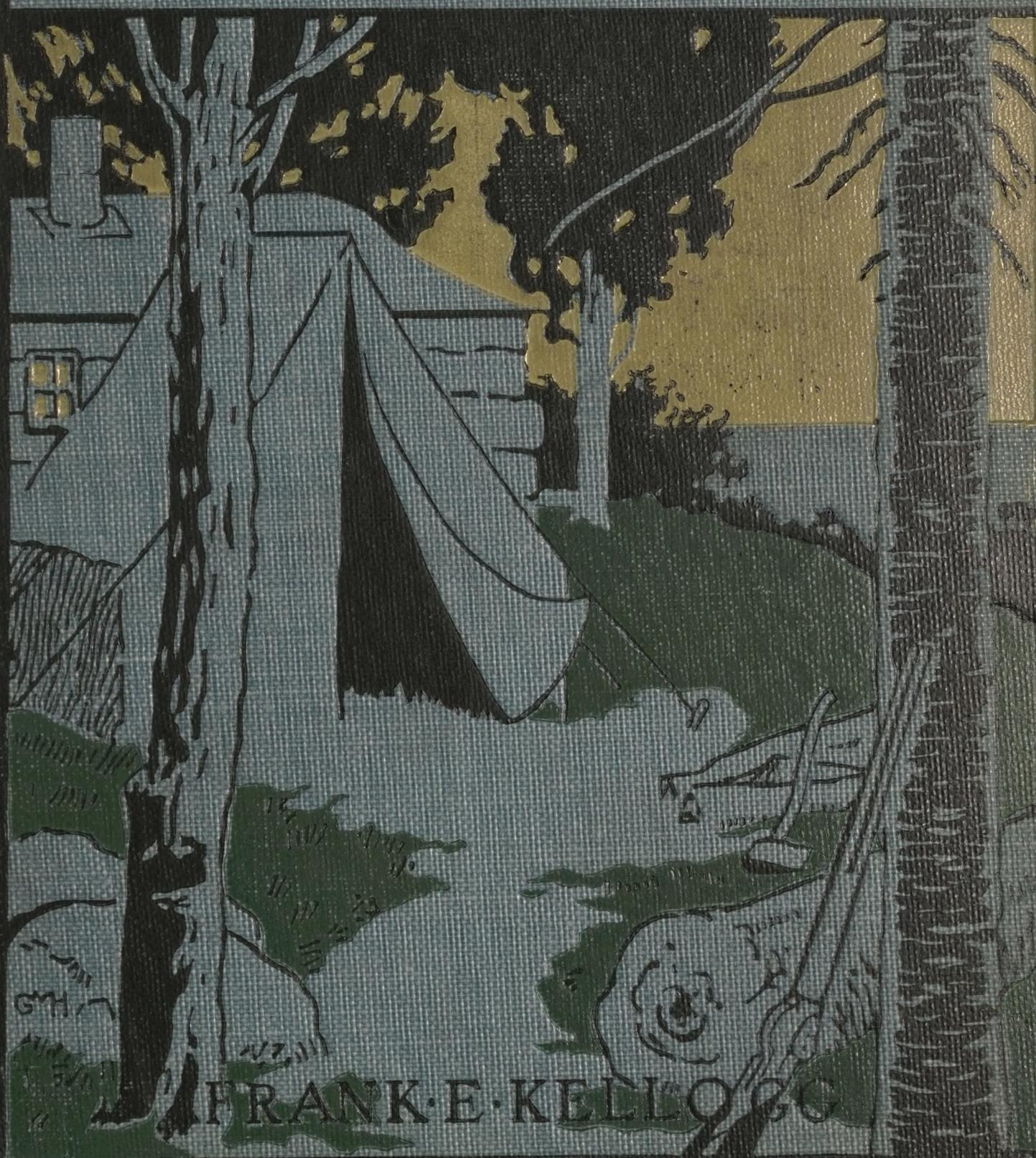


YOUNG DUCK -SHOOTERS IN CAMP



FRANK E. KELLOGG



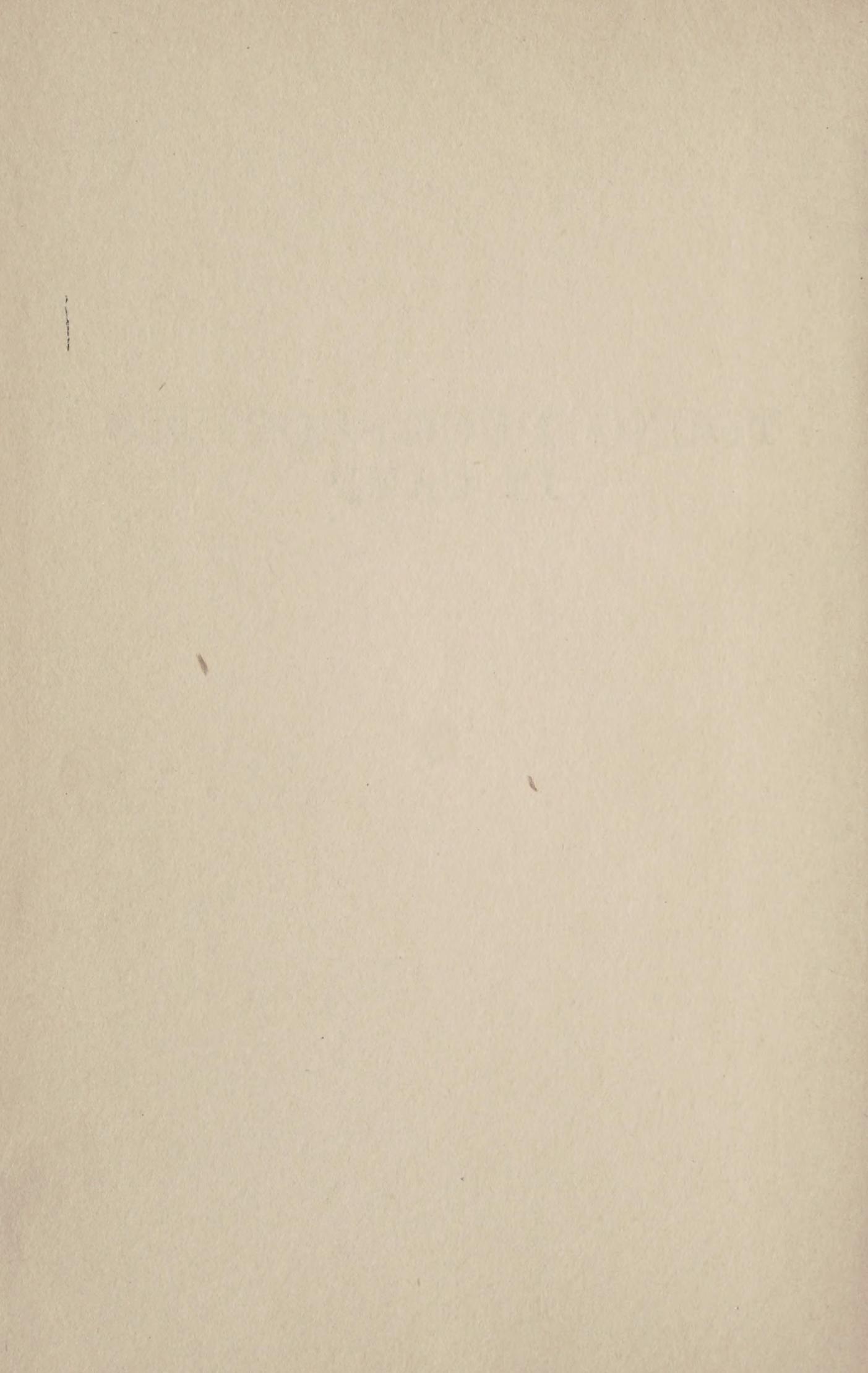
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YOUNG DUCK-SHOOTERS IN CAMP



YOUNG DUCK- SHOOTERS IN CAMP

BY
FRANK E. KELLOGG

Author of "The Boy Duck Hunters"

WITH FOUR FULL PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS



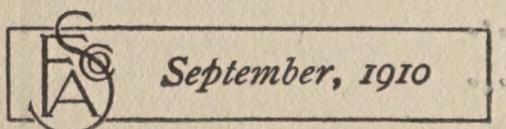
NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
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PREFACE

Many of the events recorded in this book really occurred. Beam Foster is drawn from life. He is a close friend of the author's, and when a youth, received the injury to his lung by a fall from a bridge, as herein described. The wound refused to heal and the doctors could do nothing for him. After months of suffering, as a last resort, he took his guns, fishing-tackle, traps, dogs, etc., and accompanied by a friend, went to live on an island in the Mississippi. There they remained for nearly a year, hunting, fishing, trapping, and rowing, in all kinds of weather.

The result of this rough outdoor experience was that he became as strong, rugged and hearty as a bear.

The moral to be deduced from this story would seem to be this :

Throw physic to the dogs; get out into the woods, exercise every day all you can in God's own sunshine, and Nature will do the rest, without money and without price.

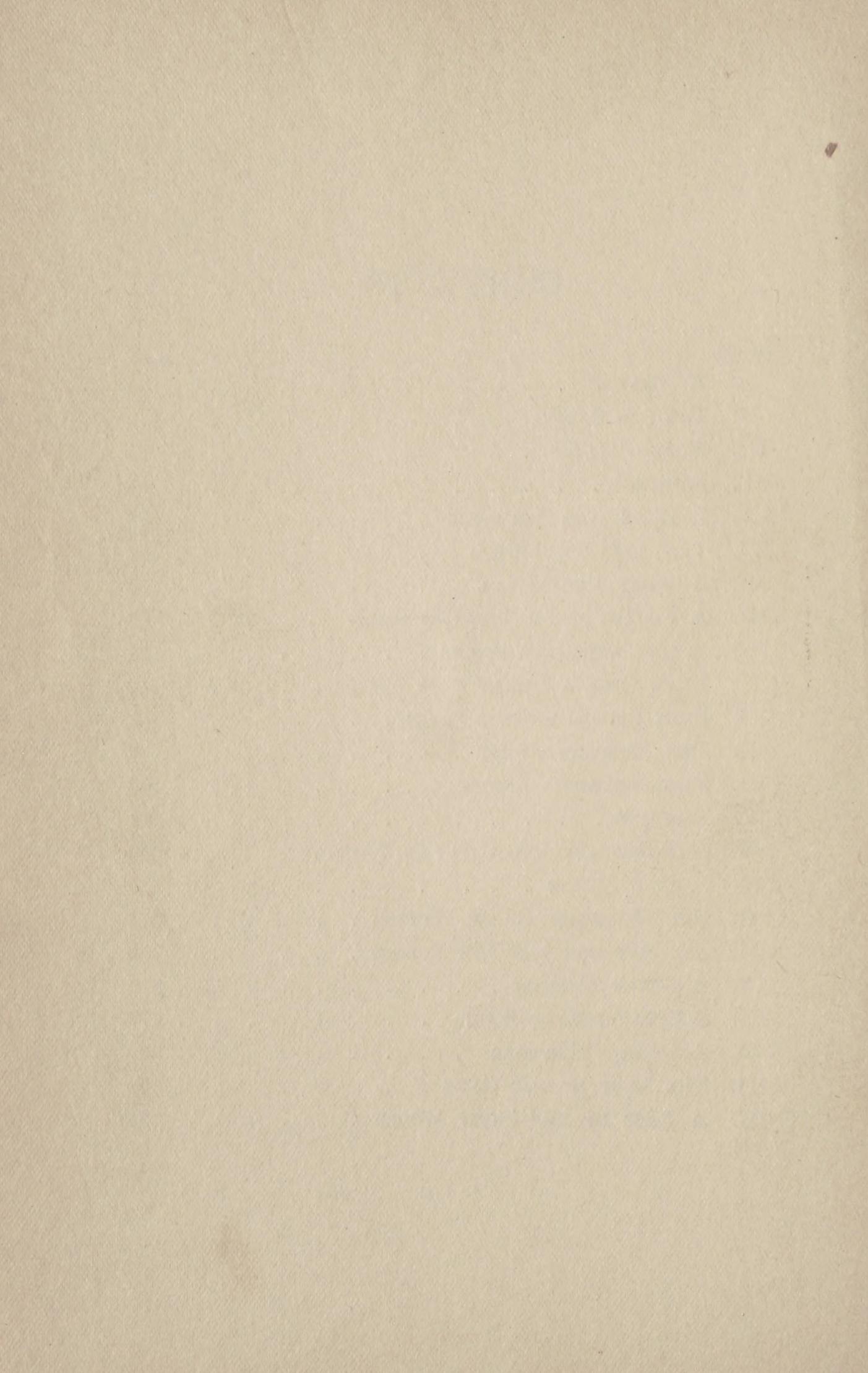
THE AUTHOR.

Eugene, Oregon.

June 28, 1909.

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YOUNG DUCK-SHOOTERS IN CAMP

YOUNG DUCK-SHOOTERS IN CAMP

CHAPTER I

A MISHAP

“**H**ADN’T we better point our noses for home, fellows? Looks like a shower comin’ up,” called Tom Williams to his three mates, who were intently watching their bobbers from the vantage-ground of a big dead tree that extended out into the waters of the slough, where it had fallen years before.

A favorite fishing spot for sunfish and coppers, the “Leaning Tree” was the objective point of every schoolboy who could hurry through his Saturday’s work and have a few hours to spare.

“Yes, let’s go home. I’m ready. This is pretty tame sport, after playing bass,” replied Beam Foster as he began reeling in his line.

“Don’t go back on an old friend,” said Jim Neal, lifting his line from the water and climbing out of his comfortable perch in a crotch of the old tree.

“Never! That’s the reason I wanted to come

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down and see the old tree once more. We've had lots of fun here," returned Beam, pulling a small string of fish out of the water and walking the log ashore.

"I'm ready; haven't had a nibble for fifteen minutes," remarked Tod Masters, and followed his mates to the bank.

"Get a move on you or we'll get wet," said Tom impatiently, surveying the heavens with a critical eye.

"Don't hurry the cattle, the weather's cool," Tod returned complaisantly, as he swung up the bank and trudged along after the others.

"Come on, short-legs!" called Jim over his shoulder.

Tod noticed the approaching storm and let out another link in the members referred to.

It was a good mile and a half to town and half of the distance had been covered when Tom cried:

"Let's have a race to the bridge and beat the storm."

"That hits me, come on!" cried Jim eagerly.

"Who carries the fish?" asked Beam.

"You long-legged ducks do the running and I'll carry the fish," said Tod, "I ain't afraid of a wetting."

"Take them, then. Good-bye, see you later."

There was a quick movement, a scurry of feet, and Tod was trudging on alone, watching the three flying forms in the distance.

"I'll bet on Beam," mused Tod, unconsciously increasing his speed.

It was two hundred yards to the little bridge, and Tod watched his mates close in on the distance, with kindling eye. He saw them reach the bridge and cross it almost neck-and-neck. Then he saw what seemed to be a collision, and Tom and Beam disappeared.

"Somebody's hurt if they went over that bank," and Tod broke into a run.

The thunder growled ominously, but he did not heed it. Panting and winded he reached the far end of the bridge and peered eagerly down over the twenty-foot embankment. What he saw turned him sick with horror. Tom and Jim were kneeling by Beam's prostrate form, wiping blood from his mouth with a handkerchief.

Tod threw away the fish and slid and tumbled down the bank.

"For heaven's sake, is he dead?" he gasped, awe-struck at Beam's pallid face.

"No, his heart beats. Bring some water, quick!" Tom cried.

Tod dashed for the little creek and in a trice returned with a hat full of water, with which they sprinkled the unconscious Beam.

"We must get him to a doctor as soon as possible," said Tom. "One of you run down to Lyfords and get their horse and light wagon, and be quick about it."

"I'll go, I can run faster," Jim cried, and he

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scrambled up the bank and darted down the road in the direction of the village.

"How did it happen?" asked Tod.

"Why, we had just reached this end of the bridge and were about to slow up, when I slipped on something that threw me against Beam and he went one way and I the other. I grabbed a root and kept from going over the other bank, but Beam wasn't so lucky. Jim said he rolled and bumped clean to the bottom. He's hurt internally somehow. I wish Jim would hurry," and Tom looked anxiously down the road.

"It's only about forty rods down there, it oughtn't to take him long."

A clap of thunder followed and a dash of rain.

"Let her rain," said Tom grimly, "it will help revive him."

"Here comes Jim and old man Lyford just a-sailing," said Tod as the rattle of wheels was heard. "Can we lift him alone?"

"No, wait for the old man. He's strong as an ox."

The wagon dashed up and a large, gray-haired man leaped out and sprang down the bank.

"How is this, boys, an accident?"

"Yes, sir; Beam fell over the bank."

"Bad business. We must get him to Doc Hall soon as possible."

Heedless of the pouring rain, he began chafing, rubbing, and bathing the unconscious form.

Either the work or the magnetism of his pres-

ence proved effective, for in a few moments Beam opened his eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"You've had an accident, and we want to get you in out of the rain soon as possible," said Mr. Lyford kindly.

"I can walk;" Beam tried to rise, but fell back.

"Tut, tut, my boy. You don't need to walk. We have a wagon here. Just keep still and leave it to us."

Tenderly the injured boy was borne up the bank and placed in the little wagon. Despite the rain, his mates took off every stitch of their outside clothing and placed it in the bottom of the wagon. Beam was tenderly laid thereon and they started for the village, only a short distance away.

"Had we better take him home or to Doc Hall's office?" queried Tom.

"We'll stop at Doc's office; it's on the way. If he's there, we'll do just as he says. G'long, Spot."

By the time they had reached the main street of the little village the shower was over and the sun peeping through the clouds.

Fortunately Dr. Hall was in his office and took in the situation at a glance.

"Bring him right in and put him in the operating chair. Is he hurt badly?"

"That's what we want you to find out. He

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fell over the bank, back here at the bridge. Don't try to walk, Beam; we'll carry you in," said Mr. Lyford, dropping the reins and leaping down from his seat with the agility of a boy.

Beam sat up and looked around at the gathering crowd.

"I can walk. I don't believe I'm much hurt," and he started to climb out.

"Better go easy," Tom warned, springing to his assistance.

"If his legs are all right it probably won't hurt him to walk," said Dr. Hall, taking one of the injured boy's arms. Mr. Lyford took the other and Beam was conducted into the office and put in the operating chair, Jim and Tod following, together with part of the crowd, while Tom remained outside to answer questions.

"How did it happen?"

"What did he fall on?"

"Where's he hurt?"

"No more school for him this term!"

"Why, we were coming from the 'Leaning Tree' and took a run for it to get here before the shower. Just at this end of the bridge, he went over the bank. He must have struck a rock or something going down, for he keeps bleeding from the mouth."

"Wonder the critter ain't dead afore this," said Silas Hopkins, "he's allers gittin' chopped or pounded or banged agin somethin'."

"Takes lots o' thumpin' to kill a boy," re-

marked Joel Perkins. "Seems as if my boy got hurt about once a week, but he allers comes out on it, somehow."

"Wal, if Beam ain't hurt very bad, le's go back an' hold down our drygoods box agin," drawled an eccentric citizen to a comrade, and the pair strolled away, followed gradually by the rest of the collection.

Tod Masters came out of the office.

"Doc says his lung's hurt. Tore some of the ligaments or something. Can't tell yet how serious it is."

"He didn't have any too strong lungs before," said Tom, looking serious.

"No, that's a fact, but we'll hope for the best."

"Here comes his father. He's probably heard of it."

"Yes, it's all over town by this time. Somebody would go right down to old Hiram Foster with the news the first thing," answered Tod.

"Wonder what he'll say. Beam never got much petting at home."

"Oh, he'll take it calm and matter of fact, as he does everything," said Tod in a low tone, as a brisk-stepping old man approached.

"What is it, boys, Beam hurt very badly?"

"We don't know. He's in there with Doc now," Tom replied.

Without any more words, Mr. Foster pushed his way into the office, past the curious, and into the little back room.

"How is it, Al, is he much hurt?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, Hi. His lung got about the worst shaking up, and I guess that's about the only injury that amounts to much."

"That's a bad place to get hurt. His lungs weren't of much account before. Are you in much pain, Beam?"

The quiet calmness of his tone gave no indication of his relationship to the injured boy. But that was one of his oddities. Really, Hiram Foster was one of the kindest-hearted men in the world.

"Not much, only I feel weak," was the almost whispered reply.

"That's from loss of blood. Don't try to talk, Beam. Here, take a sip of this. I'll have you ready in a minute and then we'll drive you down home and put you in bed. Hi, you better have the livery send down that light spring surrey with the soft seat. I'll have Beam ready by the time it gets here," and the old doctor hustled around among his pills and preparations.

How Beam Foster did hate the thought of being put to bed that soft May day! But there was no help for it. His only hope lay in getting well as soon as possible. For Beam loved the woods and fields and the old Mississippi. Outside, in the pleasant air, the birds were singing and working, and a pair of cheerful robins had a

nest half completed in plain view, within ten feet of his window. It almost seemed as if they sympathized with him in his enforced confinement.

Of course, a stream of neighbors came and went the first few days, and of course every one of them was sure that if his or her advice were followed, Beam would soon be well. The various recipes and suggestions would have made a small volume. Some of them were queer enough, too. One woman was sure that the blood of a black hen made into a poultice bound over the wounded lung would heal it in a week. Another insisted that a poultice made of boiled onions would take out the soreness in short order. Others advised herbs of various kinds, and so on down the list. But Dr. Hall was in attendance and only shook his head at most of these homely old remedies. By the middle of June Beam was able to be out of doors, but still his lung did not seem to heal, and so the summer days dragged away. By the last of August he was apparently going into a decline. He could eat but little and coughed a great deal.

In this extremity, Dr. Hall was called upon to make a final diagnosis.

He took Beam into the office and examined him carefully and critically, testing his lungs by every known appliance. Then, being a man of few words, he dismissed the boy and started for the Foster home.

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He went in without knocking and a moment later stood by the side of his old friend, in the latter's little den.

"It's no use mincing matters, Hi; I'm afraid we've got to lose him. That injury to his lung won't heal and seems to be getting worse. He may last a week and he may live two or three months. But it's only a question of a short time, in my judgment. You and I have been lifelong friends and it breaks my heart to say it, but it's best for you to know the truth."

Except for a slight compression of the lips, not a muscle in Hiram Foster's face changed at these blunt words. He looked straight at the old family physician as if trying to read his thoughts, but said not a word.

Dr. Hall continued: "I have examined him thoroughly and his lung is even in worse shape than I expected to find it. He must have received a severe shock and a harder blow than we thought. I can't help him any more and my coming here simply means a doctor's bill."

Then he paused and looked at Beam's father.

Mr. Foster still remained silent. It seemed as if he could not bring himself to speak the words that struggled for utterance.

Dr. Hall looked long and earnestly at his old friend before he spoke again.

"I feel almost as badly about him as you do, Hi. Don't take it to heart too much; it can't be helped and we must bow to the will of a Higher

Power ;" and through misty eyes the grizzled old physician looked affectionately at his friend and oldtime comrade.

The harsh outlines of Hiram Foster's rugged face softened slightly as he said wearily :

"I suppose you're right, Al. It seems a little tough, after raising a boy up to nearly eighteen, to have him die right under your eyes and not be able to help him. But that fall from the bridge seems to have done the business. I could stand it, but it breaks his mother's heart to see her only boy fade away before her eyes, just on the threshold of manhood," and the muscles of the stern face twitched slightly, while a suspicion of moisture crept into the dark eyes.

"Keep him out in the air all you can, fresh air is the best medicine in the world for affected lungs. If anything can keep him alive, that will. Good-bye, Hi," said the brusque old doctor, as he hurried out of the house, and took his way toward the business part of the town.

For an hour Mr. Foster sat pondering the matter, revolving various plans in his mind. Then his eye wandered out over the broad Mississippi along whose shores he had spent his life. The dense woods hid many a slough pond and creek, where he had spent happy hours hunting and fishing in the years gone by. The old man loved the woods and streams as he did his own family, and much of his life had been spent near to nature's heart. Of late years Beam had

been his constant companion on his hunting and fishing jaunts, and together they had tramped or rowed over every foot of land and water for miles up and down the great river. Beam grew to love the woods and streams as ardently as did his father, and he had grown to be as skillful in the use of rod and gun. No wonder that Hiram Foster's face softened as he gazed over the beloved river, and that a far away look came into his eyes.

At length he aroused himself and muttered:

"It's the boy's only show. Not one chance in a thousand; but he must take it."

As he uttered the words half aloud, the door opened and the object of his thoughts came in. A tall, lank youth of almost eighteen, with an unnaturally pallid face and attenuated frame, Beam Foster certainly appeared to be on the brink of eternity.

"Hello, Beam, how are you feeling to-day?"

"Oh, about the same," and the boy dropped wearily into a chair.

For a moment Hiram Foster gazed at his son with a yearning look in his eyes, that told more plainly than words how dear the boy was to him. It seemed as if he were on the point of taking him in his arms as he did in the days of helpless childhood. But if such a thought entered his head, he put it from him as a womanish weakness. There was not much petting and coddling in the Foster family.

"Beam," he said, and his voice was kind and fatherly, "I've been having a talk with Doc Hall since he examined you, and he doesn't like the way your lungs are acting a bit. In fact he doesn't give us much hope unless they begin to improve pretty soon."

The old man softened the blow as much as possible. "He says you want all the fresh air you can get. I've been thinking the matter over since he left, and I've figured out that there is just one thing for you to do. Take your gun, fish pole, traps, dog, and plenty to eat. Take some boy with you for company, and go out in the woods and live there until you are well, or—" Mr. Foster stopped and swallowed. He could not finish the sentence.

"Or dead;" Beam smiled grimly as he completed his father's words.

"I suppose that's about the size of it," and Mr. Foster sank back heavily in his chair.

"I've been thinking of the same thing," Beam said calmly. "I might as well be dead, as half dead. I was talking with Tod Masters about it yesterday. He said he would go out in the woods with me and stay until I was well or carried home in a box."

"Did you pick out a camping place?"

"Not for sure, but we thought 'Duck Island' was as good a place as any. It's about four miles from town, so we should be away from civilization, and it's a good point for hunting

and fishing. Then you own the island, so we would be on our own ground."

"Yes, that is as good a spot as any. You would need a tent, of course."

"There's an old wood-chopper's shanty we could live in. The roof was in pretty fair shape the last time I saw it, about a year ago. A party of us went in there to escape a shower once when we were fishing. It didn't leak much then," Beam paused and coughed ominously.

"Yes, I had forgotten that old shanty. You would be out of doors most of the time, anyhow. The main thing is to have a dry place to sleep."

"If it leaks, we'll fix it. We'll probably have plenty of time." Beam smiled slightly at the thought of time.

"Yes, you will have plenty of time. But stay outdoors every minute you can; that's what you're there for. Get away as soon as you can, too."

"I'll see Tod to-day, and we'll get ready right away," and Beam's eye brightened at the thought of living out in the woods.

"All right. And I'll tell mother about our plan, but she won't object, I know, when she sees it's for your good."

But Mrs. Foster did object—at first. The thought of her invalid boy away out in the woods where she could not see him and care for him was too much for her mother's heart.

"But, mother, it is the only hope for him.

Dr. Hall admits that he can do nothing more. He says that medicine is of no earthly benefit. If fresh air won't cure him, nothing will. Besides, he has consumptive tendencies, you know, and nothing equals pure air as a cure for that disease," said Mr. Foster earnestly.

"Perhaps it is best," his wife answered with a sigh, "but it seems as if I couldn't bear the thought of his lying out there alone in the woods, coughing, and no one to do a thing for him," and she shivered slightly.

"Tod Masters will go with him and see that he is all right. I shall arrange with Tod to come up occasionally, and report how Beam is getting along."

"Where are they going?"

"Beam thinks 'Duck Island' will be a good place. It's only four miles down the river, about an hour's row for Tod, if they should need us at any time. I tell you, mother," continued Mr. Foster impressively, "I have great faith in the healing power of Mother Nature, and that is why I am anxious to have Beam take this trip. He may be too far gone; but if he isn't, I am satisfied that living out in the woods will bring him around all right."

And so Mrs. Foster's consent was won.

That afternoon the boys met at the Foster home and made a list of their wants.

"Shall we need any boat besides your big skiff?" inquired Tod.

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"I'm going to take the little canoe," returned Beam, "it will be handy to run around in."

"That's so. If we want to hunt or fish in different places, one of us can use the canoe. But what will we do for a stove?"

"We have a little old rusty cook-stove in the wood-shed. Mother says we can take that."

"Just the thing. We had better take a ham and a side of bacon, I suppose. Of course we can kill all the game and fish that we want to eat, but we might get too lazy to hunt, and want something to fall back on," and Tod laughed at the idea.

"We'll take them, anyhow, for a change of diet if nothing else, but I'm not afraid but that I can keep us in meat with my 22 rifle, to say nothing of the shotguns."

"I don't know; I'm a pretty good feeder," Tod chuckled, patting his stomach suggestively. "You'll see a big difference in the amount you eat, too, down in the woods."

"I hope so," chimed in Mrs. Foster, who had just come into the room, "he doesn't eat enough to keep a chicken alive, now."

"I'll have him eating three squares a day inside of a fortnight," claimed Tod confidently.

"Have you got down flour, corn-meal, salt, etc.?" Beam asked.

"Yes, and forty 'leven other things," and Tod read off a long list of their needs and wants.

"I guess that's pretty near everything," said

Beam thoughtfully. "I'll have the grocer deliver them here this afternoon, and we'll get away in the morning."

"And do try and take care of yourself, Beam," pleaded Mrs. Foster with maternal anxiety. "Don't get out in rain-storms, or fall in the river. Remember to keep your feet dry, and you had better keep a flannel over your chest. And take some of that home-made balsam, and some of that grease that I grease your chest with. And take some—"

"Hold on," Beam interrupted, "I'm going down there to get away from medicine and the doctors. So don't think of anything more."

"I intend to have him get up at daylight and take a cold plunge bath in the Mississippi every morning," said Tod with a gleam of mischief in his eye.

"Beam Foster, don't you do any such thing!" cried his mother in alarm. "It would be the death of you."

"We'll see how I feel after I get down there," Beam returned evasively. "Tod and I will figure out a plan of treatment later on."

"But don't you think of jumping into the cold water undressed!"

"How shall I do? jump in with my clothes on?" asked Beam gravely.

"Don't go in at all. If you want a bath, heat some water. Cold water isn't good for your lungs. I read an article the other day that said

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so, and you must take some medicine, of course," said Mrs. Foster reproachfully.

"All right. I'll take whatever Doc Hall says," agreed Beam, and that settled the medicine conference.

"Bosh! Don't take a thing," said the blunt doctor, when Beam called at his office and explained matters. "Give your lungs a rest. Just a little something to keep the stomach in shape. I'll write you a prescription. I'm glad you're going, too. Walk, row, hunt, and fish all you can stand. Let us know occasionally how you are improving."

Beam promised to do so.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD CABIN

THE following morning was a busy one for Beam and Tod. The services of a drayman were secured, and their "household" goods and supplies hauled down to the river bank.

"It's going to hustle this old boat to hold everything," Tod remarked, scratching his head dubiously as he surveyed the amount of stuff.

"She'll hold it all right. She's got to," returned Beam, piling in more packages.

"Mighty little room left for us, though."

"Oh, we'll find a corner somewhere. It's down stream, anyhow, so we can float instead of row, if necessary. Better put that sack of decoys in the bow."

"That's the best place, I guess; the canoe is full," and Tod stowed the decoys up in front.

"Here come Tom Williams and Jim Neal," said Beam, as two boys sauntered down the bank.

"Hello, boys! What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. Tod and I are just changing our residence." Beam sat down wearily upon a stone, while his comrade busied himself with stowing away the remainder of the load.

"I'm taking Beam down to Duck Island, to cure up that lung you fellows knocked to pieces when he fell over the bridge," volunteered Tod as he paused from his labors.

"It was a mighty hard bang he got," replied Tom. "I remember that, all right, and only my luck saved me from going down with him," and adding, "you want to fix him up for football this fall."

"We'll hardly make connections that soon, as this is the last of August now. We may be down there all winter, we can't tell."

"Going to live in a tent?" Jim asked.

"We expect to camp in that old wood-chopper's shanty if it's fit to live in, but we're taking Beam's tent along to be sure of a dry spot, if the old shanty don't hold water."

"When the ducks come in the fall, we'll come down and board with you a spell."

"Just what we want. We'll have to raise some money for expenses and I expect we'll have to shoot some for the market to do it. You and Jim helped knock out his lung, and you can come down and help pay the expenses."

Two long brown hands reached out simultaneously and grasped Tod's, and Jim burst out:

"We'll do it and chop cordwood if necessary."

"All right. Come on, Beam, we're loaded."

Beam cast a last look at the town he was leaving, perhaps forever, and climbed into the skiff.

"You've worked too hard this morning," said

Tod kindly, "you lie down any old place, and I'll row her down. Here's a spot about as big as a clam-shell on the front seat that I can sit on to row," and Tod climbed in and adjusted the forward oars, while Beam stretched out on some boxes in the stern.

"Good-bye, lads; see you later."

The current caught the heavily laden skiff and canoe, and they swung off down stream.

"I don't propose to work very hard on the way down," remarked Tod when they were well under way.

"No, we don't care when we get there," returned Beam listlessly, as he watched the trees glide past.

"Don't you work so strenuously in the future, or you'll get spanked. I'll do the heavy work."

"I want to work. It's good for me."

"I know, but you want to take it in mixed doses. Pulling in a two-pound bass is about your size at present," and Tod sheered off to avoid kissing a snag that was anchored in a convenient spot for skiffs and steamboats to fish.

"That's the first thing we must do, locate the best bass ground. I haven't fished around Duck Island for a year or two, and have forgotten where the best places are."

"We'll locate the redeyes, and the big mouths too, when we get settled in camp good and comfortable," returned Tod energetically, as he bent

to the oars, despite his claim that he was going to loaf on the way.

"Take it easy. We're in no hurry."

"Thinking of those bass makes me want to get there and get after them."

"They'll keep until we get there," returned Beam quietly.

Rowing, drifting and chatting, the boys glided down the wide river.

The densely leaved forest, which walled the shores like a great green curtain, looked cool and inviting. Small islands and large islands slipped passed. Some of them had been stripped of their timber by the greed of man, and were blanketed with wild grape vines that had sprung up after the devastation and now covered every brush pile and sapling, the low rich ground furnishing an ideal garden spot for the acid fruit.

Only one steamboat passed them—the big stern wheel packet, "St. Paul," churning noisily by and throwing up a heap of spray and great waves that spread to the shores and splashed and pounded for a long time after the boat had passed.

"She throws a nasty swell," Tod commented, as the skiff and canoe danced and rocked on the waves kicked up by the receding steamer.

"Guess I'll put the shotgun together. A wood-duck might come loafing along, and it wouldn't make a bad supper," and Beam pulled out the gun case and unlimbered his gun.

"Not much show for a wood-duck in the middle of the day at this time of the year," said Tod as they swept along.

Half an hour later they sighted the head of Duck Island.

"If I remember rightly, the cabin is about half-way down the island, near the east bank," Beam remarked as they neared the head.

"We'll find it, all right, if it's there," and Tod faced around from a long look down the wooded shore. The rhythmic swing of the oars went on.

"Better land here, and I'll go up on the bank and see if I can locate it," said Beam.

Tod ran the skiff along shore and Beam stepped out and climbed the bank.

"I see it. It's about thirty rods below us," he called.

"Come on. We'll soon be there," was the reply, and Beam scrambled down into the boat.

"I'm guessing it's about here," Tod cried, running the boat into shore.

"I hope the roof hasn't caved in."

"We'll know in a jiffy. Better not unload anything until we go and take a look at it."

Beam acquiesced, and they walked up the bank, which sloped back from the water more gently than where they first landed. An old foot-path led up from the river, a path evidently made by the wood-choppers in former years.

The shanty was not more than forty yards

from the bank. It was a one room affair with a board roof, and had been the temporary quarters of a number of men once employed by Mr. Foster.

"Pretty rusty-looking affair, but we don't care, if she don't leak," Beam commented as they stood before the old shanty.

"Look at the chicken feathers all around!" Tod exclaimed.

"I should say so! Looks as if somebody had been living here lately; wonder if it's locked," and Beam went up and tried the door.

It opened easily, and they walked in.

"Whew! Dirt, whiskey bottles, old blankets in the corner, and other bric-a-brac," cried Tod in disgust.

"Ugh! How it smells of whiskey and tobacco!" Beam turned up his nose and walked to the door for fresh air.

"We've evidently stumbled on somebody's headquarters, and from the looks, they are a pretty tough lot. The question is, have they gone, or do they still inhabit this part of the country," and Tod backed out, holding his nose.

"We don't care whether they have gone or not, we're going to camp here just the same. If they show up, they get an invitation to take a walk."

"But we'll have to put up the tent for to-night. We can't sleep here until it's scrubbed and cleaned."

"Of course not. We'll put up the tent, and bring up our stuff, and then turn in and scrub out the old shack. It will dry enough so that we can move in to-morrow. The roof looks in pretty fair shape."

"Seems to me it's getting pretty near lunch time," Tod insinuated.

Beam looked at his watch.

"Eleven o'clock. Let's carry up the stuff and then have our lunch; we'll put up the tent afterwards."

Half an hour's work, and the boys had everything piled under the trees near the cabin. Then came lunch, followed by a short rest.

"I ought to keep my gun handy. I might pick up a squirrel for supper, while we are working," Beam remarked, picking up his gun.

"Good idea." Tom went into the shanty, and crossing the room, looked out of the one window into the forest on the other side.

"Come here, Beam; I believe I see a squirrel now, out in this big oak."

Gun in hand, Beam was at his side in a trice. Tod's finger pointed at a distant tree.

"See out on that limb. Isn't that a squirrel?"

"I don't see it," and Beam peered anxiously out of the little window.

"Don't you see its tail hanging down?"

Beam was about to reply, when a gruff voice broke in:

26 YOUNG DUCK-SHOOTERS IN CAMP

"What are you kids doing in our shanty?
Get out of here!"

Both boys turned quickly at the words and saw, standing in the doorway, a squat, greasy individual, who evidently belonged to the genus tramp.

Beam took in the situation at a glance. Tramps had evidently been using the shanty as a base, and living high at the expense of the neighboring farmers' hen roosts.

He retorted indignantly:

"Get out, yourselves! This shanty and island belong to me."

"Come on, Snoopy, and throw 'em out," and at the tramp's words, another party of that class bobbed up behind him.

The idea of a couple of tramps throwing him out of his own possession was too much for Beam's temper, which was none too mild.

The hot blood mounted to his face and his eyes flashed.

Snatching up the gun and throwing it to his shoulder, he pointed it straight at the head of the first tramp, and snapped out:

"Get off this island in two minutes, or I'll bore a hole through both of you!"

The average tramp is a coward as well as a sneak. He will steal, and even murder, when there is no danger to himself, but let a nervy man face him with a gun and look businesslike, and the tramp migrates.

The leader took one look into the black muzzle of the double barrel, then with one backward leap he was out of the door.

"Fly the coop, Snoopy, they're on the shoot!" And the two valorous chicken stealers dashed for the west side of the island.

Beam was after them instantly, with Tod at his heels.

"Git," he called out, "or I'll fill you with lead."

How the rascals did run! Leaping brush piles and dodging trees, they literally tore through the woods.

"They've got a boat over there somewhere," panted Tod.

"The quicker they get into it the better," and Beam ducked under a low hanging limb.

"Don't run so fast. You will get your lung to bleeding again," cried Tod. "Give me the gun and I'll chase the rats."

"Drat the lung! I'll see the finish of those skunks, if it costs two lungs."

When the boys reached the bank of the river, the fleeing tramps were well out in the stream, and rowing for dear life. They were in an old worn-out flat-bottomed punt with a pair of oars made from fence boards.

"Don't you ever show up here again," called Beam, throwing the gun to his shoulder.

One of the tramps picked up a piece of board and held it before him. But Beam did not shoot.

He saw that they were thoroughly frightened, and was glad enough to see them go without further trouble.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," said Tod, as the old punt, aided by the current, became smaller and smaller in the distance.

"I don't think they will bother this island any more for the present, but we will keep our eyes open," said Beam as they went back across the island.

Reaching the cabin, he sank down upon a stump, remarking:

"Now that the excitement is over, I feel weak and tired."

"Just take a good rest and I'll do the work."

Tod started vigorously to carry out this assertion and, while Beam looked on and chatted with him, he found a broom and proceeded to sweep out some of the accumulations of dirt, chicken feathers and empty bottles that adorned the inside of the old shanty.

"Those rats have had a picnic here, from the looks of things. Been living on chickens and whiskey. All right for them, but tough on the farmers," and Tod heaved out a pile of dirt and bottles.

"Dutch John lives only about half a mile back on the Iowa bluff. The chances are, those fellows have been helping themselves liberally to his chickens."

"I suppose so; his and his neighbors'. It's

a wonder to me they didn't get on to the thieves and chase them up."

"They probably never thought of looking on an island for them."

"Wonder where they got all their whiskey? Here's a bushel of empty bottles," said Tod, surveying the array of glassware.

"Oh, begged for the money to buy food with, of course. There is always some tender-hearted person ready to give money to help the needy."

"What in the world shall I do with all these bottles?"

"Save a few of the best ones to carry spring-water in, when we go away on a fishing or shooting trip, and throw the rest in a hole somewhere. And, by the way, I wonder if that squirrel is there yet, that you said you saw," and Beam's eye kindled and the tired look was replaced by one of expectancy, as he picked up his gun.

"That's so. Get a squirrel or two for supper, while I clean out this old shebang."

"I haven't got down to shooting squirrels with a shotgun, yet, if I have a bad lung. Where's the 22?"

"In the case there by that pile of stuff," and Tod nodded his head in the direction of a heap of camp duffle.

"When I come back we'll put up the tent, and then get some water and scrub out the shanty," called Beam as he started out in the woods.

"All right. And, say; remember that one of

those tramps was called ‘Snoopy’ by his partner. It may help identify him sometime.”

“I’ll remember. Very appropriate name, too.”

Beam grinned as he disappeared behind the shanty, while Tod went on with the cleansing process, singing in a contented way:

“The partridge swiftly flying,
The snipe is zigzag hying,
At my aim sure to fall,
At my aim sure to fall.
The deer with towering antler,
The wolf and screaming panther,
Drop at my rifle call,
Drop at my rifle call.”

The tiny crack of the 22 broke off the song; “wonder if Beam got one?” he soliloquized.

By the time Tod had heaved out another peck of dirt the rifle cracked again somewhere in the woods, and presently Beam came around the cabin with two big gray squirrels.

“Good boy! I thought something was going on up in the timber.”

“Will they make enough for a stew?” And Beam threw down his game with a satisfied look.

“Just enough. Let’s scrub out the old ranch, and then we’ll clean them,” replied Tod, his eyes kindling with thoughts of the hunting and fishing to come.

An hour’s hard work with water, soap and old

brooms cleansed the little cabin fairly well, after which it was left to dry while they put up the tent and cleaned the squirrels. Then the little stove was put up in the cabin and a fire built to assist in drying out the dampness.

"Let's put out a short trot-line and see if we can't get a blue cat for breakfast," Tod suggested. "We won't have time to fish any to-day."

"Good head! I'll fix up the line and you catch the frogs."

"All right; I'll catch frogs enough in fifteen minutes to supply a French market. And, by the way, to-morrow we must make a live-box, so we can have fish on tap any old time," and Tod emptied out an old basket and started after frogs.

"Of course, when I turn myself loose among the bass, no telling what will happen."

"That sounds good, and then I'll turn several bass loose amongst myself," Tod replied.

Inside of half an hour Beam had rigged up a twenty-hook trot-line, and about that time, Tod showed up with the bait.

"Better drop it out opposite that point," Beam suggested, pointing over to the Illinois side of the river.

"Yes, I was thinking of that spot, just abreast of the swift water. Guess the tramps won't take a sneak on us while we're gone."

"If they do, there'll be fireworks next time," Beam commented, picking up the guns, together with the trot-line, and trailing along.

"Let me row. I want exercise," he remarked, as he climbed into the boat.

"All right, but take her easy. I'll keep off the mud-turtles with the 22. Did you put in the floats and sinker?"

"Yes, everything," said Beam, heading for the eastern shore.

"We ought to pull out two or three cat in the morning," Tod observed, as he busied himself fastening the rope to the anchor stone, and tying on the floats.

"That will be plenty. We won't have a very big live-box," replied Beam, who was now rounding the boat toward the shore.

The anchor stone was let go, and the skiff dropped down to the first float. Then Tod baited the hooks as they slipped down the line, until the last float was reached. This was heaved overboard and their task was done.

"There; if we don't get some fish in the morning, I miss my guess," Tod remarked, as he settled down in the stern, while Beam headed for the island. After a moment the latter looked up at his companion.

"The old river is peaceful these days. Doesn't look much like the same one that will lash and roar and pound in a November northwester a few months later."

"The air doesn't feel much like it will then, either."

"But somehow," continued Beam, with a reminiscent look, "I long for those wild, stormy times. They seem to wake a fellow up and put vim and life into him."

"So do I. It makes your blood tingle to think of it. To see the bluebills and redheads and the rest of them skimming up and down the river, or hurrying south, up in the clouds, is worth the cold and exposure. I wish that time was here right now," and Tod's eyes danced with joy at the thought, showing that he had the true duck-hunter's spirit.

"I'd just as soon wait a while; I want to get a little more muscle and stronger lungs, so I can stand the cold."

"Yes, that's so. We want to get you in shape before cold weather comes. But we'll have the wood-duck and teal shooting before that time, you know."

"And, I hope, some woodcock," put in Beam. "I like to hunt those chaps. They're so quick and shy and shifty that it's worth something to outwit them. But we haven't much ground for the long bills around here."

"We'll get enough for a mess or two," said Tod, "to say nothing of jacksnipe and sand-snipe." Then looking up suddenly, he cried:

"Hurry! I just saw a man go around the cabin."

CHAPTER III

MORE CALLERS

“**T**HE deuce you did! I wonder if those tramps had the nerve to come prowling back here,” and Beam bent to the oars with more vigor.

“I don’t believe it’s they, but it may be some of their gang.”

Swiftly the skiff glided across the river, Tod keeping a close watch upon the cabin.

“Give me the rifle and you take the shotgun,” said Beam, in a low tone, as the boat touched the shore. Quietly they walked up the bank and headed for the cabin. They were half-way there, when a man appeared in the doorway.

Beam took one look, and laughed in a relieved way.

“It’s old man Roper. He lives north of Dutch John, about half a mile.”

The old farmer watched them intently until they reached the cabin, then he broke out:

“Well, well; if it isn’t Beam Foster and Tod Masters! I was half expectin’ to find a nest of chicken thieves here. Does this stuff belong to you boys?”

“Yes. We’re going to camp here a while.

We found your chicken thieves this noon, when we reached here.” Beam extended his hand with a smile.

“Where are they now?” and Mr. Roper looked around inquiringly.

“We had a little row with them, and finally drew lots to see which should have the cabin,” Tod chimed in, putting down his gun.

“It was a queer looking place when we got here,” said Beam, leaning his rifle against the cabin; “chicken feathers, whiskey bottles, and dirt galore.”

“The durn rats have stole more’n twenty-five dollars’ worth of chickens from me,” announced Mr. Roper, with a look of sorrow and disgust.

“Why didn’t you find their hiding-place sooner?”

“We never thought of lookin’ out here on the river for them, until Silas Nicker’s boy was after the cows night afore last, about dusk, an’ he heard chickens squawkin’ on the bank of the river, an’ heard a boat rowin’ away. When he’d told us what he heard, I happen to think of the old Foster cabin, on Duck Island here, an’ thought I’d come over and investigate.”

“You struck the right spot. There wasn’t but two of them that we saw, and I don’t think they will bother this locality right away,” replied Beam.

“They stole more from Dutch John than they did from me.”

"They were a precious pair of rascals, and I hope we are rid of them," Tod remarked, as he started to gather more wood for the camp stove.

"Better start the squirrel stew to cooking pretty soon. We'll want an early supper tonight," Beam suggested.

"Just what I'm going to do. I'm hungry as a bear," and Tod eyed the fat squirrels eagerly as he came out. "The old smoke house is getting pretty dry; she will be all right to live in by to-morrow."

"So you boys are going to camp here a while," said Mr. Roper kindly, as he surveyed the supper preparations.

"Yes. We are going to stay here until I'm well or dead. The doctors can't do anything more for me."

"Oh, you'll come out all right, Beam," returned the old farmer heartily. "Just don't worry about your trouble; and don't forget, any time you boys want eggs, milk or vegetables, come right over to my house. The latch-string is always on the outside."

"Thank you, Mr. Roper, we will do so. And any time you want fresh fish, come to our live-box and get them. When we are settled and get down to business, fishing, we shall probably catch more than we can eat," returned Beam generously.

"I'll take that offer," laughed Mr. Roper, "for

we are all fond of fish and don't get time to catch many."

"Then don't hesitate to come right here after them."

"Another thing I might mention, although I don't suppose it amounts to anything," and Mr. Roper dropped his voice and looked around cautiously. "The Pearsons, who, you know, live just back of the bluff, have reported seeing a light two or three times in the night, up near the head of the island. But I suppose it was these tramps prowling around."

"Yes, it was probably the tramps, all right. The chances are there won't be any more lights, if they keep away."

"Maybe the old island is haunted," Tod said with a laugh, pausing as he passed with the pan of squirrels.

"We don't care whether it is or not," returned Beam vigorously. "We're not afraid of ghosts."

"Well, I must be going. I hope outdoor life will make you strong and well again, Beam. Good-bye, both of you, and don't forget the eggs and milk," and the kind-hearted farmer started across the island.

"A good-hearted, honest old man, Silas Roper is. The world would be better off if there were more like him," Beam remarked affectionately, as he watched the roughly dressed figure disappear in the wood.

"Yes; those tramps might take a lesson from him."

"Fellows like that don't count as men. They're just simply whiskey swillers and thieves. They've passed the stage of reforming, if they ever reached it," said Beam, beginning to busy himself in unpacking the things and storing them in the tent and cabin.

"I'm afraid you didn't get squirrels enough," said Tod, as he started to peel the potatoes. "Seems as if I could eat three myself."

"Fill up on potatoes and river water if they run short."

"I'll fill up on something."

"Say, Tod, hadn't we better burn the blankets those critters slept on? They're probably populous with live stock."

"Yes; burn them. I dragged the old relics out with my thumb and finger. They're piled up out back of the shanty."

"It seems like a slaughter of the innocents, but self-preservation is the first law of nature; so here goes."

Five minutes later, the crackling flames were making sad havoc with the tramps' bedding, which threw off an odor that would cause a self-respecting polecat to go out of business.

"I 'most wish we had buried them," commented Beam, coming around the cabin, hot and red from standing by the fire.

"That ought to be good for your lungs," laughed Tod, putting the potatoes on to cook.

"Probably better for my lungs than it is for my nose," replied Beam, sniffing disdainfully with that organ.

"Oh, forget the smell; that's part of the circus," and Tod broke into whistling "Buffalo Gals," with complaisant cheerfulness.

"The smoke from that bunch of sweetness ought to bring on a rain," Beam commented, prowling around among the canned edibles.

"The squirrels are coming on beautifully," Tod called, coming out of the cabin with a very red face.

"Hope they'll go down just as beautifully. By the way, what are we going to eat on?"

"That's so, we haven't any table. Oh, well, what's the difference? We have eaten on the ground before, when we were out hunting ducks."

"We'll knock a table together to-morrow, when we fix our live-box. Do you want canned cherries for supper? Mother put in enough canned stuff and preserves for a regiment," said Beam, holding up a can ornamented with a very seductive looking bunch of cherries.

"Yes, anything. I'm hungry enough to eat a raw dog."

"I hope a week of this life will make me hungry; although I don't ever expect to hanker for a raw dog."

"Well, you can't tell. We'll have you eating a two-pound catfish at a sitting in a few days. Come in and smell of these squirrels, and sweeten up your appetite with a good wholesome odor; you need it."

"They do smell a little bit tempting," Beam admitted, after sundry sniffs around the hot stove.

Laughing, chatting, whistling and singing, the boys worked or loafed, as the occasion required, while their supper stewed and sputtered; Tod taking sundry peeps, salting, peppering, and so forth.

"I flatter myself that we're getting a pretty good scald on this squirrel stew," he remarked, eyeing the *pièce de résistance* with great satisfaction.

"You're getting a good scald on the atmosphere in this room, too."

"I noticed that." Tod wiped his steaming face, which glowed like a sunset, and walked to the door. "An August sun and a hot stove make a good combination for heat."

"I'll be head waiter and set the table out here on the ground," suggested Beam.

"Yes, that's all right; then we can sit on the ground and let our feet hang over. Supper's about ready."

Five minutes later, supper was served on the ground, in the grateful shade of the trees, and two contented boys were kneeling about the smok-

ing edibles, and helping themselves without much formality to the tempting array of good things spread before them.

"You seem to be hungry," Beam commented, watching his companion spear potatoes, squirrel and bread, with considerable interest.

"Don't mention it. I'm an allegory of hunger," Tod replied, his jaws going with machine-like regularity.

"What's an allegory of hunger?"

"I'll give it up. But that's what I am."

Beam had finished his supper before Tod was fairly started, but in the course of time the latter reached his limit, and announced with a grunt of satisfaction that he was through.

"You must have a full cargo in the hold," Beam remarked with an amused laugh.

"I have; couldn't hold another package," and Tod patted his stomach contentedly.

"Then you better go down to the river and wash off the hatchway."

"All right, if you think I'd be handsomer," and the devourer of squirrel stew strolled away to press the Mississippi into service as a finger-bowl. Then the camp duffle was stored away in the tent and cabin, a temporary bed fixed up in the former, and work ended for the day.

The boys sat in the twilight watching the wide river gliding tranquilly by, while the deepening shadows crept over the island.

One by one the twittering birds flitted away to

their nests among the trees and thickets, until no sign of bird life was visible. Then, presently, the "night shift" began to be heard from. The crickets and katydids tuned up and played the first overture of the long summer night's revelry. Bullfrogs took up the chorus and boomed out a far-reaching bass accompaniment, the harsh, croaking cry of a traveling bittern was added to the sound, and the sweet, plaintive song of a shy whippoorwill, over among the Iowa bluffs, came floating across the waters. These night orgies are drowsy affairs. The very monotony of the music, like a mother's lullaby, is conducive to rest and slumber.

Not a steamboat had passed since the boys landed on the island, but as they sat there in the gathering gloom, talking or listening, as the mood seized them, the "chow! chow!" of a raft boat was heard up the river. After a long interval, the blinking lights, scattered over the raft and steamer, appeared abreast of the island. The wheel at the stern churned along slowly and steadily, pushing the great raft of logs or lumber before it; lanterns flitted here and there over the raft, looking, in the darkness, like somebody walking on the water. Soon the steamer and raft were far below, then they passed around a bend and were swallowed up in the darkness.

"I'm sleepy," yawned Tod.

"Second the motion," Beam responded, and the vote being unanimous, ten minutes later they

were in the land of dreams, while through the long watches the night orchestra faithfully kept up its droning music for the benefit of belated fishermen, the whispering breezes, and a slumbering world.

CHAPTER IV.

FISHING

WHEN Tod awoke the next morning after a night of refreshing sleep he dressed and proceeded quietly to get breakfast in the tent, taking care not to disturb his companion, who for the first time in many weeks was sleeping soundly.

The tent, however, was near the cabin, which was soon filled with the appetizing odor of fried bacon and coffee.

“Hello!” called Beam, waking and rubbing his eyes to make sure he was not still dreaming, “did you stay up all night with the crickets and bull frogs?”

“No, but I like to get up and smell the fresh morning air. Isn’t it a great tonic?”

“Yes,” said Beam, “I believe my lungs feel better already; but it occurs to me that a few slices of that bacon wouldn’t be a bad tonic, either. How many eggs?” he queried later, when breakfast was ready.

“Oh, I could eat a dozen, but I suppose I’ll have to get along with two,” said Tod, sipping his hot coffee. “I wonder if we can pick up boards enough to make a table?”

"We'll rig up some sort of a table. And we mustn't forget our live-box, either; here, take my other egg. I don't want it, and I notice you eyeing it pretty sharp."

"Thanks awfully. I—I hadn't noticed it much, but we mustn't let it go to waste. That wouldn't be economy, you know," murmured Tod, quietly sliding the extra egg to his own plate without further ceremony.

"No, of course not," with a demure grin.

The last egg was vanishing from Tod's plate, when Beam looked up with sudden animation:

"Say," he said, "there used to be a little old table here under the trees somewhere. I remember seeing it a couple of years ago."

"Probably been carried away by the high water or fishermen." Tod gave a sigh of content as he finished his last mouthful.

"Let's take a look, anyhow, before we start to build one."

"All right, me Lud, after we clear away the remains of our feast."

"Humph! Nothing to clear away but the plates and cups," Beam commented briefly, running his eye over the empty dishes.

"All the better. A short horse is soon curried," Tod returned cheerfully, gathering them up and starting for the river.

"Don't you want some soap?"

"No. Sand beats soap all hollow for scouring dishes."

"Go ahead; you're the doctor. Meanwhile, I'm going to hunt for that old table," said Beam, starting down among the trees.

In the gentle current of the Mississippi Tod finished his dish washing in short order.

When he returned to the cabin, Beam was nowhere in sight.

"He'll have a good time finding that table," he mused, "might as well look for a needle in a haymow. I'll straighten up inside a bit, and get ready to move in, while he's off on his wild goose chase."

Tod was deep in the "straightening up" process, when he suddenly remembered something.

"There; we never ran that set-line. Great fishermen we are!"

Then he heard a distinct thump outside, and a voice called out:

"There's your old table. All it needs is a cleaning and another leg," and Beam poked his head through the doorway.

"Found it, eh? That's more luck than I expected. Tough looking old wreck, but we'll fix on another leg in a jiffy. Where did you find it?" inquired Tod, surveying the ancient relic approvingly.

"Oh, down in a brush pile, where it had floated in high water."

"And say, Beam, we haven't run the line."

"I know it. You were snoring when we should have run it. You want to change your mode of

life and get up in the morning, as I do. The early bird gets the worm."

"What's the use of worms? We use minnows for bait," retorted Tod with a whimsical laugh.

"We didn't last night; we used frogs."

"Oh, that was just temporary. But—Hello! Who is this coming? Well, if it isn't Dutch John! I'll wager he's after chicken thieves, too."

"It's John, all right. Good morning, Mr. Meister," said Beam cordially.

"Vell, vell; if it isn't Peam und Tot! How is dis? I expect to fint schicken tieves, already," and the old German looked around in a bewildered way, as he grasped Beam's hand.

"Pretty damaging evidence, John, that's a fact." Beam laughed and glanced about at the tell-tale feathers.

"Beam's an awful eater, but he ought to be ashamed of himself for trying to eat up all your chickens," said Tod gravely, with a slight droop of the eye.

Mr. Meister looked up, caught the squint, and burst into a hearty laugh.

"Ha, ha! You not fool me so. Beamy not steal schickens; I trade mit his fader forty years ago."

After the laugh was over, Beam said:

"I'll tell you all we know about the case, Mr. Meister. We came down yesterday to live in the old cabin a while, and found chicken feathers

and bones and whiskey bottles scattered around, and fired two tramps off the island. They had evidently been living on the fat of the land for some time. But I don't think they will come back here. We gave the rascals a pretty good send off."

The old farmer nodded wisely.

"I tawt it vas tramps. Efry day almost, da peg to eat, of my vimens, und den steal my schickens at night. Gott in Himmel, is dere no law?" and the irate farmer shook his fist at imaginary tramps.

"The law is all right; the only trouble is to catch the thieves," Beam returned quietly. "A tramp is a rather troublesome proposition, as he is here to-day and there to-morrow."

"Yah, dat is so. I suppose I must stand it already," said Mr. Meister with a sigh of regret, as he turned to go.

"Come over and see us any time you're not busy."

"Yah, I coom, und send der schildren over mit milk und eggs, sometime," was the kind reply. Then after a pause, he dropped his voice and added: "Did you poys see a light yet in der trees?"

"No. What is this light they are talking about?" asked Beam curiously.

"Vy, two, tree, a lot of times, a light he vas seen here in de night, oop und down, here und dere; sometime in der top of der tree, und some-

time on der ground. Sometime he stay still, und sometime he wiggle about und wave around so," and Mr. Meister moved his hands to and fro gently in a semi-circle, to illustrate his words. "Von night," he continued, "Pearson's schildern dey hear groans und cries und shrieks, und dey run home scart to det."

"It was these tramps we fired, of course."

"Probably one of them ate too many of your chickens, John, and it gave him the stomach-ache," put in Tod.

The honest, dull-witted old farmer failed to see any joke in Tod's remark. He took it literally, and his brow darkened.

"Der blame tief! I wish I hat him here. I make his back und head ache, I bet you," and he doubled up his fists and waved them about in a threatening manner.

"Yes, I'm sorry we didn't tickle them a little with quail shot when we had a chance," said Beam half regretfully.

"Nefer mind, Beamy; we catch him sometime und tump him goot," nodded Mr. Meister, his broad, good-natured face relaxing into a smile.

"That's right, John. We'll make sick looking tramps of them if they ever show up again."

"Vell, goot-py, poys, I coom ofer sometime," called Mr. Meister, starting across the island to his boat.

"Those tramps have been having a picnic here," said Beam as he watched the old farmer

stride through the woods. "A few gymnastics with a lantern, and a groan or two, was enough to keep these credulous country people away while the thieves feasted on their yellow-legged chickens."

"You've probably guessed the situation about right, but that doesn't run our lines. If we hooked any fish, they're liable to get away before we get there."

"Oh, we don't care. We'll get enough to eat, anyhow. We're here to rest up and enjoy ourselves," returned Beam composedly.

The sun was well up in the heavens when the boys started across the river to their lines. Tod did the rowing, and as he swept up to the lower buoy, he said:

"We probably won't get a thing this morning."

"Tell you later."

"That frog's gone, and the next, and the next."

Tod rapidly re-baited the hooks as he pulled the boat up along the line. "Hello! There's a jerk up ahead; good hard one, too. Probably a blue cat. Let up there, old man, you can't get loose," he advised, and half a minute later, a five-pound blue cat was flopping around in the boat, splashing spray over them.

"Got an azure feline, anyhow," commented Beam. "There, quit your flopping."

"'Azure feline' is good. A little bit swell, though, for a common blue catfish. No wonder it flops water on you. We'll have to bail out,"

commented Tod, dumping in another two-pounder of the same variety.

"That's the sum total of this trip," he remarked a little later, as they reached the upper buoy.

"That's plenty," said Beam, settling back in his seat as Tod picked up the oars. "We'll catch our fish with pole and line when we get settled. Then we'll get some redeyes and other high toned varieties. We just want to keep a few in the live-box for an emergency, and to give away to the farmers if any of them should happen to bring us over some milk or eggs."

"We'll stow our stuff away in the cabin and then get at the box?" said Tod, with an inquiring look at his partner.

The latter nodded.

"Take everything in but the bed. I suppose it will be better for me to sleep out of doors while the weather is pleasant."

"Of course. We can sleep out in the tent a good many weeks before it gets cold enough to drive us into the shanty."

Arriving at the landing, they tied the two fish in the water on a string to keep them alive until the box was ready. Next they finished moving everything into the shanty except the bed, which was left in the tent. Then they were ready for the live-box. A number of pieces of boards were found scattered about, and when they ran short

of boards, small saplings were cut and sawed the right length and nailed on.

"She's like the Dutchman's wife," Tod remarked after the box was completed, "not much for purty, but bully for strong! I'll risk any fish getting out of there without help," and drawing the two catfish from the water and untying the string, he dumped them into the box which had been placed in the river and fastened to the shore with a line.

By the time they had finished their task it was almost noon.

Tod looked up at the sun.

"It occurs to me that I'm hungry. How's the invalid?"

"I haven't been hungry in a year," returned Beam wearily, "but never mind me; go ahead and get what you like. I'll eat a bite, maybe."

"We'll change that; before snow flies you'll be able to eat fried boots," assured Tod, making a bee line for the camp larder, where he regaled himself on bread, pickles, cold ham, cheese, and other dainties.

"Wish I could eat that way," said Beam, who was contenting himself with a bit of bread and cheese.

"Don't have any fears about that. You'll beat me on stowing away grub, before the river freezes."

Beam shook his head doubtfully.

"I hope so, but I'm afraid not. Not that soon, anyhow."

"You haven't coughed much to-day, and your lung hasn't bled at all, has it?"

"No, I haven't seen any sign of blood to-day."

"That's good. I believe we're going to bring you out all right, down here in the woods," cried Tod, nodding his head with an air of conviction.

"I hope so; we'll try, anyhow. What shall we do this afternoon?"

"Keep on straightening up and loaf. Tomorrow we'll look for some bass ground," nurse Tod ordered, as he went on with his work with a cheery, contented whistle, while Beam loafed or helped, as he felt in the mood.

So the long, quiet summer afternoon faded away.

When the lengthening shadows warned them of approaching evening, Tod took the smaller catfish from the live-box, cleaned it and built a fire, and the savory odor of frying fish soon filled the air.

"Nothing slow about this brand of catfish," he remarked.

"No, they are all right, though I prefer bass. And that reminds me, let's get up in the morning and see if we can't catch a mess of bass before breakfast," Beam replied.

"That idea strikes me favorably, if you'll agree to wake me. I'm a pretty soggy sleeper," Tod confessed, deftly turning his fish.

"I'll agree to do that. We'll make a haul the first thing with the minnow seine and get some fresh minnows."

"Yes, we can get plenty of them right out here at this first little bar. Gee, but this fish smells good! Beam, you might be setting the table. I guess we won't need a clean table-cloth yet, will we?" Tod inquired with a wink, as he skipped about the stove.

"I guess not; you scrubbed this old table up so it fairly glistens. The leg you made out of a sapling, though, doesn't seem to match the rest of the woodwork very well," Beam replied, quickly adorning the old relic with plates, pickles, bread, salt and pepper.

In due time the supper was ready. Two empty boxes were pressed into service as seats, and Tod laid to and feasted, while Beam nibbled a little at this or that, watching his partner with an amused smile.

"Catfish, bread and butter, and coffee makes a hilarious old supper I think," observed the latter, pausing a moment to take breath, his plump, ruddy cheeks shining with fish oil.

"Everything tastes good when one is hungry. It almost makes me hungry to see you enjoy it," said Beam with a faint show of interest.

"Mother says it was lucky I didn't take to work as I did to victuals, or I would have worked myself to death," remarked Tod with a chuckle, as he held out his cup for more coffee.

Beam laughed, but ended with a warning cough.

"I guess your mother has you sized up about right," he said; "seems to agree with you, though."

"Of course it does. I never was sick in my life."

Even Tod's appetite had a limit, and he finally surrendered with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Now we'll wash the dishes and then rest under the trees."

Suiting the action to the word, the boys lolled upon the grass or sat upon the banks of the great river and watched the slow-gliding waters move past. They talked but little, then, the calm of the mighty river seemed to command silence.

When dusk began to veil the blue waters, they went back under the spreading trees to the tent.

Presently Tod, who was propped up against a tree, remarked:

"Say, are the mosquitoes biting you much?" He made a grab for one, but missed it.

"Are they? They aren't doing anything else."

"Well, they're just eating me up. Funny; I didn't notice them much last night. Ouch! they're not bashful about presenting their bills, either. I'm going to build a smudge," and after sundry slaps and scratches, Tod leaped to his feet and began to gather brush. He soon had a small fire crackling and sparkling and then

a blanket of green grass and weeds was spread over the flames.

As the smoke began to roll out in great volumes, he said:

"There, Mosky! Fill your lungs with that. It's good for what ails you."

"As Dutch John would say; 'they don't come scart pretty quick already'." Beam was slapping industriously.

"I'll fool the critters," muttered Tod, holding his breath and stepping into the thick pall of smoke. Presently he emerged coughing and rubbing his eyes.

"Your remedy," Beam remarked dryly, "is like the man that tried to freeze the dog to death by holding him by the tail in a snow-bank."

"Lucky thing your mother thought of the mosquito-bar. We'll have to fix it over the tent flap before we go to bed."

"Yes, but I don't think they will be as bad as this every night. It's still and muggy tonight, with no breeze."

"Did you bring any dope to rub on the skin and give them a bad taste in the mouth?" inquired Tod, with another vicious slap.

"Yes. I brought some oil of pennyroyal, and diluted carbolic acid."

"I'll take pennyroyal in mine. I'd rather have the mosquitoes bite me than smell the blamed carbolic. Just fix me up a dollar's worth

of pennyroyal, if you're head prescription clerk."

"No fixing up about it. Just take a little bit on the end of your finger and rub it over the skin. The mosquito is supposed to elevate its nose and retire in disgust from such a rank odor."

"Bring on your pennyroyal! I want to see something that will disgust one of these critters besides suffocating it in smoke."

"All right; you be getting out the mosquito-bar," said Beam with a grin, and started for the medicine box.

By the time Tod had found the netting, Beam was armed with a small vial of the aromatic oil.

"Now just take a drop or two on the end of your finger and touch it lightly on the face and hands, here and there. You don't need a solid coating of it. It's the odor they object to," he said, handing the vial to Tod, after anointing his own face.

"The bottle's so small, I'll have to light a lantern to see it. Is this supposed to be enough to last all summer?" Tod asked, as he gingerly took the tiny vial and began to fresco his face and hands.

"Don't use much, it's strong stuff, besides being costly. If we run out, we can get more uptown. I hope we won't have many such nights as this."

"Amen to that last remark. Now, moskies, wait till the front door is fixed and then do your worst."

The boys soon had the netting up and the tent flap open to let in the air. It was an unusually sultry night and in the drowsy summer air, after the mosquitoes ceased to pester them, both soon fell asleep.

When Beam awoke it was after daylight, and he shook Tod vigorously.

"Come, get into your clothes and get that minnow seine. We want to get after those bass."

"That's so; we're due to gather in some bass."

The magic of that word drove the sleep from Tod's eyes, and he was dressed in short order.

"Let's make the circuit on the island first, and see if there are any good spots we can reach from shore," said Beam, who was already dressed.

"Wise idea! Then, if we find a spot the bass inhabit, one of us can run down the shore most any old time and snake out a bass without taking the boat. Now I'm ready and here's the seine. Where's your pole? Got your same old lancewood, I see. That's the stuff."

"Yes," said Beam with a smile, "I've had so many good times with this pole, it's like one of the family. I'd hate awfully to part with it."

"That's the way I feel about my old split bamboo. Come on."

A short distance below camp, a little bar jutted out into the river, and the water continued shallow for some distance beyond. One haul with the seine, and they had minnows enough to fill the minnow bucket—more than they needed for their short trip.

Five minutes later they were down the shore, looking for likely bass ground.

The lower point of the island was rounded and they were coming up the west bank, when Tod spoke softly and eagerly:

"See the minnows jumping up ahead, right close to the bank. That means bass, sure, this time of day. Go still, now."

"I see them. Let's go back into the woods and come up to the bank easy and quiet."

A few minutes later they were opposite the leaping schools of minnows and back a few yards from the bank.

"Let's bait up here," whispered Beam, examining his hook.

This was done, and pole in hand Beam tiptoed to the bank and dropped the wriggling minnow into the swift current. It had not drifted ten feet when there was a boil and jerk, and a bass had the juicy morsel.

It was a pretty fight, but Beam was an old-timer and knew all the tricks of the cunning red-eye. Then Tod slipped quietly to the bank and as Beam drew the tired fish near the shore, he deftly dropped the landing net under the finny

warrior and in a twinkling it was safely on shore.

"Say, but he's a beauty. He'll go three pounds," he whispered in admiration as he disengaged the hook.

"We'll call him that anyhow," Beam chuckled, as they squatted down out of sight and baited up again.

"I want some of that pie, too;" Tod picked up his pole.

"Go after them. There's a hundred yards of bass ground along here."

In half an hour they had six as fine bass as any angler could wish. Then Tod remarked:

"Haven't we about enough for the first time? I'm getting hungry." Beam laughed in an amused way.

"Yes, let's quit. I feel a little hungry myself."

Tod needed no second invitation, and said as he strung the fish:

"I'll have two of those lads in the frying pan inside of fifteen minutes."

He headed the procession for home, with the remark that he could eat a raw mud-hen.

Beam rejected the idea of raw mud-hen, but thought he could eat a fair-sized hunk of bass, whereat Tod cried, "Told you I'd get you hungry," and let out another link in his legs.

"What are you getting for this extra walk of yours?" Beam asked, as he hurried after his friend.

"I'm getting hungry," squealed Tod, dodging limbs and jumping brush piles as nimbly as a cat.

In ten minutes camp was reached. Tod fell to work cleaning two of the bass, while Beam put the other four in the live-box and built a fire in the stove.

"I'll show you a breakfast fit for a king," cried Tod gleefully, as he disappeared in the cabin.

"All right; I'll chop wood till breakfast is ready," returned Beam, picking up the ax.

Tod was right. Surely such delicious fish were never eaten before; crisp, sweet and savory. The invalid actually seemed to enjoy his breakfast.

"It looks like old times to see you eat that way," commented Tod as he poured another cup of coffee.

"It seems like old times, too," Beam admitted, "these fish really taste good."

"Oh, I can beat Doc Hall any time on lung trouble."

"But you know this is Doc Hall's prescription."

"That's all right, but we filled the prescription with the right kind of medicine. You might have gone out in the country to a farm house, or some fashionable resort, and sat under a tree meditating upon your sins for four years and it wouldn't have helped you as much as a month

of this kind of life where you slam through the woods, fighting mosquitoes, killing snakes, catching bass, rowing a boat, or dozing under a tree ; ” and Tod was forced to stop eating to finish his long-winded remarks.

Beam laughed.

“Don’t get too enthusiastic. It may not cure me, after all.”

“Pshaw! Of course it will. You travel with me and I’ll wager a seven dollar shotgun against a nine dollar dog, that you’re tough as a pine-knot inside of a year.”

“That makes me think, I wish we had Nibs, my old setter, down here now. He would come handy to help locate woodcock. But the boats were loaded down, and then he is such a comfort to mother when I’m away. However, if we find any cock ground, we can kick out a few; enough to eat.”

After breakfast, the boys ran the trot-line, taking off three more catfish. Then they took the canoe and paddled entirely around the island, going at an easy gait, and keeping their eyes out for fishing ground, birds and animals. Paddling slowly up the west shore, a lithe, slender animal flashed out from under a fallen tree, and disappeared over the bank.

“That looks good. We’ll remember that gentleman when trapping time comes,” said Beam with an eager dance of the eye, as Tod cried out:

“Look! There goes a mink.”

"I noticed a number of good muskrat holes, too, along the bank."

"Yes, and several coon signs."

"Say, Beam, see how near you can come to that chap with the 22," said Tod, pointing to a crow perched on a limb a hundred yards ahead, cawing restlessly.

Beam dropped his paddle and picked up the little rifle.

"Quick! He'll fly in a second," Tod warned.

As he spoke, the rifle cracked and the watchful crow dropped headlong into the current.

"Well, if that wasn't a beauty of a shot! I had no idea you'd hit him," was the admiring comment.

"I happened to have in a long-rifle cartridge," Beam explained with a smile of triumph, as he reloaded.

"There ought to be a bounty on those fellows. They destroy more birds' eggs than all the skunks and weasels," said Tod as the crow drifted past.

"I think so, too, and I never lose a chance to shoot one of them."

It was almost noon when the boys made the circuit of the island and paddled up to the landing. After lunch they loafed, read, and shot at a target with the "22." That evening as they sat listening to the bullfrogs and crickets, before retiring, Tod remarked:

"Dutch John's lights and shrieks don't show

up since we fired those tramps. That was a pretty cute scheme on their part."

"Yes, that's too plain; it was the tramps, all right. We won't be bothered with any lights."

"It doesn't take much to scare a farmer, if it's something a little out of the ordinary."

"No, five cents worth of fireworks will keep them wondering and imagining things for a year," and Beam opened his mouth in a prodigious yawn.

Ah! if the boys could only have known what caused those lights.

CHAPTER V

LOAFING AND LOCATING

B EAM was awake at the first break of dawn, and, quickly dressing, he slipped out of the tent, leaving Tod snoring away beautifully. Stepping into the canoe he slipped across the river and ran the line, taking off two blue cats, two yellow bellies, a big mouth bass, and a sand pike. Then he took a quiet run up the other shore, pausing now and then to draw deep breaths of the cool, bracing air. A solemn hush brooded over forest and river, broken occasionally by the twitter of a bird or the hoot of an owl high up in some old tree. As he paddled along near shore, evidence of bird life became more apparent, and by the time he turned the bow of the canoe toward camp, Nature's children were all up and dressed and busy hunting their breakfast.

It was after sunrise when he reached the landing, and Tod was there to receive him.

“You rather stole a march on me, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I hated to disturb that snore of yours. The exhaust was working finely, although I thought it sounded as if you were pounding a little on the left side.”

"I was just pounding my left ear, that was all. Hello, you ran the lines. Got some fish, too; guess I'll let you run them every time. I came down after a couple of those bass for breakfast, but as these are handy I'll just take this bass and pike, instead," and he gathered up the two fish, while Beam, after tying the canoe, tossed the other fish into the live-box.

"Are you as hungry as you were yesterday morning?" asked Tod, coming out with the fork in his hand, after he had the fish nicely frying.

"I don't know but I am. I believe those fish will taste good."

"It makes a fellow so jolly hungry to hustle around a bit before breakfast; gee! I mustn't let those fish burn," cried Tod, darting back into the cabin.

Half an hour later, as they sat at breakfast, Beam said:

"I must admit these chaps taste mighty good. I believe I could eat another piece."

"That's the stuff. That's what I like to hear." Tod dropped another generous helping on his friend's plate and then "what's the programme to-day?" he inquired, as they swallowed the last delicious morsel of fish.

"Suppose we go over to the Illinois side and see if we can't locate some fresh woodcock plugging, and some wood-duck ponds. I haven't hunted over there lately, but there used to be a number of swales and ponds in the timber."

"That's as good as anything. It'll keep us hustling around, and maybe add a little fresh meat to our larder."

"I think I put in some shells loaded with number 10's," said Beam, going to the ammunition box. "Yes, here are plenty of them. If we run across any wood-duck, 10's will do for them, too. I've killed lots of them with 10's, when out after woodcock."

"So have I. They're easy to kill at this time of year; most of them are young birds," Tod replied, hurrying through with the morning dishes.

Half an hour later they were ready.

"Shall we take a bottle of water?" asked Tod.

"No," Beam replied, "we won't be gone long. I don't want to walk too far the first time. I'd just like to see what the show is for cocks and woodies."

Tod took the oars and they were soon across the river.

"There's a swale just beyond the pinoak ridge," remarked his companion as they climbed the bank. "I did my first woodcock shooting with father over in there when I was about knee high to a cat."

"The timber has been cut off a lot of late years," Tod answered as they started out through the grass and trees.

"Yes, I see it has. Don't look like the same ground."

Soon they came to a narrow ridge on which

grew scrubby pinoaks, standing like sentinels among the growth of saplings and underbrush.

"Here's that swale you mentioned. A little water in it, too. Looks like a likely place for cocks," said Tod in a low tone, taking the gun from his shoulder and holding it at ready.

They had gone but a short distance, when he stopped and exclaimed: "Here's a bunch of plugging as big as a water pail, that hasn't been made five minutes, according to my judgment."

Beam stepped up and surveyed the pencil-like holes.

"They're fresh, all right. There's a cock or two within twenty feet of us, probably. But they may not flush. Wish we had the—" A brown flash and a twitter answered him, and a woodcock darted up and whipped over the bank through the foliage. One swift movement of Beam's gun, followed by a quick report, and a shower of riddled leaves and twigs came drifting down.

"Did you get him?"

"Couldn't tell. I shot where I thought he was. If I caught him, he'll be just at the top of the bank." Beam pushed in a fresh shell and slipped the safety.

"We'll know in a minute," said Tod, stepping ahead cautiously.

Zip! twitter! and another bird whistled away, followed by still another, but the boys had been

through that sort of experience many times and were not flustered in the least.

Tod's gun roared, followed by two reports from Beam, and more leaves fluttered down.

"Any casualties?" queried Beam, hurriedly reloading.

"I think mine subsided. If he didn't, I'll always think he'd ought to, for I tunneled a hole through the leaves right after him," Tod replied, and his face wore a look of confidence as he changed shells.

"Mine swung across the swale and I had to give him the second barrel, but I think he's at the foot of that ball willow over there, waiting for us."

"We jumped into a regular nest of them, but we'll hardly keep this up very long."

"No, we've probably got up the last one here. Let's look for dead birds."

Beam was right, for no more were flushed in that spot.

"Here's mine," called Tod triumphantly.

"And here is my last one," Beam answered from across the swale. "Now look for my first one. He ought to be at the top of the bank there somewhere."

But thorough search failed to reveal any more dead birds.

"Guess you didn't point the old gun right."

"Maybe not. I shot where I thought he ought

to be, but he must have taken a side dart just as I pulled."

The boys walked slowly up the swale, one on either side. Some plugging was found, but no more birds flushed. As they neared the upper end the water grew deeper and the rushes more luxuriant. Suddenly a frightened squeal brought them up standing, and a pair of wood-ducks sprang from the water and sailed through the tree tops. The squeal was followed by a whistling twitter, and another woodcock darted away.

Bang! Bang! Bang! In five seconds it was all over.

"Looks as if they didn't fool anybody very much; I got both of the woodies," Beam remarked with a laugh.

"You'll find that brown bunch of lightning in the water just ahead of you. Thought I'd attend to him and let you prescribe for the ducks," said Tod, brimming over with satisfaction.

Beam waded out in his rubber boots and picked up the cock, and then the ducks were gathered in.

"Hadn't better kill much more," Tod suggested, as they stood resting a bit on the bank.

"No, the weather is too warm. We must clean these and eat them right away. They won't keep long."

"Fried wood-duck for supper and woodcock

for breakfast,"' was the way Tod settled the matter, and the boys wandered on.

They found other swales and ponds large and small. A good deal of plugging was noticed, showing that birds were numerous. Several more were flushed, as were also several bunches and pairs of wood-ducks, but the boys did not shoot any more, although sorely tempted. They had been taught to shoot no more game than they could use, and so withstood the temptation.

"A little bit tough," laughed Beam, after half a dozen woodcock had darted away from under their feet and a family of wood-ducks flushed within twenty yards of them, "but they will keep till some other time. We have a mortgage on most of them."

"No, we don't want to waste any such delicious grub as this, and we haven't any ice," Tod replied.

"And besides," said Beam as they started for camp, "we can run over here and get a mess of woodcock or ducks any time we feel like it."

They were standing on the bank of a little rush-grown pond a moment, peering about to see if a family of wood-ducks could be sighted, when Beam suddenly said in a low voice:

"Stand perfectly still, Tod."

The latter was aware that his companion's gun was being pointed at something, and stood motionless in expectant wonder.

The crack of Beam's gun broke the stillness, and Tod looked around in astonishment.

"What's up? What are you shooting at?" then he followed Beam's gaze, and saw the remnants of a big black water-snake within two feet of his legs.

"He was just getting ready to take a nip out of the calf of your leg."

"Thanks, awfully. Ugh! I hate snakes," and Tod lost no time in getting away from that locality.

They were then within a quarter of a mile of the boat, and were not sorry when they reached the bank of the Mississippi.

"Gee, it feels good to squat down on an old boat seat again." Beam breathed a sigh of relief as he dropped wearily on the stern seat.

"Perhaps I've taken you on too long a walk," said Tod anxiously, as he took the oars.

"Oh, no. Just my legs are tired. You headed the procession a little bit fast after that snake episode."

Tod laughed and shivered as he got under way.

"Maybe I did. Ugh! I hate snakes. Never was bitten, either; and I don't hanker to be."

"Can't say that I'm particularly crazy about them." Beam took a woodcock from his hunting coat and began to disrobe it, dropping the feathers in the stream.

"That's right. Get the clothes off those fel-

lows soon as possible and get them cleaned; they'll keep better," Tod remarked approvingly, as he pulled away.

Beam had the feathers deftly stripped from the three woodcock by the time they had reached the landing. Taking out his knife he remarked:

"I'll just take the mechanism out of these gentlemen while I'm over the water, where the débris can float away, instead of decaying around the cabin and calling up the weasels and skunks."

"Good head! You know most as much as I do," Tod nodded approvingly once more. Then he added:

"You just rest in the shade till lunch time, after you finish that job; I'll clean the ducks."

Beam, nothing loath, obeyed the instructions of his physician, and it did seem good to stretch his tired limbs in the shade after their long tramp.

CHAPTER VI

THE STRANGE LIGHT

MOST of the afternoon was spent in loafing, dozing, and talking. Tod made a couple of three-legged stools for seats to use in place of the boxes. Later in the day they ran the set-line, taking off two cat-fish and a German carp.

"If those farmers don't come after some fish pretty soon, we'll have a box full," said Tod as he dropped the fish in the live-box.

"I expected some of them before this, but they're probably busy," Beam replied as they fastened the boat and went to the cabin.

And so, in rowing, fishing, sleeping, walking, and shooting an occasional woodcock or wood-duck, the days passed. Beam coughed a little at first and tired very easily, but every day it could be noted that he grew stronger and his appetite gradually returned. This pleased Tod greatly.

"We'll have you weighing part of a ton inside of six months," he cried gleefully, one day in September, after they had been in camp a couple of weeks.

Beam laughed.

"You are certainly all right, when it comes to furnishing the material for an appetite. The soreness is getting out of my lung, too, I'm glad to say," and he tapped his breast lightly.

"Yes, you cough hardly any of late. Just wait till the crisp, frosty nights and the ducks come; you'll be ready to jump a ten-rail fence."

"I will if I keep on improving this way."

"Come to think of it, isn't it about time I rowed up home and reported to your folks and Doc Hall? Your mother will be imagining all sorts of things."

"I suppose you had better go up, although I don't believe they're worrying much, unless it is mother. You remember the old saying: 'No news is good news.' "

"I know, but just the same your mother is worrying and wondering how you are coming on; whether you are improving or not."

"Oh, yes, she naturally would. You might go up to-morrow and report, and bring back what supplies we need."

Accordingly, the following day, Tod started up the river, leaving Beam to run the camp. The latter alternately read and dozed until the day had waxed and waned and the sun slanted well toward the west. Then he took his fishing-rod and walked down to the bass ground where they made their first catch. In half an hour he had two fine bass, and returned to camp. Then he busied himself preparing supper. When it

was about ready, he heard Tod at the landing, and presently the latter appeared, loaded with bundles and packages.

"Gee, but I'm tired. Is supper ready? I'm hungrier than seven coyotes," he cried, dropping his load and tumbling on the grass.

"Almost; you're just in time. What's in that big bundle?" asked Beam, as he paused in his supper getting and surveyed a bulky package.

Tod chuckled.

"Three woolen blankets. I went to see Doc Hall, and told him how you were getting along. He was tickled to death, and told me to tell you to keep on sleeping out in the tent all the fall and winter, too, if necessary. Said it was the best thing in the world for you. He made me go down to your house and get some more woolen blankets. Maybe your mother wasn't tickled, too, when I told her how you were improving."

Beam's face softened with filial love.

"Bless her heart! Of course she was. Did you see father?"

"No, he was out of town. Doc Hall told me to be sure and see that you kept on sleeping in the tent. If you don't, I'm to lick you."

"Well, you want to hurry up about it or you'll have hard sledding."

"That's what I told Doc, but he laughed and said he'd come down and help."

"Wonder if he expects me to sleep out in the tent if it gets twenty below zero?"

"Of course. The colder it is, the better it will be for your lungs."

"We'll see about that later on. Perhaps I'll get used to it gradually and like cold air to sleep in. But go and sprinkle some river water over your features, and get ready for supper. I suppose you'll eat everything in sight, after rowing eight miles."

"I will if I can hold it," Tod called over his shoulder as he made a dash for the river. He was back so quickly that Beam said:

"Mighty quick toilet. I'm afraid you only gave it 'a lick and a promise.' "

"That's enough when a fellow is as hungry as I am. What have you got for supper?"

"Oh, not much. Fried bass, boiled potatoes, bread and butter, cheese, pickles, and a few other dainties."

"That's all right, if the quantity holds out. That's quite an item, you must remember," said Tod with a chuckle, as he began spearing fish, potatoes, bread, etc., with the savage relish of a camper.

"The way you start in, there won't be much left," remarked Beam as he poured the coffee.

"Not if I can hold it. Gee, but that fish smells good," sniffed Tod, inhaling the aroma of the smoking bass gratefully.

"How's everybody up town?"

"All right; everybody that I saw. Didn't manage to see any of the boys."

"They'll probably be stringing down here when the ducks come."

"Sure they will. We'll have company enough then."

They retired early, for Tod was tired and sleepy after his long row.

In five minutes he was in the land of dreams, his troubles over for the day.

But Beam was not so fortunate. He had not exercised very much that day, and was restless. Once or twice, when almost asleep, he awoke with a start. Then he was wider awake than before. Finally he became disgusted, and slipping out of bed, dressed, and went out into the air.

The night was clear and still, the air soft and pleasant. The heavens were gemmed with twinkling stars, and there was no moon to dim their soft radiance. The "Bands of Orion" were well up in the east, showing that fall was at hand. The long dim tail of the constellation hung down from the "Ell and Yard," the brilliance of the three upper stars contrasting sharply with their fainter companions.

Beam walked down to the river and sat on the bank. Except for a few hardy crickets, the night orchestra was still. By the dim light of the stars he could just make out the surface of the water.

Beam was never wider awake than now. It was barely light enough to trace the hands of

his watch, which pointed to 11:30. He uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"Why can't I sleep like other folks! Tod's been snoring for four hours. Guess I'll jump into the canoe and take a paddle. The exercise will be good for me, if it doesn't act as a sleeping powder."

Untying the canoe, he stepped in and paddled out into the current.

Then he headed the craft upstream and bent to the paddle. He was an old hand at the work, and moved noiselessly as a shadow.

When abreast of the upper end of the island, his quick ear caught the sound of an oar lightly striking against a boat. He eased up, just holding the canoe stationary in the current.

"Some belated fishermen," he said to himself; "funny I didn't hear them rowing."

He remained perfectly still, listening with all his ears.

Presently, to his surprise, a light flashed out among the trees on the island. He had just time to mutter: "There's Dutch John's light," when it flashed out again and darkness reigned. Straining his ears, he could catch the occasional snapping of a twig or the rustle of a leaf.

Beam was fully alert now, and greatly puzzled. What was happening on the island? Fishermen wouldn't act that way. Fishermen didn't use dark lanterns. Beam was entirely devoid of fear, but the apparent mystery of the odd occur-

rence appealed to him, and he softly worked the canoe toward shore. Finally he was within thirty yards of the bank, and remained motionless and secure, listening.

After a while the light flashed again among the trees, then went out.

This occurred several times, the flash never lasting more than five seconds. Then all was dark and silent, for what seemed to him in his present state of mind, an age. After a long wait, he caught another sound. It was very faint and he couldn't quite place it, but it suggested the soft closing of a door. Presently he heard leaves rustling again. There was not the faintest breeze stirring, so he knew that air could not cause the rustle. Then he heard a slight noise at the bank and thought he heard a soft whisper, but was not sure.

Beam had lived on the river all his life and was thoroughly familiar with every boat sound. He now felt, rather than heard, that a boat was being rowed softly up along the bank. He stayed perfectly still until he heard a faint but unmistakable sound, showing that the boat was above the island and still going up the river.

Then he softly turned the canoe and paddled to camp, muttering to himself:

“Well, if that doesn’t beat me. Some skull-duggery going on, or it looks that way.”

Then the mystery part went out of his head and he laughed to himself:

"Pshaw! Probably I can come up in the morning and explain the whole thing. No use to make a mountain out of a mole-hill."

Tod was still wrapped in a forty-fathom sleep when Beam slipped into the tent. It was after one o'clock and his recent exercise had tired him. He pondered over the solution of the mystery for some time, but finally dismissed it from his mind, and in a few moments was with Tod in the land of dreams.

CHAPTER VII

A VISIT FROM HOME

WHEN Tod awoke next morning, Beam, oblivious to earthly cares, was slumbering as peacefully as an infant. Tod, knowing nothing of his partner's little boat ride and knowing him generally for a light sleeper, naturally wondered thereat. But he was too philosophical to let it bother him and only yawned and murmured as he dressed:

"Wonder what struck him to sleep so late. Probably rolled and tumbled the first half of the night. Let him sleep till breakfast is ready, if he wants to," and with these remarks, he began preparing the morning meal. Half an hour later he called out:

"Breakfast is now ready in the dining car. Wake up and pay for your lodging."

Beam heard the cheery call and opened his eyes.

"Land sakes, did I sleep till breakfast was ready? Why didn't you call me?"

"What's the use of calling you? Our time ain't worth more'n four dollars a minute, and I didn't need you puttering around the break-

fast. Go out and throw some river water in your face and then come and chew."

"Aye, lad, I'll be there in seven-thirds of a minute," returned Beam briskly, hurrying into his clothes.

"I suspected you didn't sleep much the first half of the night. How many eggs can you eat?" said Tod, taking up the ham and starting to break the eggs in the spider.

"Oh, two is enough for any white man. I had to go out and take a spin on the river before I could get to sleep."

"I supposed you were up to some sort of midnight deviltry. But hurry up now," as Beam started for the river; "these eggs will be ready in a jiffy."

"Say, but that tastes good," was Beam's comment five minutes later, as he set his teeth into a bite of sweet country ham.

"Of course it tastes good," agreed Tod; "anything tastes good out in the woods. Supposing, of course," he added, "that somebody's at the helm who knows how to cook."

"I suppose that does make a difference," murmured Beam demurely, stirring his coffee.

After breakfast was finished and the "kitchen work" out of the way Tod propounded the query:

"What is it to-day—hunt, fish, or loaf?"

"Oh, I don't care a copper what we do," yawned Beam; "I feel so peaceful and content

after that breakfast. Suppose we hold down the old log on the bank awhile, and think it over and watch the boats go by."

"Pretty hard work," commented Tod, "but we can try it a spell, and if you get weary drop it and tackle something easier."

"There's the smoke of a raftboat coming up the river," said Beam, as they seated themselves on the old log. "Let's see if we can guess her identity. Which one do you say?"

Tod listened a moment and shook his head.

"I never could train my ear down fine enough to get on to the particular exhaust of any of them; and there's so blamed many. But for luck I'll guess the 'Lizzie Gardner.'

"I have a hunch it's the 'Denkman,'" opined Beam, after listening a moment.

"We both stand a good chance of missing it," Tod observed, shying a pebble at a mud turtle's head out in the river, "for there's about seventy-five rafters plying up and down the river. Duck your head, old man, and get in out of the wet."

The steamer, puffing and coughing its way up the Mississippi, soon came in view. The boys strained their eyes to catch the name, and presently Tod said:

"It ain't the 'Gardner,' sure. So that lets me out."

"Believe I hit it," remarked Beam, peering over the waste of waters.

"I believe you did, too. Yes, sir, that's her,—'F. C. A. Denkman.' Good guess."

"I remembered that she went down with a raft a few days ago and was about due up," confessed Beam with a laugh, as the boat churned past.

"Wise lad. Now can you tell who's in that skiff coming down?" observed Tod, pointing up the shore.

Beam took a long look and then said:

"That's beyond me. But we'll probably know soon."

"Wonder if it's somebody coming to see us?" speculated Tod.

As the skiff drew nearer, Beam said:

"If my eyes see straight, that party in the stern seat is my respected dad."

"That's just who it is," Tod cried with sudden animation, "and that's Chip Marsh rowing him."

"Right again," smiled Beam, his face lighting up with pleasure. "Mother is at the bottom of that trip, I'll venture."

"Boat, ahoy!" called Tod, as the skiff drew near.

The rower paused from his labors and turned around.

"Duck island, ahoy! What's the show for a couple of tramps?"

"All kinds of a show," returned Beam heartily, as they walked down to the shore.

"The spare bedroom is vacant and the cook just aching to spread himself. Hello, father! How's mother and the rest?" Beam seized the skiff and pulled it up on the sand, and his hand was soon grasped in his father's firm, warm clasp.

"She is very well. Tod brought us good news of you, but I had been intending for some time to find out for myself just how you are progressing." Then, after looking him over critically, "I am surprised and delighted to see you looking so much stronger."

"Yes, I feel a different person. I'll be able to eat more than Tod in a short time, and you know what that means."

"That's good news. Your mother will be happy when she hears that."

"Bless her old heart! Tell her I haven't forgotten her," said Beam warmly.

"By the way," Mr. Foster remarked when they reached the top of the bank, "I have a basket of jelly, preserves, etc., that mother sent down. She thought you might need them later on. Why didn't you make me think of them, Chip?"

"Don't ask me to remember anything," returned Marsh with a laugh; "I am in luck to keep track of my head. But I'll go get them," and he went back to the skiff. "Better leave the lunch in the boat, hadn't we?" he called.

"Yes," Mr. Foster replied; then, turning to

Beam, "we may look for some fish after a bit, and need it. I brought my fish rod along."

"That's right. We'll go out and look for some bass, after you've sized up the joint and rested awhile."

"Gee, there's goodies in there, I'm thinking, Beam," grinned Tod, as Chip came up with a well-filled basket; "it makes a fellow's mouth water to look at it."

"Trust you to get your share of them," returned Beam with a short laugh.

"How is the fishing?" interrupted Mr. Foster. "Have you boys found any new bass ground?"

"Yes," Beam replied, "there's a strip of shore down the west side of the island, where they bite fairly well sometimes. But I've a notion to try the running slough to-day. What do you think of it, Tod?"

"We might try it. We haven't been over that ground very much. I don't suppose your father cares where he goes, just so there's a show to nail a bass."

"Not in the least," Mr. Foster replied, as they entered the cabin; "we'll go wherever you boys think best."

"All right, then. Cook, take the basket and put away the groceries and we'll get ready. Don't forget to put up a little lunch," ordered Beam.

"We have lunch enough for all of us, I guess," said Mr. Foster, dropping into a seat.

"Well, if Tod wants to chance it, all right," remarked Beam resignedly.

A half hour's rest and chat, and then the boys gathered their fishing tackle and they all repaired to the landing.

"Better take both boats," suggested Beam; "four of us makes a pretty big boat load."

"I suppose so," said Mr. Foster. "You and Tod go ahead and we'll follow."

They reached the other side of the river and landed, Beam remarking, as they pulled up the boats:

"The slough is only about forty rods through the timber."

A few minutes later they stood on the bank.

"Now," said Chip Marsh, "you fellows that want to fish for bass, rustle for yourselves. As for me, I'm looking for a croppie or sunfish hole."

Beam pointed up the shore about fifty yards.

"That looks like your kind of ground up there. An old submerged tree and a brush pile. You'll find plenty of clams for bait along that shore, so you won't need the minnie bucket."

"No, I don't want it. You and your dad take the minnie bucket and Tod and I will skirmish for clams. Come on, Tod; we'll go up and catch a string of coppers, and let these fellows hunt for bass. Bass fishing is too much work for me."

"All right. I'd just as soon fish for coppers to-day as anything."

So saying, Tod picked up his fish pole and followed Chip along the bank to the old sunken tree, while Beam and his father went down the stream looking for likely bass ground. The current was very sluggish, but half a mile below the stream narrowed and the current was swifter.

At that point the water ran over pebbles and sand, with a soft, rippling murmur so soothing to the soul of the woods lover.

"We ought to get a mess of big-mouth along here," said Beam softly, as they came to the bank.

"It looks promising," replied Mr. Foster, in the same low tone, taking his rod out of the case.

In five minutes they were both hard at work trying to lure the wary bass from his watery den.

Mr. Foster got the first strike and it proved one of the best on the trip. Beam was thirty yards below him, trailing his minnow seductively around through the gurgling waters, when he happened to glance up toward his father. Instantly he saw that something was doing. The stout split bamboo was bent at right angles and the line, far out in the rippling water, showed plainly that something exceedingly lively was fastened to the end of it. Beam watched the fight anxiously for a few moments, then suddenly he saw a big bass leap three feet straight up in the air and shake its head like an angry dog. Beam saw it was a fine fellow and the thought

of losing it was too much for his equanimity.

Quickly reeling up his line he ran up the shore to the scene of the struggle.

"Don't you lose him, dad, or I'll lick you."

A grim smile played over Mr. Foster's face and he stood like a rock, keenly on the alert for every move of his cunning foe.

"If the line holds, and I lose him, you can lick me. Be ready with the landing net."

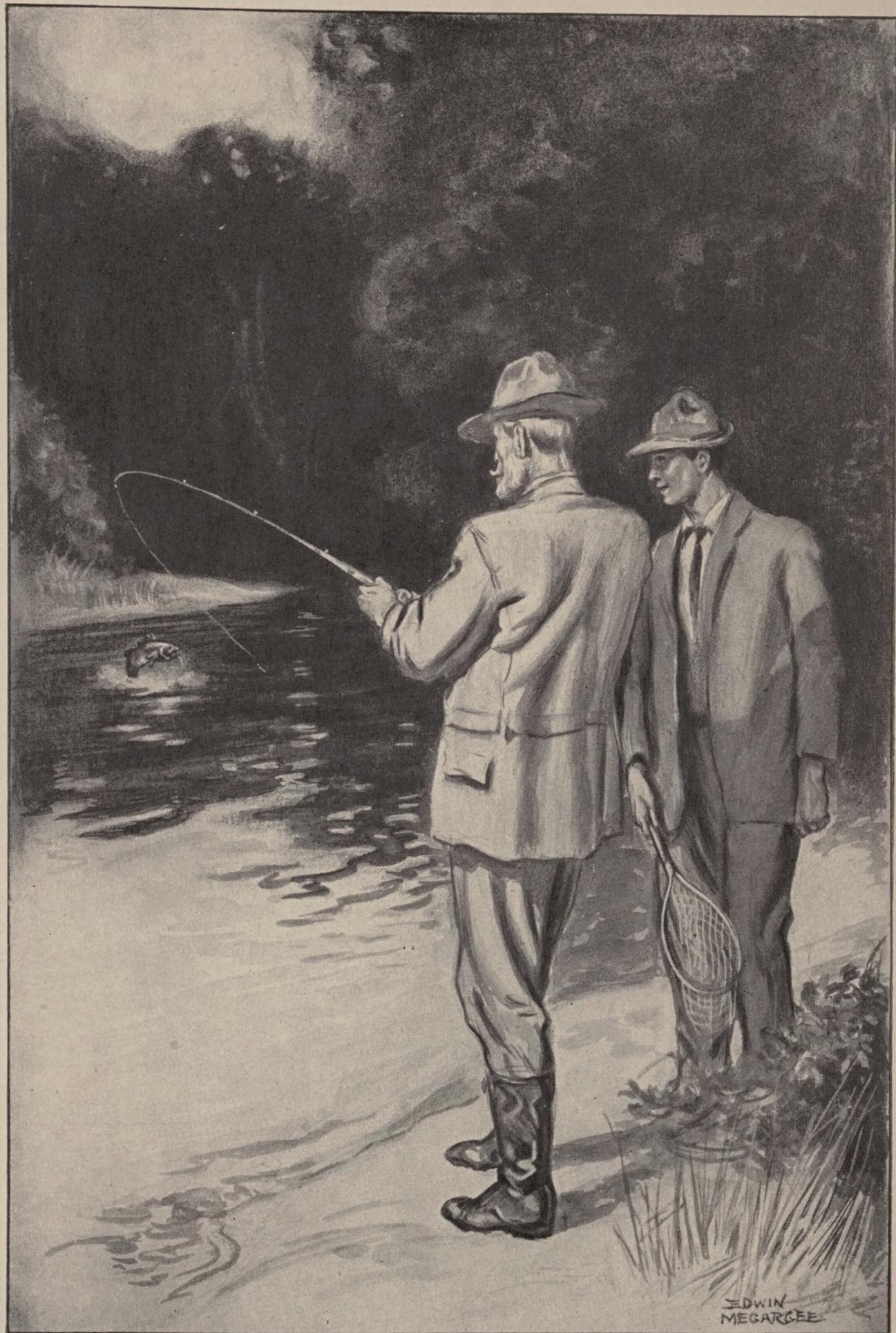
Beam seized the landing net and stood watching the fight.

Up and down, in and out, here and there, sulking and plunging, the fierce fighting bass strove for his liberty. But alas for its chances of escape! a veteran held the butt of that rod, one who knew every trick and device of his wily adversary. It was a good twenty-minute fight. Two or three times Beam started forward with the landing net, but each time the quarry took a new lease of life and shot out into the stream again.

"It's a small-mouth, or he'd never fight that way," said Beam admiringly, after the third dash-away.

"I think so. But he is tiring fast now. Be ready and I'll lead him up to the bank very soon."

Mr. Foster was right. In a minute more the scaly warrior lay gasping on his side near the shore, and Beam had the supreme satisfaction of slipping the net under the tired body.



"SUDDENLY HE SAW A BIG BASS LEAP UP IN THE AIR"—*Page 89*

"My, but he's a peach!" Beam ejaculated, as he brought the big fellow to the top of the bank where his father stood.

"He surely is," said Mr. Foster admiringly, as Beam disengaged the hook from the gaping mouth, "and he put up the prettiest fight I have had in many a day. It's worth the trip down here if we don't get another strike."

"He'll run close to four pounds," guessed Beam, holding the vanquished small-mouth out at arm's length by the gills.

"I shouldn't wonder if he did," agreed his father, re-baiting his hook and casting again in the stream.

Beam tied the fish in the water and went back to his own grounds, with the remark:

"I'm afraid that commotion has spoiled your fishing here for the present."

Half an hour's fishing proved that he was right, for Mr. Foster got no more strikes there, although Beam caught two smaller ones down below.

Then they went to the foot of the swift water, and changing to a couple of light, small spoons, caught half a dozen pickerel.

"Hadn't we better go up and find the boys and have lunch?" suggested Beam. "They seem to have quit biting."

"I suppose so. We have a fair string, anyhow." And Mr. Foster proceeded to gather up the fish.

Five minutes later they were on their way back to where they had left Tod and Chip Marsh.

"There they are," cried Beam as they neared the old tree, "both out on the old sunken tree—Tod roosting on one limb and Chip on another. That's just about lazy enough fishing to suit Chip."

"Hello!" he called a moment later, as they stood on the bank by the upturned roots of the old tree. "Haven't you lads got a mess yet?"

"You know it," Tod answered promptly. "I've had all I could do to keep Chip out of the lunch basket until you chaps got back. He insists that it's lunch time."

"Lay it to me if you're ashamed of it," retorted Chip. "All you lacked was the nerve to get into the basket before they got back," and as he spoke he pulled a wriggling sunfish from the water.

"I suppose we may as well eat one time as another. It's about eleven-thirty," said Beam, looking at his watch. "I'll put my fish in the water and then father and I will set the table," and he walked down to the water.

"Gee, but you've got a daisy bass there," cried Tod, turning to look at Beam's string.

"It sure is. And my respected parent caught it all by his own self."

"It takes the Old Man to catch the big ones," winked Chip, as he pulled up his hook and walked the log ashore.

"Where's your fish?" asked Beam.

"Oh, they're hanging from a limb down in the water. Come on, Tod, if you're hungry."

"If I'm hungry! Of course I'm hungry," said Tod, following his partner ashore.

Ten minutes later they were investigating the lunch basket, and four pairs of contented jaws were working rhythmically. After lunch Chip filled his pipe and had a smoke while they discussed their fishing exploits. An hour had passed when Beam said:

"I guess we've got fish enough. We might go over to camp and let father take his regular afternoon nap. What do you say?"

"I'm agreeable," returned Chip, putting away his pipe.

"Never mind me, boys, if you want to fish any more," protested Mr. Foster, but Beam's quick eye saw that he looked drowsy.

"No, we have fish enough," he said, springing to his feet. "Let's go to camp. Bring up your strings of fish."

Tod and Marsh went out on the old tree and each pulled up a string of sunfish and croppies about eighteen inches long. Soon after they were on their way across the Mississippi. Everything at camp was found all right and Beam insisted on his father going into the cabin and taking his regular nap, while the others sat upon the old log on the bank and talked and watched the ever interesting "Father of waters."

It was about three-thirty when Mr. Foster came out.

"Well, Chip," he said, "I suppose we had better start back. It takes longer to go home against the current, you know."

"I suppose so. I'm ready," yawned Chip.

"Don't be in a hurry," Beam said. "Chip ought to make it in a couple of hours."

"Oh, well, it will be nearly supper time when we get home," returned Mr. Foster.

"Vell, vell, if here ain't Hiram Foster," cried a well-known voice, and looking around, they saw Mr. Meister approaching.

"How do you do, John. Glad to see you," returned Mr. Foster cordially, extending his hand.

"Ain't you a leetle out of your latitude yet?" beamed John, grasping the outstretched hand.

"I guess so. But mother wanted to know how Beam was coming on, so she sent me down to investigate."

"We takes care of Peamy, all right," said Mr. Meister. "Don't you tink he look better already?"

"Very much. His mother will be greatly pleased to learn of his improvement."

"I bet she vill. We haf him strong und hearty pretty quick yet, if he stay in de woods a few months," affirmed John.

"I hope so. I want him to stay here until he is tough and rugged again. I'm satisfied this is the way to do it instead of doping with medi-

cine. I want you to come over and see the boys once in a while so that when you come up town you can keep me posted on how they are getting along."

"Yaw, I do dat," agreed Mr. Meister, delighted at the responsibility. "Und de old voman, she send a few tings. I set him down by de shanty still," and John waved his hand toward the camp.

The "few things" consisted of half a bushel of ripe harvest apples, a two-pound jar of butter, a gallon of milk, two dozen fresh eggs, and a glass of jelly.

"Isn't it bully?" exclaimed Tod, surveying this array of country dainties.

"Our many thanks to you and your wife for your kind thoughtfulness," said Beam.

"And mother sent down a basket of goodies, so I guess they won't starve right away," smiled Mr. Foster.

"We can handle lots of raw material," insinuated Tod, which remark raised a general laugh.

"We are just starting for home, so I'll bid you good-bye and hope to see you up town soon," said Mr. Foster, extending his hand again.

"Yaw, I coom soon," returned John, taking the proffered hand. Then as Chip and the boys had started to walk down to the bank, John dropped his voice and said:

"Did Peam say anytings apout de lights und noises?"

"No. What lights and noises do you mean?" asked Mr. Foster, looking at the stolid old German curiously.

Then Mr. Meister told him what he had told Beam, about the strange lights and the noises that had been seen and heard on the island.

After he had concluded, Mr. Foster said quietly:

"You don't believe such nonsense as that, do you, John?"

"Vell, I don't know. I don't see why beobles lie apout it all de time," and John scratched his head with a perplexed air.

Mr. Foster smiled and said:

"I guess you will find those tramps the boys fired when they got here could explain the mystery of any lights and noises. They were living on the fat of the land and didn't want to be bothered with people coming over here, so they hatched up a little scheme to keep them away. That's the way I figure it out. I don't think the boys have been bothered by any such disturbances. At least they haven't said anything about it to me. And I think they would if anything unusual had occurred. So, if I were you, I would just dismiss the matter from my mind and forget it. I don't think you will hear anything more about it."

"Vell, maybe dot is so," said John hesitatingly.

"Of course it's so. Good-bye, and keep track

of the boys as I told you,"' and Mr. Foster started for the landing. A hearty handshake, a kind good-bye, and the little craft was away up the river, keeping well in shore to avoid the stiff current.

The boys watched the boat till it was lost to view, then turned on their way back to the camp. Before leaving them, Mr. Meister said:

"Your fader, he don't take no stock in dose lights und noises folks see. He tink dose tramps make 'em."

"That's about the size of it," Tod replied.
"We haven't seen or heard anything."

Beam made no comment. He had thought once or twice, while his father was there, of speaking to him about what he had seen, but now he was glad he hadn't, and dismissed the matter from his mind, feeling satisfied that there was some simple explanation for it all.

CHAPTER VIII

A VISITOR AND A THUNDER-STORM

“**S**AY,” remarked Tod suddenly, the next day, as they sat discussing various things, “hadn’t I better make arrangements the next time I go uptown, about shipping the ducks and other game we kill? If we’re going to pay our expenses down here by shooting ducks, we’ve got to have a place to ship to. Savey?”

“That’s so,” assented Beam. “I was thinking about that the other day. Better see to it the next time you go up. Go to Baden & King. They do most of the game shipping for the boys.”

“You know, Tom and Jim promised to help us out this fall,” Tod continued, “and if they do, there’s going to be something done in the duck-shooting line with the four of us turned loose.”

“Yes, we’ll try to make it interesting for the web-feet.”

“It’s a case of ‘got to,’ this fall,” Tod went on with emphasis. “It’s the only way we have of raising expense money.”

“By the way,” remarked Beam, “it’s almost

time we were getting after the blue-winged teal. About all we have killed here so far have been woodies. Before long the teal ought to begin to gather in the ponds and buck-holes. Quite a few nest on these bottoms, and teal come south early."

"Yes, we must take a romp over through the woods some day pretty soon and see if we can run across any," Tod replied, his eyes glistening as they always did when a duck hunt was mentioned.

"And don't put it off too long, bringing down our fall shells."

"No, I won't forget that, you may be sure."

"I know I'm getting better, for I'm just aching for an old-fashioned whirl among the ducks," said Beam, with a hungry, wistful look over the broad river.

"I'm aching a little, myself, so I must be improving too."

"You won't if you don't stop eating so much."

"Pshaw! I'm not eating anything now to what I will when it gets frosty and the north-west blizzards howl around our cabin."

"Then, when you are up after shells, better make some arrangements with the undertaker."

"And what I eat then," went on Tod, "is nothing to what I shall probably eat in the winter, when it freezes up and we get to trapping and hunting coon and rabbit. Then you will see a pretty good imitation of a square meal."

Beam threw up his hands.

"Don't figure any farther ahead, for goodness' sake. We'll have to put our ducks in cold storage for you, instead of shipping them."

"Oh, you won't be so far behind me, after you get your second wind."

"I'm afraid I'll never travel in your class," laughed Beam.

"Time will tell; but isn't it about time to take our daily paddle?"

"I guess so. We might take the skiff for a change to-day."

"All right. Anything goes with me," Tod answered heartily.

A two-hour spin on the river, under the steady swing of two pairs of oars, followed, and the boys returned and took a good long rest.

Beam found himself growing less and less fatigued every day, after these jaunts on the river. The fresh, pure air and vigorous exercise were doing wonders for his lungs.

They were sitting under the trees after their trip, when Tod suddenly said:

"Hello! Who is this coming, I wonder?"

"Some hunter, probably," returned Beam, as a man stepped out of a small boat, tied it, and came toward them with a gun on his shoulder.

"I never saw him before," said Tod, in a low tone, as the stranger approached.

"Good afternoon, boys. Taking it easy?" he

asked, stopping before them and dropping the butt of his fowling-piece on the ground.

He was a large, athletic fellow, with a cool gray eye and a general air of ease and self-confidence.

"Yes, sir. We have been out for a little row, and are just taking a rest," replied Beam respectfully. "Take a chair on the ground. It's all we have," he added with a smile.

"Thanks. Don't care if I do. It's quite a little row down here, from uptown, and I'm somewhat tired; haven't rowed much lately," and the stranger dropped on the ground with the easy grace of one accustomed to it.

After a moment's rest, he remarked:

"I may as well introduce myself at once. You are Beam Foster, I believe," and he looked at Beam.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my name is Johnson; Abner Johnson. I'm on the road for 'Darby & Hamer' of Chicago. Here's a note of introduction from your father," handing Beam a folded slip of paper.

The latter took it and read:

"Dear Beam:

"This will introduce Mr. Abner Johnson, a traveling man from Chicago. He is a 'duck crank' like the rest of us, and is combining pleasure with business. Any favors you may show him will be appreciated by your

"FATHER.

“P. S.

“We are all greatly delighted with the way you are improving. I should advise you to stay all winter, if necessary, and Doc. Hall says, don’t be afraid to sleep in the tent in the coldest weather. He says it’s the best tonic you could have.

“F.”

Beam folded the paper and reached out his hand.

“Make yourself at home, Mr. Johnson. This is Tod Masters, my partner. Have you had your lunch?”

“Yes, thank you. I brought some sandwiches and ate them drifting along in the boat.”

“What’s your specialty,” said Beam, “hunting or fishing?”

“Either or both. I brought both gun and fish pole along, hoping I might shoot a mess of ducks and catch a string of fish to take back. I just want to see the country and have a day or two’s outing. I knew it wasn’t quite late enough for the northern ducks, but your father thought I might find a few local wood-ducks, teal, or mallard.”

“You won’t have any trouble getting a mess of them,” put in Tod. “That is,” he added with a laugh, “if you don’t want too many. Beam and I can show you where to locate them.”

“We were just planning to go across into the bottoms to-morrow and see if any teal had come

down. We can all go now," Beam proposed cordially.

"Thank you. That will just suit me. And now, remember, I don't want you boys to go to any extra trouble or fussing on my account. I'm used to roughing it. I can eat anything, and sleep in a barrel or under a tree."

"You won't get any frills here. We sleep in the tent, and you can have the whole cabin floor to yourself. We have some extra blankets."

"That's all right. Good enough for anybody. I brought a couple of blankets with me, and as it isn't very cool yet, they will probably be enough. It won't be the first time I've slept on the soft side of a pine board;" and their visitor laughed in such a jolly way that the boys felt drawn toward him.

"We might take our fish poles and see if we can get a bass this evening, if you wish," said Beam.

"Just the thing. I'm ready any minute," Johnson gleefully cried, springing to his feet with the alacrity of a boy.

Beam and Tod both smiled at his enthusiasm, and Tod said:

"You and Beam take your fish poles and clear out, and I'll get supper."

Beam nodded toward their guest, with the remark:

"That's good enough for us. Come on," and

in ten minutes they had their rods, some minnows out of the little minnow live-box, and were going down the island.

"Your father tells me this life is helping you more than the doctors," said Mr. Johnson as he dodged limbs and brush, trying to keep up with Beam's long stride.

"Yes, sir. Very much more. In fact, the doctors gave me up," returned Beam quietly, "but it looks as if I might pull through if I stay out in the woods."

"I'm a great believer in outdoor life for any ailment. Mother Nature has the only cure-all."

"Sh— Go easy now, sir; the bass lie right along this steep bank, in the swift water. Better bait up here."

In five minutes both had minnows in the water, and were as silent and watchful as a couple of cats. Presently Beam, who was above, saw his companion hook a fish, and watched the fight. The vigorous and lively antics of that bass would have satisfied the most fastidious angler. In and out; up and down; here and there, went the finny warrior, using every artifice known to his cunning tribe, but evidently a master hand held the rod, for his tricks were in vain. Sulking, leaping, diving, and running, he was finally tired out, and Beam, who cared more for his companion's success than his own, stole down the bank with the landing-net, and a moment later the red-eyed fighter was gasping on the bank.

"Say, but that was luck. I never saw bass fight the way they do here," said Mr. Johnson, his eyes fairly dancing with excitement and triumph.

"It's the cold, swift water. We won't catch them very much later," replied Beam, deftly slipping off the fish, and re-baiting the hook.

Twice more his companion repeated the performance, and Beam, who took matters more leisurely, caught one. Then he announced that supper would be ready on their return, and they called it off.

"That's worth the trip down, if I don't kill a duck," said Mr. Johnson enthusiastically as they trudged back.

"I see you're an old-timer," laughed Beam.

"Yes, I've caught bass all over the United States, and I'll say right now, that I never struck any harder fighters than you have here."

"Can you eat fried cat, Mr. Johnson?" Tod called out, rather irreverently, as they came up.

"Can I? You just wait and see," was the jolly reply as their guest leaned his fish rod up against a tree.

"It's mighty lucky you can, for we didn't have any bass or pike in the live-box," explained Tod, wiping the perspiration from his steaming, rosy face.

Mr. Johnson noticed it, and remarked:

"You ought to have a gasoline stove to cook on in warm weather."

"Excuse me. Not while the undersigned does the cooking; I'm afraid of the stuff."

Mr. Johnson proved to have a hearty appetite, and complimented Tod's cooking, to that gentleman's satisfaction.

After supper they stretched out under the trees and watched the deepening shadows slowly but surely draw the curtain of night over a drowsy world.

"Many skiffs or flatboats pass up and down here?" asked Mr. Johnson.

"Not many," Beam replied. "Occasionally a houseboat drifts by, and sometimes a skiff-load of hunters or fishermen."

"Any of them ever land here?"

"Not often; once or twice a boat has stopped to make an inquiry about something."

"You don't see many strangers, then?"

"Very few. Sometimes we won't see a soul for two or three days. The farmers over back of the bluff drop down occasionally, bringing us eggs and milk, and we give them a mess of fish. That's one reason I like it here, it's so quiet and peaceful and away from the world."

"We had to fire a couple of tramps when we arrived here," put in Tod. "They had taken possession, and didn't want to leave, either, but Beam persuaded them to leave with a shotgun."

Mr. Johnson turned toward Tod with a barely perceptible show of interest.

"A couple of tramps, eh? What sort of look-

ing fellows were they; ordinary river tramps, or the country variety?"'

"Why, one of them was short, squatly and greasy, and the other was shorter, squattier and greasier. I didn't notice them particularly; didn't have time. I remember that one of them called the other 'Snoopy.' ''

"They weren't river tramps," added Beam; "just the common greasy farm and country tramp."

"What were they doing on the island, think?"'

Mr. Johnson dropped back into his former easy, listless attitude.

"Oh, I suppose they ran across an old punt, discovered this cabin and made it their headquarters to prey on the farmers over the bluff."

"That's probably the explanation," yawned Mr. Johnson. "By the way, do the owls hoot much around here?"'

"Yes; they hoot every night and morning. We've got so we don't pay any attention to it."

The trio talked until the evening was well advanced, it was so pleasant and restful under the trees. They discussed hunting and fishing, and Mr. Johnson asked all sorts of questions, some of them queer indeed. Once, for instance, he asked the boys if they ever heard any strange noises or cries.

"Nothing but loons and owls," replied Tod, covertly exchanging glances with Beam.

"Any very high land on the island?"'

"At the upper end it gets pretty high. Several rocky mounds, something like Indian mounds," said Beam, recalling his explorations.

"Is it above high water?"

"Yes, sir. Quite a good deal above."

Gradually the talk died down and yawns became more frequent. Soon after nine o'clock a bed was made on the floor of the cabin for the visitor, and the trio retired to rest.

Beam was awake with the dawn as usual, and dressing, he aroused Tod and went out into the air. It was a glorious morning, and he drew in great draughts of the cool, pure air. Then he walked down to the landing to look at the river, always his first chore in the morning.

"Hello! Mr. Johnson's boat got loose in the night and drifted away. That's a nice note. Now we'll have to hurry down the river after it. If it was only lucky enough to get snagged somewhere! I didn't look. I supposed he would have sense enough to tie a boat so it wouldn't get loose;" and muttering to himself in a disgusted way, Beam hurried back to the tent.

"Get a move on you! Johnson's boat got loose in the night, and we'll probably have to go hunt it. Get a bite to eat, and we'll be off."

"Is that so? I'll have to wake him to get at the cook-stove. I don't propose to start off on a long row without my breakfast."

"Wake him, of course. He'll want to get up, anyhow."

Tod walked over and tapped lightly on the cabin door. No answer. He rapped again, more firmly. No answer. He gave another resounding knock, and as there was still no answer, lifted the latch and walked in.

Neither Mr. Johnson nor his bed was there.

"He's gone; bed and all," Tod called in great astonishment.

Beam hurried into the cabin.

"Well, if that doesn't beat time! Guess his boat didn't drift very far," he added grimly.

"How do you explain it?" queried Tod in great perplexity.

"I don't explain it. We'll have our breakfast first, just the same as if he was here. Then we'll figure on it."

"Here's a note," cried Tod.

"Let's see it."

Beam took the scrap of paper and read:

"Friends Beam and Tod:

"I regret to say I have been called away suddenly in the night. Will see you again soon as possible and explain. With many thanks for your hospitality,

"Yours,

"ABNER JOHNSON."

"That helps a little," said Tod with a sigh of relief. "He isn't a robber, anyhow."

"Somebody must have rowed down in the night after him, and they didn't wake us," his companion mused thoughtfully.

"Probably an important telegram came in the night, and he left orders to bring it down," nodded Tod wisely.

"That sounds plausible. But perhaps father can explain when you go up after the shells."

"Probably. Of course, the man is all right, or your father wouldn't have recommended him."

"Sure thing; you can bank on that proposition."

"You don't suppose he could have forged that note?" Tod remarked as an idea came into his head.

Beam shook his head.

"That was father's writing; I know it too well. He'll surely explain matters when we see him."

"Anyhow, we're saved a long row chasing his skiff," Tod concluded with a sigh of relief, as he started to get breakfast.

After the meal was over and the dishes washed, he said:

"What shall we do to-day?"

Beam thought a moment, and said: "Just lounge around and take things easy." And they did. Sheltered among the trees as they were, they paid little attention to the weather.

It was well along in the afternoon when Tod said:

"Seems to me it feels like a storm."

"I've been thinking that same thing. Air feels muggy and close. Don't see any clouds, though;" Beam was peering through the trees at the patches of blue sky.

"It's doubtless a thunder-storm and hasn't got here yet," yawned Tod; "guess I'll get supper and have it out of the way before it gets here."

"You'll have plenty of time. I doubt if it gets here before dark." Beam was right. Supper was over, dishes out of the way, and they were sitting in the gloaming, before the first faint growl of thunder came to their ears.

Tod banged a mosquito over the head as he remarked:

"There's the first gun of the battle. Wish it would hurry up and drown out these pesky mosquitoes."

Beam patiently watched a big hungry insect fill its provision bag with blood from the back of his hand, then delivered a short-arm blow that stopped further blood-letting.

"Mosquitoes are always worse just before a thunder-storm," he replied, contemplating the remains of his victim with great satisfaction.

Tod slapped and smashed at a few more winged warriors and then sprang to his feet.

"I hate to put dope on myself for such a short time. These chaps will let up as soon as it begins to rain." He walked to the bank to get a better view of the sky.

"We're going to have a regular old-fashioned ring-tail peeler, I'm telling you."

Beam walked down to his side and took a survey of the angry heavens.

"It looks that way. Maybe we had better chance the cabin for a sleeping ground to-night; although the tent is made of the best ten-ounce duck."

"If it's an ordinary thunder-storm, it ought to be over in an hour or two after it starts. By the way the thunder growls, it's getting nearer pretty fast now."

"Yes, there's the first breath of wind. It has changed and is coming right from the storm. We better make things snug in the tent and cabin."

A faint moan of wind sighed gently through the tree tops. Gradually it increased in force and velocity until a good-sized gale was in progress. After discussing the situation, the boys decided to carry the bedding into the cabin. This was quickly done and then the tent flaps were securely tied. By the time everything was in shape, it was, according to Tod, "as dark as the inside of a cow," and the pattering raindrops began to fall.

"There, come in out of the wet and let her pour, while we watch it out of the window," said Tod, leading the way into the cabin.

Soon the storm broke in all its fury. The rain came down in sheets, the trees bowed before the force of the wind, while the incessant flashes of

lightning showed objects almost as clearly as at noonday. Every few moments an unusually blinding glare, followed by a splitting crash, told the boys that some tree had been splintered in the combat of nature's forces.

"Gee, but this is a peach!" Tod exclaimed in awe-struck tones, gazing out of the little window, over the storm-lashed river.

Beam contemplated the raging waters, as if fascinated.

"I'd just as soon somebody else besides me would be out there in a skiff at present."

"Yes, excuse me," muttered Tod with a half shiver.

Suddenly Beam raised his hand.

"Listen!"

Both listened intently for a few moments, but only the roar of the storm came to their ears.

"What was it?" Tod inquired.

"I was sure I heard the whinny of a horse."

They listened again, and then Tod said:

"You must have been mistaken. There are no horses on the island, anyhow."

"Not unless they swam across from the main shore." Beam was still listening intently.

Suddenly, above the roar of the storm, came something that sounded like a human cry. The boys stared at each other in amazement, and Tod cried with bulging eyes:

"What was that?"

Beam shook his head.

Then they both heard it again. It seemed unmistakably a human voice.

Beam straightened up and said with compressed lips:

"Somebody's in trouble and it's our duty to go to them."

"Awful nasty night to be out. The lightning is so bright, it's a wonder they don't see the cabin and come to it."

"Probably they're hurt and can't," Beam replied energetically, buttoning up his coat. "We won't let anyone perish without trying to help him at least. Come on and shut the door after you," and he sprang out into the storm, followed by Tod.

The constant play of lightning rendered everything fairly distinct, but after a hasty survey around they could see nothing unusual.

"Which way did it sound?"

"Down this way somewhere. Hello!" called Beam. They both listened for a reply, but heard no sound save the dashing rain and the roar of the wind through the trees. Again and again they shouted, but received no answer.

"You go that way and I'll go this, and we'll make the circuit of the camp. Get a move on you, or we'll be soaked through!" called Beam, dashing away.

Here and there, up and down, calling and shouting, the boys hurried, peering under trees and bushes, now waiting an instant for an un-

usually bright flash to lighten some dark spot, then scurrying on again, only to find their search was vain. Nor was the cry repeated.

When they met on the opposite side of camp ten minutes later, both were drenched to the skin.

"This is a wild goose chase," said Tod, as they came together; "that cry must have come from the ghost of some of those old river pirates. I haven't seen a thing."

"It beats the deuce," Beam replied in a disappointed way, "however, I feel better for having looked, anyhow. I suppose we may as well go in, although we can't get any wetter."

"You'll feel a whole lot worse, physically, tomorrow, if you don't get those wet clothes off mighty soon." The nurse had suddenly remembered his duties and led the way swiftly to the cabin.

Arriving there, he made Beam take off every stitch of his wet clothing, then massaged him thoroughly and put him between the blankets.

"There, you'll be in great luck if you don't have a setback, after this piece of foolishness, young fellow," he commented, after getting his patient in bed.

"I don't care. I'd do the same thing over again," retorted Beam.

"If Doc Hall hears of this, he'll think I'm a peach of a nurse," snorted Tod, getting out of his own wet garments.

"I guess I'll be all right," murmured Beam drowsily, "get to bed and put out that light."

The worst of the storm had now passed over, although the rain was still falling steadily. The "rubbing down" Tod had given Beam acted as a sleeping powder and he was soon in the land of dreams. Tod never did have any trouble with his "sleep works," and after his recent bit of exercise, slept unusually soundly.

The storm had cleared away and everything was bright and beautiful when the sun rose in the morning. Beam awoke first and was rummaging for dry underclothes, when Tod opened his eyes.

"How do you feel?" the latter inquired, the events of the preceding evening flashing upon his mind.

"Oh, fairly well," was the reply, followed by a hollow cough.

"That doesn't sound like it. You probably caught cold after that wetting. Just keep quiet to-day and let me do the hustling."

"All right; I'll be good," returned Beam listlessly as he began dressing; "there isn't anything to do but run the lines."

"I'll 'tend to that. First I'll get you a cup of hot coffee and some toast."

"And I'll go see if the tent leaked."

Beam found the tent in better shape than he had hoped, as there were only two or three spots where the rain had driven through slightly. Of

course, the protection afforded by the trees had eased the force of the storm.

Leaving it open to air out, he wandered about the ground they had been over in the night, going still farther from camp. But he found no trace of anything that would solve the mystery of the cries.

His lung felt sore and his cough began to bother him again.

Going back to the cabin he tumbled on the blankets which Tod had not yet picked up, with the remark:

"I feel like I was about ninety-six years old. Guess I must have caught a little cold."

Tod looked up from his culinary work in alarm at this confession of weakness.

"Of course you did. And just as we had you on the mend! It's too provoking. I had no business to let you go out in that rain last night. This fish will be done in a minute, then you can have a bite to eat."

"I don't care for anything but a cup of coffee and a bit of toast. I'll be perfectly all right if I can keep from coughing much."

"I know, but that 'if' is where the trouble comes in. If your lung gets sore again, you're going to cough. But here's your toast and coffee. Maybe that will warm up your insides."

"I'll keep from coughing as much as I can. Perhaps if I keep quiet and stay in the sun, I can ward off this attack. The air is like wine after

this storm.’’ Beam rose slowly and sat down at the table.

“After I run the lines, I’m going to investigate this old island and see if I can find any clue to that business last night,’’ said Tod, spearing a fish.

“You don’t suppose that man Johnson’s visit here and sudden departure could have had anything to do with it?’’ questioned Beam.

“Never thought of it. He might have brought on the thunder-storm,’’ replied Tod with becoming gravity.

“See what you can find out about him next time you go uptown, anyhow.”

After breakfast Tod ran the lines and then made the circuit of the island shore, looking closely along the sandy beach for indications of anybody or anything landing. But none were found. However, as Beam said, the rain would have obliterated all tracks, if any were made. The light he had seen at the upper end of the island furnished him food for thought, but as yet he had said nothing about it to Tod. He coughed blood at intervals all that day. The next day he was worse and Tod insisted upon rowing up to the town and interviewing Dr. Hall.

He brought back some medicine and instructions from the doctor as to Beam’s treatment.

“You are to live out in the sun and air, and exercise a little every day. As you get stronger, you are to increase the exercise, but be care-

ful and don't overdo. I promised to watch you, for I want you to get in shape for duck shooting later on. Tom promised that he and Jim would be down when the northern flight comes."

"What did you find out about Johnson?"

"Why, your father said he got a telegram that night to come to Chicago on the first train. They brought the message down to him and he went back with the messenger and went in next morning. He left word with your father that he would be back here and explain as soon as possible. Something queer about it, seems to me, but your father says he's all right."

"Did you say anything about our wild goose chase the other night?"

"No, I just told Doc you got wet and let it go at that. I said little about it to your father and mother, for I didn't want to worry them."

"That was right. Thank you," returned Beam gratefully.

"The more I think of it," Tod continued, "the more I think that voice we thought we heard was imaginary. Surely, we would find something to show for it."

"It seems so," said Beam quietly, and so the boys dismissed the matter from their minds.

Beam began to follow Dr. Hall's instructions to the letter, but it was more than a week before the soreness began to leave his lung again. Even then the up-building process was slow at first. But the sunshine and fresh air proved a

powerful tonic and gradually he grew stronger.

He increased the mileage of his walks every day, until he was tired enough to sleep soundly. When the cough left him he began to gain more rapidly and presently began his rowing and paddling stunts again, short at first, but increasing the distance every day. Slowly but surely he gained in health, strength and appetite, so by the time October was at hand he felt better and stronger than he had since his injury at the bridge. His eyes began to take on their old-time sparkle and he moved about with more vim and agility.

"I've got you coming my way now and I propose to keep you that way," said Tod to him one day the first week in October. "I don't want you to get mixed up with any fall rains, either."

"All right, I'll be good," replied Beam gayly.

"Don't think you're an athlete yet a while," warned Tod.

He had made several trips uptown to report Beam's progress, and on one of them brought Nibs back to be ready for duck shooting. The old setter was supremely happy to be once more with his young master and roamed the island at his own sweet will.

CHAPTER IX

A DAY WITH THE DUCKS

“**B**Y the way,” Tod remarked one evening as they sat on the old log by the bank of the river—their favorite seat—“a big rise in the river is reported. It has been raining up North and the river is rising fast at St. Paul.”

“That’s good. The more water the more ducks, generally.”

“I must put out a mark. It ought to begin to rise here pretty soon. Guess I’ll do it now, then I won’t forget it,” remarked Tod, looking along the bank.

“I see just the thing. Come here, Nibs,” Beam called to the old setter who was pottering around, and came bounding up with an expectant look in his eyes. Beam tossed a bit of dirt over toward a piece of lath lying a few rods away. “Go bring me that strip of lath.”

Nibs took one look and in half a dozen bounds had it in his mouth. His master took the stick, handed it to Tod and patted the old dog on the head.

“Good boy; now run and play again,” and Nibs darted away.

Tod set his mark and returned to his log-warming.

"A few frosty nights now, and the mallards ought to begin to show up."

"Yes, I'm glad you thought to bring old Nibs down. If we get much shooting over on the bottoms we'll need him. No use for him over decoys on the river."

"That's why I brought him. I thought we might get some mallard shooting out on the ponds before the river ducks came down."

The following morning Tod found by his mark that the river had risen two inches. From then on it rose steadily until it had swelled three feet or more. By that time October was well along and frosty nights began to appear.

"Suppose we try the bottoms to-day," suggested Tod one clear, sharp morning, when the frost sparkled in the sun like diamonds.

"Barkis is willin'," was Beam's reply, as he danced a hornpipe in the invigorating air.

"You need the wire edge taken off of you, anyhow. You are getting too frisky," said Tod, eyeing his patient with great satisfaction.

"I guess so. I feel as if I could jump over the tent."

"I want to see that chest fill out a little more;" Tod spoke critically in his capacity as nurse.

"Oh, that will come after a while. I'll stuff it with snow and mink skins," retorted Beam with a laugh. "And by the way," he continued,

"this rise ought to let us through that dry cut-off. If it does, we can row within forty rods of that slough where I killed the teal."

"I didn't think of that. We'll try it."

"Rowing is easier than walking, you know. Especially, where we have two or three dozen mallards, and you do most of the rowing."

Tod felt so happy to see his old friend getting back into form that he laughed and retorted:

"Never mind; I'll get even with you after I get you patched up."

"It was after ten before the boys started, but they were in no hurry. They were going to feeding and roosting grounds, and knew from experience that their best shooting would be in the evening.

"Better take a sandwich; we may be home late," Tod suggested as they were about ready.

"Good idea; you can't shoot if you're hungry," laughed Beam as he donned his hip boots.

Five minutes later they were out on the river, with Nibs shivering expectantly in the bottom of the boat.

"Strike for the cut-off and keep hoping it's under water," said Beam, slipping shells into his gun to be ready for any emergency.

Half-way across the river, he said in a low tone:

"Stop rowing and sit perfectly still."

Tod, like Beam, was a seasoned duck hunter, and instead of twisting his head around to see

what was coming, became a frozen statue in a second.

Nibs crouched in the bottom, impatient to be hunting somewhere.

Tod watched Beam, and the latter watched a dozen ducks come sweeping down the river well above the water.

They passed at thirty yards.

"Now drop," and Tod went on his stomach on the seat ahead.

Beam threw the gun to position on the departing wild fowl, and two reports echoed over the river.

"Any fatalities?" queried Tod, scrambling back and grasping the oars.

"Three in the water. Hurry up! I think one isn't dead."

Tod sent the boat swiftly down the stream; another report roared out and a charge of shot swept over the water, ending the troubles of a redhead.

"All dead now," said Beam with a satisfied glance.

A few sweeps of the oars and the three big ducks were picked up.

"Good starter," Tod commented, as he turned the boat toward the cut-off.

"She's under water, all right," Beam cried gleefully, and a few minutes later they swept through the narrow opening.



"TOD WENT ON HIS STOMACH ON THE SEAT AHEAD"—*Page 124*

"Land her opposite that slough where I stood."

Tod nodded, and soon they were on the bottoms, with Nibs cavorting around like a dancing bear.

"We must keep our eyes out the first hour or two and see where they drop in most," said Beam, as they started for the shooting grounds.

In five minutes they were on the pass where he had killed his teal.

"Might as well stand here a little while." Beam dropped the butt of his gun on the ground and surveyed the numerous little lakes and ponds that dotted the open meadow for two or three miles parallel to the river.

"Nobody been after them this morning, I guess," Tod observed, as he scanned the heavens.

"No, they are bedded somewhere, feeding or dozing."

"They may have gone somewhere for the day. We won't get much shooting until toward evening, anyhow."

"That may be it. Just keep your eyes open and if you see any, notice where they head for. We can put in our time walking up and down the sloughs. We may kick out a few along the edge."

"You better not do too much walking," admonished Tod, "my legs are made of boiler iron and I'd better do the pedestrian act. I'll take

a ramble around some of the sloughs and you do the observation part."

"Thanks, awfully. But don't forget your lunch."

"I've got it," said Tod with a grin, as he departed.

It was clear and bright, in fact too fine for good duck shooting, except in the evening. Beam watched Tod go across to the first slough and circle half-way around it. Then he heard the report of his gun and saw ducks getting up in all directions.

"Looks as if we might have something to do, Nibs, old boy."

The dog wagged his tail knowingly, as if to say he understood.

Beam stepped down into the rushes of the dry swale. Presently four mallards headed that way. As they came over, Beam raised the gun and the ducks stopped and began to climb. Two quick reports rang out and a pair of big birds came crashing down near him.

"Go get them, Nibs."

The old dog needed no second invitation and they were soon at his master's feet.

More followed, and Beam was kept busy for half an hour or more, crouching in the rushes, shooting, and watching the direction of the flight.

He soon saw that the spot where he stood was a favorite fly-way, between two feeding lakes, and he resolved to remain there for the evening.

shooting, unless Tod in his rambles found a better point.

Beam had six mallards when the flight eased off and the ducks departed for some less harassed point. Except for the occasional sound of a gun, he had lost track of Tod. Becoming tired of inaction, he took a walk down and around the slough.

Mud-hens were numerous, swimming among the scattered rushes in their odd, jerky way. No ducks were routed out until he was half-way back. Then without warning, a pair of mallards sprang out of the tall rushes. It was like shooting at a mark. The gun came to a level and each barrel spoke the death of a "greenhead." Nibs joyfully retrieved them, and fifteen minutes later Beam was back at his stand.

It was afternoon when he caught sight of Tod coming from far up the bottoms. He was walking slowly, but in due time reached the stand.

"Well, Doctor, you've had quite a tramp."

"Don't mention it," said Tod, and threw himself wearily down in the grass.

"This coat weighs a hundred and ninety-six pounds."

"Must have something in it."

"Seven mallards and five jacks," replied Tod, pulling the birds out of his game pocket and throwing them on the ground.

"Quite a load. There are eight more to go with them." Beam pointed to his pile.

"I saw you down two or three. Say, but I'm hungry."

"Didn't you eat your lunch?"

"No, thought I'd wait till I got back."

"Wanted to be sociable, eh? All right. Let's refresh ourselves right now."

For ten minutes two sets of jaws worked pretty continuously. Then Beam eased up and said:

"Where did you decide was the best place for this evening?"

"Near as I can tell there isn't any best place. All of these ponds and sloughs are feeding grounds, and they are as liable to go to one as another. But this is the best fly-way, sure."

"That's the way I figured. And as this is handy to the boat, I propose to stand along here somewhere," said Beam, tipping up the water-bottle and washing down his lunch.

"That's a wise idea, I think. Hold on, don't put away that bottle—and I'll go up and stand at the foot of this slough above. It's on the same fly-way, and there's a bit of high ground at the end of the swale where the grass has been cut, to drop my ducks on. Say, but that water tastes good, if it *is* rather warm," said Tod, heaving a sigh of content.

"I rather look for a good many ducks this evening," pursued his companion, "from the number that were feeding here this morning."

"I do, too. I'd like to get about four dozen,

then I'd go uptown with them the first thing in the morning and—”

“Who is this coming?” Beam interrupted.

“A couple of farmer boys in blue overalls with an old musket,” Tod hazarded, after watching the approaching hunters for a moment.

“Hello, boys! Out hunting?” queried Beam, as two boys, one about twelve and the other fourteen, came up.

“Yes, sir. But we ain’t killed nothin’ yet. We ain’t seen nothin’ settin’ but mud-hens, an’ we can’t shoot flyin’,” replied the elder, dropping the butt of his old musket on the ground, where it towered above his head like a flagstaff.

“Why don’t you shoot mud-hens?” Tod asked gravely.

“Humph! We wouldn’t shoot them things, would we, Lige?”

“Naw. They’ve got bills jus’ like chickens. They ain’t ducks,” replied the smaller boy loftily.

“So you can’t shoot flying, yet?” Beam asked them good naturedly.

“No. Nothin’ but blackbirds out of the corn. I killed four once, out of a big flock; at one shot, too. But the ducks fly so fast I can’t git aim on ‘em.”

“Maybe your gun isn’t long enough,” said Tod, with mock concern.

“Yes, ‘tis; that ain’t it. I jus’ can’t git aim on ‘em. I’ll learn when I git bigger,” returned

the boy confidently, entirely unconscious of any attempt at fun on Tod's part.

"Oh, Johnny, see this pile of ducks!" called "Lige," pointing to the mallards.

"Did youse kill all them?" queried Johnny in amazement.

"Yes, we sure did."

"Find that many, settin'?"

"No, we shot them on the wing."

The two lads gazed upon the pile of ducks in open-mouthed wonder. Suddenly the small boy cried out:

"There's one you didn't shoot on the wing. You hit him right in the head," and he pointed to a big drake with a blood spot on the glossy green.

Tod simply *had* to laugh at this bit of shrewd reasoning, but Beam only smiled and said:

"I don't mean that we hit them all in the wing, but that we shot them on the wing; that is, when they were flying."

"O-o-oh, I see," was chorused from both boys.

"Would you like a duck to take home?"

"Yes sir-ee," and the mouths of both watered and their eyes danced.

Beam picked out a big greenhead and handed it to the larger boy.

"Tell your mother a strange hunter gave her that for a present. Tell her to stuff it and bake it and give you a feast."

"You bet I will. Thanks! Come on, Lige," he cried, and grasping the mallard firmly, he started off at a pace that caused his small partner to break into a trot to keep near him. The last the boys saw of them, they were still going, the big one heading the procession for home.

"Well, if that isn't a queer hunting outfit," laughed Tod, watching the blue overalls disappear.

"Poor little chaps! That duck will do them more good than a hundred would us. They probably don't have meat once a month except salt pork." As he spoke, Beam looked pityingly at the departing "hunters."

"No, and they'll talk about this adventure for a year. Did you notice how fearfully and wonderfully made that old firearm was?"

"Yes, it's probably been in the family for generations. I should say the hammer would weigh two pounds."

"And the barrel was almost as long as a fish pole. Imagine a man trying to make a snap shot on woodcock with that gun," and Tod gave a derisive snort.

"That makes me think; where did you find your jacksnipe? There don't seem to be any around this slough."

"Oh, I ran across two or three muddy swales up here, where there were quite a number. I didn't try to shoot many. I was looking for ducks."

"I wish that sun would hurry up," said Beam, glancing impatiently at the slowly declining orb of day.

How many duck-hunters have voiced that same wish!

Occasionally the boys saw a flock in the air, but not many. It was not the sort of day to make ducks restless.

"The weather's too fine," Beam remarked after watching two or three flocks of mallards circle lazily once or twice and then drop into a distant slough. "If it were cloudy and drizzly, they would be circling constantly."

"It wouldn't be as healthy a day for you to be out, either."

"No, I suppose not, but I could wear my oil-skin suit."

"They're beginning to drop in a little more. Guess I'll go up to my stand," and Tod rose as he spoke and stretched himself.

"Bring your ducks back here when you get through shooting."

Tod nodded and was off.

Beam watched until he judged Tod had reached the stand, to see if he routed any ducks on the way. Then he turned, just as four pintails dashed past up the swale.

The butt of his gun was on the ground, the safety not even slipped.

There were some lightning-like movements, a quick swinging of arms and gun, two sharp re-

ports,—and the four pintails kept on up the swale.

Beam felt cheap, and of course must scold the dog.

“Nibs, aren’t you ashamed of yourself! Why didn’t you tell me they were coming?”

Nibs whined, thumped the ground with his tail, and gazed wistfully after the departing ducks. He didn’t quite understand the reproof.

Presently Beam saw the ducks scatter and spring into the air. Then one of them dropped to the ground, and he knew Tod had scored.

A sudden whistle of wings, and he looked up to see a single mallard climbing for the clouds. A second later it was down in the rushes of the swale and Nibs had it in his mouth.

“They can’t sneak past every time when a fellow’s back is turned, can they, Nibs?”

With shining eyes Nibs dropped the duck on the pile.

The sun dropped lower and lower and more ducks drifted into the bottoms. From one to half a dozen flocks could be seen in the air constantly. Tod’s gun had spoken several times and two or three shots came down the fly-way. The sun was just above the horizon when the flight began in earnest. Ducks, mostly mallards, were circling over every lake and pond; up and down the fly-way, and crossing from one slough to another, looking for a suitable feeding ground.

Beam stepped down into the edge of the rushes

for a better blind, and soon he had Nibs busy and happy retrieving his birds.

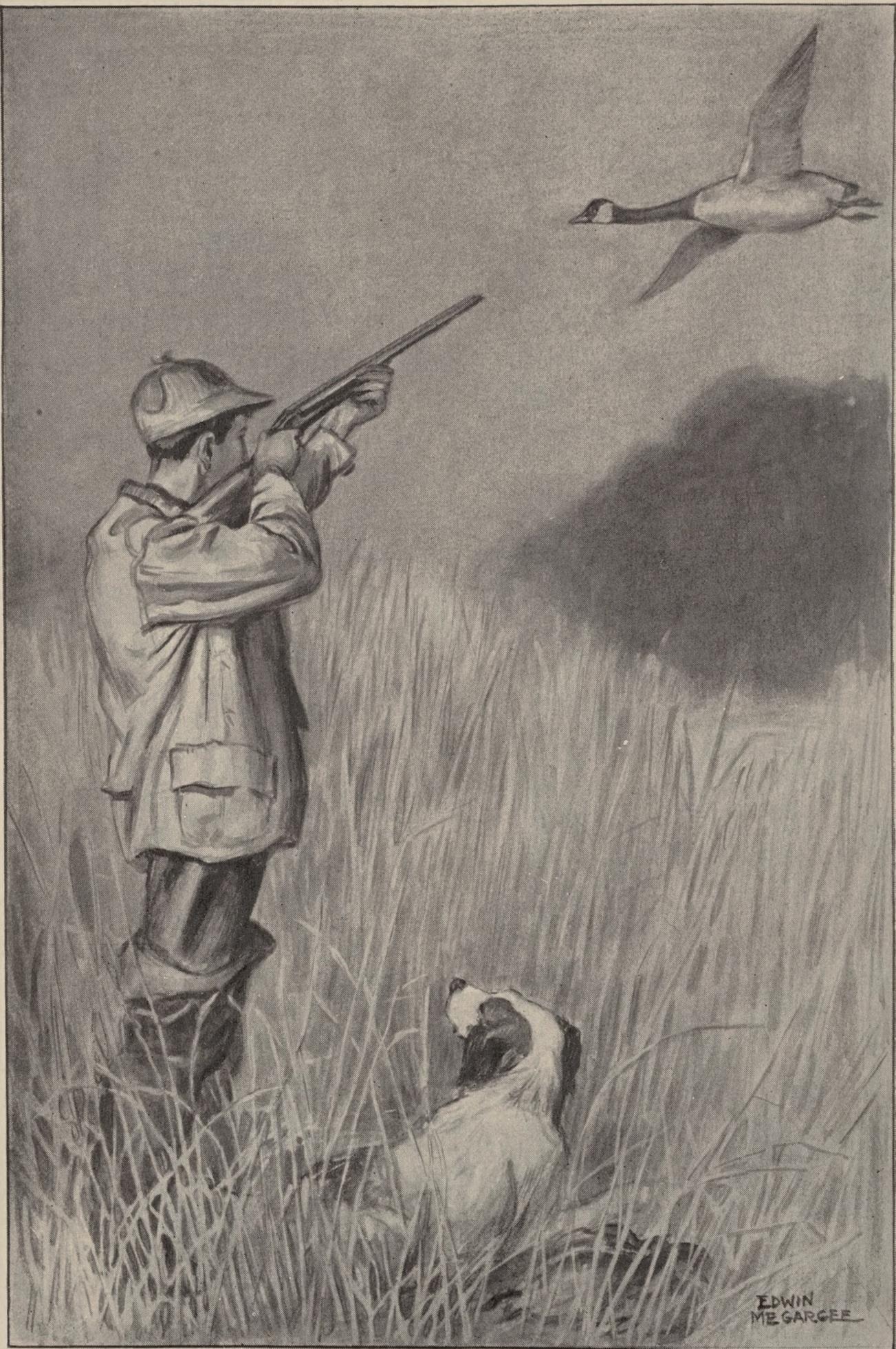
The sun sank out of sight.

A dozen mallards circled over the lower slough and came up the swale. Beam picked two with the first barrel and one with the second, and they whirled down into the rushes where Nibs was waiting for them.

The fun was fast and furious. Tod was evidently right in the thick of it, from the way his gun talked. Several times in glancing up that way, Beam saw a black ball drop from the sky and knew Tod was giving an account of himself.

According to tradition, it would here be proper to state that Beam's gun became hot from rapid firing, and that he was compelled to thrust the muzzle in the water to cool it, but in hundreds of duck shoots, the writer has never known a case where a shotgun became so overheated from rapid firing that it could not be handled with perfect comfort on a cool fall day. It has occurred on a blistering hot summer day, but never when the weather was reasonably cool.

A lone mallard now came down the swale. Beam reached for it, but through an error of judgment the first charge failed to score, necessitating the second barrel. As it crashed into the rushes, five redheads flew by and it seemed to Beam, in his disgust, that the big birds actually winked at him. But the gun was useless, and



"HE HEARD A HONK ALMOST AT HIS ELBOW"—*Page 135*

they were out of reach before the empty shells were ejected.

That was part of the fun, however, and Beam, being used to it, took the matter philosophically. They would "keep" until another time.

The glow of evening grew fainter and he could see the flash when Tod's gun spoke. The whistle of wings and the quacking of mallards were heard on every hand. Every few moments they could be heard dropping in the water in the slough below.

The piping of a green-winged teal came to Beam's ears, and a moment later a pair of the handsome little fellows dashed by at easy range.

But he watched them calmly and smiled as he murmured:

"Too small potatoes to-day, my little friends."

Then he heard a sound that sent a thrill through him. It was the honk of a goose! He peered sharply out into the gathering dusk.

Hark! There it was again, and nearer. He crouched in the rushes for what seemed an age. Suddenly he heard a honk almost at his elbow and a big dark form loomed up overhead.

"All alone, eh?" he muttered as the gun came up. A single flash, a report,—and the big fellow folded his wings and came whop down in the rushes.

"Sounded like a smoke-house falling. A little too heavy for you, Nibs. I'll get him."

But Nibs was there first, trying his best to drag the big gander in.

"An old Canada. That's good," murmured Beam, toting in the big goose with great satisfaction.

It was quite dusk when he heard the whistle of wings right over him, and looking up, saw a pair of mallards standing in the air. He covered them both in a trice, and two flashes of fire leaped up. It was so dark he was blinded by the flash and could not see whether he scored or not. Instinctively he shrunk in his clothes and waited. A thump in the rushes not two feet from him followed, then another thump ten feet away.

He reached down and picked up the nearest duck, muttering:

"Pretty close call! I don't want to get hit with one of those fellows if I can help it."

Nibs came in with the other, and Beam stopped trying to shoot, busying himself with tying the ducks together, while he waited for Tod.

This done, he walked across the swale and came back with a pole he had noticed while it was daylight. Then he sat and waited, watching the big moon slowly rise in the east.

Presently he heard the sound of footsteps, and ere long Tod came staggering in with his load of ducks.

"I didn't know but you were going to shoot all night."

"I quit before you did, for I heard you shoot while I was coming down," Tod retorted, dropping a pile of ducks and himself on the ground.

"Oh, that was only the funeral of a lone Canada."

"Did you get that fellow? I heard him."

"Sure. There he is on the pile."

"How many ducks?"

"Twenty this evening, I think."

"And I've got eighteen; all mallards but two. How shall we carry them to the boat?"

"That's easy. Tie them in bunches, string them on a pole, and put the pole on our shoulders. Mine are tied now. I've got a pole here."

"Good boy. Let's get back to camp; I'm hungry."

"That's queer," laughed Beam as they quickly tied Tod's game.

"There; can you go forty rods under one end of that?" he added, lifting one end of the string.

"I can go as far as you can, for marbles or chalk."

"All right, then. Come on."

Fortunately, the distance to the boat was not far, and the big round moon helped them on their way. The boat was reached without accident and Tod was soon pulling for camp. When they reached home, the ducks were hung high in the trees to keep them from hungry small animals, and the boys set about preparing a hasty supper.

"I could eat fried boots," declared Tod hungrily.

"What do you want to eat fried boots for?"

"I don't. But I could if I had to. I'm hollow clear to my knees."

"Oh, you are always hollow. We better just make a cup of coffee and get a pick-up supper, hadn't we?"

"I can clean and skin a blue cat in three minutes," said Tod with significant eagerness.

Beam looked at his hungry partner a moment and broke into an amused laugh.

"Well, go ahead. I'll build a fire and make the coffee," and Tod was out of the door and down to the live-box before the words were fairly out of Beam's mouth.

Ten minutes later the appetizing odor of frying fish made Beam feel glad that his partner was so hungry. The latter fried the fish and Beam made the coffee, both squatting on a soap box at intervals, discussing the shoot.

"I had the most provoking experience," and Tod stopped turning fish and looked around with his fork poised in the air. "I had just emptied both barrels at a bunch of mallards, when five redheads came sliding along as soft and easy as you please. I did some tall work trying to get loaded, but before I got coupled up they were a hundred yards away."

Beam looked interested and said:

"That was a queer coincidence. Evidently those redheads weren't intended to be killed this evening."

"How is that?"

"Because I had identically the same experience with the same ducks. Had just shot both barrels at a mallard, when those five redheads sailed past. Of course I couldn't load in time, but I chuckled to think how you would have a beautiful shot and get two or three of them, maybe."

"Evidently it wasn't their time to die. But pour the coffee; the fish is ready. Let's get to business."

"Don't kill yourself now," warned Beam, as Tod started up his grinding mill.

"Shucks, there isn't enough here to hurt me if I cleaned up everything in sight," said Tod, heaping his plate, reckless of consequences.

"I guess there isn't much danger over-eating, but I won't try to keep up with you. I'll be on an 'also ran,'" laughed Beam as he fell to.

"This is positively the best fish I ever tasted, barring none," was Tod's heartfelt comment as he finished a slice and reached for more.

Beam smiled. He was used to such remarks.

After the meal was over and the dishes washed and put away, they loafed for half an hour under the trees.

Presently Tod said with a yawn:

"I don't know whether it's healthy to go to bed on that big supper or not, but I'm awful sleepy. Guess I'll chance it."

"I don't believe it will hurt us. I'm sleepy, too. Shooting ducks is strenuous work," Beam replied, following Tod into the tent and preparing for bed.

It didn't take Tod long to get drowsy after he had once turned in.

He was just drifting away into the land of dreams when he heard the hoot of an owl. Both boys were familiar with the hoot of every owl in the country, and Tod came "back to shore" instantly, and listened.

Pretty soon he heard it again.

"Do you hear that, Beam?" he called softly.

"I do," returned Beam quietly. "It's a tolerably fair imitation, but no owl ever made it."

"Not by a jugful! Can't fool this pair on owls. What do you suppose is up?" and Tod listened more intently.

"It's too deep for me."

For twenty minutes the boys remained as quiet as a couple of cats, but no more owl hoots were heard.

Then Tod said disgustedly:

"Shucks! What's the use of bothering our heads over it? I'm going to sleep. It's probably some boys trying to see how near they can come to imitating an owl," and he turned over in the blankets and closed his eyes. In ten min-

utes he was asleep, but Beam remained awake for an hour listening and thinking. Of course the lights he had seen at the upper end of the island were foremost in his thoughts. Was the hooting connected with them? He wished he knew and felt half inclined to take the canoe and investigate, but the moon was shining and he was very tired, so he accepted Tod's explanation and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER X

BEAM GETS A LITTLE FREE ADVICE

THE boys slept later than usual. When Beam finally opened his eyes and looked at his watch, he gave his companion a vigorous shake, and fairly jumped out of bed.

"Tod Masters, it's nearly seven o'clock. Leap forth and do battle with the breakfast!"

"Is it as late as that?" Tod grunted, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"It surely is. Get a move on you," said Beam, who was half dressed before Tod had fairly started. "Those imitation owl hoots didn't seem to interfere much with your sleeping apparatus."

"Oh, drat those owl hoots! Forget them. Between an old lantern that Dutch John saw, and a boy trying to imitate an owl, we might figure out a fairy story, but I'm not built that way." Tod yawned indifferently.

"All right, we'll forget it and I'll go out and see if the ducks are in *statu quo*."

"What's that?" queried Tod, sleepily.

"It's dago, for 'all right,'" said Beam, diving out of the tent.

"They're in good shape," he announced, coming in a few minutes later.

"I suppose my first job is to go uptown and ship them."

"I expect so. We ought to get two and a half dollars for a dozen mallards."

"I hope so. We want to make enough on ducks to pay our expenses," said Tod, putting the coffee on to boil.

"You get away right after breakfast, and I'll do up the work," said Beam cheerfully.

"Did they shrink any in the night, or didn't you count 'em?"

"They're all there. We'll send up four dozen and a half, and the goose. Ship the ducks and give the goose to mother. Tell her Beam sent it, and that he's feeling finer than a fiddle."

After breakfast the game was piled in the boat and Tod pulled out, leaving Beam to run the camp. The latter washed the dishes and cleaned both guns, whistling away at his work—for Beam was actually beginning to whistle these days—then he went out and took his favorite seat upon the old log by the landing.

It was another fine October day. In fact they had been blessed with fine weather for over a week; still, clear and serene, with few clouds and no wind.

Beam knew from experience that these long calm periods late in the fall generally ended with a wild storm. But that did not disturb

him in the least; in fact, he rather yearned for it, for it meant myriads of ducks and fine shooting over decoys.

It was almost eleven o'clock. He had been out with the little target rifle for half an hour trying to get a shot at a lurking crow, and failing, he came back and took his seat on the old log again.

Presently he saw a skiff coming down along the shore.

"Tod made a quick trip. No, that isn't Tod. Some hunter or fisherman. Seems to be sizing up the island in great shape," he murmured.

The occupant of the boat would row a few strokes and then drift while he peered through the trees.

As he neared the landing he caught sight of Beam and came steadily on. Standing up in the boat and wiping his forehead, he called out:

"Any objections to a man landing here and resting a few minutes?"

"No, sir," Beam returned quietly, without rising.

The stranger pulled up his boat, and walking up the bank, took a seat upon the log.

He was a small, rather odd-looking man, with a retreating forehead and iron-gray hair, which had once been black. A small livid scar showed plainly on the right cheek-bone. The eyes were small, dark and shifty; the kind that change direction as quick as lightning and seem to cen-

ter to a needle-point. Altogether, he was not a person to attract one at first sight. He looked like a man with a history.

"Pleasant day," Beam remarked civilly, for want of something better to say.

"Yes, it's a fine day. By the way, what's the name of this island?"

"Duck Island."

"I thought so. Just camping here a few days, I suppose?"

"Another fellow and I have been living here since August."

"Is that so? Haven't been disturbed in any way?" and the stranger looked surprised.

"No, sir. Why should we be?" said Beam, stealing a side glance at the man.

The stranger hesitated, wiped his brow, and said with a queer laugh:

"I can see you haven't lived around here very long."

Beam thought it best not to enlighten him, and remained silent.

"This is the first time I have seen the island in years," the man continued, "but it used to be my old stamping ground along the upper river here. When I was young there used to be the worst gang of horsethieves and cutthroats along here that ever infested a country. This island was their headquarters. I know of six murders that were committed here. The place is haunted, or used to be. There is no doubt of that. Why,

they used to hear shrieks and groans here nearly every night. It was an awful place. You couldn't get a respectable person within half a mile of here after dark."

"Didn't the authorities look into the matter?" asked Beam curiously.

"Oh, yes. They had detectives here at different times, and they nosed around, but never discovered anything. In fact, in my opinion, there wasn't much to discover. It was a clear case of spooks," and the stranger lowered his voice and looked around. "I wouldn't stay here over night for a farm, and if you take my advice you'll get off as soon as possible."

"But that old gang is all broken up," said Beam, smiling indulgently, for he made up his mind that he was talking to one of those crack-brained believers in ghosts and spirits that one occasionally comes across—one of the sort that repeat wild, bloody tales so often that they end in really believing them.

"How do you know it is? Don't you think it. There are always some of them left. They had their secret meeting points, and places to hide stolen goods. There are goods hidden away to-day, I'll warrant you, that have been hidden for forty years."

"Well, it doesn't concern me," returned Beam indifferently; "I'm here and propose to stay here until I get ready to leave."

His calm, almost contemptuous attitude evi-

dently irritated the strange teller of bloodthirsty tales, for he arose and said with stern emphasis:

"When you get older, young man, and have seen more of the world and humanity, you will not take these terrible crimes so calmly. Some day you will wish you had heeded my warning." Then, without another word, he walked down the bank, stepped into his boat and went on his way down the river.

Beam watched him grow smaller in the distance, and murmured:

"Now what kind of a freak is that? He must take this for a nursery or a kindergarten, ready to believe most anything. How Tod will laugh! He will probably scold because I didn't hold the chap until he came, so he could pump some more blood and thunder out of him."

With these reflections, he dismissed the strange visitor from his mind and resumed his former "occupation" of resting.

Presently another boat hove in view, whose one occupant he soon made out to be Tod. In a few minutes more Tod was at the landing.

"Is lunch ready?" he called as he unshipped his oars.

"Not quite. I don't think we'd better wait for lunch, but load up the things and go home," said Beam gravely.

"Why? What's the matter?" asked Tod, his eyes flying open, as he looked up at his partner in astonishment.

"I've had a fellow along here who says if we don't get off this island we'll see spooks and be killed, and a lot of things."

"Oh, is that all?" said Tod, climbing out of the boat and walking up the bank. "I thought it might be something serious, from the way you spoke."

Beam chuckled. "Isn't that serious enough?"

"It was probably some relative of Dutch John's. They can't scare me. To hear some folks talk, a body would think this was a dumping ground for ghosts and hobgoblins. It's a good enough place for me to live," said Tod, who was thoroughly practical.

"If you can stand it, I can. Come and rest your feet while I get lunch."

"We won't leave until we get a bite to eat, anyhow. I'd give a fifteen-cent watermelon to know who started these yarns."

"So would I. There can't be anything in them, or father would have said something about it."

Then Beam thought of his experience in the night at the upper end of the island, and fell to wondering again.

"What sort of a looking chap was this blood and thunder story-teller that was entertaining you in my absence?" asked Tod as he hunted for canned fruit and other dainties.

"He was a small, dark, middle-aged man, with a scar on his right cheek. One of the kind of

fellows you wouldn't trust very far on a short acquaintance."

"I met that fellow when I was going up, I'll wager a penny." Tod paused in his search and looked interested.

"I presume so. He was probably on the river then."

"He was gaping at the bluffs when I passed him. Never looked around. Had a brown, double-bowed boat."

"Yes, that was the fellow."

"And he knew all about this neck o' woods, eh?"

"He claimed to."

"He had probably heard those yarns the old settlers tell, and as you looked pretty green, he thought he would scare you with them."

"I guess so. When he saw I wasn't impressed very much, he became disgusted and went on down the river."

"He'll have a nice time scaring this pair of ducks," laughed Tod, "and, by the way, Tom and Jim are watching the weather reports. The first sign of a cold storm, and they'll both be down here."

"That's good. We'll try and make it interesting for them."

CHAPTER XI

OVER DECOYS ON THE RIVER

THE days drifted peacefully by; every frost deepening the gold and crimson of the autumn leaves until they were as gorgeously beautiful as that master painter, Nature, could make them. Beam and Tod hunted, fished, or rowed, as the mood seized them. Twice they made small shipments of ducks, killed over on the bottoms—mostly mallards—but, as the weather continued fine, the bluebills, ring-necks, and other river ducks still lingered in the north.

October slipped away, and chilly November was at hand. The boys set the traps for muskrat, mink and coon. Beam was careful to exercise every day; paddling the canoe, rowing the boat, or making the rounds of the traps. His lungs ceased to bother him in the least and he continued to gain flesh and strength.

“If we put in the winter here, I ought to be a new man by spring,” he remarked to Tod one day as they occupied their favorite seat on the old log by the river bank.

“Yes, your folks won’t know you by spring. Sorry now I didn’t lick you when Doc told me

to," said Tod, surveying his patient with critical gravity.

"Never mind. Tom and Jim are due pretty soon; maybe they'll help."

"Beats all, how this weather hangs on. Tom and Jim have been sitting on the safety-valve for two weeks. Last time I was uptown they threatened to do something to the weather man if he didn't figure out a change before long."

Beam laughed.

"After Tom Williams's first shoot over decoys, he never cared to hunt ducks any other way. Says he's too lazy. The idea of ducks coming to him instead of having to tramp after the ducks, seemed to strike him all in a heap."

"Tom's a good shot, too. He says his Greener is just aching to pull ducks from the clouds."

"Yes, Tom's no slouch. Neither is Jim, for that matter, but I guess we can hold our own," added Beam with a laugh.

"I nicked my thumb skinning that last mink, and it doesn't seem to get well very fast," said Tod, contemplating a not overclean hand.

"Why don't you try soap and water?" suggested Beam gravely.

"Never you mind the soap and water. They're clean enough for duck-hunters and trappers. When we get back to civilization, I'll clean up."

"By the way, how much fur have we?"

"About seventy-five rats, eight mink, and five coon."

"Oh, that's not so bad. We'll have quite a bunch by spring."

"Wish we could get a wildcat or two, for variety. They're in the rocks, all right," said Tod, looking over at the bluffs.

"Yes, I wish we could get an otter or two, it would help pay the doctor's bill; but I'm afraid we won't."

"It doesn't look now as if it ever would storm," remarked Tod, changing the subject, and looking up at the soft, blue sky.

"You can't tell anything about it this time of year. It may freeze up without a storm. I've known it to, but we're more apt to get one."

"Well, let her come. The quicker the better; and that reminds me: I must flesh those last three rat hides," and Tod arose and went at his task.

The boys retired about nine o'clock that evening. The last thing before turning in, they walked down to the river bank as usual to take a final look at the stars and the river, and say good night to the world.

"Astonishing, how this weather holds on," said Beam, inhaling deep draughts of fresh pure air.

"It may keep this up for two weeks yet, but I'm going to bed just the same," was Tod's decision as he started for the tent, and Beam soon after followed.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, the latter was

aroused by a shout from the bank. Hastily springing out of bed, he thrust his head out of the tent and called out:

“Who’s there?”

“Tom and Jim. Fetch a lantern,” and a joyful bark of recognition from Nibs followed the words.

“Just a minute,” cried Beam, popping back, and he was dressed with incredible speed. In a few very brief moments he came out with a lantern.

“Duck Island hospital, ahoy!” Tom Williams called out, with a jolly laugh, as Beam appeared on the bank.

“You’ve got the wrong number. This isn’t a hospital; it’s an athletic association,” Beam retorted in the same spirit.

“Is it possible, Jim, we have stopped at the wrong island?” Tom asked, as he peered about in mock anxiety.

“Never mind; we’ll keep you all night and you can look for your island in the morning. Hurry out. I want to get hold of that old hand of yours.”

“Bring that arc light down a little closer, so we can see our duffle, or I’m liable to lug Jim out for a bundle of blankets.”

Beam was down by the boat in a trice and reaching out his long arm.

“Shake, boys. I am sure it’s a treat to see you two lads again.”

"Why, you don't look much like a consumptive," said Jim Neal, peering into his schoolmate's face.

"Me? I'm no consumptive. I'm Professor Beam Foster, Instructor of the Duck Island Athletic Association. If you don't believe it, ask Tod Masters."

"By the way, where is that short-legged partner of yours?" asked Tom, as they quickly piled rubber boots, guns, shells and other duffle out on the bank.

"Don't ask foolish questions. He's asleep, of course."

"Don't you know Tod by this time?" put in Jim. "That fellow would sleep during an earthquake."

"That's so. I forgot his weakness," said Tom, pulling up the boat and tying it securely.

"Do you hear them?" said Jim, tilting his ear and listening.

"Hear what?" Beam returned; then, after listening intently, "Seems as if I heard the whistle of a duck's wing."

Tom chuckled.

"Of course you do. We've been hearing them all the way down."

"What in the world would cause ducks to move in the night, this kind of weather?"

"Because the wildest old storm you ever heard of is sweeping down on us," Jim chimed in.

"That's why we're here. The weather report gave notice of it this evening, and Tom and I were down to the bank at dusk and we saw all kinds of ducks scurrying south. They were migrants, too. So we hustled back and loaded up our duffle and pulled out, to be sure and get here ahead of it."

"I wondered what brought you fellows down here in the middle of the night, this kind of weather."

"The storm will probably be here to-morrow, and we would rather pull down in nice weather, if it *is* in the night," Tom explained.

"Sensible idea; it's a whole lot pleasanter. Shall I wake up Tod?"

"No, let him sleep. Tell us where to bunk and we'll make up our bed. We brought our own blankets," said Tom, as he dropped his load under the trees between the tent and the cabin.

"We generally put visitors in the cabin, on the floor, but I guess we can make room for you boys in the tent. I haven't seen you for so long, I would rather keep you close to me, so we can talk."

"That suits us, if we won't crowd the mourners."

"I guess not. Tod's asleep, and I don't take up much room. We'll carry some of this plunder into the cabin, first; then we'll go in the tent and fix up your bed."

Everything was stored in the cabin except the guns, boots, and shells, and Beam led the way into the little tent.

"Pretty close quarters," he said apologetically, in a low tone, "but I guess we can tuck you away in that corner."

"Plenty of room," Tom returned in a half whisper; "I can sleep in a pocket if necessary."

"Anything goes with me," Jim added, unrolling the blankets.

A cozy bed was soon arranged and the boys began to undress.

"Did you notice that Jim has a pump gun?" asked Tom, with a grin, as he unlaced his shoes.

"No, I didn't look at his gun. Is it possible, Jim, you have come down to that?" said Beam with reproachful gravity.

"Wait till you fellows see that gun in action to-morrow, and you'll wish you had one," the owner of the pump gun retorted. "I'll keep you all retrieving ducks."

"I can see where it would be handy for cripples, or in a big flock, but they're such awkward, ungainly things to persons used to a double barrel," remarked Beam.

"Yes, a fellow might get in a corner where they would be just the thing," Tom commented, "but all the same I'll take my Greener."

"If Jim can't hit anything flying with it, we can let him sit in the blind and shoot cripples."

"Yes, he'll come in handy there."

"Hark," said Jim, and all listened.

"Well, if it isn't raining!" and Beam looked at the others in astonishment.

"I thought I saw clouds gradually working over the bluffs, when we came down," Tom remarked.

"Well, with all those ducks hurrying south this evening and this rain, we know what's up now. Let's get to sleep. We want to be ready at daylight." Beam's face lighted up with anticipation as he spoke.

"And Tod's sleeping through it all," Jim said, with a glance at the prostrate form swathed in blankets.

"All ready; switch off the lights," came in muffled tones from under Tom's blankets, and in two minutes all was dark and silent.

Presently he said:

"Got an alarm clock?"

"Yes; it weighs a hundred and sixty pounds," returned Beam softly.

"All right; just so it works," and silence reigned again.

Gradually the soft patter of the rain lulled the boys to sleep.

Patter, patter the rain kept on. Soon the wind began to rise and sob and moan through the trees. Then it shifted to the northwest and the temperature began to drop rapidly. Fine, driv-

ing snowflakes pelted the tent and the wind grew higher and wilder, until a genuine northwester was in full blast.

The duck-hunters slept through it peacefully and calmly. Only Beam stirred uneasily once or twice and half awoke; but the roar of the storm lulled him to sleep again and he drifted back into dreamland.

At four o'clock he was broad awake; partly because it was his time to wake up and partly because he felt the end of his nose getting cold.

He struck a light, looked at his watch, and then dressed and went out.

The gale was at its height and the air cold and raw. He went into the cabin and built a fire in the little cook-stove, sliced the bacon and found the eggs. Then he put the water on to boil and went back to the tent.

"What time is it?" and he recognized Tod's voice.

"About four-thirty. I've built a fire and started breakfast. I tell you it's a peeler of a storm."

"I noticed by the end of my nose and the roar of that wind that something was up," said Tod, yawning in an ample way, as he started to dress. "We finally caught it good and hard. The boys will have a wild old ride down the river. Too bad they aren't here now, so we could all start out with a hot breakfast."

"They won't have much trouble coming down

the river. The wind is in the north, so the waves won't be very high," and Beam had no difficulty in keeping his face straight in the dark.

"Oh, dear! I can't find anything," Tod grumbled as he felt for the lantern and struck a match. "Shoes here and pants there. What—" Then he stared and looked up at Beam, who was smiling expansively.

"Did those two fellows crawl in here in the night and me not know it?" and he was over shaking the sleep from their eyes, with more vigor than elegance.

"Say, wake up here and give an explanation! I've a notion to lick all three of you for this trick."

"You be licking Tom and Jim, and I'll see to the breakfast," called Beam as he disappeared.

"You were snoring so beautifully, we didn't like to interrupt the performance," Jim yawned as he started to dress.

"I'm so glad you're here, I'll let it pass this time. But isn't this a wild old twister, though? Ought to be ducks enough to-day."

"Let's get a move on us and help Beam get breakfast," said Tom energetically. "We want to do our share of the work. Whew! the end of my nose is cold."

"We'll need plenty of clothes on to-day, sitting in the blind," Jim remarked, shivering in the chill air.

"How many decoys did you bring?"

“Two dozen.”

“And Beam and I have three dozen. That makes five. That’ll be enough on a pinch.”

By this time the boys were dressed, and hurried over to the cabin to assist Beam. They found him frying eggs and bacon and preparing the coffee.

“My, but that smells good,” said Tod with a longing sniff.

“Anything smells good to you in the eat line. Step lively now and set the table. Better use the silver knives and forks for company.”

“Sure. I’ll attend to that. Where are the clean napkins?”

“In one of the drawers of the sideboard; no, come to think, I used the last one to wash the frying-pan with. Never mind, they can use their sweaters. Gather round the frugal board while everything is hot. We want to be over at the Point by daylight. Bacon and eggs, bread and butter and coffee; that’s all you get, gentlemen,” said Beam, placing the smoking breakfast on the table.

“No well-organized duck-hunter wants any better,” and Tom showed his sincerity by getting down to business at once.

“Hear that wind roar,” Jim remarked as he sipped his steaming coffee; “we’ll have some fun getting the decoys out.”

“That won’t take long with two boats,” Beam responded cheerily. “Better put them in one

bunch. Four can shoot from one blind all right. Besides, we want to do a little visiting. I haven't seen you fellows in a coon's age."

"Where you going to put them?" asked Jim, helping himself to more bacon and another egg.

"Across on Oak Point. The wind won't hit us so much there, and what there is will be in our backs. That brings the ducks in front of us, as they always come in against the wind to light."

"Wonder if the waves are very high?"

"Not with a downstream wind; if it were blowing upstream, we'd have some fun retrieving our birds."

The meal was hurried through; sweaters, rubber boots and plenty of warm clothing donned, shell pockets filled, and they were ready.

The dull gray of the morning was breaking as they filed down to the river bank. The storm had ceased, but a blanket of rough, angry-looking clouds covered the sky and sped before the wind, which roared through the trees like a demon in pain.

"Cracky! but this is one of the blizzards we read about," Tom laughed as he was almost carried from his feet, on reaching the river bank.

"Hustle our decoys into the boat, Tod," called Beam. "I'll take Tom in with me and you go in Jim's boat."

"I'm to row, remember."

"No, I'd better row. It isn't far."

"But I insist. You mustn't overestimate your strength, Beam," said Tom kindly. "While the waves are not high, the wind is something fierce, and you don't want to run any risk of straining yourself; it might be costly."

"Oh, well, rather than hurt your feelings, you may row if you need the exercise," said Beam resignedly. But he appreciated Tom's kindly intentions, just the same.

It was a wild, rough ride across the river, but the boys were used to it, and thought nothing of the danger. In fact, they rather enjoyed it.

They reached the lee of the Point, and a few minutes later the decoys were in the water.

"Now hustle and make a blind," Beam directed; "we'll have ducks here before we know it."

"I've seen fifty flocks already," said Tod as he seized a hatchet and began to cut brush.

"There goes a flock of two hundred bluebills right over the water," cried Jim excitedly.

"Let 'em go, my child. Get to work on this blind," said Tom, gathering up sticks and brush and deftly weaving them into a blind.

With four boys working, it was a short task. The blind was almost completed, when, without warning, fifty bluebills, sweeping down the river, swung into the decoys and splashed down among them.

Every gun was leaning against a tree, several feet from its owner.

The boys looked at each other, and Beam said softly:

"Can you reach your gun in time, Tom?"

"I'll try," and Tom stole quietly toward his Greener.

Two steps, and the restless, nervous birds were out of the water and gone.

"Get your gun and get into the blind, anyhow. We'll finish it soon," called Beam. "We don't want to let any more chances like that go by."

Tom complied, but the blind was finished and the four hunters ready for battle before another shot was presented.

"Ducks, ducks everywhere," said Jim, looking far over the bottoms.

"Sh— here's a bunch," and a dozen bluebills swung in against the wind.

Just as they raised their wings to drop in the water, Beam said, in a quick, crisp tone:

"Give it to 'em," and four guns belched forth. A second volley followed, as the ducks gathered themselves and hurried away.

"How many?" cried Tod.

"I see four," Tom answered as he ran up the shore to his boat.

"Only four out of that mess?" said Beam inquiringly. "I'm sure I killed a pair."

"I know I did," Tod returned quietly, "and probably Jim and Tom both did. The trouble was, two or three of us killed the same pair."

"Was it windy out there?" asked Beam as Tom returned, after picking up the ducks.

"Oh, I've seen stiller days, but the waves aren't bad."

"Get down quick," and Tom was unceremoniously jerked down out of sight.

"What's up?" For answer, there was a splash in the water, and Tom peered through the brush to see a pair of long-necked pintails sitting placidly among the decoys.

"Let Tom and Jim take one each when they jump. They didn't kill any the other time, and they want a chance to kill something," said Tod softly, never winking an eye.

Tom and Jim looked at each other, and the former said:

"How's that. Can you stand that, Jim?"

"Yes, take anything from Tod."

"Then you pick the right, and I'll take the left, when they jump."

The boys rose in the blind, and two pintails rose in the air at the same time. Two guns cracked and two pintails jumped a little higher. Two more reports—and the pair of ducks hastily departed for the south.

The two shooters looked at each other sheepishly and sat down in the blind.

Tom slammed the smoking shells on the ground and turned to Tod:

"You say a word and I'll throw you in the river!"

"I'm mum," said Tod demurely, gazing out over the wind-swept river.

"I thought you could shoot," said Tom contemptuously, turning to Jim.

"I thought *you* could, but I see you can't," retorted Jim.

"Never mind, boys, I can tell you just how it happened," Beam, who was gently quaking with suppressed laughter, interrupted. "Those ducks jumped right up into a gale of wind, to start with. The charge probably drifted two feet. Then, they're the meanest duck to hit over decoys that flies. A fellow always shoots below them the first barrel. It happened this time, when they reached the top of their jump, they were in a gale of wind; so there you are. Then, of course, tenderfeet are not supposed to hit such erratic fowls very often," and Beam gazed abstractedly out over the decoys.

Jim nudged his partner: "What do you think of that?"

"Let it pass; he's sick," said Tom, winking at Tod.

Suddenly Beam snatched up his gun and threw it to his shoulder. Two quick reports followed, then a splash, splash!

"What's the cause of the disturbance?" queried Tom. Then he peered through the blind and saw two pintails kicking among the decoys.

"He got your pintails, Jim."

"Don't call them *my* pintails," retorted that

disgusted duck-hunter, as Beam started for the boat. The latter was out among the decoys and had just picked up the two ducks, when Tod called out:

“Drop down in the boat, quick, and keep still.”

Beam complied without a word, for he knew what was up, and the next instant a flock swept over the decoys from the north. They saw the boat and darted up in the air just as six barrels volleyed and banged and roared. A splash and a thump!—then all was quiet save the whistling of the wind.

Beam straightened up and called out in the teeth of the gale:

“Who did that?” for one of the ducks had dropped squarely in the boat.

“I did it with my little gun,” Tom shouted back. “I figured on its dropping there to save you the trouble of picking it up. I knew it wouldn’t hit you.”

“Well, please just don’t try the experiment any more. I’m no target for you fellows to heave dead ducks at.”

“Beg your pardon, but it was such a nice opportunity to drop a duck in the boat, direct from the sky, that I couldn’t resist it,” Tom answered blandly.

“The truth of the matter is,” shouted Tod, “he forgot you were out there at all, but he hates to say so. He was tickled to death to drop it anywhere.”

"That's about the size of it. And here are two decoys that have turned turtle," said Beam, stopping to right two wooden ducks.

"Hurry in out of the wet. We don't want to drop any more ducks on you," Tom called to him.

Beam picked up the other duck and rowed in. He found three expansive smiles awaiting him.

"You do first rate to hold the bag," Tod remarked calmly as he made room for his partner on the log.

"Don't wiggle or wink," Jim said softly. "Here comes a flock up against the wind, right over the water."

It was a goodly bunch of ring-necks, and they were evidently looking for company, for they came up within thirty yards of the boys and prepared to alight. At this juncture, the artillery was turned loose, and in their fright and confusion the ducks came on past the hunters instead of wheeling off. That was Jim's opportunity, and he turned on his repeater. When the crackling and banging was over, he had two more down.

"Two cripples out there; hurry up!" cried Beam, quickly slipping in fresh shells. A flash and a report, and one of the birds turned over. Another report, but the other duck swam out into the wind unharmed.

"Aim two feet in the wind. It drifts the shot," called Beam excitedly, as Tom poised his gun. The latter took the hint, and at the report, the duck drifted idly on the waves. Tom dashed

for the boat and was out in the wind in a jiffy.

"How many?" asked Tod.

"I see five, and the two Jim got with his corn-sheller makes seven."

"Oh, that isn't so bad. Very windy out there, Tom?" shouted Tod, raising his voice.

But Tom was busy, and it was too windy to talk. It required fifteen minutes' hard work before he was back in the blind, for one of the ducks had drifted quite a distance.

"No fun rowing a boat out there, I'll tell you," he panted as he dropped in his seat.

"I noticed that," Beam remarked calmly.

For half an hour there was a lull in the shooting. The boys grew impatient, and were about to return to camp, when three flocks came in, only a few minutes apart, giving them fine shooting. Then another long wait followed.

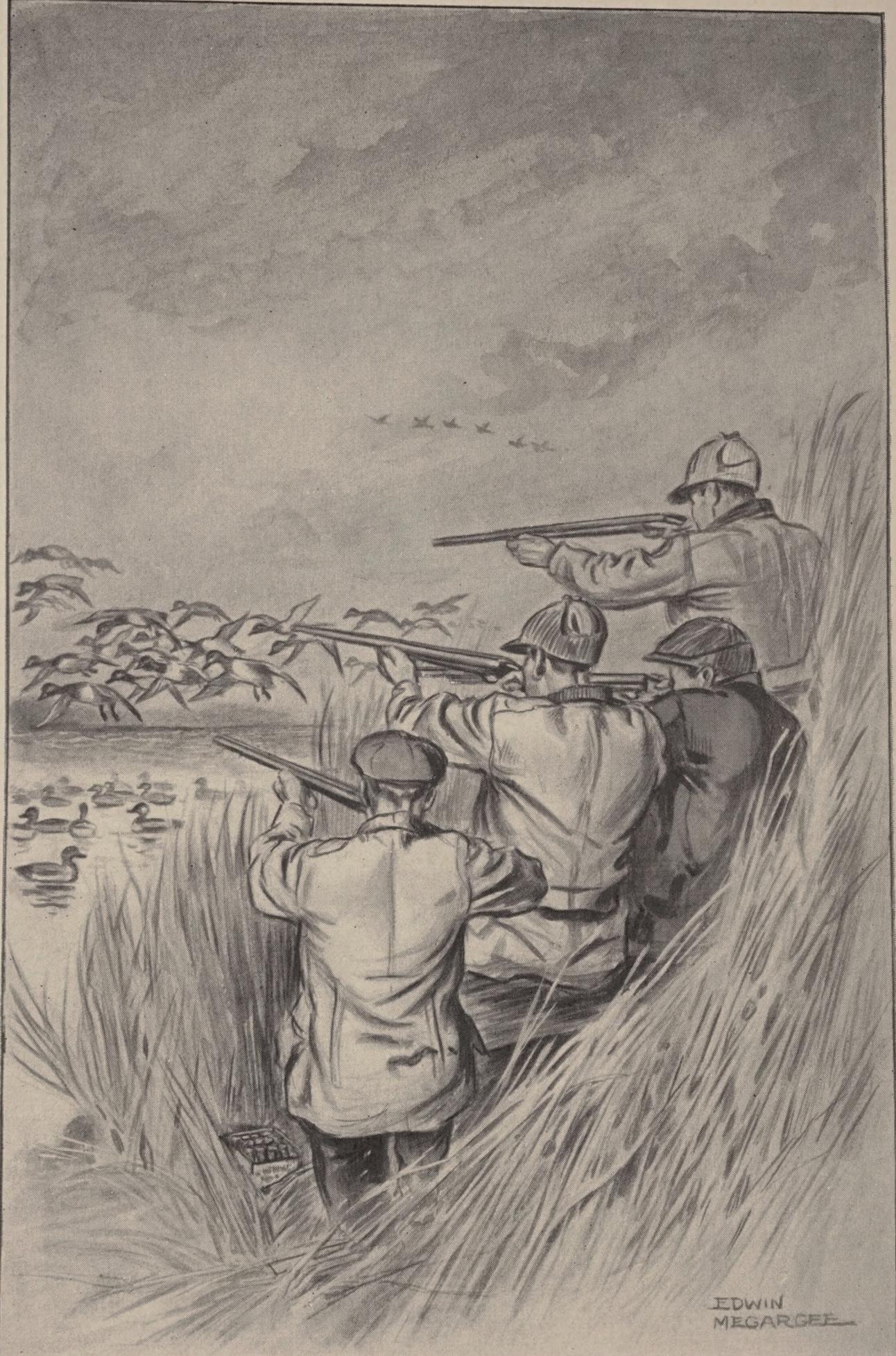
"May as well go to camp, I guess," concluded Beam, who had arisen and was searching the sky and river for ducks.

"I guess so. The flight is about over with for to-day. Wind's going down a little, too," said Tom, idly drumming on the gun-barrel with his fingers.

"Let's wait five minutes, and if nothing shows up, we'll go," was Tod's suggestion.

This was agreed to, but before a quarter of the time had elapsed, Tod suddenly gasped out:

"For the land sakes, look here!"



"THE ARTILLERY WAS TURNED LOOSE"—*Page 167*

Before the boys could realize the situation, a hundred bluebills were standing on their tails over the blind, at a distance of from twenty feet to twenty yards. They had come into the decoys, but for some unaccountable reason, instead of dropping in the water, had continued on up over the blind.

It was hard to tell for a moment which was the most flustered, the ducks or the hunters. It was all so unexpected.

Beam collected his wits first.

“Pick your duck and give it to ‘em,” and the fusillade began.

It was all over in ten seconds. Of course, the pump gun was the last to stop barking, but they were all empty at last and the boys, flushed with excitement, paused to take breath.

“Check up here. How many, Tod?” said Beam sternly.

“Didn’t get a clam,” and Tod threw his smoking shells in the water.

“Tom?”

“I—I—got what Tod did,” said Tom, scratching his head sheepishly.

“Jim?”

“I think I knocked one with the last shell. It fell up in the woods,” replied Jim meekly.

“How many did you get your own self?” retorted Tod.

“I am pleased to inform you that I think I

blew one into fragments with the first barrel. The second shot was a rank miss. There you have it."

"Show us the fragments," Tod insisted.

"The fragments strew the sea," and Beam swept his hand around the horizon, and tried to look dramatic.

"Too thin," said Tom with a shake of the head. "Show us some of the pieces, or you go down for a goose egg with the rest of us."

"Don't count me in with you poor shooters," cried Jim disdainfully, "I have one up in the woods."

"Go find it, or you go in for the biggest goose egg of all, for you had five chances," was Tom's merciless reply, and Jim started for the woods.

"He doesn't look very sanguine," laughed Tom, as he watched his friend stroll up through the woods.

Then Beam and Tom looked at each other. It was too much, and they burst into a roar of laughter.

"Wasn't that the worst mix up you ever got into?" said Tom, dropping on a log and holding his sides with laughter.

"Oh, they were too close, of course," said Beam, checking his mirth.

"If I'd had a good hickory fish pole," Tod volunteered, "I could have killed one or two that I know of. In fact, I struck at the first one with my gun barrel before I shot."

"Look here, coming," said Beam.

In the distance they saw Jim leisurely returning, swinging a bluebill by the leg.

"If he didn't get one, after all. Tally one for Jim," and a bluebill was tossed into the blind.

Beam picked up the duck gravely and looked it over carefully.

"Seems to be freshly killed," he murmured.

"I'll tell you what let's do with that duck," Tom suggested; "let's have it stuffed and mounted and keep it as a souvenir to remind us of how we killed one duck out of eleven shots, at a range of forty feet. We'll tell the story to our grandchildren."

"How 'we' killed a duck," and Jim gazed out over the water abstractedly.

"Oh, well, a duck-hunter, like a fisherman, is supposed to draw the long bow occasionally," said Tom soothingly.

"I move we quit with that shot and go to camp for some hot coffee," Beam proposed.

"Second the motion!" cried Tod fervently. It is unnecessary to add that the motion was promptly carried.

"Better leave our decoys right here," was Beam's next proposition. "It will probably calm down to-night and we'll have a quiet shoot in the morning at daylight. They're anchored with good strong cords."

"That arrangement is satisfactory; come on.

By the way, did anybody count the ducks?" said Tom.

"Forty-one, with that last one that Jim scared to death," replied Tod, starting for the boats.

Tom stopped.

"Just how it was! That duck died of heart-failure," but Jim had shouldered his pump and was half-way to the boat, so there was no argument.

The wind had eased up a trifle, but was still blowing a stiff gale when the boys crossed over to camp.

"Nibs will be glad to get out again," said Beam as he stepped ashore. "I tied him in the tent. I knew he would be no use over there, only sit and shiver."

He walked up to the tent, where a joyful bark heralded his approach.

"There, old fellow, go out and take a run." He unsnapped the chain, and Nibs, after welcoming his friends in true dog fashion, dashed away through the wood.

Beam built a fire while the others were hanging up the ducks, and soon the quartet of hilarious hunters were jollying each other around the stove, while they prepared a hot dinner.

CHAPTER XII

THE MORNING SHOOT

THE boys sat at ease around the fire in the cabin the remainder of the day. Old times were discussed, but their chief interest was in the day's shoot. That had to be thoroughly gone over, of course, and it took time; so it was night before they realized it.

They retired early, as they wished to get out early in the morning.

"If it clears off to-night and the wind goes down," Beam said, "we want to be on the Point before day begins to crack."

"All right. You run the alarm-clock," replied Tom as he crawled into bed.

"I'll see to that. Just roll out when you hear a boot whiz past your head."

He was as good as his word, and had the boys up when, to use Tom's words: "It was as dark as the inside of a possum."

A hasty breakfast, and they were away across the river.

The winds had gone to sleep and the stars twinkled merrily in the frosty air. They landed

at the Point, pulled up the boats and were soon in the blind.

"Plenty early," Tod remarked, peering out over the quiet river.

"None too early," Beam retorted. "There'll be an up-river flight this morning and we want to catch the first straggler. Nothing like being here on time. I think I see streaks in the east now."

"Let her streak," Tom said, taking his old seat on the log.

For half an hour the boys sat there, with an occasional shiver from some one, then Tod spoke again:

"Seems to me there's a hitch in that daybreak of yours."

"That's what I've been thinking," Tom agreed, pulling out his watch.

He scratched a match, then threw it on the ground with an exclamation of disgust.

"What's the matter?" asked Jim.

"It's just three-thirty now."

"Well, if that isn't a nice go," and three disgusted duck-hunters looked at Beam. But the latter was equal to the emergency. He calmly took out his watch and, lighting a match, showed the dial to his irate companions. It pointed to a little past six.

"The hair spring is caught," he explained.

"So are we," growled Tod.

That sally raised a laugh, and Beam said:

"What's the difference. It'll be daylight in a couple of hours, anyhow."

"Of course! What's a couple of hours?" returned Tod sarcastically. "Just fun to watch decoys in the dark, when it's down below freezing."

"Well, you wanted me to be sure and get you out in time, and here you are," said Beam, who thoroughly enjoyed the situation.

"No use kicking now," Tom added philosophically; "daylight will come by and by. If you will agree to throw that old watch in the river we'll forgive you."

"Not much, but I'll fix it when I get back to camp. I know what ails it."

Gradually the boys grew good-natured again, and joked and chaffed the time away. They walked up and down the shore, ran foot races in the dark, and told stories. So the time passed more quickly than they thought.

"I see a streak in the east now, all right, without looking at a watch," said Beam, pointing toward the coming sunrise.

"And I'm sure I heard the whistle of a wing," cried Tom, getting into the blind; "best be ready."

"Yes, we'll see some in a minute," and Beam took his seat, followed by Tod and Jim.

Suddenly Beam inclined his head:

"Listen!"

All did so, and the sound of wings could be

heard distinctly, followed by a peculiar flutter.

"Whistlers," whispered Tom.

"Yes, they're golden eyes, all right," said Jim, "but I'm really afraid it's too dark to see the decoys."

"They're right out here over the river," whispered Beam.

"It's getting brighter in the east," said Tod.

Suddenly Beam rose to his feet and threw the gun to his shoulder. Two reports roared out, echoing and re-echoing in the still morning air.

"What is it? I didn't see a thing," cried Tom.

The others rose to their feet and a craning of necks followed.

"A pair of whistlers just swung over the decoys. I got one of them," Beam answered, dashing for the boat.

"That fellow can pretty near see ducks in the dark," said Tod admiringly, as the boat started tiny ripples on the glassy surface of the water.

"Hurry back," Tom called, "there'll be more in a minute."

"Decoys are all here," came back from Beam as he sent the boat toward the shore with quick, powerful strokes.

"I just caught a shadowy glimpse of that pair as they went over the decoys, and gave them one for luck," he explained as he came into the blind.

"I hear them going up the river," said Jim in a low tone.

"Yes, they're moving now. Keep your eyes peeled; we're liable to get a flock any minute."

It was now light enough so the decoys could be seen plainly. Perfectly motionless they sat upon the water, not the faintest ripple disturbing its mirror-like smoothness.

Suddenly there was the soft rustling of myriads of wings, and a cloud of bluebills swept down over their heads from the north, not fifty feet above them. It was a fascinating, nerve thrilling sight for the wild-fowler. Every one grasped his gun tighter and crouched low in the blind, but made no move to shoot. The boys knew their game would circle back.

"Here they come," whispered Beam, and a moment later the flock swung over the decoys.

Before they could drop into the water, the guns opened out, and such a charivari of popping and banging as followed, echoing and reverberating far down the Iowa bluffs!

When it was over, there were numerous ripples on the water where bluebills had splashed down to rise no more.

Tod propounded the first question that is always asked on such occasions:

"How many did we get?"

"Four, five, six, seven. I see seven," and Jim hurried to a boat.

"Wasn't that a beautiful flock; and they came

in so nicely," cried Tod, executing a war dance in his glee.

"One isn't dead yet," said Beam as Jim's gun pointed out over the water. A roar followed and a charge of shot cut across the water.

"All dead now."

"Hurry up, Jim. I see a flock coming up the river," Tod called excitedly.

The former worked with feverish haste and soon was sending the boat swiftly up along the shore to where it was kept, a few yards above the blind.

"You won't have time, Jim. Send her in shore and drop down in the boat. They're right on us, just over the water."

Jim obeyed and sank out of sight just as half a dozen big birds swung across the decoys.

Three puffs of smoke belched out and three ducks hit the water.

Three more, and another bird went down.

Jim arose in the boat. Two big brown-headed birds were passing him at close range.

His eyes gleamed and he uttered an exclamation as he threw the gun to his shoulder. Bang! and a duck splashed in the water. Bang! but the other went on. He worked the "corn-sheller" with lightning speed and swung it after the duck. At the report, the big duck dropped to the water and remained motionless.

"Hurrah for Jim and the corn-sheller!" cried Beam, and the boys threw up their hats.

"That was a nice trick to play on an orphan. Thought you would have that fun all to yourselves, didn't you?" Jim chuckled as he started out again to gather the ducks.

"A nice bunch of redheads, all right," cried Tod joyfully.

"Redheads nothing. They're canvasbacks, child," said Beam with a superior air.

"No. Is that so? I just caught a glimpse of them and supposed they were redheads. That's better yet."

Jim quickly gathered the six birds and hurried in.

"Lucky thing you were up in the boat, or we would have been short a pair of canvasbacks," Beam remarked, as he came into the blind.

"Hardly, my son. Had I been here, they would have all been killed over the decoys," said Jim, putting down his gun with an air of conviction.

"That's so, I didn't think of that," demurely.

"You want to think of it, for it's gospel."

"Here comes a flock, but they're too high to see the decoys," Tod said.

"Can't tell. Just keep hidden and trust to luck."

Suddenly the ducks caught sight of the decoys and decided to come down for a visit with their supposed relatives.

It is a fascinating sight and one not often seen, when a flock of wild-fowl takes that quick, head-

long plunge down to the water from a high altitude. There is a peculiar twisting of the bodies as they shoot almost straight downward until they are close to the surface of the water. Then a slight upward curve, and they continue on in a straight line.

"See them come down," cried Tod, in admiration at their graceful aerial movements.

"Doesn't take them long to get to the water," said Tom grimly, as they crouched in the blind.

"Now!" and four guns spoke almost together, as the ducks swept over the decoys.

Another volley followed, and then Jim turned loose his dogs of war. The birds had scattered and he caught sight of one climbing in the air. He fired, but the duck climbed higher. He threw in another shell, and sent a second charge up in the air. The duck continued to climb.

By this time the others were watching him with interest.

"Get him or break a hat-pin," cried Tod.

In desperation, Jim threw in his last shell when the duck was fifty yards up in the air. It was his last and luckiest shot. At the report the duck doubled up and dropped to the water with a loud "spat."

"Good shot, Jimmy, you chased him pretty near to the clouds," laughed Beam, as he started for the boat to retrieve the game.

"Six down, out in front, and that sky-scraper

that Jim paralyzed," said Tod, glancing over the decoys.

"Guess I'll take the other boat and help, I want to warm up," and Tom started out for the other boat.

It was well on toward sunrise now, a clear, fine morning giving promise of a fair day. The flight ceased for a short time, giving the young hunters an opportunity of warming the log, while they visited and watched for ducks.

Then the birds began to come again from all points of the compass. About nine o'clock, however, a light breeze sprang up from the south, and the flight seemed to have stopped for good.

"Guess our fun is about over for to-day," Beam remarked, scanning the air in the vain hope of seeing more wild fowl.

"Yes," said Tod, "let's go back to camp. I must take these ducks up and get them off to-day."

"Do you boys ship your ducks?" asked Tom.

"Yes, we're trying to do enough hunting and trapping to pay Beam's doctor's bill and expenses."

"Besides, I have a trained nurse, you know, and they're costly," said Beam, turning a quizzical glance toward Tod.

"Humph! Trained nurse! Here, Jim, is the only genuine trained nurse in captivity."

"Twenty-five a week?" asked Jim.

"Sure; and perquisites," Tod returned blandly.

"'Perquisites,' is good. I guess we better go to camp on that," and Jim picked up his gun and filed out of the blind, while the rest followed suit.

With the two boats, it only required about half an hour's work to pick up the decoys and cross over to camp.

"I'll just get a bite to eat and then start up with these ducks," said Tod as they landed.

"We'll help row you up," replied Tom, "and by the way, you boys take all these ducks except about half a dozen apiece for us. All we want is a mess; you may just as well ship the balance."

Beam started to protest, but Tom wouldn't listen.

"Jim and I want to do something toward helping you to get well, so we'll help pay the trained nurse;" looking gravely at Tod.

"Yes, I want to see that the nurse gets his money," Jim chimed in, as he stepped out of the boat.

So that deal was settled.

After lunch the ducks were loaded, six dozen of them, and the three boys seated themselves in Beam's boat with two pairs of oars, trailing the other boat behind.

"Keep on improving as you have, and you will be tough as a pine-knot by spring," said

Tom affectionately, as he shook hands with his old friend.

"Don't be too strenuous and catch cold," was Jim's advice as he grasped Beam's hand in a hearty clasp.

"No danger of that while I have a trained nurse, you know," laughed Beam.

"That's so. I forgot the trained nurse."

"We'll come down sometime this winter and have a rabbit and coon hunt with you," Tom called back as they pulled out.

"Sure. Don't forget it," returned Beam, watching them until they were far up the river. Then he went back to camp, cleaned the guns and did the other work, and then sat down to read and rest.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO STRANGER GUESTS

"**I**T was nearly sundown when Tod returned, for the days were getting short, showing that winter was at hand.

"You didn't make quite such a quick trip this time," said Beam, as the "trained nurse" landed.

"No, I was delayed one way and another; in luck to get here early as I did," Tod replied, as he tied the boat and they walked up to camp with the freight, for he always brought back about the same number of bundles and packages.

"Had quite a talk with your father," he remarked, throwing his load on the table in the cabin. "He wanted to know if Mr. Johnson had been back here yet."

"That was a queer question. I wonder who that man Johnson is?"

"I'll give it up. Your father asked me if we had been around over the island much. I told him we had been all over it at different times with the target rifle."

"He didn't say anything more, and then I told him about the crank that warned you about the island that day. He laughed and said it

was probably one of the sort of men that likes to stuff people with blood and thunder yarns. He said that years ago it used to be headquarters all along these bluffs for horse thieves, robbers, and outlaws, but they were cleaned out long ago. From his actions, I think he knows more than he tells. But we can't make him talk if he don't want to. One thing sure, he is satisfied the island's all right now, or he wouldn't let you stay down here."

"Did you mention those noises the night of the thunder-storm?"

"Yes, but he said he couldn't explain it. That if we couldn't find any signs next day of anything being on the island, the cries must have been imaginary, and that's about the size of it."

"I'll get him to tell me more about those old days sometime. Meanwhile, let's forget it. What's in this paper?"

Tod laughed.

"That's a present from Tom and Jim. They went to King & Hamer's and bought the finest porterhouse steak in the shop and sent it down. They said we must be tired of duck meat and this was for a change."

A suspicion of moisture crept into Beam's eyes, as he said:

"Two mighty kind-hearted boys, I'm telling you, Tod."

"Yes, sir. You can bank on them every time.

They had a jolly trip down here, too," said Tod, as he hung up his coat.

"Did Doc Hall have any more instructions?"

"No, just keep right on sleeping out in the tent. We must get up a good pile of stove wood, for one thing, before the snow and cold comes."

"Yes, and bank up the cabin; and the tent, too, for that matter."

"Do you really think you dare sleep in the tent when it gets below zero, with a foot or two of snow?"

Beam laughed.

"I'm not afraid to try it with plenty of blankets. Doc Hall seems to think it is the proper thing to do, and he ought to know. If we freeze up, we'll adjourn to the cabin and build a fire."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to move the tent up a little closer to the cabin?" Tod suggested.

"Probably it would. Then if a ten-foot snowbank piles up in the night, we can tunnel through to the cabin."

Those were busy days that followed.

The boys set out in earnest to do their "fall work" as they termed it. An ample store of wood was chopped and corded up for winter use.

The cabin was banked with earth and leaves so the wintry winds could not whistle under the floor. Then the tent was moved nearer and made snug and tight at the bottom, and a little trench

cut around it so the water would drain away instead of running under it.

Tod made another trip up home and brought back a pile of old rugs and bits of carpet. The floor of the tent was covered with a thick layer of dry, dead leaves, and over these the rugs and carpet were spread.

He also brought back plenty of reading matter, with bacon, flour and an ample store of provisions that would keep any length of time in cool weather.

For fresh meat, they depended on the guns to bag rabbits, squirrels, quail, ruffed grouse and other game. Their hunt with Tom and Jim ended the duck shooting season, as they knew it would from the lateness of the flight.

An occasional bunch of fish ducks whistled around the river, but the boys had little use for their rank flesh and let them alone.

As Tod remarked:

"We won't eat them as long as we can get muskrats and rubber boots."

Everything was finally shipshape for winter and the boys had nothing to do but row, walk, practice with the little target rifle and loaf, while waiting for a freeze up.

One calm, peaceful afternoon they were sitting upon the old log, indulging in that ever-fascinating pastime of watching the wide river, and talking when they felt like it.

"It won't be long now until the ice begins to run," Tod remarked, as he shied a pebble at a turtle head floating by, out in the current. The pebble made a splash about a foot from the black head, which took the hint and promptly disappeared.

"No, we'll soon see plenty of it," Beam rejoined with a yawn.

"Let her come. We're fixed for winter."

"We may be snowed in for three months," said Beam, laughing.

"I don't care. Let it snow."

"Who is this coming?" Beam straightened up and looked down the river.

"I'll give it up. A couple of fellows out for exercise, maybe."

A skiff containing two men worked up slowly against the stiff current.

"Wonder if they're going to land here?" mused Tod.

"Probably want to stay all night with us. They're edging over this way," Beam replied with a laugh.

"Stranger things than that have happened, my son."

"They're coming here, all right," said Beam in a low tone, as the boat headed for the landing.

A few minutes later it grated on the sand and the man in the stern called out:

"Can you tell us how far it is up to the next town?"

"About four miles," Tod replied.

"Is that so? It's farther than I thought. Are you good for four miles more this evening, Doc?" to his partner.

"No, I'm bushed. Can't row another stroke, until I rest a bit, anyhow," and the rower mopped his brow wearily.

"Let's land awhile and rest up, then we'll figure on it," returned the other cheerily, stepping out and pulling up the boat.

"Pretty hard work against this current," said Beam politely.

"We found that out," said the rower with a short laugh, as he unshipped the oars.

The two men walked up the bank and seated themselves upon the log.

They were well dressed and looked like business men. The man who had first spoken engaged the boys in conversation, and in a very short time had made a favorable impression. He was a good talker, with a magnetic, winning way, and before they had been there ten minutes, Beam invited them to remain all night on the island.

"We haven't much in the way of accommodations," he said apologetically, "but you are welcome to sleep on the floor in the cabin; I see you have blankets. We sleep in the tent."

"Thanks. What do you say, Doc? Shall we stay and go up in the morning when we are

fresh?" and the attractive man glanced at his companion.

"Yes, let's stay. I'm tired out."

"Then we accept your hospitality and thank you very much," with a cordial nod.

"No thanks are necessary. It is only a favor we would ask if our positions were reversed," said Beam simply.

"And the favor would be quickly granted, I assure you," returned the other pleasantly. "We have a lunch with us, so we do not need to bother you for food."

"We will help you out with some hot coffee, anyhow."

"We won't refuse that," laughed the stranger.

"It's getting late; I'll go in and stir up the fire," said Tod, rising from the log.

"And by the way, since we are to remain with you all night, it occurs to me that we had better give you our names, so you will know whom you are entertaining," continued the stranger. "Mine is Wrapp, and my friend is Doctor Minton; both of Chicago."

"Glad to know you, gentlemen. I am Beam Foster, and my friend is Tod Masters. I am living out here in the woods trying to regain my health, and my friend here is my 'trained nurse,'" said Beam with a smile.

"The doctor here is a great believer in outdoor life as a curative agent," returned Mr. Wrapp, looking at his friend.

"A very excellent prescription, but I should recommend higher ground," said the latter calmly; "the miasmatic influences of the low land along the river are quite prone to defeat the primary object of coming out in the forest, by impregnating the system with the fever virus, thereby weakening the whole physical structure."

"I didn't think anything about that part of it; my doctor told me it was a case of get out in the woods or die, and we came to the most convenient, secluded spot. I have been gaining right along since I came here."

"Oh, of course in some systems the fever does not easily get a foothold, but the danger is always present. How much longer do you intend to remain here?"

"I don't know. Until I am well, I suppose. Probably all winter."

"I should hardly recommend that course, but your physician undoubtedly understands the case, and you will be guided by his judgment," said Doctor Minton serenely.

Here Nibs came forward with a friendly wag of the tail, to claim recognition.

"A setter, eh?" and Mr. Wrapp patted the big head kindly.

"Yes, and he's a kind of nuisance now that the hunting season is over. We have traps set for mink and coon, and we have to watch that he doesn't get into them. We keep him chained

in the tent at night. If we don't, he is liable to chase rabbits and maybe get caught."

The short November afternoon drew to a close and Tod withdrew to prepare supper, while Beam chatted with their guests.

Mr. Wrapp was an excellent story teller and a pleasant conversationalist, and before the evening was far advanced both boys mentally wished their guests would remain a week.

But they grew drowsy very early, and finally Beam remarked:

"I don't know when I've been so sleepy, and it isn't late, either. I guess our row in the wind must have caused it."

"I can hardly keep my eyes open," said Tod with a yawn.

"Rowing in the wind does certainly tend to make a man sleepy," Mr. Wrapp agreed, with another yawn, "and I propose we all turn in."

His proposition suited everybody, so the blankets were unrolled and a bed arranged upon the cabin floor. Then with good-nights, Beam and Tod retired to the tent.

"They're the kind of fellows I like," Tod remarked as they were undressing, "jolly, friendly chaps, full of stories and jokes."

"Yes, especially that man Wrapp. I wish they could camp by us for a week. We'd have some jolly old times."

"Wouldn't we, though?"

"It's some fun to be out in the woods with men like those," Beam continued, "they're not a bit stuck up. Just everyday fellows, if they are from the city. I wish more of that kind of men would come out in the woods, instead of the fussy, cranky sort that's always finding fault and sticking up their noses at everything that isn't just nice."

"So do I. I'd gladly row a boat all day for a man like Wrapp, just to hear him talk and tell stories."

"Maybe we can persuade them to come out here again sometime. Get them up a dandy breakfast in the morning, and let them see how we live in the woods."

"I'll give them the best in the shop, you may be sure."

"Did you ever camp out with one of those cranky soreheads that's always finding fault with everything?" Beam asked, as he crawled under the blankets.

"Once, and I don't hanker for any more of it."

"I did twice, and I'd sooner have the seven year itch."

"So would I. But I'm sleepy and I want to get up early, and get those men a good breakfast," and Tod rolled over and in a few minutes was in the land of dreams.

Beam soon followed suit, and quiet reigned supreme over the island. For hours that quiet

continued. Then, shortly after the midnight hour, the hoot of an owl was heard at the upper end of the island.

A moment later the cabin door opened softly, and two forms stole out into the night. A few whispered words, and one of them silently disappeared in the darkness to the north. The other stood motionless as a statue by the corner of the cabin. Now it cast furtive glances toward the tent where Tod was snoring audibly, then peered impatiently into the darkness toward the upper end of the island.

A cool night breeze sprang up, sighing softly through the naked branches of the trees, causing the silent form to pull up the collar of its coat, and draw down its head like a turtle. Slowly the minutes went by. After a time, the figure, with an impatient gesture, glanced toward the tent and then began pacing slowly and silently to and fro by the side of the cabin.

An hour passed by, and still the silent, measured tread continued. Then the night breeze died away, and the sighing branches were still once more. Suddenly the pacing form stopped and listened. Presently a slight crackling of brush was heard, and a moment later another figure came out of the darkness. A few whispered words, and both disappeared in the cabin and closed the door.

Beam and Tod slept on, utterly unconscious of this little drama.

It was after daylight when Beam awoke, yawned and stretched.

"Gee! wonder if I've overslept. Come, Tod! Roll out and start breakfast."

Tod rolled over sleepily and looked at his watch. "I should say! It's getting late. I'm due to start breakfast right now," and he sprang up and began dressing.

"I don't know when I've slept that way; actually slept so long my head aches a little," said Beam, hurrying into his clothes.

"That's the way you ought to sleep every night, instead of dozing with one eye open," said Tod, as he finished dressing.

"Wonder if our lodgers slept that way?" Beam remarked.

"Probably. They had a hard row against the current," replied Tod, as he stepped out and rapped on the cabin door.

"Come in," was the cheerful response, and Tod opened the door and stepped in.

He found Mr. Wrapp yawning and dressing, while Dr. Minton was dressed and rolling up the blankets.

"Excuse me for intruding, but this is our kitchen," Tod laughed apologetically.

"Good morning. Don't mention it. I guess we all slept like dogs last night," said Mr. Wrapp, yawning again.

"Beam and I did, I know. We didn't know a thing till six-thirty."

"Bless me, is it that late? Let's go down to the river and wash the sleep out of our eyes, Doc," and the two men walked down to the bank, while Tod built a fire and started breakfast.

"Sorry you gentlemen must leave so soon," said Beam with genuine regret, as they were refreshing themselves with bacon and eggs and coffee.

"Yes, so am I. Wish we could stay a week," returned Mr. Wrapp cordially, "but we are only out on a short vacation and it's up to-morrow, so we must get back to Chicago."

"Do you have good duck shooting here?" asked Dr. Minton.

"Yes, we had fine shooting earlier in the fall, and we generally get a good spring flight," Beam replied.

"I am a great lover of duck shooting. It is just possible we may be able to get out in the spring and have a hunt with you; that is, if you remain on the island till then."

"We'll be glad to have both of you come," replied Beam, his face lighting up with pleasure. "If we stay all winter, we shall remain until the spring flight is over."

"Thank you. If we are in this part of the country, we will probably come," was the reply, as they arose from the table.

Shortly after, their new friends departed, and Beam and Tod were once more alone.

"Sorry to have them go," said Beam regretfully, watching the receding boat.

"Yes, so am I. They're mighty good company."

"We may see them again in the spring," Beam rejoined hopefully, as they went back to the cabin to clean up the morning work.

A few days later there was a sharp cold snap, and ice began to drift in the river. The cakes increased in size and thickness, and in a day or two the river was frozen over. Beam gained in health, strength and weight every day; and eat! he fairly rivaled Tod at his best. In fact, Tod offered to give up the medal.

"Pooh, I don't eat half what you do," Beam retorted in reply to Tod's insinuation, one cold morning in December, when they were storing away an unusually large supply of bacon, eggs, buckwheat cakes, coffee and other dainties.

"You put up a mighty good imitation," said Tod, helping himself to his tenth cake.

"Of course; anybody would eat, living out in this cold air, with the exercise we have. But when you come to talk of me eating as much as you do, why that is too wild a stretch of the imagination."

"Oh, I don't know. One sure thing: if your appetite continues to improve the way it has lately, I'll have to go up and see Doc Hall about getting something to check it."

Beam laughed.

"Wouldn't Doc chuckle if he could be here once at meal time! He knows I haven't eaten enough the last two years to keep a sparrow."

"You ought to have done this a year or two ago. Maybe that fall on the bridge was a blessing in disguise, for it sent you out in the woods where you ought to be."

"Probably it was; looks that way now."

"Do you know," pursued Tod, "I've about concluded that a person can cure most any disease, if he will just throw away his medicine and come out in the woods and hustle around and fish and row and hunt."

"You're a trained nurse, you ought to know," said Beam, his face wrinkling in a smile at Tod's earnestness. "Why don't you write an article embodying those ideas and send it to the magazines?"

"For eleven reasons," Tod returned promptly. "The first is, I would soon have the doctors after me, and the other ten are, I don't just know how to write articles. If we cure you up, I'll be satisfied."

"By the way, not to change the subject, hadn't we better cut a hole in the ice somewhere and catch a mess of fish for a change of diet? I imagine they would taste good again."

"Yes, I've been thinking of it, myself. And by the way," and Tod's face took on an amused

smile, "I notice Dutch John and the Ropers haven't been over so often since we took up our trot-line."

"Oh, they are like everybody else, glad to do favors when there is a show of getting some in return. That's human nature. Still we can't complain of them. They've been very kind to us."

"I wonder if any of them have seen that strange light since?"

"Probably not, or we would have heard of it before this," replied Beam, his mind reverting to his own experience. Then the impulse seized him to tell Tod the whole affair, and he said:

"Tod, I have a confession to make."

"Out with it. Been killing somebody?"

"Not quite as bad as that."

And Beam told the whole story, of that restless night's paddle in the canoe, and the lights and the silent boat.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" asked Tod, trying to assume an injured air.

"I was afraid you'd laugh at me. What do you think of it?"

"I think it was some fishermen or hunters who landed there a minute on some errand or other."

"But why were they so quiet about it?"

"Just a coincidence; probably tired or didn't feel like talking. The middle of the night isn't

conducive to much conversation, as we know."

"Maybe you're right. I was restless and nervous enough that night to see anything."

"Why didn't you tell Dutch John and Roper, and compare notes?"

"Oh, I didn't more than half think it amounted to anything, so I let it drop and forgot it."

"Just as well," Tod said, as he finished his breakfast.

CHAPTER XIV

TRAPPING

“**I**T strikes me,” Tod remarked, as he was putting their cabin in order, “it’s late enough in the season to set our traps.”

“Yes, I’ve been thinking of it for several days,” Beam agreed, “and I don’t know but we might as well start in to-day. How many traps did we bring?”

“Eighteen, if I remember right. They’re in that old box in the corner, with the other junk.”

“Let’s get them out and see what we have.”

“All right. We might as well be setting our traps as anything else. We’ve got to put in the time at something,” with which philosophic remark Tod followed his partner into the shanty.

Beam soon unearthed the traps and piled them out on the floor, while Tod sorted and counted them.

“A dozen No. 1’s and six No. 0’s,” the latter commented as he surveyed the assortment, “and they all seem to be healthy and ready for business. I like those little 0 traps,” he continued, picking one up, “they’re so easy and handy to set.” He held the trap out in his hand and gripped the spring with his fingers.

"Can you do it, son?" queried Beam, with a cynical grin.

"Of course I can." Tod compressed the spring with the grip of his right hand until the jaws dropped, and then with the other hand he deftly lifted the pan and set the trigger.

"Quite a muscular chap, for a small boy. Wonder if I can do it."

Tod snapped the trigger and handed the trap to Beam.

"Don't know whether my grip muscles have got back their old strength or not. If they haven't, they will by spring." Taking the trap he duplicated Tod's feat, although it took every ounce of his strength to do it.

"You're coming on all right, partner. I didn't think you could do it," cried Tod heartily, slapping Beam on the shoulder.

"I was dubious about it, myself," confessed Beam, throwing the trap on the floor; "but wait till I row about a thousand miles," and he doubled his arm and felt of the biceps muscles.

"And walk another thousand," commented Tod.

"Yes, easy. I'll walk that distance in running the traps this winter."

"Well, let's get a move on us and set them to-day," said Tod briskly. "I think we had better go over on the Illinois side and set most of them on rat houses."

"I suppose so. Muskrats will be our main

catch, with a sprinkling of mink, coon, and perhaps a skunk now and then."

"Better take the guns and a lunch," suggested Tod; "no telling when we'll get back."

"Of course. We might need the guns to shoot something for bait."

"Come on, then, let's be off. I'll take the traps down to the boat and you fix up a lunch."

"I guess a couple of slices of bread and butter and jam will be all we'll need on this trip," said Beam, as Tod gathered up the traps.

"Yes, that's enough. Might put an apple or two in our pockets, though," added Tod, as he went out with the traps.

In a few minutes everything was ready and in the boat.

"I'll row across," Beam said. "I want the exercise."

"All right, me Lud. You have my permission." So Tod climbed into the stern seat, and Beam took his seat at the oars.

"It won't be long before we'll have to walk across the old creek to run our traps," Tod observed, as Beam rapidly lessened the distance to the Illinois shore.

"No, it won't be long now. Although it depends somewhat on the kind of winter we have."

"Had we better go down to Mink Lake?" Tod asked, as the boat grated on the shore.

"No, I rather think we had better try Goose Lake first. There are more rat houses that we

can reach with our hip boots, as the water is shallow around the shores, and we have no boat over here, you know. Later on, when it freezes up, we can reach all of them."

"That's so," admitted Tod as they climbed out, "I forgot Goose Lake."

"Keep your eye out for mink holes," Beam said, as they started through the woods.

"We might set a few of the traps along the bank of Pin Oak Run," Tod suggested, ducking under a limb. "We might pick up a mink or two that way."

"We'll see what the show is for rats around Goose Lake first," Beam answered. "Rats are a sure thing, and mink ain't."

"I know. But a mink counts when you do get one," was Tod's wise rejoinder.

They were half-way to the lake and walking along the bank of a little dry swale, when Tod suddenly cried:

"Look yonder!"

"What is it?" Beam asked, looking around sharply.

"A mink, sure as shooting," and Tod dashed ahead, the traps jingling as he ran.

Beam hurried after, and thirty yards ahead caught up with him standing by the root of an old tree.

"Are you sure it was a mink?" Beam inquired anxiously.

"Of course I am," Tod replied triumphantly.

"He was making for this hole, and he's in here right now."

"Good enough. I'll show you how to set a trap for mink, according to Hoyle," Beam said with a superior air, setting his gun against a tree.

"Go ahead and let's see some of your fine work."

Beam selected a spot just outside the mouth of the hole and scooped a small shallow depression with his hands. Then he took one of the small "O" traps, and setting it, placed it in the depression so the jaws were just level with the ground.

"Cut a stake," he ordered. "You've got the hatchet."

In a few minutes Tod returned with the stake and Beam put it through the ring of the trap, driving it in the ground the length of the chain to one side of the runway. Then he deftly covered the chain with leaves, twigs, etc., so that it resembled the surroundings and would not attract attention. Next the trap was lightly covered with fine dry earth, and the space under the pan was made clear and free from dirt, so that the pan could drop when stepped on. Then he stood off and surveyed his work.

"Everything proper, now?" asked Tod.

Beam shook his head.

"Not yet, my child. And I can't finish it the way I want to until we come back. I'll just put this on temporarily, in case minky should come

out while we're gone. While we're at the lake, we must shoot a mud-hen or a 'poke' or something else that wears feathers, and when we come back this way, we'll make it look like a poultry yard around here."

As Beam talked, he pulled a duck's head from the game pocket of his hunting coat, and sharpening a stick at both ends, he impaled the duck's head on one end and pushed the other end in the sloping bank, so that, at an angle of forty-five degrees, the bait was about eighteen inches above the carefully-concealed trap.

"There, I think that will do for the present. Let's get over and see how many muskrat runs we can reach by wading."

"S'pose he'll come out before we get back?" wondered Tod as they journeyed on.

"I hardly think so. But you can't tell what the little rascals will do. It depends somewhat on how frightened they are when they run in or how attractive the inside of the hole is."

They reached the lake without further ado, and Beam said, as they eased down their load:

"Here's one rat house close to the edge. No trouble to reach that."

The furry little builders had cut down a circle of reeds several rods in diameter to furnish material for their winter home. And this particular family had built so near shore that there was barely water enough to fill their runs, and

much of the ground was exposed around the house.

"I'll be setting the traps and you take your gun and pick up a mud-hen or duck or something for bait," said Beam, picking up a trap.

"That ought to be easy to do around here," replied Tod, taking his gun and sauntering down the lake.

The water being shallow, Beam set the trap in the run at the edge of the dome-shaped pile of rushes, in about six inches of water. Then he slowly walked up the bank to the north, looking for more runs and houses. He found several houses along the shore, where the water was shallow, and easily reached with hip boots. When near the north end he heard two shots on the opposite side of the lake, and surmised that Tod was getting busy. He was just wading out to a rat house with a trap in his hand, when, to his great chagrin, a pair of mallards hopped up not twenty-five yards away and with quacks of derision at his helplessness went sailing leisurely down the lake. It was no use kicking. His gun was up on the bank, and he could only think what he would have done if they had jumped up a moment sooner.

He had gotten around to the other side of the lake before he met Tod.

"What did you find? I heard your old gun bark a couple of times."

"A mud-hen and a mallard," Tod replied, setting down his gun. "How many traps did you set?"

"Eight, so far. Are there many houses near shore, down this side?"

"I noticed quite a number. But the main bunch we can't reach till it freezes up." Tod was casting longing eyes at the numbers of muskrat houses out in the deeper water.

"Never mind. They'll keep. Did you have any trouble wading across the run at the south end?"

"No, it's only about knee deep."

"Here, take my gun. You've been up this side, so there won't be anything to shoot. The traps are enough for me to carry," said Beam, handing over his gun.

They found places for six more traps around the lake and then started back through the timber.

"Isn't it getting about lunch time?" Tod inquired anxiously.

"I don't know. Hadn't thought of it," replied Beam absently, taking out his watch. "Yes, it's a quarter after eleven. We'll just have time to go over and put the finishing touches on my mink trap."

"I doubt if you get him. He may be out and gone by this time," said Tom skeptically, taking a hasty survey about him.

"Yes, and then again he may not. You chased him into that hole, and the chances are he will stay there awhile."

They soon reached the spot and found the bait and everything as they left it.

"Don't make any more tracks around the hole than you have to and I'll fix things in a minute," said Beam in a low tone. "I'll cover the trap and chain with mallard feathers and tempt him with a fresh head."

"All right. Go ahead, and I'll take a seat in the parquet," replied Tod, walking over to an old log a short distance away.

Beam plucked some feathers from the mallard and nicely covered the trap and chain. Then he sprinkled a few more feathers around the mouth of the hole in a haphazard way. Lastly, he cut off the mallard's head and put it on the stick in place of the old one.

"There, I think that will do," he said, surveying his work with a satisfied air. "If Mr. Mink don't get caught it won't be our fault."

"Come on, then, and let's eat our lunch. I'm hungry," called Tod.

"We'd better get a little farther away from the hole," warned Beam, walking over to where Tod sat.

"Just as you say."

Forty rods down in the timber, Tod dropped on a convenient log.

"He can't smell us here. I'm going to chew," and half a minute later he was cutting crescents in a slice of bread and butter and jam.

"Let's see. We have three more traps to set," mused Beam, as they ate. "I suppose we may as well set these along Pin Oak Run, as you suggested. We might pick up a mink or coon."

"Yes, so long as there aren't any more rat houses handy, I think that's the best scheme."

"Wish now I had brought another dozen traps," said Beam reflectively. "These are all the old ones I could find in the barn. A couple of years ago, you know, I trapped most all the fall and winter, running the traps mornings and evenings and Saturdays."

"Yes, I remember you did. Did you get any mink then?" asked Tod, vigorously assaulting his last slice of bread and butter.

"Two or three. Old Jim Barney told me how to circumvent them. By the way, did I ever tell you my first experience in setting a trap for muskrats?"

"No, what was it?"

Beam chuckled at the remembrance.

"I was about twelve years old then. A family of rats built a couple of houses in that little swale down back of the house that fall. I was skating around there one day all by myself, when it suddenly occurred to me that there was an old trap in the barn and I might catch a muskrat. I got the trap and went back to the pond and

began to figure on how to set it. I had never seen a trap set for rats, but down one side of the biggest house was a long slide, which seemed to me their place to slide down hill. I couldn't quite figure how they got out from under the ice to do the slide act, but they must do it, for there was the slide and it had been used. After scratching my head over it for a while I finally decided they must have some mysterious way of performing the feat, and set my trap about half-way down the slide. I staked her down good and strong and went home, feeling sure I would have a muskrat next morning. Think of it," and Beam chuckled again.

"Bright boy," murmured Tod.

"Queer it never occurred to me that muskrats did their sliding down hill in the fall before it froze up. But that idea never entered my head."

"How long did you let it set there, before you took a tumble?" queried Tod; "all winter?"

"No, that's where the joke comes in," laughed Beam. "When I went down next morning to see what I had caught, I found that somebody had pulled out the stake and taken the trap."

"Probably somebody came along who thought anyone, fool enough to set a trap half-way down a muskrat slide in the middle of the winter, hadn't ought to be trusted with a trap."

"I don't know what they thought, but I know

I never got my trap back. The next year I got acquainted with old Jim Barney, and he let me go round with him sometimes to run his traps. The most I know about trapping I got from him."

"A queer old chap, Jim was. I wonder what became of him."

"I don't know. He went north on a trapping expedition, over a year ago, and I have never heard from him since. One of the best hearted souls that ever lived," Beam added, "but he was called shiftless and lazy because he would sooner trap and hunt than work."

"Well, I guess they sized him up about right." Tod had by this time finished his last bit of bread and jam, which he must have thoroughly enjoyed, judging from the way he smacked his lips.

"Say, I don't believe I ever knew how good bread and butter and jam tastes," he said.

"Anything tastes good out in the woods," said Beam sagely. "Now we'll go and set the rest of these traps and then go home; come on."

"I hate to stir around much, right after such a hearty meal." With this facetious remark, Tod shouldered his gun and followed Beam.

It was only a short distance to the little run and they were soon there.

"I suppose it's all right to set them anywhere along the bank near the water?" said Tod, as they stood surveying the shallow little rivulet.

"Better put them under an old log or an overhanging bank or some such protected place," replied Beam contemplatively.

A short distance down the stream they found an ideal spot under a shelving bank near the water and here Beam set one of the traps almost exactly as he had the first one. The other two were set about forty rods apart, farther down the stream, and then they started for camp.

"We're just as likely to get a coon in these three traps as we are a mink," said Tod as they left the stream.

"I'm not very sanguine on either. It depends somewhat on how plentiful they are. I'll bring over some dope to-morrow and fix these traps for coon."

"What kind of dope have you got?" asked Tod.

"Oh, it's something old man Barney gave me before he went north. It's in a little bit of a bottle the size of your little finger. Some kind of an oil—oil of anise, I believe—and I don't know what else. You just rub a drop on the under side of the pan when you set the trap, and Barney said the first coon that came along would stick his paws in the trap feeling for the bait."

"Gee, if it works that way, we ought to get a lot of coon if they're in the woods," cried Tod excitedly. "Why didn't you bring it along?"

"Forgot I had it till I was setting the last trap. Then I remembered that I packed it up and brought it along. I'll bring it over to-morrow when we run the traps."

"I hope it works, don't you?" Tod's eyes were fairly glistening at the thoughts of a big pile of coon skins.

"Of course I do. But we won't build any air castles till we see how it works. It may be like lots of other sure things—nothing but a fake."

"But Barney wouldn't lie about it," protested Tod.

"I know he wouldn't; but he might get fooled. He didn't say whether he had ever caught any coon with it or not. Just said that was the way it worked. He might have got it from some fakir. However, we'll know after we try it," said Beam philosophically.

They were about half-way to the boat and walking quietly through the woods, when Beam suddenly stopped. He stared up into a tree a moment and then said in a half whisper:

"Well, I'll be switched!"

"What is it?" whispered Tod, all attention in a moment.

Beam pointed up into a tree ahead and said quietly:

"Look up there."

Tod looked in the direction indicated and, after a moment, whispered:

"Well, wouldn't that beat you!"

The cause of their astonishment was apparent. High up in the crotch of an oak tree, just ahead, sat a big coon. He was looking over toward the Iowa bluffs and his back was partly toward them. Evidently he had not heard their approach. There he sat quietly taking his afternoon siesta, oblivious to the nearness of his hereditary foe. It was a picture for an artist.

"Can you reach him from here?" whispered Tod.

"I don't know. It's a pretty long shot and my shells are loaded with number sixes. Maybe I can get a few steps nearer before he hears us."

Beam slipped the safety on his gun and, softly as a panther, stole forward, while Tod stood like a statue watching the performance.

He saw Beam diminish the distance step by step until he was in fair range. Suddenly he saw the coon turn its head this way and that in an uneasy manner. Evidently it scented danger.

Tod was on nettles in an instant. "Why don't he shoot?" he whispered to himself. Then he saw Beam quietly raise the gun to his shoulder and, a second later, a sharp report rang out. It was a lucky shot. The coon sat motionless for a second, then the head dropped forward and an instant later the big fellow came

whirling down and struck the ground with a thump. The close-shooting choke bore had done its work.

"Good shot!" cried Tod, jumping up and down in sheer delight; adding triumphantly, as he picked up the quarry, "Our first pelt. We'll ornament the outside of the shanty with his epidermis."

Beam walked up and sized up the coon with a satisfied look.

"'Ornament' is good, but don't you think 'decorate' sounds better?"

"Perhaps it's a 'more tenderer word,' Sammy," said Tod with a droll look, as they started on.

Upon reaching camp the coon was skinned and its pelt soon "decorated" one side of the cabin.

The next morning, eager to know their first catch, the boys hurried across the river soon after breakfast, Beam taking the "dope" with him.

The traps along the run were found undisturbed, but, to Beam's great satisfaction, a mink was in the trap by the hole. Then they hurried over to Goose Lake, where eight muskrats were taken from the traps. These traps were reset and they returned to camp.

The remainder of the day was spent in skinning, fleshing, and stretching the pelts. Tod was eager to know if the "coon dope" worked,

so the next morning he hurried through with the breakfast and headed the procession for the landing. Beam warned him not to put too much confidence in the stuff, even if it did come from Barney. But as they approached Pin Oak Run, Tod could not conceal his impatience. He tiptoed to the top of the bank near the first trap and peered over.

A second later, he let out a war whoop and fairly yelled:

"It worked! We got a coon! We got a coon!" And down over the bank he went like a shot. When Beam reached the spot, Tod had the coon vanquished and out of the trap.

"It worked, all right," he cried, panting from his run and shuffling about gleefully.

"Looks that way," admitted Beam quietly, but with an inward feeling of satisfaction.

"Wonder if we've got a coon in every trap?" Tod picked up the coon and started on, impatient to know.

"Hardly," replied Beam briefly, following more leisurely.

To Tod's disappointment all the other traps were undisturbed except the muskrat traps. They took out six rats and returned to camp.

During the days and weeks that followed, Tod's visions of a big coon catch received a severe jolt. They didn't catch another coon for three weeks and then only one was picked up. Another long interval of "coonless" days followed,

until Tod's faith in the "dope" was materially lessened.

But the muskrat catch was fairly steady, and occasionally a mink was gathered in. Of course, they frequently changed the location of the traps. They aimed to run them every day, unless off on a hunting jaunt or preparing the camp for winter. When the ice formed a bridge over the Mississippi, they made the entire circuit of the traps on foot, and the long walks in the crisp air did Beam a world of good.

It was their intention to keep the traps out all winter until the breaking up of the river, in order that when spring came they might have a collection of fur large enough to aid materially in paying the expenses of their long outing.

CHAPTER XV

A SNOWSTORM AND WHAT IT BROUGHT

THE short days glided swiftly by. The boys were busy at something most of the time. When the weather was excessively cold, or very boisterous and stormy, they stayed in the cabin and played checkers, chess, or read from well-worn books.

On the tenth of January the temperature went to twelve below zero for the first time, yet they slept in the tent, warm and snug under a pile of blankets. Dr. Hall had sent down a thermometer with the request that they take a record every day in a little book—a duty that Beam faithfully performed.

The boys were not the least bit lonely or homesick. Of course, they had both loved the woods from childhood, and that helped them wonderfully.

In the middle of January occurred a wild storm. Like all great snowstorms, it came on slowly and methodically. It came up so slowly, in fact, that the boys paid little attention to it; for several hours, at least. First there was a gradual decrease in the brightness of the sun. Then a light haze crept up. This was followed

by a darkening of the horizon in the north. A little later, the wind began to moan softly through the trees. A sort of weird, uncanny feeling was in the air as the darkening increased. Then the boys began to "sit up and take notice."

It was along in the middle of the afternoon, now. They walked out to the river bank, and Beam, after taking a survey of the heavens, shook his head and remarked:

"I don't like the looks of things. It has the earmarks of an old-fashioned northeaster."

"It has, for a fact. I hadn't paid any attention to it before. It's getting black up north as a thunder-cloud. I'll get a big pile of wood in the cabin to-night, so if we get snowed in, we won't freeze."

"Yes, it's well to provide for an emergency. One can't tell what a storm like this will do, and we can make ourselves comfortable at least."

"Suppose you dare sleep in the tent to-night?"

"Oh, I guess so. We can tell better by eight or nine o'clock."

"I'll go and get the wood in right now," said Tod, starting for the wood-pile. A moment later he was cheerfully whistling over his task.

About five o'clock a few feathery flakes made their appearance. These gradually increased until by the time night had closed in, a raging, driving snowstorm was in progress.

The cabin, sheltered by the trees and dense underbrush, was not affected much by the wind,

and the snow sifted down softly as bits of cotton. But down the wide river, the wind had a fair sweep, and there the storm was a howling demon. It shrieked and roared, driving the snow before it like chaff.

The boys walked out to the river bank once, but they did not remain long.

"Excuse me," shouted Tod, taking a run for shelter, "I don't want any of that pie. I prefer the cabin."

"You seem to be pretty wise this evening," called Beam, racing after him.

"I pity anybody who has to be out in this tonight," Tod said with a shiver, when they were in by the fire.

"This isn't bad. I'd rather enjoy it," replied Beam, who was of a more adventurous nature.

"It might be all right for a little while, but after this driving snow cut your face for an hour or so, you'd sing a different tune; eh, Nibs? Wake up and give us your opinion!"

Nibs raised his tail and struck the floor two or three resounding thumps, but still remained stretched out on his side; he didn't even raise his head. Nibs was getting lazy and fat.

"Is it chess or checkers this evening?" Tod asked as he put more wood in the stove.

"Chess. I want to see if I can't get the right combination on that Evans gambit."

Fifteen minutes later they were deep in the mysteries of chess, while Nibs slept on, dreaming

possibly of snipe and ducks and the fall hunt.

Outside the storm roared on, and the snow whirled and eddied. But inside the little cabin all was peace and warmth. Chess is not a talkative game, and sometimes for half an hour not a word was spoken.

It was along toward nine o'clock, for one forgets the lapse of time in that game.

"Check," Tod called with a note of triumph.

"Hm! That looks a little bilious," his adversary admitted, surveying the situation with dubious thoughtfulness.

Tod leaned back and yawned.

"Listen to that wind out on the river, will you."

"Yes. Quite a wind," Beam answered abstractedly, as he studied the situation.

Tod laughed. He knew Beam hadn't heard the wind for some time.

"It will bother you to get out of that, without losing your queen."

Ere Beam could answer, Nibs raised his head and growled. Following the growl came heavy raps on the door.

The boys sprang up, and Tod hastily put away the chess-board while Beam answered the rap.

As he opened the door, a man staggered in and fell on the threshold.

Nibs leaped up barking and growling, and started toward the stranger.

"Go back and lie down," called Beam, emphasizing his commands with a gentle kick.

Nibs obeyed unwillingly, growling under his breath.

"Help get this man inside, Tod. It's evidently somebody the storm has done up."

"I can get up alone," said the stranger, staggering to his feet and looking around in a dazed way.

Beam suppressed an exclamation of astonishment. It was the man with the scar on his cheek who had given him the warning some weeks before.

Although brave as a lion and not the least bit superstitious, Beam shivered a little in spite of himself. That the wild storm and the uncanny stranger should come at the same time, seemed a queer coincidence. Then he shook himself to rights, and was his old cool self again.

"Have a stool by the fire," said Tod hospitably.

"Thank you. I've been out in this storm ever since it started, and I'm about played out," and the man sat down heavily.

"Bad night to be out," said Tod civilly.

"Yes, and I've been around this island twice since dark. The last trip I was about played out when I saw your light," replied the stranger, spreading his hands before the stove as though he had made no unusual statement.

Beam and Tod gave each other a hasty glance, but said nothing.

Nibs lay upon the floor, his nose between his paws, and one eye canted up toward the strange man suspiciously.

Suddenly the latter said:

"I feel sick and dizzy. May I lie upon the floor?"

"Certainly. Lie on this bit of rug by the stove. It's the best we have here," and Beam sprang to assist him.

"I'll go out in the tent and get a pillow. We have an extra one," said Tod, bolting out into the storm. When he returned, Beam had the man down on the rug, and Tod slipped the pillow under his head.

"Do you want anything?" Beam asked kindly.

"Got any whiskey?"

"We have a little bottle that we always keep for just such emergencies as this," said Tod, going to a shelf in the corner where reposed numerous vials of various sizes, and taking down an eight-ounce bottle, two-thirds full.

The stranger raised his head, took two or three large swallows, and sank back upon the pillow with closed eyes.

Beam laid a hand on his forehead.

"He has a high fever, Tod."

"What in the world can we do? We haven't a thing to give him."

"I don't see anything we can do now. He

ought to have a doctor, of course, but we never could find our way in this storm."

Tod went over to the shelf again.

"Here's cough syrup and olive oil and cascara and ammonia, and a few other things, but no fever medicine."

"The fever may be just temporary from exposure," said Beam; then in a low tone, "he seems to be asleep."

For nearly an hour the boys sat there in silence, Tod occasionally replenishing the fire. Their strange charge remained quiet, apparently in a deep sleep. Presently he began to grow restless and babble unintelligibly for the most part. Sometimes the watchers caught a word or part of a sentence. Presently they made out from his incoherent talk: "Won't trust me; nice way to treat a pal; I'll get even with you fellows." Then his voice sank and he fell to mumbling to himself again.

Beam and Tod again exchanged glances. This was growing interesting, and both boys strained their ears to catch any further words that would enlighten them as to the man's identity. But he sank into a stupor and breathed heavily.

Outside, the storm continued to rage with unabated fury. Inside, two sorely perplexed boys sat and watched and wondered what to do.

Suddenly the stranger sat up and glared around.

"I may just as well get even with you fellows right here," and with these words, he pulled a big revolver and pointed it at Tod. The latter owed his life to the fact that Beam was quick-witted and supple.

Like a flash he sprang forward and struck up the revolver, and a bullet whizzed over Tod's head and buried itself in the logs above. Before it could be fired again, Beam seized the gun and wrenched it from his grasp.

"Oh, ho! that's your game," the man cried angrily, and another revolver flashed out.

It was a case of prompt action or death, and both boys hurled themselves upon the deranged man, forced him to the floor and held him there with a grip of steel. He writhed and twisted in his efforts to get free and reach his gun, but in vain. Lucky for Beam, he had about recovered his old-time strength.

After a few moments' struggling, the stranger quieted down again. But the boys did not relax their hold or their vigilance. Not knowing what shape his vagary might take next, every nerve and muscle was strung to the highest tension.

But he seemed to have exhausted himself with that one wild effort. His head dropped upon the pillow and he breathed heavily again. The boys felt cautiously around his body for more weapons, but none were found. The two revolvers were put out of his reach, but they continued to watch him narrowly. For fifteen

minutes he remained in the same state, then suddenly his breath came in quick spasmodic gasps; the hands clenched tightly and the head was thrown back. Then a rattling gasp and a gurgle, and he was still.

"Is he dead?" whispered Tod in an awed voice.

"Yes, he has shot his last man," said Beam quietly, rising to his feet.

"What do you think about it?" Tod asked as he put more wood on the fire, and softly stroked Nibs, whose bristles were still raised. For the old dog at the beginning of the struggle had sprung forward to help, growling and barking, but was sternly ordered back by his master, who knew he would only be in the way.

"I think he is some fellow who has belonged to a band of cutthroats, but got off in the upper story, and was let out of the band and ignored by his former pals."

"That seems a reasonable explanation, from the way he talked and acted," said Tod thoughtfully, then he shivered; "I don't want any more experiences like that, right away."

"No, nor I, either," said Beam, glancing down at the cold, ashen face and the slowly stiffening form, "poor fellow, he may be more to be pitied than blamed," and then respectfully covered the form with a blanket.

Slowly the hours dragged by. Shortly before daylight Tod put the coffee pot on the stove.

During the long vigil they had arranged for Tod to go up the bluff to Mr. Meister's and get him to take the body to town where, of course, an inquest would be held.

The storm had continued all during the night, but about daylight the snow ceased to fall, and although the wind was still blowing, it was not so wild and boisterous.

The dead man was moved away from the stove to the further corner of the room, and Tod, after refreshing himself with hot coffee, prepared for his journey.

"I don't know how badly the bluff road is drifted," said Beam, "but I guess you can get up it afoot. It's a question whether John can get down it with a team or not."

"If he can't, we'll have to carry the body to the top of the bluff on a litter."

"Don't say anything to him about what this man said."

Tod nodded and started through the soft snow in his rubber hip boots.

It was an hour and a half before he returned. Then to Beam's great relief he saw him coming through the woods accompanied by "Dutch" John and two other men.

"Vell, vell, Peamy. I hear you haf bad tings happen," and the honest old farmer grasped Beam's hand, as he stamped the snow from his heavy boots.

"Yes, rather a sad catastrophe. Good morn-

ing, Mr. Roper. Good morning, Mr. Jordan. Come in and get warm."

"Oh, it not cold yet." Then John dropped his voice: "We not get down mit de team, so we bring boards."

"That will have to do, then. Can you get to town with the team?"

"I think so," spoke up Mr. Jordan, "it's a north and south road and won't be drifted so bad."

"Tod, I suppose you'll have to go with them, to tell the authorities how it happened. See father and tell him the whole thing, and I guess they will let you come back with John."

"Yes, I'd better go. I'll get back to-day somehow, if I have to walk."

"You no valk. You ride mit me," said Mr. Meister earnestly.

A little later, and all that was mortal of the stranger was carefully placed upon a litter and borne through the woods upon the shoulders of the four men.

Beam breathed a sigh of relief when they had gone. It was not very cheerful, living in one room with a strange corpse. Small wonder he felt relieved.

He cooked himself some breakfast and then swept and aired out the cabin. Then he went out and made a path to the river bank.

The sun was peeping out through the clouds, showing that the storm was over. There was

at least a foot of snow in the timber, where it had fallen straight down instead of drifting.

About eight o'clock Beam began to get drowsy. He brought blankets in from the tent, made a bed on the floor and was soon in a deep sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

A COON HUNT

IT was afternoon when Beam awoke. Yawning and stretching, he folded up the blankets, muttering:

“Tod will be in luck if he gets back to-night, I suppose.”

He stirred up the fire, ate a lunch and sat down to read. Gradually the wind subsided, the clouds rolled away, and by the middle of the afternoon the sun was shining brightly.

About half-past four Beam began to prepare supper, saying half aloud:

“I’ll cook enough for Tod, anyhow. He will get back if they don’t hold him on the inquest.”

But the time passed and no Tod appeared. In due time, supper was cooked and ready to be eaten. Beam was about to step out for a final look, when he heard a vigorous stamping outside and a moment later his partner opened the door, letting in a whiff of fresh, cold air.

His chubby cheeks were rosy from the ride in the bracing wintry air. Catching sight of the steaming food, he called out cheerily:

“Got supper all ready; that’s the stuff. I’m ravenously hungry.”

"I didn't more than half think you'd get back. But I knew it wouldn't spoil, this weather, so I cooked enough to fill you up if you did come."

"The coroner kindly hurried things, so as to let me get away."

"What was the verdict?" asked Beam as he placed the supper on the table.

"Death from exposure and alcoholism."

"What in the world? Why, he wasn't drunk," and Beam paused in astonishment, almost forgetting to pour the coffee.

"Don't ask me. I was only too glad to get away soon as possible," said Tod, breaking open a big, mealy potato.

"Did you see the folks?"

"Yes, your mother was greatly upset over the affair and, of course, I didn't tell her all either. She insisted that your father bring you right back home, but he said you must learn to rough it and take chances, same as other men. Not much coddling, with Pa Foster," and Tod's eyes twinkled.

"No, he was never given to petting, or sentiment. He has been through a rough, hard school himself, and he expects the same of others. But he was always just and kind, I will say that for him," said Beam warmly.

"He's right, on the question here. As Doc Hall said, such a thing might not happen again in a lifetime."

"Of course not. That fellow was just some

freak that dropped in here. Have some more coffee."

"Don't care if I do. Dutch John's brand of driving makes a fellow hungry," said Tod, holding out his cup. "And by the way," he continued, "Tom and Jim are coming down here for a coon hunt, just as soon as the snow packs down a little."

"That's pleasant. I thought the boys would be down pretty soon."

"They'll bring two dogs, Jim's old dog 'Scraps', and Bluer's coon hound."

"They can't come any too soon to suit us. Were the roads drifted much?"

"Only in two or three places; lots of snow, though. We had to break a road, going up."

"It's going to be good and nippy to-night," Beam remarked, draining the coffee pot.

"Shall we try the tent?"

"Of course! Why not? We have plenty of blankets."

"All right; I can stand it if you can. It's according to Doc Hall's orders, anyhow, if we do freeze; just slice off another piece of that boiled ham, for a top dressing."

"We won't freeze. Say, aren't you ever going to stop eating?"

"Give me time. I want to beat you a game of chess to-night," and Tod tackled his last piece of ham with as much gusto as if it were the first.

The boys played chess until ten o'clock, then

as Tod became so sleepy that he couldn't tell a bishop from a pawn, they called the game off and crawled under a world of blankets, in the tent.

Next morning the temperature was 20 below, and they remained in the cabin most of the day. The wire edge was soon off of the cold wave, however, and at the end of a week the snow was well settled and a thaw set in.

The boys were sitting outside in the mild air, when Tod said:

"Tom and Jim are liable to show up most any time now."

"Speak of his Satanic Majesty and he always appears. Here comes old Scraps across through the woods; boys aren't far away," Beam replied with a broad smile.

"Sure as the world! Bully for them," cried Tod, throwing up his hat with a whoop.

An answering shout came from the woods on the west side of the island, and Tom Williams and Jim Neal soon came in view, leading another dog. By this time, Scraps had arrived and was having a "growlfest" with Nibs.

Having gone through the preliminaries and decided that a fight wasn't necessary, as they were old friends, Nibs started out to show Scraps the island.

"Hurry up!" shouted Tod.

"Can't make schedule time on these roads," Tom called back as they picked their way

through the brush and trees. In a few moments they were in camp and a general hand-shake was in operation.

"Here's your old Winchester your father sent down for you to protect yourself with against lions and panthers," said Tom, handing the rifle to Beam.

"Much obliged. Now bring on your lions and panthers."

"Oh, you'll have to skirmish for them."

"How did you get here?" Tod queried.

"Rode down from town with Dutch John, and then walked across."

"I would suggest that you fix the road between here and John's, too," Jim put in as he dropped on a seat.

"We'll attend to that in the spring. How's the hound?"

"Fine as a fiddle and ready for coon," replied Tom, looking down at the great tongue lolling out.

"That sounds auspicious. Are you hungry?"

"Moderately so, and I guess Jim is."

"Oh, he's always fixed that way. It's about lunch time, anyhow, so I'll get a bite."

In fifteen minutes Tod had lunch ready and the four were enjoying it with the cabin door open.

"Any coons on the island?" asked Jim as he speared a pickle.

"I guess so. If there aren't, we'll find them on the main shore," Beam replied.

"Got to have a coon to-night, somehow."

"You'll get coon, if old Joblots knows enough to find them."

"If he doesn't, we'll read the riot act to him. He's supposed to be a celebrated coon dog."

"Ever been out with him?"

"Once. Bob Casey and I took him out. He found coon that night."

During the afternoon the boys loafed, visited, and practiced with the little target rifle. An early supper was disposed of, and they were ready for business. The dogs seemed to know that something unusual was on tap, for they galloped about and looked at their masters with an air of eager expectancy.

"They know something is up," Tom laughed as he noted their actions.

"Sure. Old Joblots has been there before," replied Jim.

"The other two won't be much use except to help in a scrimmage," Tod remarked.

"Oh, they'll be company," said Tom as they prepared to start. "Shall we try the island first or go over on the bottoms?"

"Let's go down to the foot of the island and then cross over to the Illinois side. Better take your shotgun, Tod, we might see a bear."

Beam closed the door and they were off.

When they were down in the woods some distance, Jim cast off the hound with the remark:

"Now, Joblots, show these country jakes what you can do."

The hound needed no second invitation and bounded away with his nose to the ground, followed by the other dogs.

They tore through the woods and underbrush in an ecstasy of delight, but the island was drawn blank. The boys stumbled along through the gloom until the foot was reached; then Tom said:

"Your old island is no good. Where next?"

"Over on the Illinois side. If we don't find coon there, I'll eat my hat," and Beam led the way down the bank.

"Any air-holes?" Jim asked as he stepped gingerly out on the ice, after whistling up the dogs.

"No! safe as a pavement. We'll pull you out, if you fall in, anyhow," said Tod, following Beam.

In ten minutes they were across on the bottoms and the dogs cast off again.

"Now you'll hear something drop pretty soon," was Tod's prophecy as they stopped to rest a moment.

"That's what we're here for. Hark! there's Joblots giving tongue, now," cried Jim as the hound's deep bay came to their ears.

"Just stand still a minute and see if he stops," said Tom as they listened to the music.

"He's stopped, all right. Come on!"

"Think it's a coon?" asked Tod, his short legs trying to keep up with the procession.

"Tell you later, my son," Jim flung back as he hurried on.

"We're getting close to the seat of war. Have you got him, old man?" said Tom, stopping where the three dogs surrounded a white oak.

The hound whined and put his paws up on the tree.

"Of course the critter had to get in a tree with the leaves on," Jim growled as he peered up in the gloom.

Beam suggested that they build a brush fire, and in five minutes a snapping, crackling blaze threw a weird glare up against the leaves.

"T isn't going to be very easy to climb," said Tod dubiously, surveying the oak devoid of lower branches.

"I'll show you how to climb a tree." Tom jerked off his coat as he spoke, and started for the tree.

"Remember your failing, Tommy, and don't fall," Jim called after him, "the dogs might take you for the coon."

But Tom disdained reply and hugged the tree trunk. It was about fifteen feet to the first limb, where he could get a foothold. He had wormed and twisted himself almost there, when Jim drawled:

"Stick your finger nails in, Tommy; stick your

toe nails in, Tommy. The ground will catch you if you fall."

The firelight revealed Tom's body as he reached up and clutched the lowest limb. He panted back in reply to Jim's facetious remark:

"Oh, stick your tongue in! If you fellows let this coon get away, I'll lick the three of you."

"Send down your coon," cried Tod as Tom climbed higher.

"If you see the shine of his eyes, paste him with the shotgun," said Jim as they walked around the tree.

"Better go slow with the shotgun while Tom's up there," Beam warned, "we don't want to mar the festivities by an accident."

"No, besides marring Tom. I don't want to be picking shot out of him for a week," Tod chirped hilariously.

Meanwhile, Tom was making his way up the tree, grunting and making remarks not complimentary to the coon.

"Look out! He's shaking a limb," Jim spoke suddenly.

The boys waited breathlessly, but nothing dropped.

"You don't seem to be a success as a coon shaker," Tod called up the tree shrilly.

"No. Thought I had him located," and Tom gave a jarring kick to a limb, just to ease his feelings.

The results of his vicious kick were instantane-

ous. Before the boys could realize it, a black object came whirling down and hit the ground with a thump. Three dogs made a jump for the common enemy, and a growling, snarling, fighting bunch of dogs and coon awoke the echoes of the quiet night.

Of course Tod couldn't see to shoot, and he would have been more likely to hit a dog, anyhow. However, the fracas was over in two minutes, and Jim rushed in and secured the carcass of the coon before the dogs could tear it.

"Did you get him?" Tom called down.

"Of course we got him. Shake down another."

"You fellows must take this for a coon's nest. Do you suppose I keep a box of them on tap up here?" Tom began to work his way down. Suddenly he slipped, and grasped a limb with a vigorous jerk to save himself. Another dark object dropped down on the back of the dogs, just missing Jim's head. The coon sprang up and darted into the bushes, the dogs right at its heels.

"Sick him, Scraps!"

"After him, Joblots!"

"Don't let him get away, Nibs."

"They've nailed him!" yelled Jim, plunging after the dogs.

Pandemonium reigned for a minute or two. Then all was quiet and Jim came back into the firelight lugging another coon.

"Say, Tom, you stay up there shaking down coons and we'll bring your meals to you," called Tod.

"Did you get the last one?"

"Sure! Hurry up with another."

"The next coon will be an albino, I rather 'configurate,'" and Tom appeared below the leaves and began to work his way down the trunk.

A moment later he sprang to the ground, saying:

"There, see if one of you fellows can scare two coons out of the next tree."

"Think you got them all?" Jim queried.

"I guess so. Got enough, anyhow. How are they, good size?"

"Oh, just middling."

"Say, lads," Tod suggested, "suppose we cross over and go down along the Iowa bluffs. We're liable to scare up most anything around the rocks."

"Anything for fun," replied Jim, "I don't care where we go."

The others willing, the fire was quickly put out and the boys retraced their steps across the river. The two coons were left at camp and they struck across to the Iowa bluffs. From the river bank, the ground sloped up sharply to the high, frowning rocks, which were notched by many a narrow, wooded ravine cutting down through them.

"Now, Joblots, see if you can do as well over here," Jim said as he cast off the hound.

"I rather think there are more coons over on the bottoms," said Tom as the dogs dashed away.

"Perhaps, but it will be a change of ground, anyhow," Beam replied as they trudged on in the direction the dogs had gone.

"I expect the best show is up some of these ravines," said Tod, shifting the gun to the other shoulder.

For half a mile they sauntered along the base of the rocks, easily keeping tab on the dogs from the noise they made. Once or twice Jim blew his whistle and called in the dogs, then sent them scurrying out again.

"That sounds as if old Joblots had something treed!" exclaimed Jim, stopping suddenly.

All listened intently.

"He's barking in the same spot. He's got something. Come on," cried Tod.

"What is it, old man?" asked Jim as they came up to the dogs gathered under a big butter-nut in the mouth of a ravine.

Just as plainly as they could, the dogs said they didn't know, but it was something alive.

"All right; we'll investigate. Can you fellows see anything?" asked Jim.

"Only black darkness," said Beam, straining his eyes.

"Hold on; I see the shine of a pair of eyes," said Tom suddenly.

"You have mighty good optics," Jim remarked, looking long and earnestly, "hold on, I see them now. I suppose it's up to me to climb this tree. Can you find any brush for a fire?"

"Sticks aren't very numerous here, but we'll find something," answered Beam as they began to skirmish in the gloom for firewood.

In a short time a small blaze lighted up the tree trunk and Jim started to climb.

"Don't slip a cog and fall on our heads," said Tod as Jim reached the first branch.

"I can't make any rash promises, but whatever you do, don't let the critter get away," and Jim went higher.

He shook every limb he could see or feel, but nothing dropped.

"I haven't seen those eyes wiggle yet," Tom commented, "guess he isn't high enough yet."

"Now he has the right limb," cried Tod, "see those green sparks sway up and down. Get out from under and give the dogs a chance."

"The critter sticks like a burr to an old overcoat," said Beam, keeping his eyes steadily on the phosphorescent spots.

Jim gave another vigorous shake and suddenly the eyes disappeared.

There was a scratching, scraping sound, and Tom leaped back just as a long claw raked his

stomach and legs, and something hit the ground with a thump, at his feet.

The snapping, growling dogs sprang forward, eager to bite, worry and kill, but the lightning-like movements of the enemy must have surprised them. Snarling, striking, and biting, it was everywhere at once. Now on top of a dog, now on its own back, its long, hooked claws tearing at everything within reach. A howl and a whine, and one of the dogs slunk away.

"Keep back, Tom. That's no coon," Beam cried as the former started toward the dogs.

"If I only dared shoot," and Tod half raised the gun.

"Don't try it. You may kill one of the dogs," warned Beam.

"Get a club, then. The critter will kill every dog we've got," cried Tod excitedly.

"What is it?" Jim called down.

"Near as I can make out, it's a big wildcat. Mamma, how it does fight," Tom replied with admiring awe.

"Which dog threw up the sponge?"

"Old Nibs, and I'm afraid he's done for."

All of this took place in half a minute. Suddenly the animal leaped over the back of the hound, gave Scraps a final cuff, and bounded away into the darkness.

Not a dog made a move to follow it. Evidently they had had enough.

Beam threw more brush on the fire, with the remark:

"Let's brighten up the fire and see how badly the dogs are hurt."

"Don't shake down any more of that brand of goods," Tod called as he started to look for Nibs.

He found the faithful setter lying down just outside the circle of firelight. It made no move to get up, and Tod called back:

"Bring a light, somebody."

Beam was there in a moment with a firebrand, looking down anxiously at his old friend.

One glance showed that the eyes were gone and the face and nose covered with blood.

"Poor old chap, he's done for," said Tod pityingly, as the setter made a feeble effort to rise, only to fall back with a whine of pain.

"Yes, some of you boys shoot him and end his misery; I can't," and Beam turned his head away.

The other two dogs were whining, trembling, and licking themselves, and Tom said:

"Scraps and the hound are covered with blood and their noses scratched to ribbons. How's Nibs?"

"One of you fellows will have to shoot him. I couldn't do it," Beam replied sadly, walking back to where Tom was examining the other dogs.

Jim, who had climbed down, now came forward. He heard Beam's remark, and said:

"Too bad. I can do it if I have to. I suppose it's only an act of mercy if his eyes are gone. Wish I had that cat in a trap."

He picked up the gun and walked out to the edge of the flickering light. A moment later a sharp report rang out, the fire was covered up, and the boys sadly retraced their steps toward camp.

Two very subdued dogs followed them and the boys did but little talking. As they reached camp, tired and hungry, Tom said:

"I think we'll call this hunt off and go home in the morning. I don't want any more wildcats in mine at present."

"No, nor I," replied Beam. "I feel awful bad about losing Nibs, poor fellow, but I suppose he had better go than Joblots. Bluer never would get over losing that hound."

"I should say not. Bluer thinks more of that dog than he does of anything. He wouldn't have let us bring the critter if he hadn't been under obligations to Tom," said Jim as he dropped on a stool.

"He wouldn't anyhow, if he had supposed we'd run foul of a wildcat," rejoined Tom; "hokey, but I'm tired!"

"Got anything for a midnight lunch for the boys, Tod?" queried Beam, dropping on another stool.

"You know it. Here's boiled ham, bread and butter, pickles, jelly, canned cherries, and other bric-a-brac. I'll build up a fire in a jiffy and warm up some coffee. It's all ready," said Tod, bustling about in a business-like way.

"Beam," said Tom suddenly, "while Tod is getting lunch, suppose you give us the straight of that story about the fellow they had the inquest over."

"Not much to tell," returned Beam quietly, and he proceeded to give the boys an account of the strange incident. He told them of the stranger's first visit and his summary departure, and of his return and the tragic events following on the night of the terrible storm. When he had concluded, Tom said:

"A mighty lucky escape, I call it."

"Yes," put in Jim, "mighty lucky for Tod that Beam kept his wits about him."

"You can't kill a fellow with a bullet if he's born to die some other way. Come to lunch," called Tod.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BREAKING UP OF WINTER

THE latter half of the winter passed by swiftly and smoothly for Beam and Tod. After the coon hunt they settled down to the regular routine of camp life in the winter. Tod's story at the inquest excited considerable curiosity, and at different times during the winter when the sleighing was good, parties would drive down to inspect the place of the tragic event and talk the matter over with the boys.

But in the main, they were alone, cozy and content.

Having plenty of blankets they slept in the tent every night and were warm and comfortable.

They practiced every day with the little target rifle, and sometimes with the 38 caliber Winchester that Mr. Foster sent down; played chess and checkers, read, slept, told stories and ran races from the cabin to the river.

With March, the sun began to climb rapidly higher and higher and the snow soon felt its power. Gradually the white blanket shrank. It lost its white freshness and purity and began

to take on a dirty, grimy color. Then—the joy of it!—a bare spot of ground appeared. That was cause for great rejoicing, and the two young hermits ran and leaped and capered like a couple of school boys when the last day of school is at hand.

"Looks good, don't it?" and Tod's face cracked into an ample smile, as they stood on the bank of the ice-locked river.

"Don't mention it," answered Beam, while his face reflected the smile. "It won't be long now until the ice goes."

"I can hardly wait to get that old boat in the river and feel the swing of the oars again," said Tod impatiently.

"Have patience, my son. Give old Sol time and he'll bring things around all right. You can't hurry him a bit. Remember the old adage: 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.' "

"If they'll just hurry up and open this old river, I'll chance the rest," was Tod's reply.

Another warm day, and many bare places were visible.

Then the boys noticed, with joy, that the water began to creep up past the ice.

"Good! The river is rising," shouted Tod exuberantly; "that will fetch her."

"Yes, sir-e-e. The ice won't stay long now. But we ought to see a flock of ducks or geese," said Beam, scanning the heavens anxiously.

"I've nearly twisted my head off looking, but haven't seen a thing but crows and sap-suckers."

"Ice looks black and rotten out there, doesn't it? Beats all, how it hangs on."

"It's staying there just to be bullheaded, because we want it to leave," said Tod with an injured air, keeping one eye on the ice and the other turned up to the sky for ducks.

Beam laughed.

"My; I wouldn't be as restless and impatient as some folks for anything."

"Pity about you," and Tod's lip curled scornfully. Suddenly his whole appearance changed. His face lighted up and his eyes danced. He leaped three feet in the air, his index finger shot out as he fairly yelled:

"Hurrah! I see ducks! I see ducks!" and he capered about like a monkey.

"Where, where?" cried Beam, his eyes expanding to the limit.

"Way over the bottoms; just above that big lone pinoak; see them?"

"Yes, I see them now. That's good for sore eyes. Now I'm happy and I feel as if I could whip my weight in wildcats," and Beam gave his companion a resounding thump in the chest and leaped back like a panther.

But Tod was too busy looking for more ducks to waste any time sparring, and the boys went on silently for a few moments.

Suddenly Beam's right arm shot out, and he called:

"I see another, right over that point."

"And there goes a flock low down, right over the timber; see them? Now they've dived down into that springy slough. I'll wager a cent the upper end is open. But they're safe from us, now."

"Never mind. They're here. That's the main thing. Say, boy, if this keeps on, I'll have to lick somebody," cried Beam, his eyes dancing with the joy of the true duck-hunter as he looked down at his shorter comrade.

"Never mind licking anybody. Just watch for ducks," continuing to scan the heavens industriously.

"Hark; I hear a bluebird," Beam cried out again, bending his head to listen, but keeping an eye out for ducks.

"I hear it, and I heard a robin this morning," said Tod, his eyes glued to the sky.

"Haven't they a sweet, soft warble? Bless their little blue hearts! They bring the gentle springtime."

"Oh, drop your moony talk and look for ducks. That's what interests the subscriber at present; plain ducks and geese. Bluebirds and robins are a secondary consideration."

With these rather unsentimental remarks, the practical Tod again swept the horizon for wild-fowl.

"See; there's another flock!" he exclaimed.

"I'm going to look over my shells and shotgun. I want to be ready," cried Beam, racing for the cabin.

Tod remained on the lookout for some time, then he went in to rummage over and sort out his shells.

The following day it became quite evident that the ice could not hold much longer. Not only was it black and rotten, but the water had risen over a foot, thereby loosening it along the shores.

It was just after lunch, and Beam was busy at something in the cabin, when he was electrified by a yell from the bank.

He was out of the cabin in a second.

"What is it?"

"She's going."

That was sufficient, and he was at Tod's side in three jumps.

Tod was right. The wide, lead-colored mass of ice was slowly moving.

"I saw her when she first started," he cried excitedly.

Grinding and scraping along the shores, the great mass moved slowly and majestically for perhaps three hundred feet, then it caught somewhere and stopped.

"Keep going, old man! Don't get weary," cried Tod, shuffling about uneasily.

"It will start again, presently," said Beam with a satisfied look.

"A fellow can see ducks most everywhere, now that he can't get to them," Tod grumbled.

"I wonder if the mallards don't drop in down at the foot of the island, along that low willow swale."

"Might take our guns and go down there; maybe get a shot or two. I've got to do something or bust."

"We won't need many shells," Beam remarked as they donned their rubber boots; "a dozen apiece is enough. They may not light in there at all. But this time of year, they're apt to drop in most any place where there's a bite to eat, and mallards are fond of certain kinds of willow roots in the spring. There, I'm ready."

"I'll be ready in three-quarters of a jiffy," said Tod, getting into his hip boots with feverish haste.

"Follow me and I'll make a man of you," and Beam was off.

Half-way to the foot of the island, Tod caught him by the sleeve.

"I'm sure I saw a pair drop down in the willows just then."

"Think so?" Beam asked eagerly, taking the gun from his shoulder and breaking it from force of habit to see that it was loaded.

"It was something; I just caught a glimpse of it." Then, as if to back up Tod's statement, the sonorous "quack, quack" of a mallard hen came to their delighted ears.

"Some there, all right," Beam nodded, his face lighting up.

"Go easy, now," he warned, "and if any get up, don't shoot unless they are in easy range, for they'll come back if they've been feeding here."

"It's in that low swale just below us; where we had the mink trap," Tod half whispered.

They had just reached the head of the swale, when they heard a chorus of frightened quacks, and a dozen mallards sprang out of the willows seventy-five yards below.

"Don't shoot!" cried Beam as Tod half raised his gun; "they'll come back."

"Better split up," Tod suggested as he lowered his gun. "You go down toward the lower end, and I'll stay up along here somewhere. We'll catch more of them when they drop in."

Beam nodded and kept on his way down the swale, while Tod went a little farther and halted under a willow.

Beam went nearly to the lower end, and had just stopped to survey the situation, when, without warning, a pair of mallards leaped up with frightened quacks, not twenty-five yards away.

Such an opportunity could not be lost, and his gun went to his shoulder like a flash.

At the first report the drake subsided, but the hen was farther away and among the willow tops, and lived to tell the tale after the second barrel spoke.

Beam heard ducks getting up at other points, and stood still.

Presently he heard Tod's gun, both barrels, and knew something was going on up there. Then all was quiet for a few minutes.

Then he gripped his gun tighter, for soft and low came the electrifying hiss of a mallard drake.

Beam stood like a statue, not moving a muscle.

Then through the willows came a pair of mallards, chattering and hissing their spring song. Evidently, they concluded that was the place to dine, for they slid over the willows and down into the swale with graceful abandon.

The wings were thrown up and the orange legs extended to alight, when Beam's gun sprang to his eye.

The movement caught their attention and both ducks leaped into the air,—too late. The first barrel caught the drake squarely and he wilted like a rag. The hen climbed still higher, but this time she was in fair view, and when the gun cracked she doubled up like a ball in the air and struck the ground with a thump.

Beam picked up the ducks, muttering as he inserted fresh shells:

“There goes Tod's gun again.”

Then another wait ensued. Presently he heard another report from Tod, and a moment later a drake came down from that direction, just over the willows.

"Looks as if Toddy missed that time," Beam chuckled to himself. "I'll see what I can do for you, my friend."

The drake came squarely over him, unsuspecting of danger.

Then came a flash and a report, the dark green head was thrown over on the back, the wings folded, and the drake crashed down through the willows.

"'You can't fool all of the people all the time,' ducky!" Beam's eyes shone as he re-loaded.

He picked up the drake, remarking to himself:

"That makes four; guess I'll go up where Tod is. We don't want to get too many to-day," and, gathering up his birds, he started back, keeping his eyes and ears alert.

He was about half-way to Tod, when he saw a mallard sailing over the willows about where he supposed Tod was located.

Suddenly, without hearing a sound of any kind, Beam saw the bird double in the air as if struck by lightning.

He just had time to say, "well," when he heard the report of a gun.

Then he smiled and understood the situation. The duck had been killed so quickly, that it started to fall before the sound of the gun could reach him.

"Did you get a lone drake a few minutes

ago?" Tod asked as he came up to the latter's stand.

"Yes, the one you missed," said Beam, throwing down his four mallards.

"I wouldn't have missed him if he'd come close enough," Tod declared. "It was a long shot, but I thought I'd chance it. Most of them don't come quite this high up."

"He came right over me, just at the top of the willows. How many have you?"

"Three," and Tod pointed to three birds behind him.

"That's enough to-day. We don't want more than we can eat. Let's go back and see if the ice has started again," Beam proposed, picking up his ducks.

"That's my kind of shooting," said Tod as they tramped back.

"Yes, I always liked to shoot mallards in the timber. Think I prefer it to decoys."

"I know I do. I suppose Tom Williams wouldn't, though."

"No, he's a decoy crank of the first water. A matter of taste, I suppose. We can't all like the same things best."

"She's moving again, all right," cried Beam, as they came in view of the river, "if she just keeps it up."

"That's good. I hope it's gone by to-morrow. I'd like to take a row on the old creek once

more," said Tod, smiling as he saw the black, rotten ice grinding along with the current.

"There's an open spot, and ducks in it, too."

"They'll keep. We can get after them with the boat by to-morrow, maybe. Hope so, anyhow."

The boys hung up the ducks and put away the guns, then went out and sat on the friendly old log on the bank and watched that ever-fascinating spectacle, the moving of the ice in spring.

Bluebirds warbled softly, crows flapped lazily and aimlessly across the sky, and robins told how glad they were to return. Tiny rivulets trickled down into the swales, forming pools for the birds and frogs. A delicious sense of warmth and languor pervaded everything. In such an air it was joy just to be alive.

Truly, Nature was in one of her mildest, softest moods.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. JOHNSON AND HIS FRIEND

HAVING just started on its southward journey, the ice was still in large cakes. Sometimes these cakes reached almost from shore to shore;—then would come a stretch more or less broken up. Every few minutes some telltale evidence of the various uses that the crystal bridge had been put to would drift by. Some of them were gruesome. For instance; presently the boys descried a dead horse, well over toward the other shore, drifting along on a big ice floe, with a couple of crows perched contentedly on its back.

Then a section of wood road, that teamsters had used in the winter, went along.

A group of several bushes, standing upright in the ice, drifted slowly past. A battered old tin can among the bushes furnished the key to that mystery.

“Somebody’s fishing ground,” Tod remarked.

“Everybody seems to leave some kind of a trace when they use this river in the winter,” said Beam; “there’s a few sticks of cordwood some fellow has lost off his load.”

A few minutes later Tod said:

"There's something that looks like the wreck of an old bob-sled. Some fellow's had a break-down probably, and didn't go back to pick up the remnants."

Then another winter ice road drifted by.

Toward evening the ice stopped again, and Tod was on nettles once more.

"Why can't the old creek clear up and be done with it?" he growled petulantly.

"It's clogged below somewhere," returned Beam, "but it can't last forever. Have patience, like Job."

"Job was never snowed in three months on an island," Tod retorted, and Beam laughed.

"I'll tell you what let's do," he said; "no fun watching the ice any more at present; let's go up to the north end of the island, where Dutch John claimed they saw those lights, and look over the ground; the snow's gone now. Ever nosed around there any?"

"No, I never took any stock in the yarns, so I didn't bother my head about it. We've both been over the ground with the target rifle; nothing there but two or three Indian mounds and some trees. But, of course, if you want to go up there, I don't care."

"Well, we've nothing else to do, and it isn't supper time yet; let's go up, just for fun."

As Tod said, there was nothing of interest to be seen. There were only two good-sized mounds and one smaller, grouped together.

One side of the largest mound sloped down sharply and was strewn with pebbles and small stones.

"What there is about this place to cause anybody to go through gymnastics and swing lights around, I can't see," said Tod scornfully as they walked over and around the little hillocks. "Dutch John and the rest probably saw some fireflies and worked their imagination for the balance of the story. Anybody can see with one eye there's nothing here. If it were in the rocky bluffs, with a chance for caves, there would be some sense in their yarns."

"I confess I can't see anything very alarming about the place," Beam admitted, after scrutinizing every stone and tree.

"Then let's go to camp; and don't ever tell anybody that we were silly enough to come around here looking for robbers' dens," and Tod started for the cabin.

Beam laughed good-naturedly and followed. He had about reached Tod's conclusion.

"Haven't you got that 'light' story out of your head yet?" asked Tod as he started the supper going.

"Yes, I had a few traces left, but they're gone now."

"One would think you had a whole harness left, to watch you peek around there."

Beam laughed at the pun, then added seriously:

"I think it's all balderdash, just as you do. Let's forget it."

"All right. Excuse me for not cleaning one of those ducks for supper, but between watching the ice and going up with you on that geological goose chase, I didn't have time."

"I'll forgive you. Another meal of bacon won't hurt us."

The following day the river was almost clear. Only a few big cakes drifted idly along.

The boys put the boat and canoe in the water, and took a row and a paddle, dodging the ice cakes meanwhile, but they did not venture across the river on an extended hunt, as they feared another ice floe might come along and cut them off from the base of supplies.

However, they were in no hurry. Spring had come, and they were correspondingly happy.

"Better put our decoys out on that Point where we shot last fall, and leave them there, hadn't we?" Tod suggested.

"Yes, as soon as the ice stops running. We don't want a cake of ice to come along and carry them down to New Orleans."

"Not much danger there. It's dead water almost, to the left of the Point," Tod replied.

"You can't tell what a cake of ice will do in the wind."

However, the following afternoon the ice seemed to be entirely out of the river, so the boys

loaded the decoys in the big skiff and rowed over to the Point. The wooden ducks were anchored properly with strong cords and heavy weights, and after watching them in the blind for half an hour, and no flight being on, the boys went back to camp, intending to return in the morning.

They did not care to get out very early that morning, so the sun was peeping over the trees when they walked down to the bank to cross over to the decoys.

"Who is this coming?" said Tod as a boat containing two men came along down the island.

"It can't be Tom and Jim, can it?" asked Beam, straining his eyes to identify the occupants of the boat.

"I wonder if it isn't?" and Tod's face lighted up joyfully.

"Anyhow, we'll wait and see before we start out."

As the boat came nearer, Tod said:

"I don't think that's Tom and Jim."

"Who can it be, then?" queried Beam, finger-ing his gun locks.

"Tell you later."

Nearer and nearer the boat approached, and suddenly Tod spoke in a suppressed voice:

"The fellow in the stern is that man Johnson."

"I believe you're right," Beam said after another look.

"I know I'm right. Can't fool me."

Presently the boat came along, and they were not astonished to hear a familiar voice say:

"Hello, boys! How are the ducks?"

"Oh, they're flying some. How do you do, Mr. Johnson?" Beam called back.

"I'm well, thank you. How are you and Tod?"

"Oh, we're too healthy for any use," Beam said with a laugh.

"That's good. So your lungs are all right again?"

"Yes, sir. Seem to be sound as a nut," and Beam thumped his chest.

"Glad to hear it," said Mr. Johnson heartily.

Then he added as he stepped out of the boat:

"Thought I'd come down and have a little duck hunt with you, and I took the liberty of bringing a friend along. Is it all right?"

"Certainly," Beam returned courteously, "you are both welcome. We were just going over to the decoys now. Tie your boat and get in with us and come along."

"Well, that's lucky. We'll do it. This is my friend, Mr. Craven, boys." Then turning to his companion, "This is Beam Foster and Tod Masters, whom you have heard me speak of."

The introduction acknowledged, Mr. Johnson's boat tied, and the four stepped into Beam's roomy skiff.

Mr. Craven was a very silent man and let his companion do most of the talking. In fact, he rarely spoke, except in monosyllables, or to answer a question. On his face was a look of sadness that the boys could not help noticing.

"I don't know whether they're going to fly much to-day or not," Beam remarked as they approached the Point. "Sometimes the flight doesn't begin until nine or ten o'clock."

"Ducks are erratic birds, I know," replied Mr. Johnson, when they had landed. "Their flight depends somewhat on the weather and the time of year."

"And the kind of ducks," put in Tod as they started for the blind.

"There goes a flock just over the water now, but they don't see the decoys," said Beam, and all hurried into the blind.

Presently Beam added, in a low voice:

"Here comes a pair up over the water. We always give visitors the first shot."

"All right; be ready, Craven," Mr. Johnson replied, in a voice a little too loud for an old duck-hunter.

Mr. Craven made no reply, and moved not a muscle. He simply slipped the safety with a single movement of the thumb.

A moment later the ducks were over the decoys, and Mr. Johnson, rising, so he would have an unobstructed view, fired both barrels.

The only effect upon the ducks, a pair of gad-wells, was to cause them to spring into the air and sheer off.

Then Beam and Tod were treated to a bit of shooting that did their hearts good.

Mr. Craven's gun went to his shoulder as if sent by a steel spring. The two reports blended almost as one, and both ducks, although several feet apart, dropped into the water.

"Why, you're a good duck shot!" said Mr. Johnson as he reloaded his gun.

"He comes pretty near being an expert," smiled Beam as Tod started after the game.

"I used to hunt ducks a great deal in my younger days," replied Mr. Craven quietly as he slipped in fresh shells.

"I never hunted ducks very much," Mr. Johnson admitted, "but I like it. If I had leisure, I'd be hunting them all the time."

Tod returned to the blind after retrieving the birds, and a ten-minute wait followed.

"I hear some behind us," Mr. Craven said presently, in the same low, even tone.

All listened.

Suddenly a flock of bluebills swept down over their heads on a sharp incline.

Every one remained motionless but Mr. Craven. As the flock came over, his gun sprang to his shoulder, two quick reports followed, and two ducks splashed down in the edge of the water.

Beam and Tod looked at each other in astonishment.

The birds had been going at express train speed, and it seemed as if it would hustle a streak of lightning to catch them, especially on a sharp incline. Yet here was a man who made a double without an effort.

Mr. Craven saw the look, and smiled at their enthusiasm.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly, "perhaps I should have waited for them to come back. But it used to be my custom always to shoot when the birds were in range, no matter at what angle or position they were in. One never can tell what ducks will do. They may come back and they may not."

"You are perfectly right there, Mr. Craven. Ducks are very uncertain critters," Beam answered with a laugh, "but it takes more skill than the average hunter possesses to hit them at that speed and that angle. I'm glad to know a man who can do it."

"So am I," burst out Tod. "You beat anything I ever saw in the duck-shooting line," and he waded out after the two ducks.

"Yes, I wish I could shoot that way," said Mr. Johnson admiringly.

The flight that morning proved very uneven. Sometimes flock would follow flock in quick succession; then a long wait would ensue.

Mr. Craven proved himself a phenomenal shot,

at any and all angles. He rarely missed, and never paused an instant in his aim.

By noon they had twenty birds, and decided to return to camp for lunch. After lunch they discussed the morning shoot, and talked on other subjects until about two o'clock, when Mr. Johnson said:

"Well, we must get back to town this evening. But I want to thank both of you boys for the sport we have had. I only hope we can have more of it in the future."

"Don't mention it," laughed Beam. "It's worth something to see this friend of yours shoot ducks. He takes the medal around here."

Mr. Craven smiled quietly, and said: "Thank you," while Mr. Johnson remarked:

"Yes, he is certainly a fine shot. I envy him."

Shortly after they made ready to return, the boys insisting that they take most of the ducks.

"We kill all we want, and more too," said Beam.

"All right, then," responded Mr. Johnson heartily, "I'll give them to your folks and let them distribute the birds around to their friends. All we wanted was the fun of shooting."

A few moments later the two men were rowing up the river.

"What do you think of Mr. Craven for a duck shot?" Beam asked with a grin.

"I think he's the best duck shot in the country," said Tod emphatically.

"I wonder how Johnson happened to have him in tow?"

"I'll give it up. And Johnson didn't offer any explanation of his leaving so suddenly last fall, either."

"No, never said a word about it."

"Something queer about the man's actions," Tod said. And Beam thought so, too.

But, of course, they were only guessing.

CHAPTER XIX

ANOTHER CAMPER

“**S**UPPOSE we take a spin down the Illinois shore and see if there is any show for bass yet,” Beam suggested, the second day after the shoot with Mr. Johnson and his friend.

“Good enough; I’m ready for anything. Get the rods and I’ll skim you over there in a jiffy. Haven’t much faith in bass yet, though.”

“Neither have I, but we want to do something to earn our supper, and incidentally put on muscle.”

Five minutes later they were skimming across the river.

“Drop down to where that little run comes in. It’s springy and there might be a show for early bass ground up in there.”

“We didn’t have much luck there last summer; the water was too low. But, as you say, it may be good early ground, on account of the springs,” said Tod, turning the boat down the shore.

“Here we are. Suppose we run up it a little,” Beam proposed, and accordingly Tod turned the boat up the run, which came in at a sharp angle.

"Hello! Here's another camp," Beam remarked in surprise, before they had gone forty yards up the run.

Tod paused with uplifted oars, and looked around.

He saw a small wedge tent on the bank of the run and, as he looked, a man came out of the tent.

"Some hunter or trapper," and the oars again dipped the water and resumed their swing.

"Might stop and pass the time of day with him," Beam suggested.

A moment later Tod touched the shore by the little tent.

"I'm betting that you are the boys who are camping on the island," was the greeting from shore.

Although considerably taken aback, Beam responded promptly:

"That's a safe bet. We're the lads."

"I thought so. I've been coming over to see you and swap shooting and fishing yarns," was the reply, as the occupant of the tent walked leisurely down to the boat.

"We thought we might find some early bass up this springy run," Beam said.

"That's one reason I camped here, but I haven't caught a single one yet. Guess it's little early."

"No use for us to try it, then."

"No, but come up on the bank a while and

tell us what you have been doing, and how long you have been camping. I don't have many visitors, and they help a fellow's digestion wonderfully," was the genial reply.

The tone was so cordial that the boys couldn't resist. They stepped out, pulled up the boat, and took a seat on the bank.

"Been over there very long?" and the man nodded toward the island.

"Since last August," Beam replied.

"Well, quite a camping trip, for an outing."

"It wasn't exactly an outing," said Beam quietly. "I have been curing up a bad lung."

"Ah, yes. Best medicine in the world."

"I'm getting about all right again," Beam continued, "so we'll probably break camp in a few days and go home."

"How did you happen to camp over on that island so long?"

"Why not there as well as anywhere?" Beam asked. "The island belongs to my father, and we felt that we had a right there."

"That makes some difference, of course."

Then the speaker paused and said with a laugh:

"When I spoke, I was thinking of my own experience. I camped along here a few days, a couple of years ago, and I put in one night on that island. About twelve o'clock that night I heard the most dismal groans and cries out in the woods somewhere; sounded like somebody

in pain. I looked out of the tent, but couldn't see anything out of the way. I went back to bed and presently I heard it again. Sometimes it sounded up in the trees and sometimes on the ground. I'm not given to superstition, but that kind of a racket was too much for my nerves, and I didn't sleep any more that night. Soon as it was daylight, I went out and looked all around. Everything seemed peaceful and quiet, but just the same, I packed my stuff and got off of there. It was too uncanny for me. I want to be where I can sleep nights," and the narrator shook his head in a convinced way.

"We haven't been bothered," Beam replied, "although some of the farmers over on the bluffs claim to have heard queer noises and seen strange lights. We haven't paid much attention to their stories, though; laid it to their country superstition."

The man seemed to give a sigh of relief as he smiled and said:

"I'm glad somebody else heard them. I've sometimes thought it might have been my imagination, but now I'll always think there was something in it."

"Funny we haven't heard anything mysterious," put in Tod.

"That's the part of it I don't understand. Perhaps the spooks have left," and he laughed again. Then, as if throwing the subject from his mind, he said genially:

"But let's talk about something pleasanter. What do you boys do to pass away the time?"

"Oh, the same as any other camper," Beam answered, "shoot, fish, row, walk, eat, sleep, read and loaf."

"I suppose you are getting pretty tired of it by this time."

"Oh, I don't know; we both like the woods and streams," said Beam simply.

"So do I. You are my kind of boys, I can see, and I'm liable to come over and call on you most any time. I'm Abe Dawson, and I camp out a while every year. Don't do much but fish and loaf, but I like the country," and the man's eye sparkled with enthusiasm.

"Glad to see you any time," Beam returned cordially. "We don't have many visitors, so they are doubly welcome."

"I may drop over this afternoon if I have time. You see, I am a sort of an amateur botanist and do considerable writing in the way of notes and classifications."

"All right; come any time. The latch string is always out. By the way, what bait have you used here for bass?"

"I've tried everything; minnows, worms, spoon, salt pork, and I don't know what else."

For an hour the boys lingered with their new acquaintance. He was evidently a nature lover, and had a pleasant, engaging way of talking on

wood lore and botany. Both felt glad that the fishing trip had carried them where it did, for it had added another genial acquaintance to their list.

When at last they arose to go, Beam said:

"Now be sure and come over. As we are camp neighbors, we may as well be sociable."

"That's the way to talk," was the hearty response; "I'll be over just as soon as I can get some work out of the way."

"Come over and stay to tea," Tod invited as they stepped into the boat.

"Maybe I will. It would save me the trouble of building a fire," Dawson answered with a laugh and a twinkle of the eye, as the boys pulled out.

"Another nice, jolly chap," Tod said, when they were well under way.

"Yes, wish he camped on the island."

"What do you think about the groans and racket he heard when he camped there?"

"It's a poser, I'll confess. Funny part of it is that it agrees with what Dutch John told us, just as we had settled the matter that it was tramps."

"Perhaps it *was* tramps, and we scared them so they don't come back any more," suggested Tod.

"There may be something in that idea. However, so long as we are not molested, we won't bother our heads over the matter."

It was almost noon when the boys pulled into camp.

"Strikes me it's about lunch time," Beam remarked as they stepped out and tied the boat.

Tod laughed.

"Seems to me you are getting as anxious about meal time as I am."

"I guess so. I can eat any old time these days."

A generous lunch was disposed of, and then followed the usual loafing bee on the old log. Both were anxious to have their new friend call upon them, and two pairs of eyes frequently wandered across to the little run.

It was about three o'clock when Tod said with a brightening eye:

"Here he comes all right. I was afraid he might get busy and forget it."

"Yes, that's who it is, I guess. We want to make him stay to supper, too. He must be lonesome over there," remarked Beam as he watched the little boat, with a single occupant, coming toward them.

"He'll stay, I know."

CHAPTER XX

A STRANGE EXPERIENCE

"**W**ONDER where he lives?" Beam mused.

"He'll probably tell us, when he gets to talking. Looks like a man who had been cooped up in the house lately."

"Yes, but he likes outdoor life, or he wouldn't be camping alone," returned Beam as the boat drew near the shore.

"Welcome to Duck Island," Tod called as Mr. Dawson landed. "We were afraid you wouldn't come."

"I got lonesome after finishing my work, and thought I would keep my promise."

The visitor unshipped his oars and stepped out.

"Tie her there, by our boat," said Beam cordially.

"Ever troubled with sneak thieves here on the main river?"

"Not a bit; never have missed a thing. Come up and take an easy chair on the old log," said Beam, leading the way up the bank.

"Mighty fine view of the river here; you can

see every skiff and steamboat that passes," and Mr. Dawson dropped on the log contentedly.

"Yes, we flatter ourselves that we struck about as nice a camping spot as there is around."

"I see you have a live-box and a minnow box. Everything up to date."

"Yes, just as well have things handy."

"I was raised along the river. My home used to be in St. Louis. But I have been traveling a good deal of late years, so I don't see the old creek as often as I'd like to. Whenever I get a vacation, I generally head for the Mississippi."

"A person never loses his love for the big river," returned Beam quietly.

"I never do, I know. It has a wonderful fascination for me. By the way, I caught one bass over there, after you left. Shows they're beginning to bite."

"This warm weather will make them hungry," put in Tod.

"I hope they will be biting better before I leave."

"The bass around here are generally good fighters, as you probably know," Beam remarked.

"Yes, I never found but two or three streams where they fought any better, and I have fished over a considerable part of the globe."

"Did you ever cross the Atlantic?" asked Tod curiously.

"Yes, and the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

I have been in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and I don't know how many other places and seen many strange things."

"Gee Whillikins! Tell us about some of them," cried Tod, his eyes dancing eagerly.

"Did you ever see the Pyramids and Sphinx?" Beam asked, his eyes lighting up also.

"Yes, and climbed the big pyramid twice."

"Tell us about it." Tod spoke with such beseeching earnestness, that their guest smiled and said:

"All right; I know just how you boys feel. I used to yearn to see some of the wonders of the world, and I didn't rest until I saw them."

Thereupon he entered into a series of tales of travel and adventure that held his youthful listeners in wondering, ecstatic delight the remainder of the afternoon.

He told of crossing the ocean in steamships and in sailing vessels, of tiger and lion hunts, of shipwrecks and drifting for days upon the sea, of being in battles and exploring expeditions, of tramping over burning deserts, of being cast into loathsome dungeons by the vengeful Turk, of climbing the pyramids and voyaging down the Nile, and of life in China and other lands.

No lecturer ever held a more appreciative audience. He was a fluent talker and the boys hung upon his every word. Poor thirsty souls, they had hardly been outside of their village, and

here was a man who had been face to face with most of the wonders they had read and heard of. No wonder they were delighted, entranced and enthralled.

The sun dropped low in the west, and finally Tod heaved a sigh of regret and looked at his watch.

"Goodness me, if it isn't five-thirty and no supper started! I hate to break away, Mr. Dawson, but business is business, and we must eat. You must stay to supper. I'll have it ready in a jiffy. Only don't tell any more stories until I can hear them."

"All right," laughed the former; "I'll rest my voice while you get supper."

And Tod darted away to prepare the evening meal, while Beam and their guest strolled about and talked on other subjects.

Tod was so eager to hear more stories, that he hurried supper along with a rush. In a seemingly incredibly short time, he announced the meal ready, and the three sat down to partake of it.

"So you have cured a case of lung trouble by simply living out in the woods?" asked Mr. Dawson as he sipped his coffee.

"Yes, sir. No medicine of any kind."

"Truly remarkable."

"The best of it is, it was a doctor that advised me to come," laughed Beam.

"Yes, they don't do that very often, I guess."

"Where does the trained nurse come in?" Tod inquired gravely.

"The trained nurse?" inquired Mr. Dawson, elevating his eyebrows in a puzzled way.

Beam laughed.

"We call Tod the trained nurse. He is taking care of me."

"Oh, I see. How stupid of me," said their guest, joining in the laugh.

"Now," said Tod familiarly, when they had finished supper, "I want to hear some more travel yarns, and I know Beam does. What's the matter with you staying all night with us, and we'll show you what a nice quiet island we have these days. We have room enough in the tent."

"Yes, just as well as not," chimed in Beam.

"Well, really, I hadn't thought of such a thing. But if you boys wish it, I don't care," returned Mr. Dawson good-naturedly.

"I'll get the dishes out of the way in short order, then we'll loaf and talk under the trees," said Tod, hustling about his task.

"As I told you, I haven't a very good opinion of this island as a quiet resting place, but it seems to act all right now," remarked Mr. Dawson as they arose from the table.

"Of course it's all right," Tod assured him confidently; "nothing but owls, bullfrogs and crickets to bother, and they just lull you to sleep."

Half an hour later, the trio were gathered under the trees in the soft spring air, and Mr. Dawson was again launched upon his fascinating tales of travel and adventure. All too swiftly for Tod and Beam, the hours drifted by. Darkness settled over the island and river. Nine, ten, eleven o'clock came and went; then Beam scratched a match and looked at his watch.

"Say, it's after eleven o'clock. We don't want to tire out Mr. Dawson the first night. We'll have plenty of chances to hear more stories. Better put him to bed now and let him get some rest. I'll fix a bed for him," and Beam started for the tent.

"You must excuse us," Tod apologized with a laugh, "but this is the first time either of us ever met anybody who had seen the things you have, and would tell about them."

"Your curiosity is only natural, my boy. Any intelligent mind yearns to know something of strange lands and people," replied Mr. Dawson kindly as they followed Beam to the tent.

By the dim rays of the lantern, Beam was arranging a bed in the corner.

"Don't try to fix anything elaborate. I can sleep in a tree if necessary."

"We haven't anything very elaborate to fix," Beam responded with a laugh, as he threw down another blanket. "There, I guess you can sleep on that all right."

"Good enough bed for a king," said Mr. Dawson with a yawn.

Ten minutes later, the light was out, and silence reigned in the tent.

Soon a gentle snore from Tod told that he had drifted away to the unknown land of dreams. Then a soft gurgle from Mr. Dawson's corner showed that he, too, was wooing the slumbrous god. Beam soon followed suit, and the hours drifted peacefully on, only a chorus of frogs breaking the stillness.

It was after two o'clock, when Beam felt something touch him on the shoulder. Always a light sleeper, he was awake in an instant.

"What is it?"

"Do you hear that?" came the whispered answer. It was the voice of Mr. Dawson.

Before Beam could reply, a sepulchral groan was heard outside the tent.

"What in the world can it be?" Beam was upright in bed in an instant, his ears keenly alert.

"Oh, my boy, I fear the worst. I should not have remained here over night," and Beam caught the tremble of fright in the whispered voice.

"I'll wake Tod," said Beam, shaking his partner vigorously but softly.

The latter, aroused from his sleep, was about to blurt out something, when again came that dismal groan.

"Wha—what's that?" he whispered, his hair slowly rising at the gruesome sound.

"We don't know. Mr. Dawson just heard it and woke me. Listen!"

Another blood-curdling groan thrilled the listeners, and then came the awful words:

"Abraham Dawson, leave this island with the break of dawn. The spot is accursed of God. Twice you are warned; beware the third. Your young friends must, too, leave this fateful spot. Hell yawns for them if they heed not this warning. We are the spirits of men murdered here. Doomed to wander eternally through space, on the Ides of every April we return to warn the unwary. Behold the manifestations of a mysterious power."

An explosion followed the prophetic words, and a greenish glare was visible through the tent.

"Oh! Lord! And this is the 15th of April!" Mr. Dawson's voice sounded piteous in its terror.

Another explosion was followed by a hissing sound, and a yellow light shone through the tent.

Neither of the boys believed in the manifestations of spirits, but they were face to face now with something that staggered them, and even Beam shivered at the dreadful warning.

Tod belonged to the practical sort, that are brave because they lack sufficient imagination to be easily frightened. But he was thoroughly

frightened now, as he could tell by his voice that, although a seasoned traveler, Mr. Dawson was plainly in a state of terror.

As the hissing came to his ears, Beam with trembling hand opened a tiny bit of the tent flap and peered out.

"Look here!"

The very tone of his voice caused the others to peer out into the night. Truly it was a gruesome sight. A serpent of fire writhed and twisted on the ground before the tent. Through the dim yellow glare they could see its angry, darting tongue, and anon see it pause and peer about as if looking for something, while above it shone a soft phosphorescent glow.

"The rod of Aaron"; a low groan came from Mr. Dawson and he sank to the ground.

"For Heaven's sake, shut the tent. It may see us." Tod was barely able to whisper the words audibly.

Beam obeyed mechanically, and the terrible object was shut from view.

For a few brief moments they remained like statues, hardly daring to breathe, then the yellow glare faded slowly way. But once more came that sepulchral voice:

"We go, but we return. Be warned! Be warned! Be warned!"

The latter words were uttered slowly and distinctly, each time sounding a little farther away. Then all was quiet. Even the frogs were still.

For some time not a move was made in the tent, then Mr. Dawson roused up and said:

"Thank Heaven it is over. From this time on, I believe in the spirit world, and if I live until daybreak I will heed the warning."

"So will I," murmured Tod. "I don't want any more of this."

"Why do you suppose we were allowed to remain here so long in peace?" Beam asked in a subdued voice.

"Didn't you hear the spirit say, they returned the Ides of every April? To-day is the Ides of April; the 15th," replied Mr. Dawson in a low solemn tone, as he sat up and mopped his streaming brow.

"I wouldn't stay here another night for a farm." Tod uttered the words with heartfelt unction.

"Neither would I, and I wish it was daylight right now," returned Mr. Dawson.

"It won't be long until daylight," and Beam peeped out of the tent again. "What do you think of this, Mr. Dawson?"

"I think that there is a spirit world and its ways and workings are forever hidden from mortal intellect," was the reply in a thoroughly convinced tone. "We have just witnessed something that no human being can explain."

Sleep was out of the question the remainder of the night. Quietly conversing in a low tone or sitting in silence, the night dragged slowly by.

Beam heaved a sigh of relief as he peered out for perhaps the hundredth time.

"It's beginning to break at last."

Presently the twitter of a bird broke the stillness, then another and another.

"Let me out of here. I feel as if I had been shut up in a drawer all night," cried Tod, bursting out of the tent and filling his lungs with fresh air, while the others followed.

Mr. Dawson looked pale and haggard, and Beam was thoughtful and subdued.

"Shall I start breakfast now, or is it too early?" Tod asked.

"Don't bother to get any breakfast for me, I'm not hungry," returned Mr. Dawson quietly as he started for the river bank. "I'm going over to God's country just as soon as I can get there, and if you boys take my advice, you will do the same thing."

"We'll pack up and get out of here to-day," said Beam as they followed their guest down to the landing.

"I'm sorry now that I asked you to stay all night, Mr. Dawson. If I hadn't, you would have missed all that," said Tod, nodding his head toward the tent.

"I don't blame you in the least, and thank both of you for your kindness. I would ask you over to my camp, but I shall pull up stakes to-day and leave. I confess that I am completely unnerved. I have traveled all over the world,

but I never saw anything like that before. It was my fate, I suppose, that I should see it and be convinced.” He dropped wearily into the boat and bowed his head upon his hands a moment.

“Hadn’t one of us better go over and help you pack up?” asked Beam sympathetically.

“Oh, no! I will go over and get a little sleep and then pack up. The exercise of rowing will wear off some of this depression, I hope. When do you boys leave?”

“We’ll probably get away sometime this forenoon, if we can get the duffle together by that time.”

“Well, good-bye. If we never meet again in this world, remember the few pleasant hours we have spent together,” and Mr. Dawson bent to the oars.

“That man is nearly on the verge of a collapse and I’m almost afraid to let him go alone,” said Beam thoughtfully, as they walked back to the cabin to prepare breakfast.

“He’s certainly badly shaken up, but the row will do him good. I’ll admit that I’m up a tree, myself. I’m hoping yet that I’ll wake up and find it all a dream,” said Tod as he started to build a fire, while Beam stood thoughtfully looking on.

Presently he said:

“Did you notice how pale he was? And his

hand fairly shook when he took hold of the oars."

"Yes, his face looked like ashes. He's naturally of a light complexion and evidently hasn't been out in the sun much lately."

"Poor fellow, I feel sorry for him. I'd like to know what father will say to that business last night."

"I know what he and Doc Hall both will say," returned Tod as he put on the bacon. "They'll laugh and say we were both dreaming and it's all bosh."

"We know mighty well we weren't dreaming."

"Of course we do, but it's another thing to convince two such old hard heads."

"Well, we'll go up and tell them the whole thing and see what they have to say about it and what explanation they can make, anyhow," said Beam as he walked out to the tent.

Everything outside was just as it was the previous day; not a mark or print of anything on the ground or in the trees. Beam scrutinized the surroundings carefully and turned away with a shake of the head. He was completely nonplussed.

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER SURPRISE

To a person in robust health, breakfast is a great restorer of vitality. A cup of hot coffee does wonders to clear away the cobwebs from the mind.

It acted so with Beam and Tod. After breakfast, they felt more like themselves and some of their old spirits came back.

"There, I feel a lot better," Tod remarked as he drained his second cup.

"So do I. But we'll dig out of here to-day just the same. I couldn't sleep here any more, after what happened last night. Every frog croak and owl hoot would put me on edge."

"Sure thing; no more of this for the undersigned. Soon as our breakfast settles we'll begin to pack up. It won't take more than an hour."

They strolled down to the river and sat upon the log.

"Breakfast and the sunshine makes a fellow feel brave again," said Tod.

"Yes, especially when he knows he hasn't got to stay here another night."

"I feel sorry for poor Mr. Dawson, he took

it to heart so much," Tod continued, gazing across the river where the little tent was hidden among the trees.

"So do I, and I'm almost tempted to go over and see how he is."

"Better let him rest. He's probably trying to get some sleep."

"You see now where Dutch John's lights come in."

Tod nodded.

"Yes, no wonder they keep shy of this place, if they saw a tenth part of what we did."

Lack of rest and sleep made the boys dull and listless and they kept postponing the task of packing up. As Tod remarked:

"If we get home any time to-day, it will do." So they loafed and talked and examined the ground and trees around the tent again, for some evidence of the night's disturbance, but in vain.

It was after ten o'clock and they were talking of breaking camp, when a skiff appeared in sight, coming along down the island.

"Wonder if it's visitors? Callers want to hurry up if they are going to find anybody in this camp," Beam remarked with a grim smile.

"Maybe it's some of the boys from town."

"It's Mr. Wrapp and Doc Minton; the men who were here last fall," exclaimed Tod, as the boat drew nearer.

"Think so?"

"I'm sure of it," and Tod strained his eyes the harder.

"Nice welcome we'll have for them. Just going to break camp," growled Beam discontentedly; "glad they didn't come yesterday, though."

"If they're down for a duck shoot, they're too late. Had we better tell them about that business last night?"

"I guess not. No use to worry and bother them with it; they're out for a vacation. Just tell them we have decided to break camp and go home, and the ducks have mostly gone north."

By this time the boat was near enough to see that Tod's guess was right, and shortly after they were hailed by Mr. Wrapp's cheery voice:

"Hello, Beam and Tod. I see you are both here yet."

The fact of being saluted familiarly by their Christian names naturally warmed their hearts, and Beam responded cordially:

"Yes, sir; although we are thinking of pulling up stakes to-day."

"Pshaw! Going to quit, eh? Well, we will land and eat our lunch with you anyhow, and talk over old times," as the boat grated on the sand.

"Did you come down for a duck shoot?" asked Tod as they stepped out and shook hands all around.

"Well, no. Doc here doesn't believe much in shooting ducks in the spring. In fact he is 'agin

it.' But we brought our fish rods. We are out for a little row and thought we would see if you boys were here yet. How are you both, anyhow? Beam is strong as a panther, I suppose, by this time. Doc, I tell you there's nothing like camping out," said Mr. Wrapp, beaming upon the boys.

"Camping out is certainly an excellent tonic. The only objection here is the lowness of the ground, which is generally accompanied by excessive moisture along water courses. However, the moisture hasn't seemed to interfere with the recovery of our young friend here," said the sedate doctor, smiling upon Beam.

"Sorry we are going to leave just as you gentlemen come. Tod and I were in hopes you would stay a week next time."

"As it happens, we couldn't stay anyhow; so it is just as well you are going home. We will eat our lunch together, chat a while, then we will pull out and look for some fish," said Mr. Wrapp as he went to the boat and brought out a basket of lunch.

"Let's adjourn back under the trees by the cabin," suggested Beam; "this sun is warm." And he led the way from shore.

Five minutes later they were comfortably seated under the trees and the boys had forgotten their recent experience under the magic of Mr. Wrapp's genial presence.

"By the way, boys," he said presently, "I have

a confession to make. We are on a vacation, it is true; but instead of being traveling men, we are detectives. I didn't tell you last fall as you were strangers, but the more I see of you the more I am convinced you can be trusted. Just be good enough not to say anything about it when you get home, as we don't care to be known in that capacity at present. Here is my badge," and he opened his coat and showed a star.

Both Beam and Tod were greatly astonished and secretly pleased to hear this. They promised compliance with his wishes, and soon Mr. Wrapp had launched out upon a story to willing listeners.

An hour later when he was in the middle of another story, Tod said:

"Who are these fellows coming?"

All looked toward the river and saw two men step up the bank.

"A couple of farmers probably from the Illinois side," said Beam indifferently, noting the dress of the men; "go on with your story, Mr. Wrapp."

"Better wait and see what they want," returned the latter, quietly.

"Probably want to know if they can get a mess of catfish," Tod snorted, impatient to have the story going again.

The two men were roughly dressed in flannel shirts, heavy boots, etc., and as they came up, the

four arose as by one accord to meet them, and Mr. Wrapp reached for his handkerchief, apparently.

"None of that, Duffy; throw up your hands, both of you, and be quick about it." The taller "farmer" spoke these words quietly but crisply, and to Beam's and Tod's utter astonishment and consternation, two long black revolvers were pointed at their guests.

That a terrible mistake was being made by somebody, both were certain, and Beam cried out anxiously:

"Hold on! Those men are detectives."

"I can't help what they are, we want them."

The stranger turned his head slightly toward Beam as he spoke, and in that brief instant, quick as a flash, Wrapp and Minton hurled themselves like tigers upon the two men, the former crying:

"It's a hold up, boys. Help us!"

There was no chance for "gun play" at such close quarters. It was a rough and tumble fight where every ounce of muscle and wit counted.

Half involuntarily Beam started toward the struggling men, when he caught the gleam of a star on Wrapp's antagonist.

He stopped in astonishment.

Were two sets of officers fighting each other unknowingly? It looked that way. Motionless, he watched the battle, as if fascinated.

The men were locked in each other's arms, gripping and swaying, each trying to trip his antagonist and hurl him to the ground.

Suddenly Dr. Minton threw his man and fell heavily upon him. Clutching his adversary by the throat with one hand, he quickly freed the other. An instant later a knife gleamed in the air and he hissed:

"Damn you, Gray! This is the last time you ever cross my path."

Ere the knife could descend, Beam made one bound and caught the uplifted wrist with both hands, grown strong with months of rowing.

"Let go my arm, you country whelp!" What a change in that even, quiet voice! It was like the snarl of a wolf.

"Come here, Tod, quick. Do you want to see a man murdered?" Beam's grasp on the frantic man's wrist tightened as he spoke.

But at that instant there came the sound of running feet and two men dashed out of the bushes from the west side of the island. One of them, a large, powerful man, tore the knife from the uplifted hand, then seizing Dr. Minton, hurled him upon the ground as if he had been a child and despite his struggles snapped handcuffs upon his wrists.

The other man seized Mr. Wrapp around the neck in a strangle hold and with the assistance of the latter's antagonist, soon had him on the ground and decorated with "bracelets."

The four newcomers arose to their feet and the one who had demanded the surrender of the two men said, as he breathed heavily from the tussle:

"Sorry to interrupt your picnic, boys, but business is business."

Something in the tone of his voice sounded familiar to Beam and he looked at him curiously.

The latter noticed the look and laughed as he jerked off a false whisker:

"Now do you know me?"

"Mr. Johnson!"

"Good guess. Don't I make a pretty average looking farmer?"

"Yes. But I would like to know the meaning of all this," Beam replied in perplexity.

"I'll explain everything later. In the meantime, we have more work to do. Purvey, you and Gray take these men uptown. You have time enough and they are safer there than here. Come on, Gabe; no use to sulk over a bad bargain," and he walked over to Dr. Minton and took him by the shoulder.

The latter got upon his feet with a scowl of hate, and was led down to the river, followed by his partner, who had drawn into his shell like a clam.

It is not a pleasant sight to see a hypocrite unmasked and Beam and Tod were both relieved when their late guests were securely chained in the boat and the two detectives designated by Mr. Johnson had stepped in and taken the oars.

The little group on the bank watched the boat until it was well up the stream, then Mr. Johnson said to his companion:

"They ought to be back before supper time, Dickson."

"Yes, they ought to make it by that time if they have no bad luck," was the reply as they walked back to camp.

"If they are just coming back after you two, you might have saved them the trouble by going up in our boat and then sending down by a boy," Beam said.

"Oh, we have another boat on the west side of the island. They are coming back for business. We are not through with your island yet," Mr. Johnson replied with a short laugh.

"I would like to know something about this affair," said Beam in a perplexed way as they dropped on the ground by the tent. "I know you must be all right, as father said so, but we supposed those other men to be all right, too. They were down here last fall and stayed over night with us. They seemed to be perfect gentlemen and never offered to molest us in any way."

"They were down here for a purpose. Did you sleep pretty well that night?"

"Yes, sir. I remember we slept like a couple of logs and woke up with a headache in the morning."

Tod suddenly slapped his leg as a thought flashed through his head, and said: "By Ginger!"

Mr. Johnson smiled.

"Good guess, Tod; you were doped all right."

"That explains it. Who are they, anyhow?" asked Beam, looking very much disgusted.

"They belong to a gang of thieves that we have been trailing down for two years. We have pinched them, all but two, in the last twenty-four hours, and I hope to get those two on this island to-night, if they don't get wind of the deal and our plans miscarry."

Beam and Tod pricked up their ears and the latter said:

"How are you going to get them here?"

"We'll show you. Going to have a little family party."

Mr. Johnson's lips compressed grimly.

Suddenly the events of the previous night, which had been driven from his mind, flashed upon Beam and he said:

"By the way, something happened here last night that I wish you men would try to explain. It nearly made Tod and me gray headed."

"What was it?" queried Mr. Johnson curiously.

"Why, we got acquainted with a gentleman who is camping over on the Illinois side. Name is Dawson. Yesterday afternoon he came over to pay us a visit. He has been all over the world and Tod and I kept him telling stories of his travels until evening. Then we persuaded him to have supper with us and, finally, to stay all night. But I'll warrant he'll never stay on this island over night again," and Beam proceeded to

give a minute account of what they had seen and heard.

"What kind of a looking man was this Dawson?" asked Mr. Johnson with a queer look.

"Medium size, very fair complexion, and brown hair a little sprinkled with gray."

The detective looked at his companion with a short laugh, and the latter said:

"Aunt Jane and Gabe treated the boys to some theatricals all right."

"Who is 'Aunt Jane'?" Beam queried wonderingly.

"Aunt Jane is another crook, and Gabe Cary's particular partner; has been for years. On account of his fair complexion, he sometimes poses as a woman, and has acquired the nickname of 'Aunt Jane' among detectives and crooks. He is one of the best ventriloquists and sleight of hand performers in the country. They didn't want you camping on this island, so they put up a job on you. That's the size of it. Now do you begin to smell a mouse?"

Beam was too much astonished and disgusted to reply. He turned and looked at Tod.

The latter met the look unflinchingly, and said calmly:

"Oh, you needn't look at me in such an injured way. You're the boss of this camp and this is your island. I'm only a trained nurse."

Beam continued to gaze at him in silence, getting madder and more disgusted every moment,

as he saw how they had been duped. Finally he said:

"Well, for first class soft heads and greenies, you and I are certainly gifted above the sons of men. Why didn't we have sense enough to know there couldn't be any such foolishness as they went through with?"

Then he turned to Mr. Johnson.

"Won't that man Dawson take the alarm and make his escape, if he sees any commotion over here on the island?"

The detective smiled.

"He is in a cell uptown, by this time. We knew where he was. I sent two of my men over to his camp this forenoon to nab him. I saw them going up the other shore with him, just before we landed here. We have been piping off these two fellows all the morning. We knew they would show up at your camp sometime to-day, as they are due to be on the island to-night."

"I thought they didn't act very much disappointed when we told them we were going to leave to-day."

"No, that's what they wanted. Saved them the trouble of watching you."

"Have they a den on this island?" asked Tod.

"Yes. I never have seen it, but I hope to to-night."

At these words Beam and Tod pricked up their ears, and the latter remarked:

"Gee, that sounds business-like."

"Where is the den?" asked Beam.

"In one of the mounds at the upper end."

Then Beam thought of the strange lights he had seen there, and nudged Tod.

"Looks as if Dutch John and I had reason to be a little suspicious, after all; eh?"

"Yes. Looks as if the laugh might be on the rest of us."

"How in the world do you detectives get on to all these things?" asked Beam with native curiosity.

"Oh, hundreds of ways. In this case, one of the gang confessed. Do you remember that Mr. Craven whom I had down here duck-shooting?" Beam nodded, while Tod's eyes and mouth opened.

"Well, he is the man. It's too long a story to tell you here, but I was instrumental in his getting religion and thereby seeing the error of his ways, and he was so thoroughly changed and made over, as it were, that he confessed everything to me. He proposes to dedicate the balance of his life to the cause of reclaiming criminals. He is evidently sincere in the matter and I hope he may do some good."

Tod drew a long breath of relief.

"Then he won't have to go to prison?"

"Oh, no. It was through him that I learned of the den on this island."

"I'm awful glad of that. He was such a good

duck shot," said Tod in a heartfelt way that raised a smile.

"This den," continued Mr. Johnson, "is only one of several places that the gang had for storing stolen goods. I didn't know about this spot until last summer. By the way, what names did these two fellows give you?"

"The one with the brown mustache called himself Mr. Wrapp and the other one, Dr. Minton."

"Come to think, Cary did practice medicine in his younger days," said Mr. Johnson, turning to his companion.

"Yes, he practiced a number of years out west somewhere. He got into a scrape and had to leave in two days and since then he has been a professional crook."

Then Beam remembered the small, strange man and his warning, and said:

"Did father tell you about the man that died on the island in our cabin, after he had tried to shoot Tod and me?"

"No, I haven't seen your father since last fall. Tell me about it," replied Mr. Johnson, looking interested.

Then Beam told of the stranger and his warning; of his return in the wild storm; of his delirium and sudden death.

Both of the detectives listened with close interest, and when Beam had concluded, Mr. Johnson said:

"Did he have a livid scar on his cheek?"

"Yes."

"I know of him, although I never saw him. He joined the gang in another part of the country. But they soon found he was a weak sister and tried to shake him. I don't know why they didn't kill him. He was a crack-brained sort of a fellow that they couldn't depend upon. He never knew the exact location of this joint, although he had an inkling of it. His name was La Moile."

"One of the boys told me that Gabe Cary tried to shoot La Moile once, out in Omaha," put in Dickson, "but he was too quick and got away before Cary could get his gun in action."

"He was quick on the trigger that night, I know," said Beam with a shudder, as he thought of Tod's narrow escape.

For over an hour they sat and talked under the trees, then Mr. Johnson proposed that they go to the upper end of the island and look over the ground.

"Hadn't we better have a bite to eat first?" Tod suggested. "Those two genial detective friends of ours brought a basket of lunch. We might eat it and save me the trouble of getting some."

"Good idea, Tod," laughed Mr. Johnson; "we'll get something out of them, anyhow. Open the basket and see what they eat."

"They know how to pick out a lunch," said

Tod as he fished out sandwiches, pickles, cheese, sardines, cake, pie, and other good things.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's better than they will get from this time on," replied Mr. Johnson with a dry laugh, as they all helped themselves to the goodies.

After they had cleaned up the lunch, the detectives lighted cigars and the four started for the north end of the island. As they walked along, Mr. Johnson carefully noted the path, trees and underbrush.

When they stood at the foot of the largest mound, he said:

"Craven said it was in here. The entrance is on this sloping side, I believe, but we won't disturb anything now. We shall know to-night for certain, I hope."

It was well along in the afternoon when they returned to the camp, and Tod soon after began to prepare supper.

"You won't get a very elegant spread, gentlemen, and there are mighty few dishes."

"Oh, anything goes, out in the woods, Tod," laughed Mr. Johnson.

"We can eat on our knees, if necessary," put in Dickson.

"That's the way to talk. You look like that kind of men," said Tod, bustling about his work.

"So our friend Mr. Dawson is a crook, too," Beam remarked thoughtfully, as he watched Tod

flying about. "Well, he tells a good story, anyhow," and Beam gave a sigh of regret.

"They were probably made up on the spur of the moment. He was never across the ocean in his life. We have his record way back."

"And we thought he was all unstrung." Beam laughed and glanced at Tod, but that person was apparently too busy just then to pay attention.

"Charge it up to experience, my boy. That's the way we learn things that we don't forget in a hurry."

"Is Dawson his real name?"

"No. His name is Bill Cass. Every detective in the country knows him, or knows of him."

"He's been mixed up with crooks all his life," put in Dickson.

"Do you suppose that fellow you call 'Gabe' was outside, furnishing the fireworks?" Tod asked, pausing in his work.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Makes me feel mighty silly, to be taken in so easily," said Beam with a look of chagrin.

"Go down and brighten up your intellect with river water," called Tod; "supper will be ready in a minute."

"Let's go too, Dickson," and the trio went out to make their toilet.

They were eating when Purvey and Gray returned.

"Did White and Whalen get 'Aunt Jane'?" called Mr. Johnson.

"Yes, he's snug and safe."

"Then come and get some of Tod's delicious bacon, eggs, and catfish."

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAST OF A GANG

“**T**HAT menu strikes me pleasantly and rowing makes a fellow hungry,” was the response as Purvey and his colleague seated themselves and proceeded to do justice to Tod’s cooking.

The meal was eaten in silence, each of the four detectives being busy with his own thoughts on the coming work.

When the meal was over, Mr. Johnson said as he arose from the table:

“Now boys, let’s go up and arrange our plans.” And the four men walked up through the woods, while Beam and Tod cleared up the supper dishes and with suppressed excitement talked over the momentous affair that was to take place during the coming night.

“Those fellows don’t seem to be a bit worried about getting shot or stabbed,” said Tod, nodding his head in the direction the men had gone.

“No, they’re cool as a lot of cucumbers. I suppose, like soldiers, they get so used to taking their lives in their hands that they think nothing of it.”

"Wonder if they'll want us to help?" Tod said and shuffled about with nervous eagerness.

"I don't know. I hope so."

"So do I," Tod burst out, slamming the dishpan over in the corner. "I'm just aching to be right in it."

"We'll know when they come back."

It was after sundown when the detectives returned. They seated themselves under the trees, Mr. Johnson produced some cigars, and they were soon smoking and talking as calmly as though on a pleasure trip. But under that calmness and apparent indifference there was a certain air of alertness and expectancy which showed they realized the work before them and were ready to meet it.

The boys were on nettles to know what was expected of them, and presently Beam asked:

"Can we be of any assistance to you to-night?"

Mr. Johnson smoked meditatively a moment.

"I don't know. We have men enough to take care of them, I guess. Anything the boys can do?" this to his men.

Mr. Purvey looked at the two eager faces calmly and critically for a moment, and then blew out a long spiral of blue smoke.

"How's your nerve?"

"The tall lad had nerve enough to jump and grab Gabe Cary's arm when the critter was about to shove a knife into me," Gray remarked quietly.

"They're both quick on the trigger when it comes to shooting ducks, I can vouch for that," laughed Mr. Johnson.

"How would it do to let them watch the boat?" asked Purvey, turning to his chief, for Johnson was evidently leader of the expedition.

"Good idea," the latter nodded, approvingly; "one of them may give us the slip in the scrimmage, and he would naturally make a break for the boat. You don't want to kill anybody, I take it, so just take your shotguns and stay in hiding along the bank. If the parties come, they will probably land about opposite the mounds.

"You are both to stay right there and watch that boat. We will be over at the mounds to receive them. As I said, if one of them should get away from us he will probably make a run for the boat. In that case, you are to tear two or three good sized holes in that boat with your shotguns. Fix it so it can't be used for the present."

"Can you shoot straight in the dark, boys?" asked Purvey.

"I've killed ducks when it was so dark I couldn't see the rib of my gun, and so has Tod," replied Beam quietly.

"The moon rises about twelve-thirty and they will probably come before that," Mr. Johnson remarked. "I have inside information that they will be here between eleven and twelve, if something doesn't occur to delay them, of course. If

anybody wants to take a little nap, now is the time," he added.

"Go in the tent and lie on our bed," said Beam.

"Come on, Gray, we didn't get much sleep last night." Purvey yawned as he spoke.

Ten minutes later they were rolled up in the boys' blankets.

The other two detectives talked and smoked, while Beam and Tod listened with eager interest.

About ten-thirty Mr. Johnson awoke the two men and preparations were made for the work before them.

Shortly after eleven o'clock everything was ready and the entire party started up the island. The detectives had located the positions of each on their previous visit, and when each had taken his stand, Mr. Johnson walked to the river bank with the boys.

"Now be still as mice here among the trees. If a boat lands don't make a move or a sound. The occupants will come over to the mounds. There will be nothing for you to do unless, as I told you, one of them gets away from us. Then obey instructions. I am going down toward the cabin now. You will probably hear some owl hooting after a bit, but don't wonder at it. It's part of the programme. Be watchful and silent and don't lose your heads," was his parting word as he disappeared in the woods.

It was a new rôle for Beam and Tod and every

nerve was tense as a fiddle string. Seating themselves in a little clump of bushes, their guns across their laps, they waited.

How slowly the minutes dragged along! The stars twinkled brightly in the warm spring air and no sounds disturbed the solitude of night but the never ending chorus of frogs. It seemed to Tod that it must be almost morning, when—

“Sh—” said Beam and laid a warning hand on his arm, for his quick ear had caught an indistinct sound out on the river.

A long wait followed, at least it seemed long to them, then Beam whispered softly:

“Guess it wasn’t anything after all.”

“I’m betting they don’t show up,” Tod answered just as softly.

“Can’t tell; we’ll do our part, anyhow.”

Presently Tod whispered as a faint, white glow gradually spread over the east:

“The moon is rising.”

“Listen!”

Beam clutched his arm with a grip of steel, for a boat was rapidly approaching on noiseless oars.

It touched the shore within twenty feet of them and two men stepped out, silent as phantoms.

In the still air, the boys heard one of them say in a low tone:

“We’re late on account of that cursed sandbar. Hurry up and give Duffy the signal.”

“Nothing to fear there. Duffy has them

asleep, you can gamble," and with that, the other man picked up two bundles and walked up the bank. He passed within five feet of the young listeners and Tod feared the beating of his heart would betray them.

The other man brushed by, bearing a load of something, they could not tell what.

Then out in the woods they heard the hoot of an owl. It was a good imitation, but it did not deceive the trained ears of the young watchers.

A moment later and down in the island they heard an answering call. Then all was quiet again.

Not daring even to whisper to each other, the boys waited breathlessly. It seemed to Tod in his anxiety that he must do something—yell, shoot, or anything that would let off some of the bottled-up steam. But he held himself together and listened.

The detectives were there; why wasn't something being done?

Beam twisted around and looked toward the mounds. He saw a light shine for a few seconds and then go out. Presently he heard a sound as if a door was being shut softly; the sound he had heard in the canoe months before.

Then came sounds that caused each to clutch his gun tighter—sounds of a struggle—of oaths and blows and curses. Then came two reports of a revolver, followed by a heavy fall.

"Somebody's killed," whispered Tod, fairly

boiling with excitement, "hadn't we better go and help?"

"No, Johnson put us here to watch this boat. One or both of them may come tearing back here any minute," replied Beam, who was much cooler than his companion.

"That's so. I forgot all about the boat." Tod cast a glance down at the skiff, gradually showing more plainly in the slowly brightening rays of the rising moon.

"I don't hear any more racket, I guess they've got them," whispered Beam, listening intently.

As he spoke, there came the sound of footsteps and rustling leaves, and the safeties on both guns were quietly slipped ready for business.

A moment later Mr. Johnson's voice said with a ring of triumph:

"All right, boys; we've got them safe. Is the boat here?"

"Yes, sir. It's right down here below us," Beam replied as they rose to meet him.

"I wonder if there's anything else in it?" said Mr. Johnson as he walked down the bank and flashed the rays of his bull's-eye lantern over the boat.

"Here's something. It may be a bomb or a bottle of whiskey," and he focused the rays of his lantern on the object and gingerly picked it up.

"The latter, of course," he chuckled, reading the words, "Old Rye. Bottled in bond," and

adding, "That's all. You boys may take this boat down to your landing, and we will take the prisoners down through the woods. It's getting lighter every minute."

"Was anybody shot?" asked Tod anxiously.

"No, but it was a mighty close call. The first bullet went through my hat, just grazing my head. Then Gray knocked the gun up and the next one went wild. It burns a little yet," said Mr. Johnson, as he removed his hat and ran his fingers lightly over his head.

Tod shivered and looked wonderingly at the man who had missed death by a hair's breadth and could speak so calmly and unconcernedly of the affair.

"Did you find their den?" Beam asked.

"Yes, we let them open it before we pinched them. It's just a sort of a cellar excavated under the largest mound. We haven't examined it very thoroughly. Time enough for that to-morrow when we have more light."

At that moment Purvey appeared in the moonlight and said:

"Gray suggests taking those fellows up to jail to-night. He says two of us will have to guard them, anyhow, and we may just as well put in the time rowing."

"Perhaps that wouldn't be a bad idea. But the three of you better go if the boat is large enough; two pairs of oars and one man to guard the prisoners."

"Let them take our boat. It will hold six or seven comfortably," said Beam.

"That will be just the thing. They will be back before breakfast time," Mr. Johnson nodded approvingly.

This plan was carried out. Beam and Tod rowed the prisoners' boat down to the landing in the moonlight, while the detectives took their men down the island.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea for one of your men to tell father and have him come down and see this den?" Beam suggested, as the prisoners were placed in his big boat.

"Yes, it would," Johnson agreed and spoke a few words to Purvey, who nodded as he stepped aboard. In a moment they were on their way up the river, their dripping oars flashing in the moonlight.

"You boys get some sleep and I'll patrol the island until daylight," the detective said to Beam and Tod.

"Why should you do that? Do you expect any more?" queried Tod.

"No, but it's always best to be on the safe side. It only lacks a couple of hours till day-break. We've made a clean job of this so far and I don't want any slips."

"Call me at daylight," said Beam, as he and Tod went into the tent.

"It strikes me we've got into a queer mixup down here," Tod remarked, as he threw himself

on the blankets. "Wonder what will show up next?"

"I rather think we are coming to the end of it. Looks as if we had been living on top of a volcano without knowing it."

"Say, but a detective has a strenuous life of it; up all hours of the night and liable to be killed any minute; shucks, I'm not a bit sleepy," Tod muttered, turning over restlessly.

"Neither am I, but we can put in the time chatting."

However, after a time they both fell asleep and it was after sunrise when Beam awoke, with Tod still snoring.

Beam went outside, to find "Dutch" John talking with Mr. Johnson.

"Hello, Peamy. You alife yet already?" and a grin widened the broad face.

"Yes, I'm living," returned Beam good-naturedly. "Is everything all right, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, haven't seen a thing."

"Vat you tink of my light now, eh?" came with a triumphant smile from John.

"I guess you saw straight, John," Beam admitted as he went back to arouse Tod.

Shortly after, the latter emerged gaping and stretching; but a dash of cold river water drove the sleep from his eyes and he began preparing breakfast. In due time it was ready, and Beam, knowing how his German friend loved fried catfish, insisted upon his sharing the meal. Need-

less to say, much urging was not necessary in order to get him to partake of the fish.

After breakfast Tod went down to the landing and soon came hurrying back with the news that the detectives were in sight.

"There's father and Doc Hall both in the stern," cried Beam as the boat drew nearer.

"That's so. Pretty early for such old birds to be out on the river so far from home," Tod rejoined.

"Duck Island, ahoy!" called Doctor Hall as the boat drew in at the landing.

"Ahoy, your own self! And there is my paternal parent," cried Beam, hurrying joyfully down to the landing.

A moment later they were out of the boat and Beam had grasped his father's hand in a firm, heartfelt grip for the first time in many a long day.

Holding Beam off at arm's length, Doctor Hall turned to his old friend:

"What do you think of him now, Hi? Looks like a different boy, doesn't he?"

Hiram Foster, as we know, was not demonstrative, but his rugged features softened as he looked at his boy, tall and stalwart, with the dark tan of health on his cheeks.

"Yes, there seems to be method in your heresy, Al. This will do his mother a world of good."

"It does me a world of good, too," said the bluff old doctor, slapping Beam familiarly on the back.

"Any of you gentlemen been to breakfast?" Tod called from the bank.

"No, we want to sample a Duck Island breakfast," was the doctor's rejoinder.

"All right. It's catfish and river water, this morning. We'll be ready for the second table in a few minutes," said Tod, hurrying back to the cabin.

The party filed into camp and Doctor Hall took a peep in the tent the first thing.

"Did you sleep here every night during the winter, Beam?"

"Yes, sir, every single night, warm or cold."

"That's what helped bring him out, Hi," and the doctor's face beamed with satisfaction.

Tod's fish breakfast was discussed and praised by the late hungry arrivals, and when it was over Mr. Johnson said:

"Come on now, and let's examine that den thoroughly."

"You say it is in one of those Indian mounds?" Beam's father remarked as the party started up the island.

"Yes, I'll show you in a few minutes."

Arriving at their destination, Mr. Johnson said:

"We were in here a few moments last night.

We let the parties open it before we nabbed them. Afterwards we closed it up again. See anything suspicious?"

"I confess I don't," Doctor Hall answered in a perplexed way.

The detective walked half-way up the slope of the largest mound and stood on a blanket of small stones and pebbles. Then he stooped over where the innocent looking layer of pebbles seemed thickest, and inserted his fingers among them.

Presently he found what he was feeling for and gave a jerk. An iron bail, like the bail of a big soap kettle, rounded up in view. He braced his legs wide apart, took hold of the bail with both hands and pulled.

"Want any help?" asked Purvey.

Mr. Johnson shook his head, and a dummy sheet-iron box, filled mostly with leaves, was lifted out, disclosing some rough steps leading down under the mound. At the bottom of the steps was a door.

Mr. Johnson went down and inserting a key in the lock, opened the door and said:

"Come in, everybody, and bring your lanterns," and two minutes later the entire party, including "Dutch" John, was down under the big mound where once had reposed the bones of Indian braves.

The room was perhaps ten feet square and

high as a tall man. A number of chairs were scattered about, a short bench, and a table. In one corner of the room was a sort of sideboard or cupboard. Mr. Johnson walked over to it and opened the door. On the shelves within reposed dozens of boxes of fine cigars, many bottles of choice wines and liquors, and several packs of cards.

“Those fellows were evidently high livers, but if they didn’t steal anything besides this stuff, it wasn’t much loss to humanity,” remarked Doctor Hall dryly.

Mr. Johnson smiled and walked to the rear part of the room. He inserted a key in a small hole in the woodwork, turned it, and opened a section of the wall the size of a door.

Exclamations of astonishment were heard as the lanterns revealed the contents of the inner room.

Silks, velvets, bolts of cloth, and costly fabrics of every description filled the room. Closer inspection revealed gold and silver articles of many kinds—knives, forks, spoons, snuff-boxes, watches, bracelets, chains, and so forth, all wrapped in tissue paper to prevent destruction by dampness.

“Well, well! we might almost imagine we were back in the time of the Arabian Nights,” said Doctor Hall in great astonishment, “but why didn’t they use a cave in the bluffs?”

"Because here is the last place anybody would ever think of looking for a hiding-place for stolen goods," replied the detective.

"You see, this gang didn't originate the den," said detective Purvey. "It was made and used by one of the old time gangs that infested the river years ago."

Mr. Johnson nodded.

"That's the way of it. The secret of the place was handed down in some way to this later band, and they have made use of it, as you see."

"Py Chiminy," broke out "Dutch" John in amazement, "there vas almost enough stuff to start a store mit, still yet."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't buy many of these kind of goods, John," said Mr. Foster with a smile, turning to the old farmer.

"No, I tink not. Dis truck too rich for my old womans," was the grinning reply.

"This is your island, Mr. Foster," said Johnson, "but we propose to have this den dug out and filled up and the goods taken away."

"Certainly, that's the only thing to do. Make a clean job of it this time. As for the goods and valuables, I don't know whether there is a law or not to cover the case, if you can't find the right owners. Anyhow, I wouldn't touch a dollar of the proceeds even if the law should allow it to me on account of my ownership of the land. It is all the fruit of men's toil that has been stolen from them by these rascals."

"We can find the owners of at least part of the stuff, I know. Meanwhile, we will get a force of men and dig out this mound and check off the goods and pack them away for future disposal," said Mr. Johnson, carefully locking the doors as the party moved out into the sunlight.

"Vell, Peamy, you purty lucky, I tink, not to be kilt by dem fellers," said Mr. Meister as they were returning to camp.

"Oh, I don't know. I guess they don't do any more killing than they can help."

"That's right," added Mr. Foster, who had overheard; "all the same, if I had known before that Johnson's thieves were on the island, I should have called you back."

"We're glad you didn't know," cried Tod. "Shall we begin to pack up?"

"Yes, we may as well break camp now as any time."

Arriving at the cabin, the chief of detectives said:

"Mr. Foster, you are acquainted with everybody in your town. Will you send down about a dozen good men with shovels, picks and axes? And send down some public official to help make a list of the things. We want to have this deal open and above board."

"Yes, gladly. And I'll get the mayor, Charlie Gerts, to come down and help superintend things," returned Mr. Foster.

"Thanks. That will be all right. Purvey, you

and Gray go up and bring the men down. Dickson and I will remain here and keep camp and watch things."

"Tod and I are going to break up housekeeping to-day. But you are welcome to use the cabin, and the tent also if you wish," said Beam.

"Ah; is that so? Going back to civilization, eh? Well, I don't know how long we will be on this job, but we shall be glad to avail ourselves of your offer, and bring up the tent and blankets when we come," returned Mr. Johnson cordially.

"It will help us out some, too," chimed in Tod with a laugh; "it won't take us so long to pack up."

"I suppose we might remain and watch them open up that den," Beam mused thoughtfully. "I don't know, though, as I care much about it. We've been inside and seen what it's like. Guess I'd rather see that good old mother of mine; so we'd better pack up and go."

"All right. I'm ready," said Tod, disappearing in the tent.

"I suppose the originators of that den were some of the old gang that the citizens broke up in the early forties," Mr. Foster mused, turning to Doctor Hall.

"Probably. That was just before I came."

"I remember it well, for I was one of the posse that cleaned them out. You don't remember anything about it, I suppose?" turning to Mr. Johnson.

"No, that was before my time. All I know is what the man that squealed on this gang told me. He said the old-time river thieves used to have a number of rendezvous and places to hide plunder and stolen horses, and this was one of them. This gang got on the location somehow. I believe the secret was handed down by some of the families of the old-timers."

"Well, clean it up this time. Dig it out and fill up the hole."

"Just what I propose to do. We have work enough in other parts of the country, without having to watch this place."

"It's a wonder they didn't try to interfere with the boys and get them off the island," said Doctor Hall.

"Ask Beam about that," and the detective's eyes twinkled.

"I hate to tell about that scrape, but I suppose I'll have to." And Beam told his father and Doctor Hall how they had been tricked, Tod occasionally adding some embellishments.

They listened to the story, then Doctor Hall said:

"That was certainly an original scheme. It would have impressed most anybody. Especially that 'rod of Aaron' and the 'Ides of April,'" and his eyes shone with merriment as he nudged his old friend.

"They probably thought it was time the boys moved on, and took that method of helping

them along,'" said Mr. Foster, chuckling audibly.

"That Dr. Minton, or Cary, or whatever his name is, advised us to get on higher ground. Said it wasn't healthy here," said Beam with a grin.

"He was interested in your health," Doctor Hall commented dryly.

"It's rather an odd place for a den of this kind," said Mr. Foster, "when one considers the numerous holes and caves in the bluffs along the main shore."

"That's what I thought at first," Mr. Johnson replied, "but when you stop to think that a posse of men might go all over the island without finding anything suspicious, it looks like a pretty shrewd idea. Long ago this island was probably a dense mat of vines and trees, as it is now."

"Yes, it was for a fact. You almost had to cut your way through with an ax," said Mr. Foster. "I can see it was an ideal place to hide stolen horses. Just swam them across from the main shore and hid them in one of these thickets until the chase cooled down. Honest people rarely visited these islands in those days."

"That's why the thieves made use of them," returned the detective; "they were isolated from the world."

"What did Johnson think of your thunder-storm experience?" said Mr. Foster, turning to Beam.

"I didn't say anything about it. Tod and I concluded it was all in our imagination."

"What was that?" inquired the detective, looking interested.

"Why, it seems that one night last summer during a thunder-storm, the boys thought they heard a horse neigh and then heard a scream or cry. But they never could find any evidence of anything being on the island to cause it."

"Craven told me that the old-time members of the gang used to have a place on this island to hide stolen horses temporarily, but he didn't think it was used any more. He didn't know the exact location of the place, but thought it was somewhere in the southwestern part. He didn't have anything to do with the horse stealing part of their depredations, as that amounted to very little now, compared to their other stealings."

"No, there isn't one horse stolen now, where there used to be ten," said Mr. Foster.

Tod, who had come out of the tent and was listening eagerly, now broke in:

"I'll bet I know where it is, Beam. You know that short ridge with the tangle of grape-vines, grass, brush, and fallen trees, where we caught the two mink?"

Beam nodded.

"Well, that's in the southwest and it's the best spot on the island to hide anything. In fact, it's such a dense tangle that we never tried to

explore it much; just set our traps around the edge."

"Suppose we walk across and look the ground over," Mr. Johnson suggested; "it isn't far. What do you say, Mr. Foster? Purvey and Gray can go on up after the men. You'll probably go back with the boys, anyhow."

Mr. Foster nodded his acquiescence.

"I'll be with you in a moment. Must let Charlie Gerts know about getting the men."

He hastily scribbled a note and handed it to Detective Purvey. "There, come on, Al. And you come too, John, you're interested in everything around here. No telling what we may find on this island."

"Yah, I coom," replied Mr. Meister promptly.

"Better take the ax," Tod suggested; "it's an awful thicket in there."

"Yes, and by the way, there's a pickax in the boat. We might take that, too," said Mr. Johnson.

"I'll get it," cried Tod, and five minutes later the party was trailing across the island. The objective point was only about three hundred yards from camp, and they were soon there.

"It is quite a little jungle, that's sure," said Mr. Johnson as they reached the foot of the knoll. "Let's circle around and see if we can find any trace of a path leading up."

The little hill was truly a network of vines, underbrush, and fallen trees. It looked as if a

cyclone, some time in the past, had visited the spot and literally torn things to pieces. Half-way around Johnson, who was in the lead, paused and said:

"This looks like an old path. Give me the ax, Tod," and taking it he started up the hill, followed by the others.

"Hasn't been used much lately," Mr. Foster remarked, as they worked their way up through the brush and over fallen trees.

"No, but it was a path once, you can see," rejoined Dr. Hall.

Cutting off limbs and chopping down brush, the detective forced his way, until presently he emerged into a little clearing at the top and called back:

"Here's a cozy spot, boys. If this isn't the place, it ought to be."

It was an ideal hiding-place; an open glade about thirty by fifty feet at the summit of the hill, the ground bare of everything but dead leaves, and surrounded by several large maple and elm trees, whose branches interlaced overhead, and which, when in full leaf, evidently formed a perfect canopy of shade. Scores of smaller trees and bushes between made a network so dense that only occasional patches of sky could be seen. It was simply a case of one of nature's queer freaks in leaving that little nook bare of vegetation and hidden from the outside world.

"There's a big hole in the side of the hill, all right," said Mr. Johnson, pointing ahead; "it may be a wolf den and it may be something else. Get your gun ready, Dickson, and we'll go ahead and investigate. If a wolf jumps out, paste him."

So saying, the detective pulled his revolvers and stepped ahead to the opening. They all peered in cautiously, but could distinguish nothing.

"You light a match, and I'll have my gun ready," said Mr. Johnson.

Dickson complied, and they crowded into the narrow opening. The flickering match gave but little light, and Mr. Johnson said:

"Give me your gun and light two matches. We ought to have made a torch, I suppose, but we can do that later. There isn't anything in here, or it would be stirring by this time."

"It's an old stable, all right. There's a rope halter hanging from a post in that corner over there," said Mr. Dickson suddenly.

"Yes, I see it. That's clear evidence of the use the place was put to. Nothing here now, though. Even the wolves or skunks pass it up. Let's go out and call the boys."

Mr. Foster, Dr. Hall, "Dutch" John, Beam and Tod had walked to the top of the hill, directly over the opening, and were awaiting developments, when Mr. Johnson appeared at the entrance.

"It's been used for a stable," he called, "come on in, though there isn't much to see now but an old rope halter."

"What do you think of our hearing a horse neigh, now?" cried Beam triumphantly, as they hurried down to the entrance.

"This gives color to your story, although I don't remember hearing of a horse being stolen in the last year around here," replied his father as they peered around in the gloom.

"One of my neighbors, Sam Screiber, four miles west of me, lost a horse from his pasture last September and never heard from it afterwards," said Mr. Meister.

"Perhaps that explains it; anyhow, it's plain that horses have been kept here."

"Yes," replied Mr. Johnson, "while the Vigilance Committee was hunting them, they simply stayed concealed here until the chase cooled down and then got out of the country."

"They won't do it any more," said Mr. Foster quietly; "we'll have the men blow this up when they do the other den."

"See, here's a little pile of moldy oats," called Mr. Dickson, who had wandered over to another corner of the place. This settled it and they needed no further evidence.

"Mute, but incriminating," Dr. Hall remarked as they walked out. "Plenty of room here to hide half a dozen horses. You will do a good thing to destroy this den, Hi."

As they were walking back to camp, Beam said:

"Now, if I could only explain that human cry I'm sure I heard. Maybe it wasn't our imagination after all, Tod."

"The chances are you will never know what it was, after this length of time," said Mr. Johnson.

Dr. Hall dropped on a seat under the trees, with the remark:

"I was just thinking of the thousands of men who try to get a living at that kind of business, and they work harder than they would to earn an honest livelihood, besides having the penitentiary staring them in the face continually."

"Oh, they drift into that kind of a life from various causes. It's easy to get started, but hard to stop," replied Mr. Johnson, sitting down beside him. "I'm satisfied that the best way to reach such fellows is through religion. I can thank religion for being able to clean up this gang. The trouble is, not one preacher in fifty is fitted to do anything with them. It needs a magnetic, forceful, sympathetic fellow, a master of his calling, as it were. And there are mighty few of them."

"Society hasn't much time to waste on its outcasts," said Dr. Hall with a curl of the lip.

"Pshaw, Al, you're getting to be an old cynic. There are two ways of looking at these things.

Let's go uptown and help send those men down," said Mr. Foster, slapping his friend on the shoulder, as Beam and Tod went into the tent to finish packing.

CHAPTER XXIII

A PART OF THE BUSY WORLD

IT was mid-August; just a year after Beam and Tod had gone into the woods to find out what Mother Nature could do in the way of restoring an emaciated, pain-racked body to normal health. That the kind old nurse had performed her task well, all of Beam's friends acknowledged.

It would be hard to describe in words the joy of Beam's mother over her boy's return to health. Indeed it made both father and mother feel young again to watch the color in his cheeks and the sparkle in his eye.

Dr. Hall scouted some one's remark that the cure was almost miraculous.

"Miraculous? Bosh!" he said. "Turn any sick man loose out in the woods and he'll get well without medicine, if he has any vitality left in him. In nine cases out of ten, medicine does no good, except as a temporary stimulant. Nature does the healing and the doctor and his pills get the credit. That's all there is to it."

Just now, there was a business meeting at his office. Besides himself, there were Hiram Foster and Beam, and Tod Masters.

"So you have decided to study forestry instead of medicine, Beam?" and the doctor looked at the tall, straight young fellow affectionately.

"Yes, sir. I have thought the matter over, and believe I will like that better."

"You're to blame for it, Al. You and that trip down in the woods," remarked Mr. Foster with a smile.

"I'm not ashamed of my part in it," stoutly maintained the doctor. "Forestry is a grand work, and the chances to rise in it are just as great."

"Well, I don't care which profession Beam chooses. The main thing is for him to get into something that he likes. He will be more likely to make a success of it," said Mr. Foster.

"That's the idea exactly," the doctor returned emphatically; "do something that you like to do, and half the battle is won at the start. That's what I've always claimed."

"What is that I hear about your going on the river?" said Mr. Foster, turning to Tod.

"It is true, I hope. My cousin, Tom Davis, one of the pilots on the 'Susie,' is going to teach me piloting; that is, if I have brains enough," added Tod with a laugh.

"I guess that business depends as much on memory as it does on brains," Dr. Hall remarked.

"A man needs both, and a cool head to boot," returned Mr. Foster; "but I think Tod will pan

out all right. I hope so, at any rate. I feel under everlasting obligations to him for fetching Beam out of the kinks."

"You don't owe me any thanks. That was the time of my life. I would like to go through it all over again."

"Except that night of the snowstorm, when the fellow was swinging two big revolvers around rather carelessly," Beam remarked grimly.

"Yes, I'll omit that night."

"By the way, Hi, what was ever done with all that plunder they took from the island?" asked Dr. Hall.

"Why, Johnson found some of the owners, I believe, and the rest of it was shipped to Chicago. I don't know what they do with unidentified stolen goods; whether the state owns it or not. It ought to go to some charity fund, I should say. I'm awfully glad the den is cleaned out, anyhow."

"Yes, so am I. We won't have that to bother over any more."

"Johnson told me there was over eighteen thousand dollars worth of goods in that little room," said Mr. Foster.

"They were goods that run into money fast. I could see that."

"Johnson told me a queer bit of news that came out at the trial of those fellows," continued Mr. Foster. "It seems that man Cass, or

'Aunt Jane,' as the detectives called him, had an occasional mania to pose as a woman. Once, when he was passing as 'Marie Neville,' he met this man La Moile, who died on the island, after trying to shoot Beam and Tod. With La Moile, it was a case of love at first sight. He proposed and they were actually married. It broke him all up when he discovered the deceit, and he was never the same man afterwards."

"It beats all how many freaks there are in the world that pass for men and women," Dr. Hall interjected.

"The oddest part in this case is that in after years, unknown to each other, they both joined this gang of thieves."

"Fate seems to give some people queer experiences. By the way, Hi, how many years did those fellows get? Do you remember?"

"From twenty to thirty years. I don't remember exactly."

"You and I will both be over the divide before they get out, anyhow. When do you take your first turn at the wheel, Tod?" asked the doctor, turning to young Masters.

"On the 'Susie's' next trip up."

"And Beam starts for the woods to-morrow."

"That's the programme now," Beam replied.

"I tell you, Hi, it was a happy thought, sending that boy down to the island, instead of dosing him with medicine."

"It certainly was," Mr. Foster admitted.

"I wouldn't mind chaperoning another boy or two," put in Tod.

"You learn how to 'chaperone' a steamboat," remarked Beam; "there's more money in it."

"That's so. I forgot. I'm going to be a business man now," said Tod, gazing fondly out over the broad river shimmering in the sunlight.

THE END

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