alive.”

A match was applied, the dogs held off facing the dark hole on the ground, and I mentally noted a young hickory growing on the edge of the cleared space.

The canes crackled and burnt fiercely ; we waited, trembling with excitement. We decided that Joe should have the first shot.

“ Hit’s a-gittin’ warm,” chuckled Sammy. “ The old feller’ll think cold weather is over shore ! ”

Then came a growl and a black muzzle was thrust out, to be instantly drawn back. Then the canes burnt through in one place and must have touched his hide, for he came out in a hurry.

The dogs struggled to get loose and Joe fired. For the first time since our arrival

he made a poor shot, and at a bad time, too. The bullet knocked off a strip of fur, leaving a white streak that rapidly reddened, and Bruin was mad clear through!

The dogs broke loose and made for him—not more than twelve feet away. I fired hastily and missed. This gave the bear an idea that I wanted to see him, and he came for me in three great bounds. I did not stop to exchange greetings or see what the others intended to do, but, dropping my rifle, I turned and went for the young hickory, “tetchin’ only on the high places,” as Sammy said afterward.

“Don’t climb the tree or he’s got you shore!” yelled Sammy.

But I heeded not. I landed four feet up the trunk and went the rest of the way quicker than I ever climbed a tree before, with the bear two feet behind and gaining, snapping at my feet and trying to catch me with his terrible claws.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WE BUILD A TRAP AND CATCH A BEAR.

“STEVE DANE, you’re gone this time, sure!” I thought, as pursued and pursuer made the bark fly in clouds from the hickory. “You’ve taken too big a tree, and the bear can climb faster than you can.”

I gave one hasty glance down and noted the bloodshot eyes, the blood trickling down his nose from Joe’s shot, and the great, horny claws within two inches of my boot heel.

The boys were running toward the tree, under which the hounds were baying like all possessed.

“Slide out on a limb!” shouted Sammy. “Git out as fur as you kin.”

Without a second’s hesitation I swung out on the nearest, and went out backwards.

The bear seemed surprised, but immediately turned around and advanced cautiously.

I went out farther. The limb tapered down to two inches, and bent under our weight. I glanced fearfully at the ground twenty-five feet below, and tried to calculate how many bones would be broken if I fell. The bear paused, unable to come farther, and Sammy fired.

I saw the hairs drop where the bullet went in—too far back of the shoulder to be vital. The bear bit savagely at the wound, tottered, and then, quickly rolling himself into the semblance of a ball, he dropped straight on the dogs standing open-mouthed below.

By this means he tried to crush or strike them with his paws, and be up the tree again before they could retaliate ; but our dogs were too wary, and scattered.

Thump ! he landed. It was a ludicrous sight. He seemed astonished that he had killed none of them, and, as Bob and Treve fired hastily and harmlessly over him, he shambled off into the canebrake with the dogs hanging to his hams.

Sammy and Joe were furiously trying

to ram a bullet into their muzzle-loaders. From my lofty position I could see the bear's movements by the swaying canes. He was going in the direction we had come.

I shouted this intelligence to the others, and, then, after working my way in on the limb, I slid down the tree and secured my rifle.

“We ought to mortgage ourselves,” was Treve's disgusted exclamation as we started in pursuit. “Every one had a shot, and only two bullets touched.”

Then we tore through the smaller canes, and struggled and wiggled through the larger ones, perspiring in spite of the chilly temperature.

“There he is !” shouted Joe, as we came out very near the place we had gone in. “The dogs are holding him !”

The moment the bear saw us he dropped on all fours and started off, the dogs fastening to his flanks and hams, and trying to stop him. He would strike viciously at them, but the moment he turned to retreat they were with him.

I could have laughed when he stopped

with his fore feet on a large log and allowed the dogs to fasten firmly ; but Sammy was frightened.

“ Boose ! Growler ! ” he shouted. “ Kim yere ! ”

It was too late. The next moment the bear went over, with the dogs stringing out like tails, and then, before they could get out of the way, he struck out with both paws.

One of the hounds flew through the air and landed at our feet with the life knocked out of him, and Boose limped off, whining, with four big cuts in his back.

“ I knowed hit, ” cried Sammy ; “ but that’s the last time—— ”

His voice was drowned by the crack of five rifles.

Four bullets went into Bruin’s head, the fifth behind his fore leg, any of which would have been fatal.

Sammy bewailed the loss of Growler, while the rest of us tried to bind up Boose’s wounds with our handkerchiefs.

“ I guess now we have got a chance for Loafer to earn his board, ” said Treve.

“ Yes, ” replied Sammy. “ You-uns kin

stay yere an' see that nothin' pesters the game, an' I'll take Boose an' go fur him."

To this we agreed, so Sammy, with Boose limping after him, departed.

Not a long time afterward he came back with Loafer, his bridle and collar, a few straps, and an axe. Then he cut down a couple of saplings fourteen feet high, and tied the butt ends to Loafer's collar, the small end resting on the ground. We caught the idea, and soon a strong litter was formed, and the carcass of the bear rolled upon it.

With Sammy at the bridle to guide him over the most accessible route, Loafer soon drew his load to the cabin. Bear steaks and bear-paw soup formed many a meal afterwards.

The weather moderated slightly, but not enough to melt the snow.

"Hit won't be long at this rate," said Sammy, "afore the b'ars that is left out an' the wolves'll be prowlin' round yere fur somethin' to yeat."

"Then all we'll have to do will be to sit in the door and shoot them," said Bob.

"Hum! I don't reckon we kin stay up

all night jess to shoot a b'ar. We'll build a trap !”

The quartette glanced at each other dubiously.

“ Oh, I know how,” went on Sammy, watching us. “ O' course hit's work ; but you-uns don't mind that. We'll take the axes in the mornin', an' I betcher afore night we'll have a trap that no b'ar in these yere parts kin git out of arter he gets inside.”

“ Make it of wood ?” interrogated Treve.

“ Yes, an' kotch em' alive !”

This we thought would be great fun ; but next day, when we were ordered to cut down ten trees eighteen inches in diameter as a beginning, the fun waned until you couldn't have found it with a microscope.

But we were not the kind to back out, and with Sammy worked like beavers. The site selected was but a short distance from the cabin.

To prevent burrowing, a floor of logs was laid, flush with the surface of the ground. Then the sides and one end were made, the ends of the logs being notched

and locked firmly together. Sammy was very particular about this. At the open end, and at the corners, huge posts were driven in both inside and out to strengthen it.

The roof of logs was held down by heavy cross bars, which, in turn, were held by chains at each end, running under the trap. The door was of roughly hewn, eight inch plank, placed horizontally and spiked firmly together. It was of the sliding pattern, and dropped between the ends of the sides and great posts, and was prevented from being moved sideways by additional posts.

The door was raised and held in position by a hardwood peg, to which was attached a buckskin line and the bait, deer meat soaked in honey, discovered by Sammy. A pull on the bait would withdraw the peg, down would come the door, and—presto! he was caught!

“Don't it look fine?” asked Bob, as we surveyed our handiwork toward the close of the day, and wiped the perspiration from our brows.

“Like a silk dress sewed with a log

chain," was the comparison of the irrepressible Treve.

"'Ef we hain't too tired after supper," observed Sammy, "what do you-uns say to takin' a duck hunt on Injun Lake? Hit's about three miles north o' yere; but we'll go in the dugout, so it won't tire you-uns out any."

"I believe I would like some fun of some kind, after working all day," said Joe. "We haven't had any excitement to speak of since the bear hunt."

"I don't know's hit'll be excitin," returned Sammy, cautiously; "but we kin git a heap o' ducks and geese."

"Shooting from behind a reflected light?" questioned Joe.

"We kin, though I wasn't reckonin' on that kind. We kin jess hold a torch up an' they'll fly fur the light, so we kin knock 'em over with a stick. Ef you-uns want to shoot from behind a light we'll have to rig up one on the dugout."

"We can do that easy," said Joe. "We'll make the floor and back of these green planks. They won't burn through in the

short time the fire is lit, and a few dashes of water will prevent spreading.”

“It will be a poor reflector,” said Bob ;
“but it’s a go.”

After seeing that the trap was properly baited, we selected plank enough and returned to the cabin, where Bob and Sammy built the blind.

After ourselves, the dogs and Loafer had been fed, and the dogs locked in—as we always did to prevent pilfering on the part of Jim Lacy—we followed Sammy into the dugout with our breech-loaders.

It was well loaded, and moved but slowly up stream in spite of the two paddles used. Fully an hour afterwards, after passing through several bayous, we came upon a lake a couple of miles long by a half mile wide.

It was pitchy dark, with the heavens studded with twinkling stars. On all sides could be heard the fluttering of wings and the cries of ducks and geese.

“Light the fire,” whispered Sammy.

I did so. The improvised reflector lighted up the water for a hundred feet on three sides, while on the fourth was

inky blackness. A multitude of ducks and geese paddled into the light and stared curiously at it.

Then the breech-loaders threw a hail of shot among them, causing them to pay dearly for their curiosity. Sammy sent the dugout silently through the water, the quartette alternately picking up the slain and firing into fresh flocks. Sammy occasionally changed places and had a share in the fun.

“Not another duck or we’ll sink the boat,” said Bob, after three quarters of an hour of the best shooting we had ever had.

Compelled at last to desist, we reluctantly turned about and paddled back.

The dogs were barking furiously when we arrived. Sammy ran in and got his rifle, and then followed the dogs toward the bear trap.

“What is it?” I asked, following him up.

“The door’s down!” he shouted gleefully. “We’ve got him! We’ve got him! There’s a b’ar in the trap!”

CHAPTER XIX.

A TROUBLESOME PET—WOLVES !

I HURRIED forward and saw that the door was indeed down. An angry growl and furious scratching inside told that something was in there.

Then Bob, Joe and Treve came running up bearing torches, and by holding a torch on one side of the trap, and peering through the cracks on the other, we could see the huge black form.

“ There’s two o’ em ! ” shouted Sammy, ecstatically. “ A big one and a leetle one.”

“ Nothing less than a battering ram can break that trap,” said Bob.

“ No, sir-ee ! They’re fast enough. We kain’t do nothin’ in the dark ; so we’ll let ’em stay there till mornin’. Bump yourself all you want,” he continued, as the bear

threw itself heavily against the side of the trap. "In the mornin' we'll let you chuck yourself agin a bullet."

"What! Kill it after all the trouble of catching it?" demanded Bob.

"O' course! We kain't do nothin' with the big one; hit's the leetle one we want to keep alive. I reckon we'll have our hands full with jess him alone."

"How about the other big one?" asked Joe. "Don't they usually go in pairs?"

"I 'low he kain't get in any more'n the one in there kin git out," returned Sammy.

"Well, let's go to bed," I broke in. "We'll probably have plenty of work to do to-morrow, and the more sleep we get the better."

So we filed back to the cabin and turned in, leaving the occupants of the trap to make the best of it.

Sammy had us up early next morning. While breakfast was being prepared, he made a strong collar of buckskin, and at the same time superintended Joe's and my movements in plaiting two twenty-foot lariats.

"We'll put on our worst clothes," observed

Sammy, "fur ef the young feller's very big he'll fight like blazes! We'd better lock the dogs up or they'll make him all the worse."

Both of which suggestions were acted upon.

With our rifles, an axe and the lariats we repaired to the bear trap. The inmates were growling and the large one made another attack on the sides of the trap, but of course without avail.

"The first thing," said Sammy, "is to stick a rifle through a crack an' bore a hole in the big one. Who'll do it?"

"I'd rather you'd give it a chance," murmured Bob.

"Yes," replied Treve, sarcastically. "We'd rather let it out so it could chase us up a tree and probably kill one of us as the other did a dog."

"Shoot it right where it is," I put in hastily.

No one seemed anxious to perform the task, so Treve finally proposed that Joe should do it. Every one but Joe was satisfied.

After a great deal of poking around and

tapping on the trap to get the bear to look the right way, the report of the rifle rang out, followed by a heavy thump.

The smoke drifted out between the logs, and when it cleared away we saw the bear lying stretched out on the floor.

“Loosen up on the chains so I kin slip a log out o’ the roof,” said Sammy, “an’ then I’ll tie a knot in these nooses so they won’t choke him to death. I hain’t got no hankerin’ to fool with his neck.”

We all peered down through the opening. The little fellow raised on his haunches and growled at us.

It was a long time before Sammy got the noose over his head, as every time he would knock it away, or drop on all fours and run around the trap. At last it settled over and was instantly drawn taught, and the end fastened to a timber outside, so the little fellow could plunge and rear and scratch as much as he pleased.

Then the door was raised and the carcass of the large one drawn out, the little one doing his best to get at us.

“Now, I’ll loosen up on the lariat till he kin git his head out the door, then some o’

you-uns git the other noose over his haid. I reckon we'll have him then."

I kneeled on top of the trap, and as the little black head came out in pursuit of Treve's feet, slung the noose over his head, and Bob and Joe at the other end pulled it taught.

Sammy allowed the little fellow to get far enough away for me to reach the tough leather rope, which was drawn through the trap, and then the animated black ball was between five struggling boys.

He refused to be led, and promptly sat down and braced his fore feet when we tried to do so. Finally Treve volunteered to let himself be chased, and the bear went readily. Indeed, he went so readily that before we knew it he had nabbed Treve's heel and took half of his trousers off with one sweep of his paw.

We drove stakes down in one corner of the cabin to prevent the dogs "pesterin'" him, and when we muffled him and held him down, Sammy sewed the buckskin collar on, with the end of a chain passing through. This was tied around one of the logs of the cabin.

“ We don’t tie him outside an’ let the old one kim along an’ turn him loose for our trouble,” Sammy explained.

We took the dogs with us every morning when we examined the traps, and left the cub with plenty of yellow-bottomed acorns, of which he was very fond.

He grew quite docile. Occasionally, however, he would hit us a stinging rap with his paw—just for fun, I suppose—if we happened to be within reach. The second night of his capture he began to whine dismally. The dogs bristled their backs and growled; but we thought they were growling at him and paid no attention.

Suddenly a heavy body threw itself against the door with tremendous force; but the thick bars held. Then a hoarse growl came from without.

“ Hit’s the old one,” cried Sammy, as the dogs flew to the door and began barking.

We grabbed our rifles and stood waiting, not daring to open the door.

The little one in the corner, which Treve had named “ Brute,” redoubled his efforts to break his chain and whined shrilly.

Another growl from the outside and another blow on the door. Then Sammy drove the dogs into one corner and said :

“ While I sling the door open be ready for him ! ”

All was silent outside. I know my heart was hammering my palate when he threw open the door.

A great form towered up ; there was a hoarse growl ; the flash of four rifles, and the form fell inside with a force that made the ground shake.

“ Dead ! ” said Bob, trying to keep the dogs from biting the carcass.

“ As my great grandfather ! ” added Joe.

“ It looks as large as a cow, ” I put in. “ We’ve got more bear meat than we know what to do with. ”

“ The pelt is good, ” observed Sammy.

For several days we did nothing but eat and make the rounds of the traps. The pelts began to accumulate to such an extent that Sammy was obliged to erect a shed outside to hold them.

Then we had a grand deer hunt, and brought in five of the noble game, but we started so early in the day that we neglected

to visit the traps. It snowed heavily during the night, and next morning we looked out on more snow than had fallen for many years in that country.

“We oughtn’t to leave the fur in them traps any longer,” said Sammy, at noon. “Hit’s been in two days, an’ with this snow somethin’ ’ll yeat hit.”

“Bob and I ought to be able to make the rounds,” said I. “You can take the others in the dugout, or leave them to keep house; but, whatever you do, be sure and have a hot supper ready for us when we get back.”

“I am willing,” affirmed Bob.

“I ain’t,” replied Joe, “if you can get along without me. Take Treve in the dugout with you, Sammy, and I will keep house.”

“Joe’s a pretty good cook,” observed Treve. “I, for one, will let him off if he’ll promise to have that supper ready.”

“I will,” responded Joe, “if nothing happens.”

So off we went.

Bob and I had our rifles slung on our backs. The traps were covered with snow, except where the game was alive, and the

ones that had not been sprung we would never have found had we not been well acquainted with their location.

As it was, impeded by the snow, before we reached the last trap the darkness had begun to settle. And three quarters of a mile to the cabin, and thirty pounds of pelts apiece to carry !

Off to the right came the mournful howl of a wolf.

“ Say, let’s step a little faster,” said Bob, glancing about apprehensively. “ I ain’t afraid, of course ; but it is much nicer in the cabin than it is out here in the timber.”

“ Here, too, Bob,” I replied.

The tall timber looked cold and cheerless outlined against the rapidly darkening sky, and the white snow made every nook and cranny in the dark trunks more black and gloomy as we hurried along.

A wolf howled off to the left, and at the same time one gave voice behind us.

“ Say, ain’t they getting closer ? ” I asked.

There was no need of naming what I meant. We both had heard them.

Then a few lank forms began to skulk

between the trees on both sides of us, occasionally sitting down and howling miserably.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to run for it,” Bob said desperately. “Let’s pile the pelts up in the fork of this small tree, so we won’t be burdened, and can save them.”

We did so. The wolves were getting bolder, and it was astonishing how fast they accumulated. A dozen seemed to come every time one howled.

We were not far from the cabin now, and Bob proposed that we run. In an instant the whole pack were at our heels. Oh, how we ran, unslinging our rifles as we went! But they were so close behind we could almost feel their breaths.

“If the door ain’t open, we’re gone!” and Bob’s voice sounded like a shriek above the yelling pack.

We tore around the corner of the cabin. There was no light within; no smoke issuing from the chimney; the door was closed! the cabin was deserted!

The yelling wolves almost knocked us over, they were so close, as we fell against the door of the cabin, panting.

“ Hold them off till I can get the door open,” I shouted, as the wolves came for us open mouthed.

I grabbed two or three times for the latch string before I caught it, during which time Bob’s repeater spoke five times.

CHAPTER XX.

A BAD RETURN FOR A GOOD ACT.

AT last the door swung open and we staggered in, with the raging pack pressing so close behind us that one big fellow was caught half inside, trying to follow, and was promptly shot and kicked back for his trouble.

“There !” exclaimed Bob, as we barred the door. “That was what Sammy would call a close shave.”

Then we glanced around the cabin and wiped the perspiration from our brows.

The fire had burned down until but a few coals remained. Brute sat in his corner and listened to the yelling without uneasily. The trunk containing the surplus guns and ammunition was stored away under the blankets in one corner, and, as near as we

could see, was untouched. The dogs were gone.

“What can it mean?” I asked, in an awe-struck voice.

“It is past my comprehension,” replied Bob. “It looks to me as though Joe had taken the dogs and gone out for game, and has not got back yet.”

“No need of that, with the bear meat and venison on hand.”

Redoubled howling and a general fight seemed to be going on outside.

“Loafer!” I gasped.

“Can’t be! I’ll bet they’ve got the meat down! Jerusalem! They’ll starve us out.”

“Not much, they won’t. When daylight comes, they’ll slink off, unless I’m very much mistaken. We’ll build the fire up, have something to eat, and wait for the boys to come.”

“But they can’t come with that pack of howling wolves out there,” protested Bob.

“This is a pretty mess all around.”

I agreed with him.

We prepared a supper of ash cake, coffee, and broiled venison. Of the latter, our

supply was limited, for we kept the meat out in the cold, and found it all the better for it, and the short round left in the cabin would not last a great while with two hungry boys.

Then we lay and watched Brute and the fire, and listened to the wolves trotting about outside, and for any sound of the others.

Some of our four-footed friends seemed to be satisfied, but stayed to watch those who were not, so we had company.

I was firmly resolved not to sleep a wink ; but when I returned to consciousness, Bob was snoring by my side, and a faint streak of light struggled through a crack in the door.

“ Bob, Bob ! ” I called. “ It is daylight, and Treve, Joe and Sammy have not come yet ! ”

“ Then they’re not here, ” he returned, drowsily.

“ Of course they’re not, and it is our place to hunt them up. Where do you suppose they can be ? ”

“ Down paying their respects to Jim Lacy, maybe. ”

“ There ! ” I exclaimed. “ Why didn’t I think of that before ? ”

“ I’m sure I don’t know,” said Bob, sitting up. “ We never get lost ; some one always lugs us off. First Simpson got you, and then Jim Lacy caught the rest of the quartette. We can trace them easily through the snow.”

“ Well, the wolves are gone,” I remarked, looking carefully out of the door.

“ Nothing left but some bones and their footprints,” added Bob, sorrowfully, glancing over my shoulder.

We finished the remnant of our stock of meat for breakfast, and then, taking our rifles, we locked the door and started.

“ Why, Loafer is gone ! ” exclaimed Bob, peering into his shed as he passed.

“ And he didn’t break away, either,” I said, “ for his halter was untied ! ”

We looked at each other, and then at the ground. The wolves had beaten the snow down around the cabin. We started to make the circuit, going in opposite directions, when Bob exclaimed:

“ Here is Sammy’s rifle lying in the snow, and it looks as though there had been a

struggle, for the snow is all stirred up ! ”

I ran to the spot, and there, sure enough, lay Sammy's rifle. A number of footprints led off to the left.

We walked to the bayou, and saw that the dugout was tied to a root, the knot looking as though it had been made hastily. Then Bob said :

“ Jim Lacy must be decidedly anxious for our company, coming away up here after us. Perhaps you and I won't be so fortunate as you and Sammy were, and may get caught. ”

“ Well, let's put his rifle in the cabin, and start. I'm anxious to get them out of their hands. What did they seem inclined to do when you were captured and tied up down there ? ”

“ Give us food and club us for eating it, ” replied Bob, dryly.

We put Sammy's rifle in the cabin. On the south side, where the wolves had not obliterated them, we found the tracks of a score of men, among which the prints of Loafer's hoofs appeared.

Farther on, the tracks leading from Sammy's rifle united with the larger ones.

Bob looked around, paused, and then said :

“ This was no doubt the meeting point.”

“ Evidently,” I responded. “ But what gets me, is where Treve went. He was to go with Sammy in the dugout ; but I saw but one track leading from the bayou, and that was Sammy’s.”

“ He might be at large,” replied Bob, “ but that is doubtful. At any rate, he would have come back to the cabin before this, if possible.”

We passed on in silence, passing the cane-brake and turning off over the low ground.

“ We’ll have a path worn between our humble cabin and the angels’ mansions if we tramp down here much more,” said Bob at length.

“ After boys ‘lost, strayed, or stolen,’ ” I could not help adding.

“ Changing the subject : have you decided on any mode of rescue ! ”

“ I have not,” I returned, promptly.

“ Neither have I. I suppose it would be better to see how the land lies before making any plans and wasting breath ; but we really ought to have an idea of what the other intends to do, in case we are sepa-

rated, so we could work in unison. I would propose——”

There was a shrill snort ahead, and Loafer came through the timber with hairless tail and head erect. He stopped and snorted again.

“Why——” I began, when three villainous looking half-breeds popped up in hot pursuit. One carried a rifle.

Before we could recover from our astonishment, he did what we should have done: covered us with his rifle and told us fiercely to “Drap gun! Put ten fingers up heap quick!”

“How nice!” murmured Bob, allowing his rifle to slip to the ground.

The two worthies accompanying the gentleman with the rifle came forward craftily and relieved us of the responsibility of looking after a Winchester.

“Now go that a-way,” commanded the commander of the situation, pointing a dirty finger in the direction he had come.

“Yeas and nays are not counted, I notice,” said Bob, as we started forward.

When we came in sight of the settlement we both became possessed of an idea that

our arrival might be inharmonious, and started back, but our captors waved the rifles in such an emphatic manner that we changed our minds and went on.

Our dogs held possession of the bone collection, and contentedly gnawed them while their hosts looked on. They started toward us, but the half-breeds drove them back.

We were led into the largest house, in the front room of which were gathered Jim Lacy and several others. They looked surprised, but not a word was said as they unbarred a heavy door and shoved us into a back room.

The door closed behind us with a bang, and the next moment we were shaking hands with Joe, Treve and Sammy.

“This is worse’n hens wrestlin’, hain’t hit?” questioned the latter, earnestly, when the first excitement had subsided.

“I suppose so,” I laughed, for now that we were reunited our spirits rose. “But how did it happen, and what are we going to do?”

“One at a time,” replied Joe. “Such questions are perplexing. I hardly know

how it did happen ; but it went off quickly and quietly. After you left and Sammy had started——”

“And Treve,” I interrupted. “Did he go?”

“No. He felt indisposed at the last moment and stayed to keep me company. Well, after Sammy had started, we brought in a round of venison and were going to have a stew, when the door opened.

“I thought it was some of you forgot something, and turned around to see, when, lo and behold, in tramped about twenty of our angelical friends ! Before you could wag your upper jaw they pounced down on us, juggled us in the air until they were satisfied and we exhausted, and then they took Loafer and we started.

“Just then Sammy heard the racket and came sailing back just in time to get an invitation to join us, which he accepted after forcible means had been resorted to. So here we are, with Loafer and the dogs.”

“Now how are we to get out ?” asked Bob.

“Just before you came in,” replied Joe,

“ we commenced to operate on the logs with our pocket knives.”

“ And,” added Treve, gravely, “ I have every reason to believe that if we are not molested, we can, in six months or more, saw through to daylight.”

At this moment Jim Lacy's voice was heard saying :

“ I reckon we'd better begin to wunst, or they'll give us the slip agin. When we git through with 'em they won't have backbone enough to claim the ha'r on their heads !”

CHAPTER XXI.

TRIED—WARNED OFF—SIMPSON.

THE door was unbarred and opened, and the grim visage of Mr. Jim Lacy, Esq., peered in.

“ Well, we got the hull boodle o’ you-uns, didn’t we ? ” he chuckled. “ I told Smoky Bill that ef we got half o’ you-uns’ the other half would kim down lamb-like.”

“ What do you intend to do with us ? ” I asked.

“ Whatever the court says ! ”

“ What court ? ” demanded Bob.

“ Our court. You-uns needn’t think we haint civilized ’cause we live out yere in the timber. We kin hold as good a court as any one in the state, we kin. Y’ hear me ? ”

“ Yes, sir ! May I ask who has the honor

of discharging the judicial functions of the institution ? ”

“ Hem. Yes. Kim agin.”

“ Who holds down the bench ? ”

“ Hit hain’t a bench ; hit’s a box,” corrected Jim Lacy.

“ No matter,” shouted Bob, with a great show of indignation. “ Who holds it down, I asked you ? ”

“ I do ! ” replied Mr. Lacy, equally as loud. “ Say, I don’t want none o’ you-uns sarse ! ”

“ Very well. Our stock of it is limited and our price high ; so you are not likely to handle any. ”

“ I jess piked in to tell you-uns,” said Mr. Lacy, moderating his voice, “ that as soon’s the rest o’ the boys kim up court’ll begin. Furder,” and he pointed his finger at us impressively, “ don’t none o’ you-uns try to git away, fur there’s guns in the crowd.”

“ Thank you for the gentle hint,” replied Bob, and Mr. J. Lacy retired.

“ Well, this is a great go ! ” exclaimed Treve. “ That clodhopper has no more right to hold us for trial than I have to hold the United States.”

“If their prosecuting attorney is as big a muddle-head as their judge, we would have no trouble before a fair-minded man, no matter what we were tried for. But Judge Lacy ; oh my !”

“I nominate Joseph B. Miller for the defendants’ counsel,” I put in. “He has kept the dust off the books in a law office, and will probably work better for us than any one else, seeing he is as deep in the mud as we are in the mire.”

Carried unanimously. Joe blushed and tried to back out, but we would not let him.

“Keep a stiff upper lip and your hair combed, sling all the big words you can think of at him, whether they harmonize or not, and paralyze him,” advised Bob.

“It is a one-sided arrangement all the way through,” replied Joe. “We don’t even know what we are to be tried for, and for the life of me I can’t guess.”

“I kin,” said Sammy, who had been watching us with staring eyes. “Hits a Simon-pure case o’ ‘run out’ ; that’s what hit is. They’ll wear out a lot o’ willows on us an’ then chase us off. But, by gum, ef pap don’t make somebody screech fur this I’m——”

“A prevaricator,” finished Bob.

“I s’pose so,” admitted Sammy, cautiously.

The door was unbarred and Smoky Bill stepped in.

“As the—collerer, warn’t hit, Ji——”

“Marshal!” thundered a voice in the room.

“I knowed hit wuz about the same,” said Bill, desperately. “You-uns will perambulate into court!”

“The old man is on his dignity,” murmured Treve. “I wonder if he has got plush railings and electric lights?”

We perambulated in.

Mr. Jim Lacy was seated on a cracker box behind a pine table at the end of the room, his huge feet spread out underneath and his chin resting on his hands. The rest of the men were leaning against the walls, with the exception of a few who occupied stools. Five blocks of wood were reserved for our use.

“Hit won’t take long fur this case,” remarked Judge Lacy, tickling his nose with a pencil, just as though he had a few thousand on the docket.

“Stand up !” he yelled.

We stood up.

“I sentence you-uns to——”

“But hold on,” interrupted Joe. “We don’t know what we are to be tried for ; but whatever it is we demand a fair trial.”

“Well, hain’t you-uns a-gettin’ hit ?” growled the judge.

“No. Let the prosecuting attorney read the indictment.”

Everybody looked at each other. The judge looked at the marshal, and the marshal looked at the judge. Things had taken an aspect they had not expected.

“The—the which ?” asked the judge.

“The prosecuting attorney,” replied Joe, impatiently.

“Oh !” said Smoky Bill, as though it had just occurred to him. “He hain’t yere. He took his rifle an’ went squirrel huntin’ !”

“What !” ejaculated Joe. “Oh ! I see. The State refuses to prosecute. That lets us out.”

“Not by a long shot hit don’t !” ejaculated the judge.

“But——”

“No buttin’ about yere ; you mought

break somethin'. I'm a-runnin' this yere court. You-uns are guilty, bound to be guilty, *got* to be guilty."

"You cannot sentence without telling us what we are sentenced for."

"Well," said the judge, condescendingly, "firstly, you-uns hunted on Muddy Run thout our permission. Twicely, when we brung you-uns down yere, you broke away, was goin' to shoot the wimming folks an' nigh skeered 'em to death."

A growl went up from the men.

"Surely, your honor——"

"Eh? Kim again," ordered Mr. Lacy, spreading out his feet and contemplating his audience with ill-concealed satisfaction.

Joe saw instantly that he had struck the right strain. Mr. Lacy could absorb more flattery than he could give him.

"I was about to remark to your honor, and these intelligent and well-bred citizens," continued Joe, bowing to the former and designating the latter with a wild sweep of his arm, "that I must have misconstrued his honor's eloquent and versatile words in inferring that our presence here is to answer to such an unsubstantial charge.

As to the first—I presume you know it is out of your jurisdiction?” and he turned quickly on that wonderfully learned judge.

“Yes, yes,” agreed the latter, hastily.

Three of the quartette jammed handkerchiefs into their mouths, and Joe mopped his lips industriously to hide the smile.

“As to the first,” pursued Joe, turning his back on us to keep from laughing, “according to the unwritten law, Mr. Isaac Jimmerson holds the claim we were on, and we hunted there with his permission. So, you see, your honor could not have meant to apprehend us for that.”

“O’ course not,” his honor assured him.

“To the second charge, that of feloniously leaving your enchanting mansion and flourishing weapons before the gaze of your gentle and cultured wives, I suppose we will have to plead guilty.”

“Ha!” ejaculated the judge, nodding his head vigorously, as though that was the detrimental point.

The rest voiced his sentiments

“In that,” went on Joe, rapidly, seeing that he had overrated them, “perhaps we have erred; but we did it in ignorance of

the contumacious nature of his honor."

Here the judge smiled benignly, at what he evidently considered a compliment.

"But we have done nothing the law will not uphold us in," continued Joe, impressively, shaking his finger at the being behind the table, "and if you have a copy of Austin's 'Province of Jurisprudence Determined,' or the works of Maine, Mill or Bentham on the subject, I can quickly show you passages that will substantiate, fully and entirely, what I have said."

And Joe pretended to scan the table. Mr. Lacy followed suit, went through his pockets, looked under his hat and finally glanced helplessly at Smoky Bill, who was gazing at the floor with his hands in his pockets, as though trying hard to think where those books were.

"I reckon some one must o' borrowed 'em," murmured the judge.

"Perhaps so," returned Joe, sympathetically. Then he resolved to hazard another "teaser," as he called them, knowing that Mr. Lacy did not know a third as much about law as he did.

"I am sorry they were loaned, as they

are of vital importance in a case of this kind; but no doubt your honor is familiar with their contents or he would not be able to hold the honorable and influential position to which these well read citizens have elected him."

"I—I sartinly have read 'em," stammered the judge, wading deeper into the mire.

"Your honor can look it up at his leisure if he doubts the veracity of my statements," and Joe gave me a sly kick.

I took the cue, immediately arose with the others, and we started for the door.

"Where—where be you-uns goin'?" demanded the judge.

"To our humble cabin," replied Joe. "Surely your honor does not mean to deprive us of our liberty after we have explained away both charges?" and Joe raised his voice and eyebrows as though it were the most astonishing thing he had ever heard.

"But this yere court was made to find you-uns guilty an' give you a ginerall 'run-out.' I reckon I'll have to take advice like the other big ones when they get stumped. What do you say, Bill?"

Smoky Bill borrowed a pipe full of tobacco and smoked it half up before replying. Then he said :

“ You’re the doctor, Jim. Ef you say run-out hit’s run-out, an’ ef you say turn ’em loose hit’s turn ’em loose. That’s what I say.”

And having delivered his opinion in this neutral manner, the gentleman with the obscure name plumed himself and gazed at the others as though his words were bound to be conclusive.

They were.

“ He talks like a l’arnt gentleman,” said the judge, “ an’ I don’t want to run ’em out. An’ then there’s Ike Jimmerson—” and the judge paused and nodded suggestively at Sammy.

“ He’d have to kim down an’ paw dirt,” complained Bill.

“ An’ Milt,” said the judge, who seemed glad that he could find obstructions.

“ He’d have to cut up rough,” added Bill “ ’cause he said hit had to be a run out.”

“ Who said so,” demanded Joe. “ What is his surname ? Where can I see him ? ”

“ Right yere ! ” said a voice from behind.

We wheeled around. The door had been opened softly, and standing in it, with a shotgun in the hollow of his arm, both barrels of which were cocked, was a man we instantly recognized.

“Simpson !” cried the quartette in one voice.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CONFESSION.

“YES, there he is!” cried Mr. Jim Lacy, nodding vigorously towards the form of Simpson in the door, and seemingly glad of shifting the responsibility to the other’s shoulders, “go fur him!”

“That’s just what we’re going to do,” said Joe, with a ring of determination in his tone. “We’ve got a bone to pick with you!”

“And rather an expensive one,” I chimed in.

“Hear the bantams crow,” laughed Simpson. “You-uns don’t seem to recognize the fact that I’ve got the drap on you.”

“There hain’t a-goin’ to be any shootin’ done yere,” broke in the judge, stepping down from his judicial chair and out of range in rather a hasty manner.

“ Now, Jim Lacy,” said Simpson, “ I wanter know why you wuz goin’ to turn them boys off when I told you partic’larly to make hit a run-out.”

“ You do ? ” sneered Mr. Lacy. “ Well, you’ll have to find out ! ”

“ I will, eh ? ”

“ That’s what I said.”

“ Be keerful. I’ve got the upper hand yere, an’ not a one o’ you-uns had better raise a gun or he’ll kotch buckshot ! ”

This included every one. The men began to scowl and look darkly at Simpson ; but they were careful not to move their guns. The gentleman in the door was overreaching himself.

“ Hiss on both parties and we’ll have all the allies we want,” whispered Bob.

“ There hain’t no cause fur you to rile up, Milt,” said Mr. Lacy, soothingly. “ Whatever the court says is square, hain’t it, boys ? ”

“ You bet ! ” chorused the men.

“ Bah ! ” cried Simpson. “ What do I keer fur your court ? I’ve got my reasons fur wantin’ them boys run out, an’ I reckon ef I hadn’t popped in jess’s I did they’d be

prowlin' round same's usual. Is hit goin' to be a run-out?"

"The court says no!" replied Mr. Lacy, doggedly.

Mr. Simpson said something unpleasant concerning the court, which made Jim Lacy jump several inches.

"Ef I had my rifle——" he began.

"Well?" asked Simpson, beginning to finger the trigger of his gun nervously.

"I'd clean hit. Hit needs hit pow'ful bad, an' I thought I'd do hit while you're holdin' the door," was the faint reply.

"Hum. I asked you once afore ef hit was goin' to be a run-out."

"I suppose you know, my vernacular friend," remarked Bob, before Jim Lacy could reply, "that you can't hold that door all day. The moment you start away there'll be a crowd of bullets chasing you."

"I don't know about that," returned Simpson, calmly.

"Why don't some of you cover him with a gun and take his away? He won't dare to shoot," I said to Mr. J. Lacy.

"Won't he? You don't know him," was the cheerful rejoinder. "He'd jess's

leave turn both bar'ls loose in yere an' git away in the timber as not."

I moved in back of Jim Lacy. The men before me protected my movements, and I doubt if Simpson had even an inkling of what I had done.

I took a rifle out of Smoky Bill's unresisting hand, and then, shoving it between Bob and Joe covered Simpson before he knew what had happened.

"You don't seem to recognize the fact that I've got the 'drap' on you," said I, trying to imitate his voice as much as possible.

His face turned the color of ashes.

His gun was pointed at us, and he could have pulled the trigger, but to have done so would seal his fate. Verily he was at a disadvantage, although I doubt if I could fire at any person unless my life was in great peril.

"Now, Joe," I went on coolly, "will you step over and relieve him of his gun and that pocket-book which he ought to have about him? Don't you try to stop him, Simpson, or you'll get a bullet through you, and never be any good afterward."

Simpson and Joe must have recognized those words, for they were similar to the ones uttered by Joe when we first made Simpson's acquaintance.

"And," I added, "don't try any knocking down, for I shall watch for just such a move and perforate you on the first indication."

"You won't git the money," he growled. "I've put that where you-uns will never see hit again."

"Then we'll have the satisfaction of seeing you serve ten years at hard labor," returned Joe, advancing cautiously.

"Well, yere's the gun," said Simpson, holding it out butt first. "I don't want to see you sneakin' up fur hit, an' you'll git hit any way seein' you got the drap on me."

"That's right," replied Joe, more cheerfully.

"Ef hit warn't fur you-uns, these Swamp Angels would never have tetched me," remarked Simpson, derisively.

"Well, we got you now," responded Mr. Lacy with alacrity. "I didn't think you'd show dirt, Milt," he continued, in an agrieved tone.

“I’ll show more’n dirt afore I’m through with *you*,” said Simpson, looking straight at the other in a way that made the latter quail.

“Now go through his pockets while I have him covered,” I broke in, “and see if he hasn’t got that fourteen hundred dollars stowed away somewhere.”

The Swamp Angels pricked up their ears at that, and I instantly regretted that I had mentioned the amount.

“Oh, I hain’t got hit with me,” declared Simpson, in rather a good-natured tone. “I don’t kerry such a pile.”

Jim Lacy assisted in the search.

“You’d oughter divvied up, Milt,” he said, running his hand into a pocket, “an’ then we’d a stood by you.”

“I’d a-ruther give hit back to the boys than took you into partnership,” retorted Simpson.

This showed that Mr. Lacy’s character was not above reproach, and also that if we found the money while he was present we would be placed in the same predicament as when Simpson had it.

“Well,” observed Lacy, after the search

had proved fruitless, "had we not better put him on trial?"

"No," replied Joe, "but you might help us take him to Jimmerson's, and there Mr. Jimmerson will find a way of getting him to Jonesboro."

"An' what'll you do with him there?" demanded Mr. Lacy.

"Lock him up. If he don't care to tell us what he has done with the money so we can get it back, he can go to the penitentiary, and we'll help put him there."

"I won't," said Jim Lacy.

"Go easy, Joe," I whispered.

"Jess's soon's you fellers git through foolin' I want to get a deer fur Patty to cook," remarked Mr. Simpson. "So gimme my gun an' I'll start."

"You kain't have your gun!" said Jim Lacy, waving him back with his hand.

"What?" asked Simpson.

"You heered what I said," replied Jim Lacy, coolly. "I don't give you no gun to empty into us almost afore you git hit in your hands. The fact is, Milt, I wouldn't trust you half as fur as I kin spit."

“ I never'd a-thought you'd a-gone back on me like this,” growled Simpson.

“ Neither did I,” said Jim Lacy, calmly. “ I kinder mistrusted there was somethin' up when you kim bouncin' in yere one night with Miggy an' your darter. An' hit wuz 'cause you nailed fourteen hundred from these chaps that you wanted 'em run out, eh ? ”

“ Quite cute,” added Treve.

“ Well, I'll——” began Simpson, angrily.

“ Now don't get excited,” I advised, turning the rifle toward him in a very trying manner.

He glared furiously at us, and then suddenly his foot shot up and the rifle flew into the corner.

He sprang toward the door ; but Bob and Treve were holding themselves in readiness for just such an action and were on him almost before he reached it.

They grappled, rolled outside, and Simpson's wonderful good fortune must have still been with him, for he landed on top. Before Joe and I could get out he was on his feet and running toward the timber.

“ He's gone ! ” yelled Jim Lacy.

Simpson sprang on a log near the edge of the woods, waved his hand good-bye, and then slipped and seemed to plunge head first off the other side. He did not get up.

We ran to the spot. He lay on his back, with one arm twisted under him. His face was slate color.

“Don’t pick me up,” he moaned, as we crowded around. “My arm and back’s broken! I’m done fur this time. Put your head down, one o’ you. I want—want to tell you somethin’.”

I promptly kneeled down.

“Hit’s—hit’s in the stump—stump,” he whispered, hoarsely and with difficulty, “twenty paces—north o’ the shadder o’ the big oak—oak nigh my cabin. Tell—Patty—I’m—I’m sorry——”

His eyes closed and he was gone.

“What did he say?” asked Jim Lacy, eagerly, as I rose to my feet.

“Just mumbled,” I returned shortly.

“If you don’t object we’ll stay here to-night,” I said to Jim Lacy later in the day, after Simpson had been buried where he fell.

“We want to get our rifles, anyway.”

“All right,” he responded, carelessly.

“ And where did Simpson live ? ” I asked, in the same tone. “ We didn’t see him here before.”

“ Back in the timber a piece,” he replied. “ There’s the path yander.”

At the first opportunity I told the boys what Simpson had told me about the money.

“ We’ll go there to-morrow,” said Bob. “ In the meantime we’ll get our rifles and dogs, so when we start we can shake the dust of this place off our feet forever.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

WE REGAIN THE \$1400.

It seemed rather a forward way of doing—throwing ourselves on Jim Lacy's hospitality without even a hint from the latter; but Treve eased our consciences by saying:

“He brought us down here whether we liked it or not, and I guess now we'll stay whether *he* likes it or not.”

Mrs. Lacy gazed on us sourly. She had been visiting a neighbor's when court was held, and had remained there during the exciting scene that followed.

“Didn't one o' you-uns say that Simpson lifted fourteen hundred outen you?” asked Mr. Lacy, with a poor assumption of carelessness.

“I believe Steve did say something about that,” replied Joe, guardedly. “But as

Simpson has died without saying anything to *me* about what he's done with it, there is a possibility that the firm up in Missouri will have to stand it."

"What did he say to you?" pursued Mr. Lacy, turning to me.

I did not want to lie, neither did I care to tell him the location where we expected to find the money. There was no compulsion to tell everything, so I replied :

"He said to tell Patty he was sorry, and then he died without finishing."

"Hum. He died awful quick," grumbled Mr. Lacy. "I've seed fellers hang on two days with their back broke, an' he mought have done hit jess's well's not an' told us what he done with the cash. But that's the way with some people ; so stingy they wouldn't draw breath ef they could help hit, fur fear o' wearin' out their lungs."

And Mr. Lacy leaned against the wall as though loath to give up.

"By the way, where is Patty?" I asked.

"She's down at the cabin, hain't she, maw?"

"I reckon she is," replied Mrs. Lacy. "Leastways she wuz awhile ago when I

went down an' told her her paw was dead."

"Take hit very hard?" asked Mr. Lacy, without the least show of sympathy.

"Well, I should say she did! Cut up so rough I 'lowed I'd better move to'ards home afore I cried myself."

"And you left her there all alone?" asked Treve, in astonishment.

"Why, yes," replied Mr. Lacy. "She's all right; she kin shoot better'n her paw. I've seed her shoot squirrels away up in the top o' the biggest tree down yere, an' she never hit a-one back o' the eye."

"That would equal Sol Dunlap's shot," remarked Treve. "You know how tall the timber grows down here."

"You know Sol Dunlap?" questioned Mr. Lacy, quickly.

"We have met him."

"So've I," acquiesced Lacy, ruefully. "Blamed ef the ornery brute didn't make me give him three coon an' an otter's skin to haul me over his old pond full o' willows."

After supper we were awarded the room that had been utilized as a prison before, Mr. Lacy making no apology for the fact

that we were compelled to sleep on the bare floor.

“Rifles and dogs in the morning, boys,” muttered Bob, hunting for the softest spot. “Remember!”

“No danger of our forgetting it, is there?” asked Joe. “If there is, I’d better write it down.”

Then with coats for pillows, we cuddled together to keep warm, and went to sleep.

Mr. Lacy furnished us with breakfast, and we visited several houses before we found our rifles.

With a “so long,” Mr. Lacy left us.

“We had better start toward home, and then make a detour to reach Simpson’s cabin,” whispered Joe. “If we don’t, we’re liable to have more treasure-seekers than is necessary.”

So we whistled to the dogs, and, after going quite a distance in the right direction, made a circuit around the settlement toward the place where the Simpson cabin was supposed to be. We struck the path Mr. Lacy had pointed out, and followed it until we came in sight of the cabin. It was in the middle of a clearing, by the side of an oak

tree, that for some reason or other had been left standing.

Around it were scattered the stumps of trees hewn down, some of which still lay where they fell. Plying the axe on one of these, with the skill of a woodsman, was a trim little figure in leather and velvet. A sombrero, considerably the worse for wear, was jammed down over her pretty yellow curls, and, as she looked up when the dogs ran toward her, we saw that she had been crying.

“Why, it’s the same girl that looked in and thought I was out,” cried Treve, getting mixed in his excitement.

Then we wondered why we had not thought of that before.

“Great goodness!” exclaimed Patty, staring at us in amazement. “Which one is you?”

“This is me,” I explained.

“And this is me,” chimed in Treve.

So Patty was just as wise as she was before.

“Which one did I see in the cabin?” she asked, desperately.

“ Me,” I responded, alluding to Simpson’s shanty.

“ Me,” returned Treve, alluding to Jim Lacy’s domicile.

“ Here, hold on,” interrupted Sammy. “ This one, Steve,” and he pointed to me, “ you seed first. An’ this one, Treve, you seed in Jim Lacy’s cabin.”

“ Oh,” said Patty, in a tone of relief. “ I don’t know you,” and she nodded at Treve ; “ but I know this one.”

And then Treve grew red in the face and looked around for something to shoot at, while I, inwardly exultant, introduced the rest of the X. T. C. Quartette.

She was just going to get breakfast, so Sammy and I volunteered to cut the wood and build the fire, while the others went out for game. The quintette ate the second breakfast, and thought it better than the first.

“ Did you ever see your father hide anything in a stump around here ? ” asked Joe, beginning to talk business the moment breakfast was over.

“ No. Why ? ” asked Patty.

Thereupon Joe told as much of our story

as he thought proper, carefully refraining from mentioning that Simpson had held us up. Then, turning to me, he continued :

“ Did he say what time of day to look ? ”

“ No. ”

“ There’s a good many stumps here. Good thing that the sun has come out fair. Now the shadow is way over there, and to-night it will be way over here. So you see we will have a great many stumps to examine if he planted it in the evening. ”

“ And twenty paces to be paced off to each one, ” groaned Treve.

“ I’ll help, ” volunteered Patty.

Then we all went out to where the oak cast a deep shadow on the white snow.

“ This will be great fun before the day is gone, ” said Treve, pacing off twenty steps from the farthest point of the shadow.

It brought him within two feet of a hickory stump, but investigation proved that nothing larger than a pin could be hidden in it.

“ Now perhaps he planted it at high noon, ” observed Treve. “ People generally feel better after a meal. ”

“ Perhaps he did, ” returned Joe, dryly.

“ At any rate, we will not remain idle on any such hearsay.”

And we did nothing that morning but pace off the distance every five minutes and examine tree stumps.

We were beginning to think of dinner, when I waded out through the snow. The twentieth step would bring me right in the center of an immense stump.

We poked around the bottom and scratched away the bark in a listless sort of way, for we were beginning to feel disappointed. I thrust my hand into a heap of crumbling bark in a little cavity between two roots, and struck something that felt smooth.

With my heart trying to choke me, for fear it might be only a piece of bark, I drew forth—the wallet!

“ I’ve got it! I’ve got it!” I shouted.

And then, with the others crowding around, I sat down on a snow-covered stump and counted it, Patty’s eyes opening like saucers at the sight of so much money.

“ Ten dollars gone, or I made a mistake.”

But subsequent counting on all sides

showed no mistake, so ten dollars was charged to profit and loss, and we prepared to start.

“ I’m goin’ with you,” announced Patty, as we began to gather our rifles and call the dogs.

“ Of course you are,” I returned promptly.

“ Jess wait till I get my rifle an’—oh! I forgot to tell you. I’ve got that Bible, an’ now you can tell me what them papers says in hit. You know I was jess’ goin’ fur hit when pap an’ Miggy come——”

“ Better wait till we get to a safe place,” interrupted Joe. “ Lacy might take a notion to come over here, and explanations are odious.”

Patty flew into the cabin and came out with a light rifle and a Bible, which latter I pocketed with a feeling of guardianship, and then we started for our cabin, taking care to give the settlement a wide berth.

We found Loafer browsing on the edge of the canebrake, and caught him with difficulty, for freedom seemed to limber up his legs.

We reached our cabin, fed ourselves, the dogs, and Brute, who seemed none the

worse for being left alone—and then held a consultation.

“The money ought to be placed in Jimmerson’s hands at once,” said Bob. “We’ve been here nearly a month; had plenty of shooting; trouble enough for double our number, and I propose we start for home.”

“There’s pelts enough,” said Sammy.

It never took the Quartette long to make up their minds. In less than an hour Loafer had been harnessed, the pelts tied and loaded into the wagon with Patty and Brute.

Sammy placed the money carefully in an inside pocket, promised to be back early next morning, mounted, and we watched them until they disappeared amid the labyrinth of trees.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT THE SMALL BIBLE CONTAINED.

“ I AM glad that money is on its way to the right party again,” I said, with a sigh of relief, after the wagon had disappeared.

“ Well, there’s plenty of work to be done yet,” returned Bob. “ All those traps to be taken up.”

“ And there is enough of them, too,” added Joe.

“ Do you think we can get them in before dark ? ” I asked.

“ We can try,” replied Joe. “ Treve and I will take up the ones on land, and Steve and Bob can take up the others with the dug-out.”

“ And bring in some ducks for supper,” finished Treve.

“ I don’t suppose it would break Isaac

Jimmerson if we missed a trap or two," I said to Bob, after the others had departed and we crawled down to the dug-out.

"Hardly. We want to get everything done, so when Sammy comes back in the morning for the traps and ourselves, we won't have to do anything but load up and pile in."

Frequent expeditions after water fowl had made us perfectly familiar with the management of the dug-out, and, under the powerful influence of two strong paddles, it darted up stream like an animated being.

We knew the location of the traps almost as well as Sammy did. One of us generally accompanied him, while the other three took the land route.

The dug-out darted from one side of the stream to the other, shot into silent lagoons and narrow bayous. We gathered in the traps and the game some of them contained, and by the time the eighty odd were secured it was growing dark.

So we stopped long enough to scare up a flock of teal, dropped seven out of the lot and then made for home. The others were there before us, tired and hungry, with

their traps and fur dumped down by the door.

There was a merry quartette in the cabin that night. The fire roared and crackled, and the wind moaned through the tree tops. Bob was telling an admirable ghost story.

“The phantom rider bore down on him——”

Bob's voice sounded far away. What the phantom did when it reached him, or whether it rode him down I am unable to say, for when I awoke the fire had burned down and the others were snoring melodiously. I could almost hear the thunder of those hoofs as I hastily tossed more wood on the fire, and then rolling up in my blanket, dozed off, to be hauled out by Joe at an early hour.

The door of the bear trap was dropped, to prevent any animal being caught and starved to death, and the dug-out was hauled out of the water and once more propped up in the hollow tree. Sammy arrived soon after, having made a quick return with the empty wagon. We loaded on the trunks, the traps and ourselves, and,

whistling to the dogs, started on the first installment of our journey homeward.

“Is the money safe?” was my first question.

“All safe. Maw took to Patty like a duck to water.”

This was good news. It was not long before the Quartette, partially to lighten Loafer's load, but more for amusement, were down on both sides of the wagon diminishing the number of quail.

“Things air turnin' out right along like they oughter,” said Mr. Isaac Jimmerson, shaking hands all round. “Got the fourteen hundred back agin, an' fur enough to pay you-uns' fare down yere an' back an' a good deal over.”

“Where does Sammy come in?” I asked mildly.

“Oh, he don't ask fur anythin',” said Mr. Jimmerson, liberally.

“Then,” said I, speaking for both myself and the rest, “with the exception of what specimens we select for ourselves, will you turn over to Sammy whatever amount the fur is worth, and give him permission to pay us a visit?”

Mr. Jimmerson stared at us in blank amazement.

“And it won’t half repay our indebtedness,” added Bob, who with the others had been made acquainted with Sammy’s desires.

“I will if y’all say so,” he returned, and the look on his face told that he did not understand it.

So Joe obligingly explained our reasons. Sammy abruptly left off unharnessing Loafer and disappeared around the house. Mr. Jimmerson was surprised, and also so tickled at the thought of Sammy’s becoming a “book l’arnt feller,” that he immediately departed in search of him, and a little later the latter was the happiest boy in the State.

“Steve,” said Patty, as we were all gathered in the general sitting-room that evening, “I’m jess dyin’ to know what them papers in the Bible says, and now’s as good a time as any.”

“Why, I had forgotten them entirely,” I replied. “Now we will soon know what has been troubling the mind of this young lady for I don’t know how many years.”

Everybody crowded around as I pulled out the small Bible and laid it on the table. Mrs. Jimmerson placed the candle in the most advantageous position, and the little Jimmersons opened their eyes and mouths to their widest extent.

There were two envelopes, yellow with age, both sealed with a large daub of red wax and both of which had been broken. Amid a death-like silence I extracted a folded slip of parchment paper and read the label, written in a cramped hand :

“The last will and testament of John S. Halford !”

“What under the sun,” began Bob, but stopped as I opened it and continued :

“Being in a sound state of mind and health, I, John S. Halford, do hereby give, devise and bequeath to my only daughter, Geraldine Halford, all my property, both real and personal, wherever found or however situated, including twenty-three thousand dollars in United States four per cent Government bonds, etc., etc. Said bonds and all rights and titles belonging to me have been placed in the hands of one Claribel R. Simpson——”

“ Oh ! ” burst from the rest of the Quartette.

“ To be conveyed, with the said Geraldine Halford, to Memphis, Tenn., to be placed in charge of——”

There the will abruptly left off, signed, but neither dated or recorded. “ Well, that beats me,” said Joe, turning it over in his hands. “ He must have drawn it up himself. Evidently the one Claribel R. Simpson was either the sister or the wife of our highwayman.”

“ And I suppose the twenty-three thousand dollars in Government bonds has gone the way our fourteen hundred would have gone had not that accident happened,” remarked Treve.

“ Well, where is this Geraldine Halford ? ” I wanted to know.

Joe gave me a peculiar look and elevated his eyebrows at Patty across the table.

“ You don't mean,” I stammered.

He nodded his head emphatically.

Mechanically I drew out the contents of the other envelope.

A cry of astonishment went up. With feverish haste I counted twenty-three thou-

sand dollars in four per cent. United States Government bonds !

We stood like so many wax figures until Treve picked up a thin package that had dropped on the table unnoticed until now. He quickly undid it and disclosed a small photograph and a few faded letters.

“ A blind man could see that this picture is the counterpart of Patty, even though it was taken eleven years ago ! ” exclaimed Treve.

“ Well, all I can say, ” said Joe, solemnly, “ is that Miss Geraldine Halford, the young lady on the other side of the table, need not spend the remainder of her days in the sunk lands, with twenty-three thousand dollars and interest accrued for a trifle over ten years. ”

“ An’ my name is Geraldine, is hit ? ” asked Patty, in a dazed manner. “ An’ Simpson wasn’t my pap, an’ I kin go away from yere an’ be like other girls ? ”

“ Of course, ” we assured her.

“ What does the Quartette say to taking her home with us, ” asked Treve. “ I know mother and the girls would be glad to take care of her until things simmer down. ”

“ Agreed ! ” cried the rest.

“ That is, if Patty is willing,” added Treve.

There was no need to ask her. She danced around the room as though treading on air at the prospect of the trip.

“ With her small fortune, Patty is dependent on no one,” said Joe.

Except on certain rare occasions, she has remained Patty with the Quartette ever since, and seems better pleased than when we say “ Geraldine.”

“ Well, I’m dodswoggled ! ” suddenly exclaimed Mr. Jimmerson, resonantly. “ Ef this don’t beat anythin’ I ever seed, I’ll yeat my haid ! ”

“ Do you remember Simpson’s wife, or sister, or whatever she is ? ” asked Joe, turning to Patty.

“ I remember a woman who used to be awful good to me ; but she died a long time ago.”

“ There isn’t a particle of doubt as to Patty’s identity in my mind,” said Treve. “ But what gets me is why Simpson did not sell those bonds.”

“ Now, that would be a rather difficult question,” replied Joe ; “ but I account for

it like this : Simpson was undoubtedly an illiterate fellow, and knew no more about Government bonds than a hog does about Sunday. Claribel R. Simpson was probably in the same state, or, unless he had unbounded confidence in her, Mr. Halford would not have trusted her with such an amount. Supposing that Claribel could not read, and being near no one that could, she did the best she could and kept the child. She could not have done much better any way, seeing that no further directions are given. Simpson kept them when she died for the same reason."

And there we have had to let the matter rest, for all efforts to find any one acquainted or related to John S. Halford, through the newspapers, have proved unavailing. The Quartette and all concerned have accepted Joe's solution of the problem.

After another coon hunt, and several days' shooting at quail and prairie chickens, the Quartette started for home.

Boose was left in charge of Sammy, who promised to keep him for us until we came down the next fall, for shooting was too

good there to run the risk of finding new fields.

Mr. Jimmerson undertook to teach Brute some tricks and thus enhance his value. We learned afterward that the cub grew considerably larger, and rebelling one day, knocked his tutor through a two inch plank door, whereupon the latter grew disgusted and sold him to a showman for forty-five dollars, which he forwarded to the X. T. C. Quartette and would listen to no refusal on our part to take.

Sol Dunlap ferried us over Maumelle Lake. We noticed he said nothing about "them air Simpsons," when he saw the young lady accompanying us.

Jim Mills received Loafer reluctantly, but was apparently well pleased at the fact that he had not been compelled to provide for him for a month.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

“BACK again, eh?” said Mr. Roberts as I walked into the office next morning.

“Yes, sir.”

“Had a good time, I suppose? What’s the prospect on pelts? How’s Jimmerson?”

Thereupon I told our story and answered his various questions pertaining to the business.

Later in the day he came around and said:

“Look up that Appleton account again, will you? I believe you were working on that the day before you left.”

So I went to the vault and hauled out the books of the previous year. The papers I had used when checking up the account before were as I had left them; but it was not these that caused me to give a gasp and then shout:

“Cæsar’s ghost! I have it!”

There came a crash in Mr. Robert’s office as that nervous gentleman overturned his chair and his ever overturning inkstand. Then I grabbed a long yellow envelope, covered with pencil marks, and, shoving my trembling fingers inside, drew out the first fourteen hundred dollars that had been placed in my possession for Mr. Jimmerson to call for!

I flew into Mr. Robert’s office, collided with him as he was coming out to see what the trouble was, and then, as he sat down violently in the waste paper basket, I shot across the floor, plunged into a Japanese screen and narrowly escaped going into the fireplace.

“Hi—ho—ho—how!” he spluttered. “What’s up?”

“Neither of us,” I retorted. “Natives dropped a quarter of a cent by the market report this morning.”

He glared at me as though undecided whether to be angry or not, and then, perhaps remembering that he should make allowances for a person just returned from a month’s sojourn in the sunk lands, re-

placed his spectacles and stared at the money I placed before him.

“Why—why, where did this come from?”

“That is the money we thought was burnt,” I explained.

“I—I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, unless I placed it in last year’s books by mistake and left Davis’s consignment out for Mr. Jimmerson.”

“Which Mike burnt up and which accounts for our not being able to find it. Quite a remarkable incident. Well, well!”

“If Jimmerson *had* called and I had given him the consignment papers instead of the money, I would have been placed in just as bad a light,” I told myself, as I returned to work. “If I had not been so worked up over the hunt it would not have happened.”

That evening the X. T. C. Quartette met in the club room for the first time after their arrival home. Of course the guns and rifles had to be polished and put in their respective places, as well as the rest of the accouterments.

I told of my good fortune, and then Bob said:

“The X. T. C. Quartette seems to have

taken Patty's financial affairs under its direct supervision, and Steve and Treve's mother and sisters, herself. As the president and general manager of this illustrious body, I have interested father in her behalf, and he promises to see that her fortune is properly deposited."

"And Patty has decided that she will attend the young ladies' seminary with Edith, so we are going to lose sight of her for awhile," I added.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Bob. "Will we have to go hatless and crawl into her presence on our knees?"

"Never!" I retorted. "No one will ever get any such fandangle ideas into her head. Patty is too sensible a girl for that."

And I am glad to say she was.

Sammy paid us a visit before winter was over, and of course was visibly impressed with his first venture into a city; but the X. T. C. Quartette gave him no time to be bashful, and shoved him through and into everything in a way that must have made his hair rise.

He has since educated himself, and through Mr. Jimmerson's and my efforts,

secured a good position in the fur department of Mr. Robert's establishment, with a snug little fortune and a great, large chance of promotion. He never fails to accompany the Quartette on their annual hunting trip to the sunk lands.

Jim Lacy and his followers paid us a visit when we hunted in his region the next season, but did not molest us, and soon after disappeared. We never heard of them afterwards.

Miguel wandered into Mr. Jimmerson's settlement not long after we returned home ; but wandered out considerably quicker when four men started for him with guns. He has not been seen there since.

Bob, Joe and Treve remain as of old, although I notice they have begun to cultivate a down on their upper lips and the nightly meetings in the club room are less frequent.

The last time I saw Bob he hinted that receptions, balls, operas and musicals, claimed the majority of evenings in the week and I suppose it is the same with the rest.

And Patty—well, you should see her, for words can give but a poor description.

Four years in a seminary have done wonders. She no longer says "hit" for it, or "jess" for just, but is a brilliant conversationalist. You would see a vision of loveliness with bewitching blue eyes, creamy complexion and a wealth of golden hair. She is the brightest, wittiest—but there, perhaps I am prejudiced. No doubt Bob was joking the other day when he asked me if any date had been decided on.

Just before we indulge in our annual hunt we have a general meeting in the club room, and if any outsiders are present, they generally ask for an explanation of our aim and object. Then Joe, who, by the way, is about to be admitted to the bar, will recount the adventures we met with when on our first hunt IN THE SUNK LANDS.

THE END.

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