

Young Hunters of the Lake

Ralph Bonehill

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YOUNG HUNTERS OF THE LAKE

or

Out with Rod and Gun

By Captain Ralph Bonehill

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PREFACE

My Dear Lads:

This story is complete in itself but forms volume three of a line known under the general title of "Boy Hunters Series," and taking in adventures in the field, the forest, and on the river and lake, both in winter and summer.

The boys of these stories are bright, wide-awake lads of to-day, with a taste for rod and shotgun, and a life in the open air. They know a good deal about fishing and how to shoot, and camp life is no new thing to them. In the first volume, entitled, "_Four Boy Hunters_", they organize a little club of four members and go forth for a summer vacation. They have such good times that, when Winter comes on, they resolve to go camping again, and do so, as related in the second volume, called "_Guns and Snowshoes_." In that story they fall victims to a blizzard, and spend a most remarkable Christmas; but, of course, all ends happily.

In the present story, summer is once more at hand, and again the boy hunters venture forth, this time bound for a large lake a good many miles from their home town. They have a jolly cruise on the water, fall in with a very peculiar old hermit, and are molested not a little by some rivals. They likewise follow up two bears, and are treated to a ghost scare calculated to make anybody's hair stand on end. What the ghost proved to be I leave the pages which follow to reveal.

As I have said before, good hunting, especially in our eastern states, is fast becoming a thing of the past. In some sections only small game can be had and even then the eager hunter has to travel many miles sometimes for a shot.

Trusting that all boys who love the woods and waters, a rod, a gun and a restful camp will enjoy reading this volume, I remain,

Your sincere friend, Captain Ralph Bonehill.

CHAPTER I

FOUR LIVELY BOYS

"Boys, I'm going swimming. Who is going along?"

"Count me in, Snap," answered Shep Reed.

"Swimming?" came from a third youth of the crowd of four. "Why, you couldn't keep me away if you tried. I've been waiting for a swim for about eleven years-----"

"And a day," broke in a small, stout youth. "Don't forget the day, Whopper, if you want to be really truthful.

"All right, put in the day," cheerfully assented the lad called Whopper, because of his propensity to exaggerate when speaking. "Of course you'll go, too, Giant?" he added, questioningly.

"Will I?" answered the small youth. "Will a duck swim and a cow eat clover? To be sure I'll go. But I'll have to run home first and tell mother."

"I'll have to go home, too," said the lad called Snap. "But I can be back here in a quarter of an hour."

"Where shall we go?" asked Shep Reed.

"I was thinking of going up to Lane's Cove," answered Snap Dodge.

"Lane's Cove!" cried the smallest youth of the crowd.

"Yes. Isn't that a nice place?"

"Sure it is, but don't you know that Ham Spink's father has bought all the land around there?"

"What of that, Giant?"

"Maybe he won't let us go swimming on his property---because of the trouble we had with Ham."

"Oh, I don't believe he'll see us," came from the boy called Whopper. "Why, I've been swimming at the cove a thousand times, and nobody ever tried to stop me."

"If he orders us away we can go," said Shep Reed. "I know he is just mean enough to do it."

"Is Ham home yet?" asked one of the boys.

"No, but I heard he was going to come home as soon as that boarding school shut up for the summer."

"Wonder if he'll try to make more trouble?"

"If he does he'd better watch out, or he'll get into hot water," said Shep Reed; and then the boys separated, to get their swimming outfits and tell their folks what they proposed to do.

The boys lived in the town of Fairview, a country place, located on the Rocky River, about ten miles above a fine sheet of water called Lake Cameron. The town boasted of a score of stores, several churches, a hotel, and a neat railroad station at which, during the summer months, as high as ten trains stopped daily. On the outskirts of the town were a saw mill, a barrel factory, and several other industries.

To those who have read the two former books in this series, entitled, "Four Boy Hunters" and "Guns and Snowshoes," the lads getting ready for a swim will need no special introduction. The lad called Snap was Charley Dodge, the son of one of the most influential men of that neighborhood, who was a school trustee and also part owner of the saw mill and a large summer hotel. Charley was a brave and wide-awake youth and was often looked up to as a leader by the others. Where his nickname of Snap had originated it would be hard to say, although he was as full of snap and ginger as a shad is full of bones.

Sheppard Reed, always called Shep for short, was the son of a well-known physician, a boy who loved outdoor life, and one who was as strong as he was handsome. He and Snap had been chums for many years, and as a consequence were occasionally known as the twins, although they were no relation to each other.

Frank Dawson had moved to Fairview about three years before this tale opens. He was a merry lad, with laughing eyes, and his method of exaggerating had speedily gained for him the nickname of Whopper. But Frank was withal a truthful lad his "whoppers" being of the sort meant to deceive nobody. Even his mother could not make him give up his extravagant speech. Once when she spoke about it he gravely replied:

"I know it is wrong, mother, but I simply can't stop it. Why, I've made up my mind over a million times to---" And then he broke down, and his mother had to laugh in spite of herself.

The smallest lad of the four was Will Caslette, always called Billy or Giant. He was the son of a widow lady, who owned a small but neat cottage on one of the side streets of the town. Mrs. Caslette thought the world of her offspring and Giant was fully worthy of the affection she bestowed upon him. Although small in size he was manly in his deportment, and at school he was as bright as any one in his class.

About a year before, the four boys had organized an outing or gun club and obtained permission to go camping for a few weeks in the vicinity of Lake Cameron. They reached the lake after several adventures and settled down in a comfortable camp, from which, however, they were driven by a saw mill owner named Andrew Felps, who ran a rival concern to that in which Snap's father owned an interest. The young hunters then moved to Firefly Lake, a mile away, and there hunted and fished to their hearts' content. They were frequently joined by old Jed Sanborn, a trapper who lived in the mountains between the lakes. They had some trouble with Ham

Spink, a dudish young man of the town, who established a rival camp not far off, and they came close to perishing during a disastrous forest fire.

The summer outing made the boys hungry for more, and as soon as the winter holidays were at hand they made arrangements to go into the woods again, this time taking their outfits on sleds. They had with them their snowshoes, and found the latter articles very useful when out after game. They fixed up a comfortable camp, and rescued a half-frozen tramp. But the tramp did not appreciate what had been done for him and ran away with some of their things, which brought on a lively pursuit. Then the boys had more trouble with Ham Spink and his crony, Carl Dudder. In the end it was discovered that Ham and Carl had gotten the tramp to annoy the young hunters, and as a result Mr. Spink and Mr. Dudder had to foot some heavy bills for their sons. Ham and Carl were sent off to a strict boarding school, where their parents hoped they would turn over a new leaf. Snap and his chums came back home loaded down with game.

"The best outing ever!" declared more than one of the boys.

"We'll have to go again!"

"Yes, indeed!"

And then and there they began to plan what to do during the next vacation.

"I've got an idea," said Snap, one day, during the spring. "Why not get a good boat---one that will stand some hard knocks---and go through Lake Cameron and Firefly Lake to Lake Narsac? Jed Sanborn was telling me that was a fine place for hunting and fishing, and the lake is as clear as crystal."

"It's an awfully wild place, so I was told," said Shep.

"About a million snakes up there, so I once heard," put in Whopper. "Snakes are so thick you have to kick 'em out of your way to walk around."

"Excuse me, I don't want any snakes," answered Giant, with a shiver.

"Somebody once told me the lake was haunted," said Snap. "But of course that wouldn't scare us---we are not afraid of ghosts, are we?"

"No!" came from all of the others promptly.

"The ghost that tries to scare me will get his ear pinched," added Giant, and said this so drolly that all had to laugh.

"One thing is sure," said Shep, after a pause, "with fish, game, snakes and ghosts we'd certainly find enough to interest us, eh?"

"Is the lake very deep?" asked Giant.

"Jed Sanborn told me that you can't touch bottom in some places," answered Snap. "The lake lies right between three tall mountains. He said we might have to carry our boat around some of the rocks

in the stream leading to it."

"Well, we can do that to---providing the boat isn't too heavy."

This talk led to many others, and in the end it was decided that the four boys should start on the trip the week following the Fourth of July. Then commenced active preparations. Guns were cleaned, camping outfits overhauled, and the lads looked around for just the right boat in which to make the trip. Through Mr. Dodge a fine, strong craft was obtained; and then the lads waited impatiently for the day to come when they should begin the outing on the lake. They anticipated some adventures, but did not dream of the curious happenings in store for them.

CHAPTER II

SWIMMING, AND WHAT FOLLOWED

Lane's Cove was situated almost a mile from Fairview, but the four boys did not think anything of walking that distance. All were good pedestrians, for their numerous outings had hardened their muscles and given them good lung power. Even little Giant trudged along as swiftly as the rest and even suggested a race when they came in sight of the spot selected by Snap for the afternoon's fun.

"No, don't run---you'll get overheated," said Whopper. "When I run I sweat like a house afire."

"Sweating like a house afire is good!" murmured Giant, with a grin. "Now if you had only said sweat like a stone, or a piece of iron, all of us would have known what you meant. As it is---" And then he stopped and ducked, to escape the piece of dried mud Whopper playfully shied at him.

The cove reached, the boys speedily found a spot that suited them. It was at a point where some overhanging bushes and trees sheltered a strip of sandy shore. At one point a rock ran out into the river, making an excellent place from which to dive.

The lads hustled into the bushes and in a very few minutes Snap appeared in his bathing outfit and was followed by Shep.

"Beat you in!" cried the doctor's son, but hardly had he spoken when Snap made a leap and landed into the river with a loud splash. Shep came after him, and both disappeared under the surface, to come up a second later, thrashing around wildly.

"Whew! it isn't so warm as I thought!" ejaculated Shep. "No Turkish bath about this!" And he gave a slight shiver.

"You'll soon get used to it," replied Snap. "It's always the first plunge that takes the breath out of a fellow."

Giant came in next, diving from the rock. Whopper followed more slowly, putting in first one foot and then the other.

"Moses in the bulrushes!" he gasped. "Say, this water is about half ice, isn't it?" And he drew back again.

"Whopper, you know better than to go in that way," remonstrated Snap. "Wet your face and then go in head first---it's the only right way. If you go in by inches you'll gasp fit to turn your liver over."

Very gingerly Whopper wet his face. As the water ran down his backbone he let out another yell.

"Don't know as I'll go in," he observed. "I thought it would be much warmer."

"Oh, yes, come in," urged Snap.

In the meantime Shep had come to shore and crawled out, behind some bushes. Softly he crept up behind Whopper. Then came a sudden shove, and over went Frank with a loud yell and a splash that sent the spray in all directions. Before he came up Shep was out of sight behind a tree.

"Say, wh---who---" spluttered Whopper, as he came up and gazed around half angrily. Then he caught sight of a shoulder back of the tree. "Come out of that, and let me give you something to remember me by!" And he struck out for shore.

But Shep had no intention of being caught, and as Whopper came out he sprang in. Then Frank came after him, and a race ensued, in which Snap and Giant joined. The rapid swimming warmed all the boys, and then they declared the water "just O.K.," as Snap expressed it. Whopper watched his chance to get even with Shep, and when the other was not looking, dove down and caught the doctor's son by the foot. Shep was just shouting to Giant and had his mouth wide open, and as a consequence swallowed a lot of water. When he and Whopper came up they indulged in a splashing contest lasting several minutes.

"What's the matter with swimming across the river?" suggested Snap, presently.

"It's a pretty good distance," answered Giant. "And you must remember the current is rather swift."

"I'll go, Snap," said Shep, who was always ready to follow his "twin."

"I don't think I'll try it to-day," put in Whopper. "I'll stay on this side with Giant. If you find anything good to eat over there bring it along," he added.

"Might find some berries," said Snap.

At this point the river, from the outer edge of the cove, was about a hundred yards wide. The boys had frequently swum across, so Snap's proposal to go over was nothing unusual. Side by side the boys started out and took their time. They did not attempt to stem the current but allowed it to carry them down the river for several hundred feet. They landed where there was an old orchard, backed up by a large strawberry patch.

"No apples ripe around here," said Snap, as he and his chum walked up the river bank, to a point opposite where they had left Giant and Whopper.

"Let us go over to the strawberry patch," suggested Shep. "We may find some strawberries worth eating."

As nobody was in sight, the proposition was readily accepted, and the boys picked their way carefully along, for they had no desire to hurt their bare feet. Reaching the patch, they began a hunt and soon discovered a corner where the berries were thick and sweet.

"Say, this is prime!" observed the doctor's son, smacking his lips. "This would suit Giant and Whopper to a T!"

"Wonder if we can carry any over to them, Shep?"

"I don't see why not. A little water won't hurt them. In fact they ought to be washed, they are that full of sand."

"Who owns this patch?"

"Old Tom Ashenbury."

"Well, we had better keep out of his sight, or he'll be after us with his gun. Don't you remember how he chased us once, when we were walking through his peach orchard?"

"Indeed I do. But we are doing little harm here. In a few days all these berries will be rotten. I guess he has given up picking them."

In moving around the boys had found a couple of old berry baskets, and these they now proceeded to fill. The task was about half completed when Snap suddenly straightened up.

"What was that?" he asked.

"What?" demanded his chum.

"I thought I heard a cry from across the river."

Both listened, but nothing came to their ears.

"You must have been mistaken," said the doctor's son, and resumed his work of picking strawberries.

"No use of picking more," said Snap, a few minutes later. "We'll be lucky to get over with these. Perhaps we'll drop half of them, trying to swim."

"Hi, look there!" shouted his companion, and pointed across the field in the direction of the river.

A flock of sheep had suddenly appeared, some fifteen or twenty in number. At the head was a large ram, who gazed in wonder at the two boys in their bathing outfits.

"Say, that ram means business!" ejaculated Snap, an instant later.
"We had better clear out of here."

"Come on, I'm willing," responded the doctor's son, and started for the stream, carrying the basket of strawberries in one hand.

"Let us go up the stream," went on Snap. "No use of getting too close to him. I don't like his looks."

Both boys had good cause to feel alarmed, for the ram was coming toward them on a trot. Once or twice he stopped and pawed the ground, but then he came on, and they could see he meant to attack them.

"He's coming for us!"

"Can we reach the river!"

"We must reach it!"

Then the two boys broke into a run, giving no further heed to the fact that the ground was uneven and that their feet were bare. They had heard stories of vicious rams many times, and knew that only the year before a girl had been almost mauled to death by such an animal.

They had still fifty yards to cover when Snap went into a hole and pitched headlong. Shep was directly behind him, and over he went on top of his chum, crushing one of the baskets of strawberries between them. The other basket was scattered in all directions over the ground.

"There go our berries," grumbled Snap. "Too bad!"

"Get up!" roared Shep, scrambling to his feet. "Here comes the ram, and he's as wild as they make 'em!"

He caught his chum by the arm, and both tried to go on. But Snap's ankle had received a bad wrench and he was forced to limp.

The boys had to pass a low shed, used occasionally for the storage of fruit and baskets. As they reached this the ram came up and lowered his head.

"Jump for the shed!" yelled Shep, and caught hold of the roof of the structure. He scrambled to the top and gave his chum a hand. Then on came the ram and hit the side of the frail building a resounding whack with his head. Snap escaped by less than a foot; and then both boys stood upright on the top of the shed wondering what they had best do next.

CHAPTER III

A TRICK THAT FAILED

"We are in a pickle, Snap."

"It certainly looks like it, Shep."

"How long do you suppose that ram is going to keep us here?"

"I don't know---maybe you'd better ask him."

"I wouldn't feel quite so bad if I had on my, regular clothing and my shoes. But with this thin outfit---"

"Here he comes again!" was the cry, and crash! the head of the ram struck the shed once more, causing it to tremble greatly.

"I really think he's trying to knock the old thing down!" was the comment of the doctor's son.

The boys tried to look across the river, but could not because of a heavy clump of bushes growing between the shed and the water's edge. They heard a distant cry and wondered what it meant.

"I believe that is Giant and Whopper calling," said Snap.

"More than likely they are tired of waiting for us. Maybe they are dressing."

A few of the sheep had come up and were gazing curiously at the boys and the ram. Then the ram commenced to walk around the shed, viewing it speculatively from all sides.

"Looks like a warrior, doesn't he?" said Shep. "Wish I had a brickbat to throw at him."

"Here's a short board!" cried Snap, and tore off a piece that was partly loose. "I wish I could reach him with this."

"Wait, I'll coax him over," answered the doctor's son, and put down a leg over the edge of the roof. At once the ram charged, and as he did this Snap threw the board at him, hitting him in the side. This so surprised the animal that he turned and ran away a distance of several rods.

"Now is our chance! Come!" yelled Snap, and leaped from the roof of the shed on the river side. His chum followed, and once again the pair put for the stream with all speed. They kept out of sight of the ram as much as possible and he did not see them until they were almost at the water's edge. Before he could come up they dove into the stream and swam out several yards.

"Say, that's what I call a narrow shave!" cried Shep, when he and his chum realized that the danger was over. "I want nothing more to do with that ram."

"It's a pity we lost the strawberries," returned Snap. "However, it can't be helped."

The two boys were soon well out in the river and they looked anxiously over to the cove. Nothing was to be seen of Giant and Whopper.

"They must be behind the bushes dressing," said Snap. "Hello!" he yelled. "Hello! Where are you?"

No answer was returned, and the doctor's son joined in the cry. Then both boys pulled a more hasty stroke and soon got to a point where they could wade ashore.

"It can't be possible they went home," said Snap, as he gazed around in perplexity.

"We'll soon see," was the answer, and the doctor's son ran to the bushes where the clothing had been left. "Well, I never!" he cried.

"Why, all the clothing is gone!

"Yes, their clothing and ours too!

"Do you think they've played a trick on us?"

"No, they wouldn't be so mean."

"But where are they, and where is our clothing?"

"I don't know."

In deep perplexity the two chums looked around that vicinity. No trace of Giant or Whopper was to be found and the only article of wearing apparel they could discover was a blue-and-white sock.

"That's Giant's sock," said Snap. "And that proves something is wrong. He wouldn't go away and leave his own sock behind."

"True enough, Snap, but what do you think happened?"

"I don't know, unless they caught somebody in the act of running off with our duds and ran after them."

"Let us call again."

This they did, using the full power of their lungs. Soon an answering cry came back, and Whopper appeared on the river bank above them, followed by Giant. Each carried a bundle of clothing under his arm and some shoes in his hand.

"Well, what does this mean?" demanded the doctor's son, as the others drew closer.

"You're fine fellows to stay away so long," grumbled Giant.

"We called to you about a million times that we wanted help," put in Whopper.

"Well, we've had our troubles of our own," answered Snap. "A big, angry ram came after us and held us prisoners for awhile. But what happened here? Did somebody run away with our outfits?"

"Yes, and we had a great time getting them again," answered Whopper.

"We had to run after the chaps barefooted," came from Giant.

"Just look at my feet," and he showed how they had been cut and scratched.

"Who were they?" demanded the doctor's son.

"We don't know exactly, but we've got our suspicions," answered the small boy.

"There were two of them," said Whopper. "Both good-sized fellows. We didn't hear them until they had all the clothes in their arms and were running away. As soon as they heard us coming both threw their coats up over their heads, so we wouldn't recognize them. They would have gotten away sure only Giant yelled that he would fire a pistol at them if they didn't stop and then they, got scared and dropped the clothing in a ditch."

"And who do you think they were?" asked Snap.

"Ham Spink and Carl Dudder."

"Why, they aren't home from boarding school yet!" cried Shep.

"I don't care, that's what I think," said Giant, sturdily. "I know just how those fellows look and walk. Of course I didn't see their faces, but I am pretty sure they were Ham and Carl."

"They may have gotten home during the last day or two," said Snap, slowly, "and it would be just like them to lay around waiting to play some mean trick on us. If they had gotten off with our clothing we'd have been in a fine pickle truly!"

"That's right---worse than with the ram," answered the doctor's son, and then he and Snap told of what had occurred on the other side of the river.

"Too bad you lost those strawberries," sighed Whopper. "I like strawberries so much I could eat about----"

"A million platesful," finished Snap, with a grin.

"No, I was going to say a spoonful or two," said Whopper, and then Snap groaned.

The boys found two socks, a collar and a necktie missing, and a long search around failed to bring the articles to light. One of the undershirts had been knotted up tightly, and Shep had to "chaw on the beef," as boys call it, to get the knots untied.

"I'd like to know if it really was Ham and Carl," he growled. "If it was I'll fix them for this new trick of theirs."

"How were they dressed?" asked Snap.

"Each wore a brown suit, kind of yellow brown," answered Whopper. "I'd know 'em out of a million."

"We'll lay for them, Whopper."

Having donned their clothing, the four boys started back for town.

To get to the road they had to cross a wide pasture, and when they were in the middle of this they saw a man approaching. The man carried a heavy cane, which he shook at them.

"Hello, it's Mr. Spink!" cried Snap.

"Come to warn us away, I suppose," grumbled the doctor's son. "Shall I tell him about what was done to our clothing?"

"No," answered Whopper. "We are not certain it was Ham and Carl."

Mr. Spink was a tall, overbearing man, who dressed almost as loudly as did his son. He strode up to the four lads with a dark look on his face, and this look grew even more resentful when he recognized them.

"Ha! so you are going to come here in spite of my warnings, eh?" he said, harshly.

"You haven't warned us or anything, Mr. Spink," answered Snap, calmly.

"Can't you read? Doesn't the sign say, 'All trespassing forbidden'? That is plain English, isn't it?"

"I haven't seen any sign," said Shep

"Because you didn't want to see it, young man!"

"We have only been down to the cove swimming," put in Giant.

"This land is mine now, and I want you boys to keep off of it," exclaimed Mr. Spink, hotly. "If I catch you on it again I'll have you arrested."

"We'll get off as soon as we can," answered Snap. And then he added suddenly: "Is Ham home?"

"You mean my son Hamilton, I presume? Yes, he is home. What do you want of him?"

"Nothing, just now. But we may want something later," answered Snap, and started again for the road, his chums following.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY OF A GHOST

"I say, what do you want of my son Hamilton?" repeated Mr. Spink, coming after the boys with a look of curiosity on his face.

"We want to see him," replied Snap, after a look at his chums.

"What about?"

"We think he played us a mean trick," put in Whopper, as Snap

paused.

"Oh, I thought that affair was a thing of the past," said Mr. Spink, loftily. "My son was not to blame so much as that tramp. The tramp told a string of falsehoods---"

"We don't mean that, Mr. Spink," spoke up Giant. "We mean a trick Ham and his friend, Carl Dudder, played on us this afternoon."

"Humph! You ahem!---you must be mistaken."

"If we are we won't say anything," said Whopper. "But if he did play the trick---"

"We'll get square with him for it," finished Shep.

"What are you talking about anyway?" demanded the rich man. "I don't see why you can't leave my son alone."

"We will---if he'll leave us alone," said Snap.

"What do you accuse him of?"

"While we were swimming two fellows came up, took our clothes, and tried to run away with them," came from Giant. "We are pretty sure the fellows were Ham and Carl. When we went after them they dropped the clothes in a hurry. Two socks, a collar, and a necktie are missing."

"Yes, and my undershirt was full of knots," grumbled the doctor's son. "Just wait till I catch the fellows who did that---I'll show 'em!"

"Humph! is that all?" growled Mr. Spink. "I imagine you are only making up this tale to get my son into difficulties,---just because you know I will not permit you to come here to swim. Now clear out, and be quick about it,---and don't ever come here again." And having thus delivered himself he shook his heavy cane at them, turned on his heel, and walked, away.

"He's a gentleman, I must say," declared Snap, when Mr. Spink was out of hearing. "A person can easily see where Ham gets his arrogant ways."

"Yes, and he'll stick up for Ham first, last and all the time," added Whopper.

As the boys walked home they discussed the situation from several points of view. Reaching the street leading to the railroad depot they came in sight of a familiar figure ahead of them. It was the old hunter, Jed Sanborn, and he carried a gun in one hand and a fishing rod in the other, while a basket was slung over his shoulder by a broad strap.

"Hello, Jed!" sang out Snap, and ran forward to stop the man.

"Why, boys, how are ye!" said the old hunter, turning around and halting. "Ready to go on your summer trip?" And he smiled broadly.

"Not yet," answered Shep. "But we are going out after the Fourth

of July."

"So I heard. Well, I hope ye have as good a time as ye had last summer an' last winter."

"We want to know something about Lake Narsac," came from Whopper. "I've heard there were about a million snakes up there and all big fellows, too. Is that true?"

"O' course it is," answered Jed Sanborn, with a grin. "Snakes is twenty to fifty feet long, and so thick ye have to wade through 'em up to your knees. Ha ha!" and he commenced to laugh. "I got ahead of ye thet time, didn't I, Whopper?"

"But tell us the truth," insisted Giant. "We're thinking of camping up there, and, of course, we won't want to go if there is any real danger."

"Well, to tell the plain, everyday truth, boys, I don't allow as how there is any more reptiles up to Lake Narsac nor there be around Lake Firefly an' in the mountains whar I hang out. Narsac may have a few more rattlers, an' them's the wust kind---you know thet as well as I do. The wust thing I know about Lake Narsac is the ghost up thar."

"Is there really and truly a ghost?" queried the doctor's son.

"Of course, I don't believe in them," he added, hastily.

"If ye don't believe in 'em why do ye ask about 'em?" demanded the old hunter, rather indignantly.

"Oh, well---" and Shep could not finish.

"Did you ever see the ghost?" asked Snap.

"I sure did, my boy."

"When?" cried Whopper.

"What did it look like?" demanded Giant.

"I see the ghost less nor a month ago---when I was up to Lake Narsac after fish. It was a foggy morning, an' I was fishing from a little island near the upper end o' the lake. All to once I heard a strange sound, like somebody was moanin'. I sat up an' listened, an' I looked around-----"

"And what did you see?" asked Giant, excitedly.

"Didn't see nuthing just then. Soon the moanin' died out, an' I thought I must have made a mistake, an' I went on fishin' ag'in. Then come that strange moanin' once more, an' it made me shiver, for I was in a mighty lonely spot. All to once, something cried out, 'He's dead! He's dead!' I looked around, but I couldn't see a soul. 'Who is thar?' I called. Then I heard a strange whistle, an a rustlin' in the bushes. A minute later I saw a figure in bright yellow standin' out before me on the lake. It seemed to move right over the water in the fog, an' in less than a minute it was gone."

"What was it?" asked Snap, and his voice trembled a little.

"I dunno, Snap. It looked like a real old man, with claw-like hands. I called out to him, but he didn't answer, and when he seemed to be lost like in a smoke, I was scared an' I don't deny it. Just then I felt a big tug on my line an' I pulled in an' found I had hooked a water snake. Thet settled me, an' I came down to Firefly Lake an' to hum quick as I could git thar!"

"What do you think it was?" asked Whopper.

"I can't for the life o' me tell."

"Are you sure you heard that voice, or was that imagination?" asked Snap.

"It wasn't no imagination whatsoever," answered the old hunter, positively. "I heard thet voice jest as plain as I can hear yourn, an' it come right out o' the sky, too!"

"That is certainly queer," mused Snap. "You say the ghost was yellow?"

"It was."

"I thought most ghosts were white," put in the doctor's son.

"Was it a man?" asked Frank.

"If it was, how did he walk on the water?" demanded Jed Sanborn. "Oh, it was a sure ghost, no two ways on it!" And the old hunter shook his head positively.

"Are there any houses near the lake?" questioned Giant.

"Not a house within two or three miles. It is the wildest place you ever visited," answered Jed Sanborn. "Hunters don't go there much on account of the rough rocks in the stream flowing into Narsac. If you take a boat you may have to tote it a good bit---an' it ain't much use to go up there less you've got a boat, because you can't travel much along the shore---too many thorn bushes."

After that the old hunter told them all he knew about Lake Narsac. He said the lake and its surroundings were owned by the estate of a New England millionaire who had died four years before. In settling the estate the heirs had gone to law, and the rightful possession of the sheet of water with the mountains around it was still in dispute.

"One thing is sartin," said the old hunter. "If ye go up thar, ye won't have no Andrew Felps chasin' ye away---as was the case up to Lake Cameron."

"No, but we may have the ghost chasing us," answered Giant.

"Say, maybe we had better go somewhere else," suggested Whopper, hesitatingly.

"Whopper, are you afraid of ghosts?" demanded Snap.

"N---no, but I---er---I'd like to go somewhere where we wouldn't be bothered by anything."

"I am going to Lake Narsac, ghosts or no ghosts!" cried the doctor's son.

"So am I," added Snap, promptly. "If Whopper wants to stay behind---"

"Who said anything about staying behind?" demanded Whopper. "If you go so will I, even if there are a million ghosts up there."

"I don't believe in ghosts," came from little Giant. "It's some humbug, that's what it is."

"Maybe, maybe," answered Jed Sanborn. "But if you hear that voice and see that yellow thing---well, I reckon your hair will stick up on end, jest as mine did!"

CHAPTER V

A FOURTH OF JULY CELEBRATION

On the following Monday Snap and Shep were walking down the main street of Fairview when they heard a cry and saw Giant beckoning to them from the post-office steps.

"What's up?" asked Snap, as he came up to the small youth.

"Ham Spink and Carl Dudder just went in to mail some letters," said Giant.

"What of that?"

"Whopper went in after them. Whopper and I are now sure it was Ham and Carl who tried to steal our clothing the day we went swimming."

"How do you know that?" asked the doctor's son.

"By the way they are dressed. They have the same yellow-brown suits on they wore that day."

Giant had scarcely spoken when Whopper came out. His face showed that he was angry.

"I told you they did it," he said to Giant. Then, seeing the others, he explained:

"I accused them of it and they admitted taking the clothes--- they said it was nothing but a little joke and they laughed at me. Then when I said they could pay for the missing things they told me to clear out or they'd have me locked up for trespassing on Mr. Spink's land!"

"That's like Ham," answered Snap.

"I wish we could pay them off good," went on Whopper.

Just then Ham Spink and Carl Dudder came out of the post-office. Snap and the others were standing behind some boxes of goods and the dude and his chum did not at once see them.

"We'll have a celebration with those fireworks when they come," Ham was saying. "We'll show Fairview a great sight."

"That's right," returned Carl Dudder. "We'll put them in my father's barn until we want to use them."

Then both boys caught sight of Snap and the others and broke off their talk. They, wanted to brush past without speaking, but Snap and Shep blocked the way.

"We want to talk to you," said Snap.

"We have nothing to say," cried Ham, haughtily. "Get out of my way!" And he tried to brush past again.

"Ham Spink, I want to say just one thing," answered Snap. "I think you are as mean as you ever were, and I, for one, am going to pay you back for what you did the day we went swimming."

"Oh, give us a rest" muttered the dudish youth, and went on, and Carl Dudder followed, sticking his tongue in his cheek as he passed.

"Say, shall we pitch into them?" whispered Whopper. "We can knock them into the middle of next month!"

"No---wait---I've just thought of something," interposed Snap. "Let them go and come with me."

He led the way to a safe distance and then turned to Whopper.

"Did you hear them speak of some fireworks?"

"Sure."

"Did they say anything about the fireworks in the post office?"

"Why, yes. But what has that got to do with-----"

"What did they say, Whopper?"

"Why, it seems Ham and Carl and some other fellows---the same crowd that has been against us for so long---have chipped in and ordered some fireworks from the city. They are going to set the fireworks off in front of the Dudder house on Fourth of July night. The Spink family and some others are to be there. Ham and Carl are boasting what a fine celebration it is to be."

"Then I know what I'm going to do," said Snap.

"What?" came from all of the others.

"They took our clothing---why can't we take the fireworks?"

"Whoop! Just the cheese!" ejaculated Whopper. "We can set them off in the public square."

"Where the whole community can see them," added Giant.

"And we can return the remains after they are shot off," came from the doctor's son.

The matter was talked over for a half hour. All of the boys knew it was not just right to appropriate the fireworks but they were "dead sore" on Ham and Carl and knew no other way to "get square."

The boys had made only a few preparations for the Fourth, for nearly all of their spending money had been used up in buying things for the proposed outing. They had some firecrackers, and some blank cartridges for their pistols, and that was all.

Independence Day dawned bright and clear and throughout the town of Fairview there was the usual amount of noise. During the morning Snap heard from another lad how Ham and Carl were boasting of their fireworks.

"Finest fireworks the town ever saw," Ham had said. All the boys were invited to "hang on the Dudder fence" and see them set off that evening at nine o'clock.

"Now is the time for us to do something," said Snap to his chums, a little later.

The evening before they had visited the Dudder barn but had failed to locate the fireworks.

"That's right," said Giant. "The fireworks are there now---I saw Carl and Ham bringing them from the express office."

With caution the four boys walked down a side street, which connected, by an alleyway, with the Dudder barn. Nobody was in sight, and they slipped into the barn with ease. In a corner, on the floor, they saw a long, flat box, marked "Fireworks! With care!"

"We mustn't take them all!" said Shep. "We must leave a top row---just to fool 'em."

The others understood and went to work with care. In a very few minutes they had most of the fireworks pinwheels, rockets, Roman candles, flower pots and others---in their possession. Then they stuffed hay in the bottom of the box and on the top placed two pinwheels and three small Roman candles.

"I'm afraid they'll suspect us if we set these off," said Snap, when he and his chums were at a safe distance.

"What if they do?" demanded the doctor's son. "If they say anything we can yell 'stolen clothes' at them."

The boys were afraid Ham and Carl would attempt to sort out the fireworks before the time to set them off, but this fear proved

groundless, for Ham and Carl were busy showing off two silver-plated pistols they had purchased. They were firing at a target set up near Ham's house, but they failed to hit the bull's-eye more than once in a dozen shots.

"No wonder they can't bring down any game," observed Giant, when he heard of this. "I could do almost as good as that with my eyes shut."

In a quiet way word was passed around to the juvenile element of Fairview that there would be "something doing" at the public square directly it was dark. Secretly a notice was posted up that the "Swimmer Company would give a free exhibition of Carlham fireworks." Several wanted to know who the Swimmer Company were and what Carlham fireworks were like, but no answer could be had to these queries.

At exactly half-past seven that evening there was the flare of a rocket in the public square, followed by the discharge of several Roman candles. Folks came running from all directions, to learn who might be giving the exhibition.

They saw a truly marvelous sight. Four men or boys were there, dressed in fantastic suits and wearing old gloves and big, pointed-top hats. Each had a mask over his face, so that it was utterly impossible to tell who he was.

Boom! bang! sizz! went the fireworks, being set off by all four of the persons at once. Rockets flew high in the sky, leaving a golden train behind them, and Roman candles let out balls of various colors, while on the ground, flower pots spouted forth in great beauty, and pin-wheels whizzed from several trees and hitching-posts.

"This is great!" cried several.

"A bang-up exhibition," added another. "Never saw a finer display, did you?" put in an old man. "And all free too!" he continued, greatly pleased.

Carl and Ham could not resist the temptation to see what was going on and came running to the square, leaving their box in the barn. They were full of envy, but went through the crowd boasting that their own display would be much better.

At last everything was set off but three large rockets. These were left in charge of one of the masked figures while the other three figures suddenly disappeared in the darkness following a pinwheel flare. The three figures took with them what could be found of the burnt-out Roman candles and other things.

With one grand sizz the three rockets went up into the air simultaneously. The crowd gazed in admiration at the sight. Then as the sky grew dark, they looked out on the square for the last of the masked figures.

It had disappeared.

CHAPTER VI

PREPARING FOR THE GRAND OUTING

Less than quarter of an hour after the celebration at the public square Snap and his three chums met at Whopper's back gate. They were minus their tall hats and gloves, but still wore a portion of their grotesque outfits.

"Hurry up," said Whopper, and led the way to a carriage house. Here, with great rapidity, the four youths stripped off the odd suits and donned their regular garments. Then they hid the other things in an out-of-the-way corner.

"Did you place the burnt-out fireworks in the box?" asked Shep, who had been left at the square to set off the three rockets.

"We did," answered Snap.

"Hurry up, we want to see the rest of the fun," cried Giant, and set off on a dog-trot in the direction of the Dudder mansion.

When the four boys reached that vicinity they found quite a crowd collected. More people were coming from the public square. The piazza of the Dudder homestead was illuminated with Chinese lanterns, and there sat Mr. and Mrs. Spink, the Dudder family, and a dozen specially invited guests.

"Carl, isn't it about time you began to set off those fireworks?" asked Mr. Dudder, as his son came up the steps.

"Ham and I are going to get them out right away," answered Carl.

"Who set off the fireworks at the square?" questioned Mrs. Spink.

"I don't know."

"Were they nice?" asked Mrs. Dudder.

"Not near as nice as those we are going to show," returned Ham.

"Hurry up wid dem fireworks!" shouted an urchin hanging on the fence.

"You get off that fence, or you won't see anything," cried Carl.

"Bring on the fireworks!" shouted several.

"We are going to have a regular programme," announced Carl, standing on a garden bench. "First there will be a bouquet of four rockets. Then will follow two large Roman candles, six vari-colored pinwheels, two large and four small flower pots, one living picture of George Washington, two aerial bombs, four golden clusters, one living serpent, two mines, and a whole lot of other things too numerous to mention."

"Go on with the show," shouted a man outside. "We don't want to

listen to no speech."

"Come, let us get the box," said Ham, and then he and Carl hurried down to the barn, where they found the flat box. Much to their surprise it was bound around and around with some old telegraph wire. Snap and his chums had wanted to nail the box up but had been afraid of the noise.

"Somebody's been playing a joke on us!" growled Ham.

"Never mind, we'll soon have the wire off," answered his crony.
"Let us take the box outside."

They lifted the box and carried it out into the yard. There a number of visitors gathered around to watch proceedings, two holding up lanterns to illuminate the scene.

It took several minutes to take the wire from the box. Then the cover was wrenched off.

"Here we are!" cried Carl, and took up the top layer of fireworks.
"Let us stack them against that bench, Ham."

"Look!" screamed Ham, and pulled up a handful of straw, in which the fireworks had been packed. "What does this mean?"

As he spoke he held up two half-burnt pasteboard tubes---the remains of two Roman candles. The burnt-out remains of several pinwheels followed.

Carl dove into the box and withdrew his hands covered with soot and holding several burnt-out flower pots and the frame upon which had once been fastened the "living picture" of our first President.

"What does this mean?"

"Somebody has been at this box!"

"The fireworks have all been shot off!"

"Hurry up with that display!" came from the fence. "Don't keep us waiting all night!"

"Thought you was going to show us something better than that show at the square!" piped in a small boy.

"We have been swindled!" groaned Ham.

"Somebody has tricked us," gasped Carl. "Oh, this is dreadful!"

"What's the matter, boys?" asked Mr. Dudden, coming up, followed by Mr. Spink.

"The box is full of---of rubbish, father!"

"Somebody set off the things and put them back burnt up," added Ham.

After that there was considerable excitement. The box was overturned and out tumbled the remains of the square celebration. With the

articles came a small basket, wrapped in a brown paper and sealed up. Ham tore the covering from the basket and out dropped---two lemons! On one was a bit of paper labeled Ham and on the other a paper marked Carl.

"Oh, just let me catch the fellow who played this trick!" roared Ham, dancing around in his rage. "Won't I just fix him! Won't I though!"

"Ain't you going to set off them fireworks?" called a boy from the fence.

"Don't believe they've got any to set off," said another.

"It's a shame to keep us waiting here," put in a third.

"You shut up, all of you!" cried Carl, who was as angry as Ham. "We'll set off the fireworks when we choose. Oh, if this isn't the limit!" he murmured.

With no fireworks worth mentioning, the proposed celebration could not come off, and everybody was bitterly disappointed. The crowd outside the fence began to jeer, and some small boys threw lumps of soft mud at Ham and Carl. Then Mr. Dudder got angry and ordered everybody off, and took his guests into the mansion. Ham and Carl were so chagrined they knew not what to do.

"We must find out who did this," said Ham.

"Maybe it was Snap Dodge and his crowd," suggested Carl. "It would be just like them."

"If they are guilty---I'll fix them!" went on Ham, bitterly.

"They had no business to touch our fireworks. Just think what they cost us!

"And it made us the laughingstock of the whole town," added Carl, sourly.

"I've got an idea---that celebration at the square---maybe they held it with our fireworks!"

"What! Say, it must be so! Oh, what fools we were! Of course it was them. I see it all now---'Carlham fireworks' indeed! That's Carl and Ham, as plain as day."

"Yes, and the 'Swimmer Company' is plain enough, too. They did this to get even for taking their clothes away that day."

"We can't say they stole the fireworks. If we do they may say we stole their clothes."

"We won't say anything---but let us get square, the first chance we get," and so it was decided. It was several days before Ham and Carl heard the last of the "grand celebration" they had reported they would give.

With the fun of Independence Day at an end, Snap and his chums turned their attention once more to the matter of the summer outing.

They realized that a trip to Lake Narsac would be quite different from one only as far as Lake Cameron or Firefly Lake. The two latter resorts were close to civilization, while Narsac Lake was a wild spot, seldom visited by the regular run of sportsmen. To get to the lake would be quite a task in itself, and whatever would be needed for the trip must be procured at home or at one of the other lakes. And while they must take all needed articles along they must make their boat load as light as possible.

Doctor Reed made them a present of something which was much to their liking. This was a "nest" of aluminum cooking utensils, including a pepper and salt box, and a match safe. This kit weighed very little and was exceedingly handy.

As Mr. Dodge had procured for them a suitable boat, and the doctor the cooking things, Mr. Dawson said he would present them with a new tent, of light, but strong and waterproof material. He also got for them a rubber cloth, to be spread over their things when it rained.

"My mother is going to supply us with the eatables," said Giant. "She told me to get the list and she would have them all ready the day we are to start." And then the list was made out, including bacon, beans, flour, salt and pepper, sugar, and many other necessities. The boys also got a liberal supply of powder and shot for their guns, some cartridges for the rifle, and some fishing hooks and lines. Everything was stored away in the boathouse on the river, which was locked up tightly, so that nobody might carry off their belongings.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE BOATHOUSE

"I wonder if Ham and Carl will attempt to get at our outfit," said Shep, the evening before the start was to be made.

"Well, we mustn't forget that they blew up the old boathouse before," answered Snap. "Of course, they may be afraid to try on the same thing---they'd know they'd be in danger of arrest."

"Let us go down and take a look at the things," put in Whopper. "I wouldn't want to have anything happen to the outfit for a million dollars."

The three boys walked in the direction of the building where the things were stored. Giant was not with them---he having been detained at home, to do some work for his mother.

Apparently the outfit was as it had been left, and the three boys breathed a sigh of relief. Having overhauled the things carefully, they prepared to lock up once more when Snap noticed a small boy named Joe Bright, hanging around.

"Well, Joe, what's doing?" he questioned.

"Nuthin'," answered Joe. "Say, are you fellows going on a trip to Lake Narsac?"

Yes."

"Ain't you afraid of the hobgoblins up there?"

"Not particularly."

"My uncle was up there once and the hobgoblins took his things away from him."

"What did they take?" asked Whopper.

"Took his coat, which he had hung on a tree while he was fishing, and took his basket of fish, too. Say, he was scared when he saw that thing, I can tell you. He wouldn't go there again!"

"Did he see the ghost?" asked Shep.

"No, he didn't see anything, but he heard it moan and groan, and heard it say something about being cold and hungry."

"We are not afraid," said Snap, as bravely as he could. "We are going to keep our eyes peeled for that ghost, and if it shows itself there will be some shooting done. By the way, Joe, how long have you been around here?"

"Two or three hours. I didn't have nuthin' to do, and I like the water."

"Have you seen anybody around this building?"

"Yes, two fellows were here, but they went away when they saw me."

"Who were they?" asked the doctor's son.

"One of 'em was Ham Spink, and the other was that chap who is always with him."

"Carl Dudder?"

"I guess that's his name---the chap who was going to give the fireworks celebration."

"Humph!" muttered Snap. "What did they do?"

"Walked around the building several times and peeped in the windows. One of 'em tried the back door, but just then the other fellow saw me and he gave a little whistle. Then both of 'em walked away pretty quick."

"The rascals!" cried Whopper. "I'll bet a sour apple against a gooseberry they wanted to spoil our outfit!"

"Sure they did," answered Snap.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Shep, after the boys had talked

the matter over for several minutes. "I think somebody ought to stay here to-night and watch this outfit. For all we know, they may come back."

"There is an old cot in the boathouse---a fellow might sleep on that," suggested Whopper.

"Then that is what I am going to do,---if my folks will let me," answered the doctor's son.

"You'll be lonely," said Snap. "Maybe I'd better stay with you. If Ham and Carl did come back you couldn't manage them alone."

"I could if I had a shotgun."

"Oh, you wouldn't want to shoot anybody, Snap!"

"No, but I could scare 'em off."

"I've got an idea," cried Whopper. "Why not fix it so as to give them a warm reception---if they do come," and then he explained what he meant.

In the end it was decided that Snap and Shep should remain at the boathouse, and Whopper ran off to tell their folks and to get a few things. As the boys were used to outings the youths' parents thought little of their staying away that night, and only sent word back that they should keep out of mischief.

"We'll keep out if we are left alone," said the doctor's son, grimly.

Whopper had brought with him an old tin pail containing some hot water and half a pound of flour. This was stirred up into a thick flour paste, and to give it the "proper flavor," as Snap suggested, they broke into the mixture two ancient eggs which one of the party had picked up.

Joe Bright had been sent away, with instructions to say nothing about what was going on at the boathouse, and soon Whopper followed him. Then Snap and Shep went into the building and locked the door behind them.

The structure was a one-story affair, with a small loft overhead, for the storage of extra oars and odds and ends of boat lumber. Up into the loft went the two boys and opened the tiny window at either end---thus letting in some needed fresh air. Then they took the rank-smelling flour paste and poured half of the stuff into an old paint can that was handy.

"Let us take turns at resting," suggested Snap, and so it was arranged.

It was a calm, clear night and before long the town was wrapped in slumber, and only the occasional bark of a dog or yowl of a cat broke the stillness. Out on the river nothing was stirring.

It was after midnight, and Snap had almost reached the conclusion that the alarm had been a false one, when, looking from one of the little windows, he saw two figures approaching the boathouse. The

two boys or men had their coat collars turned up and their soft hats pulled well down over their foreheads.

Making no noise Snap aroused Shep, who was sound asleep on the cot.

"What is it?" demanded the doctor's son.

"They are coming. Hush, or they may hear you."

Silently the two boys crawled to the small window facing the town. The two figures outside were now close by and Snap and Shep felt sure they, were Ham and Carl.

"Anybody around?" came the question, in a whisper.

"I don't see anybody."

"We don't want to get caught at this."

"Oh, don't get chicken-hearted, Carl."

"Humph! Please remember what happened last winter, Ham."

"Hush! Don't speak my name, please."

"Well, then don't speak mine."

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"I did not, I say. Come on."

"How are you going to get in? You said you knew of a way. I am certain the doors and windows are all tight."

"Just you follow me and I'll show you a nice little trick."

"But where do you want me to follow you to?" insisted Carl Dudder.

"Under the boathouse."

"Under it?"

"Yes. Here is a place where we can crawl under very easily."

"Yes, but what are you going to do after you are under the building?"

"Get inside."

"Is there a trap door?"

"No, but I know where a couple of boards are loose in the flooring, and we can shove them up easily."

"Oh! All right, go ahead, and I'll follow."

A moment later Ham Spink let himself down in a little hole beside the boathouse. Here his feet were close to the water, but he supported

himself on a cross rail nailed from one section of the spiling to another. Carl Dudder followed him, and both moved cautiously forward to the front end of the building. Once Ham slipped and a slight splash followed.

"What's that?" cried Carl, in alarm, for he was decidedly nervous.

"My foot slipped, that's all," was the answer.

"Is it deep under here?"

"Not over four or five feet."

"Where are those loose boards?"

"Right here. Now take hold of that end and we'll soon have them up and be inside the building," answered Ham.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW TWO PROWLERS WERE TREATED

While Ham and Carl were moving around under the boathouse, Shep and Snap were not idle. The doctor's son, on awakening, had wanted to throw the flour paste out of the window at the midnight prowlers, but Snap thought of another plan.

"Come on below, and wait until they shove up the flooring," he whispered.

The doctor's son understood, and with caution, so as not to make any noise, the two chums came down out of the tiny loft, bringing with them the pail and the tin can of awful-smelling flour paste.

It was absolutely dark below, but they could plainly hear Ham and Carl working on the loose boards of the floor near the river end of the boathouse. Thither they made their way, Snap with the pail and Shep with the can, both ready for action.

Slowly one board was lifted and pushed aside and a second followed. Then two heads appeared in the gloom.

"Robbers!" cried Snap.

"Burglars!" yelled the doctor's son.

"Shoot them!"

"Don't let them get away alive!"

Then with a vigorous throw Snap landed his pail of stuff full upon the head of Ham Spink. Splosh! it struck the dudish youth squarely in the face and ear. Another splosh followed, and Carl Dudder was likewise decorated.

"Hi! wow!" spluttered Ham. "I---Oh, what a smell!

"Oh, my eye!" groaned Carl. "Phew! what's this?"

"We're discovered!

"What's this they threw on us?"

"Oh, did you ever smell such stuff?"

"Robbers! thieves!" yelled Snap and Shep. "Shoot them! Give them a dose of buckshot!"

"They are going to shoot us!" screamed Carl Dudder, and dodged down. Then he lost his footing on the wet and slippery rails, clutched at Ham to save himself, and both went down with a loud splash into the dirty water under the boathouse.

"There they go!" cried Shep.

"Let us scare them some more," whispered Snap. "Pretend you don't recognize them."

Quickly a lantern was lit and held over the opening in the floor. Down below two dark forms, covered with mud and flour paste, could be seen clutching at the slippery braces of the spiling. Snap and Shep could scarcely keep from roaring.

"There they are! Get the gun!" yelled the doctor's son.

"Two dangerous burglars!" cried Snap. "Wonder where they came from?"

"W---we ar---are not burglars!" spluttered Carl. "We are---"

"Do---don't sh---shoot!" wailed Ham Spink. "We di---didn't mean---"

Bang! went the shotgun Snap had picked up. He fired at the corner of the building, into a mass of rubbish. A piercing yell of terror came up from below, and down dropped Ham and Carl into the water once more. They were too afraid to come up under the boathouse again and so struck out for the river bank some distance away.

"They are going away!" called out Shep. "They are two desperate burglars! Give them another shot!"

"Perhaps they have been robbing some stores," called out Snap. Then he discharged the shotgun once more, and down ducked Ham and Carl again, yelling wildly in their fright. They swam with energy and soon reached the shelter of another boathouse. Here they crawled from the water and took to their legs with all the speed at their command. Both were frightened nearly out of their wits, and for the time being paid no attention to the foul-smelling paste and mud that covered them.

"They---they thought we were thi---thieves!" panted Carl, after he and his crony had covered several blocks.

"Yes, and we came near being shot dead!" added Ham.

"I didn't know they were going to stay there to-night."

"Neither did I."

"Those shots will wake up the whole town."

"Yes, and we must get out of sight. Phew! what a smell!"

"They dumped something down on us."

"Must have been rotten eggs. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know---go home, I guess."

"I can't go home looking this way."

"You'll have to go."

"Well, it's lucky they didn't recognize us."

"That's true. But this suit is about ruined."

"So is mine. And we didn't hurt their outfit at all."

"Never mind, we'll get square with them another time."

After that Carl and Ham separated and each lost no time in sneaking home and washing up and trying to clean his garments. They did not dare to tell their parents of what had occurred and so had to suffer in silence.

The shots from the gun aroused some folks living near the river front, and several men came down to the boathouse to learn what was the matter.

"Two fellows tried to get in here, but we scared them away," said Snap.

"Who were they?" asked one man.

"Two fellows dressed in dark suits and with slouch hats."

"Did you hit them?"

"No, we only fired to scare them off."

"Where did they go?"

"Ran back of Dickson's boathouse," answered the doctor's son.

A brief search was made, but the prowlers, of course, were not located. Then the men went home, and Snap and Shep settled down to make themselves comfortable for the rest of the night.

"Ham and Carl won't forget that reception in a hurry," remarked the doctor's son, and indulged in a laugh, in which his chum joined.

The rest of the night passed without anything unusual happening. Early in the morning Whopper and Giant appeared and were told of what had occurred.

"Served 'em right," cried Giant. "Oh, I wish I had seen them," he added, with a broad grin.

"I don't think they'll try any such game again in a thousand years," said Whopper.

"Make it a million, Whopper," added the doctor's son.

Whopper and Giant had had breakfast and said good-bye to their folks and now Snap and Shep went off to get something to eat. By nine o'clock they returned and said they were ready for the start. The others already had the boat out and the outfit properly stored on board.

"All ready?" called out Snap, who was looked upon as the leader of the club.

"All ready," came from the others.

"Sure we haven't left anything behind---salt, mustard, vinegar, or canned soft-soap?"

"Maybe Whopper's left his shaving outfit behind," suggested Giant.

"Humph!" muttered the youth mentioned. "Be sure and take Giant's hobby horse with you." And then there was a general laugh, in the midst of which Snap shoved off from the boathouse dock.

It was arranged that Shep and Whopper should row for the first few miles and then be relieved by Snap and Giant. A number of boys had come down to the dock to see them off. There was a general shouting.

"Hope you have a good time!"

"Be sure and bring back plenty of game!"

"Say, if you see that ghost up to Lake Narsac give him my regards!"

"I wouldn't go up to that locality for a farm! You'll be sure to get into trouble. Every spot up there is alive with snakes."

"I'll bet they won't go any further than Lake Cameron or Firefly Lake," said one boy, who was a chum to Ham and Carl.

"It's Lake Narsac or bust!" cried Snap.

"Huh! I'll believe it when I see it," returned the boy on shore.

"Don't worry, you'll never get there, Jack Voss," said a man standing by. "You are too much of a coward."

"Won't I?" answered Jack Voss. "A lot of us are going up to Lake Narsac in a few days, or next week."

"Who?"

"Never mind. We are going and that's enough," answered Jack Voss. "I ain't afraid of that ghost---or of snakes either," he added.

"There they go!" shouted Joe Bright, enthusiastically. "Hurrah for the young hunters of the lake!"

"Hurrah!" shouted several and waved their hands and handkerchiefs.

Those in the rowboat waved in return. Then Shep and Whopper bent to the oars; and the summer outing was begun. Little did the young hunters realize how many strange adventures were in store for them.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST DAY OF THE OUTING

As my old readers know, the distance to Lake Cameron in an air line was about ten miles, but the river was a winding one and this added three miles to the journey. Beyond the town the banks of the stream were lined with farms, orchards and patches of dense woods, a beautiful outlook and one which the boys thoroughly enjoyed as they rowed along. They passed Simon Lundy's farm---where they had once had such a curious happening when after apples, as related in "Four Boy Hunters," and then continued along under the overhanging branches of some willows, where it was shady and cool.

"Do you think Jack Voss spoke the truth when he said he was going to Lake Narsac?" queried Shep, after he had turned his oars over to Snap.

"It may be true---although Jack knows how to blow," answered Snap.

"If he goes out it will most likely be with Ham and Carl and that crowd," put in Whopper. "They always travel together."

"I'd like to know how Ham and Carl feel this morning, cried Giant.

"Most likely pasty," answered the doctor's son, and this made the others laugh.

"If that crowd should take it into their heads to go to Lake Narsac I hope they don't camp near us," went on Snap, after a pause.

"They'll try to bother us all they can, you can rest assured, of that," said Whopper. "They seem to live for nothing else."

"Well, we can give them as good as they send, can't we?" asked Giant. "I'm not afraid of 'em."

"Of course we're not afraid of them," returned Whopper hastily.

To reach Lake Cameron the young hunters had to take to a side stream lined on either side with blackberry and elderberry bushes. They resolved to push on to the lake before stopping for lunch. Then they would row to the head of the lake, camp there over night, and the next day strike out for Firefly Lake. Here they would put in another day, and then embark for Lake Narsac.

They found Lake Cameron and its shores just as beautiful as during the previous summer. To be sure, the portion that had been burnt down during the great forest fire looked black and desolate but only a small portion of this territory was to be seen from the boat. They passed along the shore opposite and put in at a little cove that looked particularly inviting.

"I'm as hungry as a bear!" cried Whopper. "I can eat about a hundred sandwiches, ten pieces of pie, and any other old thing that happens to be handy."

"Jed Sanborn was telling me he had seen some wild ducks up here last week," said the doctor's son. "If they are around we must keep our eyes peeled for them. They are pretty scarce."

All of the boys wanted coffee, and so some wood was gathered and a campfire started, over which they made the beverage. Snap and Whopper prepared the midday meal and while they did this Giant and the doctor's son got their rods, cast in their lines, and tried their luck at fishing.

"First prize!" called out Shep, in a few minutes, and drew in a small perch.

"If we can get enough, we might have fish for lunch," suggested Whopper.

"Better keep them for supper," answered Snap. "We'll be good and hungry by night."

"As if I wasn't hungry enough now," growled Whopper.

Shep caught three perch hand running while Giant did not get a nibble. The small member of the club was somewhat disappointed, but suddenly there came a tug that almost pulled him into the lake.

"Got something!" he sang out. "Must be a whale!"

"Maybe it's a maskalonge!" sang out Whopper. "Want any help?"

"No," was the reply, and then Giant began to play his catch with the skill of a natural born fisherman. Soon came a deft swing of the fishing rod and out on the grassy bank landed a lake pickerel of good size.

"A pickerel!" cried Snap. "And a beauty."

"That's better than my three perch," was Shep's comment. "Giant, you're the fisherman of this club and no mistake."

The two boys continued to fish, both before lunch and after, and when they finally wound up their lines they had nine perch, two chub and two pickerel---certainly a very respectable haul.

"That means fish for both supper and breakfast," was Snap's comment. "They'll taste fine, too, coming right out of the water."

Having put away the things used in getting lunch, the four boy hunters embarked once more, and the journey along the shore of Lake

Cameron was resumed. As they had not a great distance to go, to reach the other end of the sheet of water, they took their time, watching the trees and bushes for a possible sight of game.

"There are your wild ducks," cried Whopper, after half a mile had been covered.

He pointed inland, to where there was a clearing among the trees, probably some marshy spot. Several wild ducks were settling down, and in a few seconds they were out of sight.

"Want to go ashore?" asked Giant, who was rowing.

"I don't think so," answered Snap. "Perhaps we'll see some of them on the lake."

"I see three now!" called Whopper softly, and pointed almost dead ahead.

"Turn the boat into the bushes," ordered the leader of the club, and Giant did as commanded. Snap was already reaching for a shotgun, and Whopper and Shep did likewise.

The wild ducks had settled on the bosom of the lake and were paddling in the direction of the rowboat. They came on slowly, however, and the young hunters could scarcely wait until they got within gunshot. Giant still had the oars and now he dropped one rather loudly on the bow. At once one of the ducks took alarm and arose in the air.

"They are flying away!" yelled Shep, and raised his shotgun. Bang! spoke the weapon, and reports from the two other firearms followed. One of the ducks came down heavily, while a second fluttered around badly wounded. The third flew off, apparently untouched.

"We must get that second one!" cried Snap, and fired once more. But the wounded duck had reached the cover of some bushes and was not hit again. The rowboat was hastily turned in the direction and Snap and Whopper leaped ashore. Then the duck tried to fly but a shot from Whopper's firearm laid it low. Soon the boys had both ducks on board and were examining the game.

"They are pretty plump," was Snap's comment, and he uttered the words with satisfaction.

"Not so bad for the first day's record," said Giant. "Fish and ducks."

"Now if we could only get some squirrels, a few rabbits, a deer, and three or four bears---" began Whopper.

"Do you want to bring down everything within ten miles the first day?" demanded the doctor's son.

"I believe if Whopper was hunting lions he'd want to bring down a dozen the first clip," was Snap's comment. "Let me tell you there will be many days when we won't bring down a thing."

"Oh, I know that," answered Whopper. "I was only fooling. Say, it will be fine to have roast duck for dinner to-morrow, eh?" And he

smacked his lips.

"Duck, stuffed with sage and onions!" murmured Giant, patting himself in the region of the stomach.

"No stuffings in this," cried the doctor's son. "I just want pure duck---a nice brown leg,---yum."

"Say, you make me duck-hungry already!" cried Whopper. "Let's go on, unless we are going to stay here for the rest of the day."

Once again the oars were taken up, and with scarcely a sound they moved along the shore of the lake. The sun was now well over to the hills in the west, and the trees along the shore cast long shadows over the rippling surface.

"No use of talking, such a spot as this is a regular Paradise," was Snap's comment. "I can tell you, there isn't anything like a life in the open!"

"Especially when it rains," suggested Giant.

"Or when you're caught in a blizzard," added Shep. "Do you remember that blizzard last Christmas?"

"Will we ever forget it," answered Giant. "Just the same, what Snap says is true---give me such an outing as this every time. Some fellows are always hankering after the city---but I never did."

An hour later the young hunters reached the end of the lake, where a small, rocky watercourse joined that body of water to Firefly Lake. Here they went into camp, pitching their tent in a convenient spot among the trees. Over a bright campfire they cooked some of the fish to a turn, and took their time eating the meal. Then they sat around and chatted, and Giant told his chums something which interested them not a little.

CHAPTER X

THE STORY OF A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

The boys were talking about money matters in general and inheritances in particular when Giant mentioned the fact that his mother had some money coming to her, but could not get possession of it.

"You know my mother came from France," said the small member of the club. "She arrived in this country when she was about sixteen years of age, coming with an uncle, who was her guardian. My uncle's name was Pierre Dunrot, and he was by profession a teacher of ancient history."

"No wonder you always get your history lessons so easily," was Whopper's comment. "It must run in the blood."

"You keep quiet, Whopper, and let Giant tell us about this money,"

interposed Snap.

"After my mother was in this country about six years, she met my father and married him. My uncle approved of the match, although he told my mother he wished she had married a Frenchman instead of an American. They all went to live at a place called Watchville on the seacoast. My uncle was then writing a great work on ancient history to be issued in ten big volumes."

"Phew! I hope he didn't want any fellows to study it," murmured the doctor's son.

"Mother has told me that my uncle was all right in his mind while I was a little boy and when my father was alive. But after my father died Uncle Pierre grew kind of queer in his head. My mother thought it was too much study and she advised him to take a rest. But he said he must get his big history written and he kept on writing and burning the midnight oil as college fellows call it, and it made him queerer and queerer every day.

"One day he went to the post-office for his mail. That was when I was about nine years old. When he got back he began to dance around and he caught me by the hands and rushed around the house like a crazy man. 'A hundred thousand francs! A hundred thousand francs!' he kept calling out, over and over again. Then my mother asked him what he meant. He said a distant relative had died and left him and her a hundred thousand francs."

"How much is that?" asked Whopper, who knew little about French money.

"A franc is worth about nineteen cents," said Snap.

"Yes, and a hundred thousand francs is about nineteen thousand dollars," went on Giant. "My mother tried to get the particulars from Uncle Pierre, but he was so excited she could not, excepting that half the money was coming to himself and half to her. He said he would see about it the next day.

"That night there came a violent thunderstorm and our house was struck by lightning. The only damage done was to one corner in which was located Uncle Pierre's writing desk. The desk was ripped apart by the lightning bolt and some of his precious manuscripts were burnt.

"When my uncle discovered that part of his great historical work had been destroyed he acted as if he was insane. He was almost on the point of committing suicide, but my mother stopped him. She told him to remember about his good fortune in having all that money left to him, but he only shook his head and said he would rather have his manuscripts back. At last she got him to bed, but in the morning he had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" came from the others.

"Yes. He had put on the oldest suit of clothes he had and gone away. Of course my mother sent out an alarm, and men hunted all over for him. But he was not to be found."

"But you found him later," ventured Snap.

"No, he was never found. When folks learned how queerly he had acted all came to the conclusion that he had gone to the river and drowned himself, and after awhile my mother thought so too."

"And what of the fortune?" questioned Shep.

"My mother tried to find the letter Uncle Pierre had received, but that was gone too. Then she wrote to France. She learned that some money was really coming to her and my uncle, but could not get any particulars. She even employed a lawyer, but after a year the lawyer gave up, too. There was a mystery about the whole affair and the solution, it seems, rested with my Uncle Pierre."

"And you never got the money?" asked Whopper.

"Not a dollar of it."

"It's queer you never spoke about this before," said Snap.

"Well, mother doesn't like to speak of it, because she doesn't want folks to know we had a crazy man in our family. But Uncle Pierre wasn't really crazy---he was only queer---and that lightning bolt burning up his beloved manuscripts unset him completely."

"I hope you'll get that money some day, Giant," said Snap. "I wouldn't give up trying for it so easily."

"When I am a man and can afford it, I am going to France and try to hunt it up," answered the small youth.

"Does your mother ever say anything about it?" questioned Shep.

"Not much. She hates to think of my uncle. She was very much attached to him, and to have him disappear like that makes her shudder and feel very bad."

"Were you living over on the coast when he disappeared?"

"Oh, no, we were living at a place called Bartonville, about twenty miles to the north of here. My father used to be cashier of the Bartonville Lumber Company."

"I once heard of a man disappearing and coming home fifteen years later," said Shep. "But he simply ran away because he had some trouble with his wife."

"I heard of a case like that," put in Whopper, with a grin on his face. "That man wanted his wife to make him some gooseberry pie and she wouldn't do it. When he came back he asked her, 'Maria, will you make the gooseberry pie now?' and she answered, 'no.' 'All right,' said he, 'I'll go away again,' and he did."

"That's a whopper all right enough!" cried Snap. "It's about time you turned up. You have been very quiet lately."

"I never tell anything but the strict truth," said Whopper, meekly.

When it came time to retire, Snap asked the others if they should post a guard.

"Oh, I think we are safe enough without one," answered the doctor's son, who was fagged out. "Let's chance it."

"Most of our outfit is on the boat," said Whopper. "I don't believe anybody will carry it off."

"Let us fix the fire so it will burn the most of the night," said Giant. "That will scare off any wild animals that may be prowling around."

Wood was to be had in plenty, and they cut several sticks which were not very dry and would, consequently, burn slowly. They sat up until about nine o'clock and then turned in, resolved to be up at daybreak and on their way once more, directly after breakfast.

It was cozy enough in the tent, which was just large enough to accommodate the four boys. As they were to remain there but one night they had not fixed up any couches further than to throw down some dry brushwood and a few cedar boughs. Giant and Whopper rested at the rear of the tent and Snap and Shep in front, close to the half-open flap.

Snap had been asleep about two hours when he awoke with a start. He listened and heard the bark of a fox not very far from the camp.

"Wish I could bring him down, just for the fun of the thing," he murmured to himself, and then, reaching for his shotgun, he arose and tiptoed his way out of the tent.

The fire had burned low and Snap was wise enough to slink into the shadows, so that the fox might not see him. Just back of the temporary camp was a big rock and toward this he crawled, keeping his firearm before him and ready for use.

Several minutes passed, and then he heard the bark of the fox once more, this time much closer. He strained his eyes to catch sight of the creature, but the darkness under the trees was too great.

After that fully five minutes passed and Snap had about made up his mind that the fox had gotten scared and turned tail, when he heard a cracking of brushwood directly in front of him.

With eyes on the alert he watched in the direction from whence the sound had proceeded, and at last caught the gleam of two small eyes as they looked suspiciously at the campfire.

"Now is my chance," thought the young hunter, and raising his shotgun he took hasty aim and pulled the trigger.

Only a sharp click followed, and all in a flash Snap remembered that in the evening he had cleaned the firearm, but had not loaded it. The fox heard the click, caught sight of Snap, and whirling around made a leap for the woods and was out of sight in a twinkling.

CHAPTER XI

A SEARCH FOR A ROWBOAT

"Well, of all the chumps in this world, I'm the worst!"

Thus it was that Snap upbraided himself for having forgotten to load the firearm. He knew it would be useless to dash back to the tent for ammunition---the fox was gone and would take good care to keep its distance.

Much chagrined over his mistake, the youth turned back and walked toward the fire. Then he set his gun against a tree and built up the blaze a bit, for the night was chilly. He was just about to leave the fire and crawl back in the tent when a voice reached him:

"Who is out there?" It was Shep who asked the question.

"It is I, Snap," was the reply.

"What's wrong?" And now the doctor's son poked his head from the shelter.

"I heard a fox and thought I'd shoot him----but he ran away," said Snap. He was in no humor to tell about the empty shotgun, for he did not wish his chum to have the laugh on him.

"Oh, is that all. Say, do you know it's cold?"

"Yes, and that is why I am stirring up the fire," answered Snap.

"Do you know, I had an awful dream," continued the doctor's son. "It has left me wideawake."

"Better go to sleep, Shep, or you'll be fagged out in the morning."

"I dreamed somebody ran away with our boat and all our supplies," went on Shep. "We didn't have a thing left, and we were in our nightclothes!"

"You must have been thinking of Ham Spink and Carl Dudder, and what they did last year."

"Maybe. Of course the boat and outfit are safe," went on the doctor's son.

"I suppose so---I haven't looked."

"Just take a look before you turn in, will you?"

"Yes."

Shep's head disappeared, and Snap finished fixing the fire. Then he turned to the lake, where the boat with the most of the outfit had been left, tied to an overhanging tree.

The craft with its contents was gone!

Snap could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses. He pinched himself, to make certain that he was awake. It was true---the craft was nowhere in sight.

At first he thought to arouse the others but then concluded to look for the boat first. Perhaps it had only broken away and was drifting close by. If so he would bring it back and fasten it securely without giving the alarm.

But a five-minutes' hunt convinced Snap that the rowboat with its valuable contents was nowhere in that vicinity, and then he ran back to the tent much disturbed.

"Get up, you fellows!" he called. "Get up! The boat is gone!"

At first nobody paid attention, for even Shep was asleep once more. But then Giant roused up, quickly followed by his chums.

"What's the matter?"

"The boat and our outfit is gone!"

"Gone!"

"Why---er---I dreamed it!" stammered the doctor's son. "Am I awake or asleep?"

"You're awake," answered Snap, and then he continued hurriedly: "Shep, do you think you heard somebody take the boat while you were in a doze and so imagined you dreamed it?"

"I---er---I don't know. No, I don't think I did---my dream was so unnatural. Come to think of it, the boat had wings and flew away. Now, that couldn't happen."

"Not unless some wizard turned the craft into an airship," answered Whopper.

All were soon at the water's edge and looking in all directions for the missing rowboat. What had been left of the outfit had been stored in the stern and tied down with a rubber cloth, to keep off the heavy dew. They stirred up the campfire still more, and each provided himself with a firebrand as a torch.

"This is the worst luck yet," observed the doctor's son, with something like a groan. "Supposing we can't get our boat and outfit back---"

"Oh, we've got to get 'em back!" burst out Whopper. "We'll do it if we have to scrape the lake with a fine-tooth comb."

"I wish it was morning---we can't see much in the dark, even with the torches," said Shep.

Giant was examining the shore, for the possible discovery of strange footprints. But he could discover none that looked different from their own.

"If I was an Indian I might distinguish them, but to me they all look alike," he said.

What to do next the young hunters did not know. Had they had a second boat they might have rowed up and down the lake, but even this move was denied to them.

"Let us go up and down the shore on foot," suggested Snap. "It is all out of the question to go back to bed---I couldn't sleep a wink."

It was decided that Shep and Snap should go north while Whopper and Giant went south. All procured new torches, and each took along a gun.

"If you discover anything give the old whistle," said the leader of the club.

The way Snap and Shep had chosen was anything but easy. To the northward the shore of Lake Cameron was rocky and uneven, with many gullies and little streams flowing over the rocks. More than once they thought they heard somebody or some animal moving but the sound proved to be nothing but the falling water. Once Shep stepped into a hollow and was scared by the sudden appearance of several big bullfrogs.

"Wish they were rabbits or squirrels, I might shoot them," he said.

"Well, you can shoot the frogs if you wish," answered Snap. "The hind legs are as sweet as squirrel meat."

"I know that---but I'm not out for frogs just now. I want to find that boat."

The two young hunters covered a quarter of a mile when they came out on a small point of land overlooking the broad lake. As they, did this Snag uttered a cry:

"What is that out yonder, Shep?"

"Why, I declare, it looks like the boat!"

"Just what I was thinking. How can we get to her?"

"I don't know---unless we swim over."

"Is anybody on board?"

"I can't make out---in fact, I am not at all sure it is the boat," was the slow answer.

The object they had discovered was quite a distance out on the lake and the light from their torches reached it but faintly. The thing was drifting down the lake slowly, and as they watched it almost passed from view.

"Here, this won't do," cried Snap. "If it is the boat we must catch her and bring her in."

"It's kind of cold swimming---this time of night," answered the doctor's son, who did not relish such a bath.

"Here, you hold my things and I'll swim out," declared Snap, "I don't think the water is any colder now than in the day time."

He was soon ready for the plunge, and noting the direction in which the object had last been seen, he waded into the water. The first touch felt icy, but after he had ducked down and taken a few strokes it did not seem so bad. He struck out lustily, and Shep held up both torches, that he might have some light by which to guide himself.

Snap was a good swimmer, but the object out on the lake was further away than he had calculated, and it took him fully five minutes to get in the vicinity of it. The sky had clouded over a bit, hiding the stars, so he could see little or nothing on the water. On the shore he could see the two torches that the doctor's son was waving and that was all.

At last Snap saw the dark object directly ahead of him. By this time he was somewhat exhausted by his swim and he was glad to think that he would soon be able to rest. Then he made a discovery which did not please him at all.

The object was nothing more than a part of a fallen tree, the trunk resting half in and half out of the water and several branches sticking out in as many directions. At a distance it looked a little like the rowboat but the resemblance faded completely as he got closer.

"Too bad! I thought it was the boat sure!" he murmured. "Well, I'll have to rest on the log a bit, before I strike out for shore."

He swam up to one of the branches and caught hold of it. He was on the point of reaching for the tree trunk when an unusual sound came to his ears.

Then Snap made a discovery that almost took his breath from him. On the tree trunk rested a big wildcat, its eyes gleaming fiercely at the youth in the water!

CHAPTER XII

THE CAMP ON LAKE CAMERON

Snap did not stand upon the order of his going, but went at once. Without a thing with which to defend himself, he had no desire to come into contact with such a savage creature as a wildcat, and, consequently, he dropped back into the water in a hurry and started back for the shore. He almost fancied he heard the wildcat splash in after him, and a chill crept down his backbone which was not caused by the night air.

"Hello! hello!" he yelled to Shep.

"Got the boat?" came back the cry.

"Not much! Get your shotgun ready and fire a shot into the air."

"What's the matter?"

"A wildcat is out here---on a floating log. I'm afraid he's after me."

"A wildcat! Want me to scare him away?"

"Yes."

The doctor's son now understood, and raising his shotgun with one arm he pulled the trigger.

The report sounded out loudly in the night air and the echoes went ringing over the surrounding hills.

In the meantime Snap continued to swim for the shore with all possible speed. Fortunately he came in where there was a sandbar, so that he could wade to solid ground. When Shep reached him he was panting for breath.

"I wa---was---never so scar---scared in my, life!" he panted. "It was only an old tree, and I was going to take a rest on it when I heard the wildcat. He was a big fellow, and his eyes seemed to bore me through and through. Maybe I didn't strike out for shore in a hurry!

"I don't blame you," answered the doctor's son. "Did he jump in the water after you?"

"I don't know."

"And it wasn't the boat?"

"No, I didn't see a thing of the boat."

Snap lost no time in dressing, and in the meantime Shep kept his eyes open for the possible appearance of the wildcat. But the savage creature did not show itself, nor did the fallen tree come again into view.

The report of the gun had reached Giant and Whopper, and they came up on the run, fearing something serious had occurred.

"We walked along the shore for almost quarter of a mile," said Whopper, "but we didn't see a blessed thing that looked like the boat. I am afraid it's gone for good."

"If it is we'll have to go home, and that will be the end of this outing," answered Shep.

"Oh, we're going to find that boat!" declared Giant. "But I don't think we'll be able to do much until daybreak."

They followed the shore for a short distance further, and then went back to the temporary camp. It was now half-past three in the morning.

"It will be growing light in another hour," said Whopper. "I move we get breakfast and be ready to start off as soon as we can see."

His suggestion was carried out. Snap's swim had made him cold, and he was glad enough to drink two cups of steaming hot coffee. The boys had brought some doughnuts along, and these, with the coffee and some fried fish, gave them a very appetizing breakfast. They took their time eating, waiting impatiently for the first signs of light in the eastern sky.

At last it was light enough to see almost across the lake, and then they looked in all directions for some sign of the missing rowboat. The craft was not in sight, and once again the party divided, this time Whopper and Snap going to the south and Shep and Giant to the north. Each took his gun along, and it was Snap who told them to make sure the firearms were loaded.

"You never want to go out with an empty gun," he said.

"Humph!" muttered Giant. "Did you ever do such a thing?" But Snap pretended not to hear and did not answer.

Whopper and Snap covered almost half a mile before they came to a turn in the lake shore. Here there was quite a good sized cove, and much to their surprise they saw two large tents standing among the trees. Nearby was the remains of a campfire, with sticks, an iron chain, and a big iron pot over it.

"I didn't notice this camp when we came up," said Whopper.

"All the folks here must be asleep," said Snap. But as he spoke a man came from one of the tents and stared at them. It was Andrew Felps, the rich lumber merchant who owned much of the land around the lake and who had treated them so meanly the summer and the winter previous.

"Hi, you!" roared Felps. "What are you doing around here?"

"Looking for our boat," answered Snap.

"Humph! This is a pretty time to visit our camp, I must say!"

"We didn't know you had a camp here," said Whopper.

"I'd like to know what you are doing here---after my ordering you away last summer and last winter," went on the lumber merchant, sourly.

"Didn't I say I was looking for our boat?" said Snap.

"Well, if you've got a boat you must be camping up here."

"We stayed ashore over night, that's all. We are bound for Lake Narsac," said Whopper. "Did you see a boat drifting past?" he continued.

"No, I didn't," snapped Andrew Felps. "Look here," he continued. "If this is a trick, let me warn you. You can't camp around here, and that settles it."

"We don't want to camp around here, Mr. Felps," answered Snap. "All we want is our boat, which got away from us last night. If you saw anything of the craft---"

"I want you to get out of here!" roared the lumber merchant.
"I won't have you hanging around!"

At this moment two men came from one of the tents. They were Giles Faswig and Vance Lemon, the lumber merchant's two friends, and the men who had once tried to get the boys to let them have some ammunition. They had treated the young hunters so meanly that the latter had voted not to let them have any powder or cartridges and this had broken up the outing of the Felps party.

"Hello, those young rascals are out here again!" muttered Vance Lemon, who was naturally as sour as his name implied.

"Say, I've fixed them," whispered Giles Faswig, with a wink at Lemon.
"I'll tell you about it later. I took a walk late last night, and I discovered they were camping not far from this spot."

"We are not young rascals!" cried Snap, indignantly. "We are just as good as you are, and maybe better."

"Bah! don't talk to me!" growled Vance Lemon.

"You thought you were smart last winter, when you refused to sell us a little ammunition," broke in Giles Faswig. "I haven't forgotten that dirty trick."

"You know well enough why we didn't let you have the ammunition," answered Snap. "You didn't deserve it."

"Humph! Just wait, and you'll find out---" The man did not finish.

"Now I want you two boys to go away---and stay away!" cried Andrew Felps. "If you are bound for Lake Narsac better be on your way."

"We can't go until we have found our missing boat," said Whopper.
"It must be somewhere on this lake."

"Make them go away," said Giles Faswig, and then he whispered something in the rich lumber dealer's ear. Whatever he had to tell made Andrew Felps grin.

Snap and Whopper saw the whispering and the grin, and instantly they suspected some trick. They well remembered what a rage Faswig had been in when they had refused to let him have any, ammunition.

"Look here, if you know anything about our boat I want to know it," said Whopper, without stopping to think twice.

"Your boat?" repeated Vance Lemon, and then he looked at Giles Faswig, who winked.

"Yes, our boat," repeated Whopper. "We tied it to a tree last night and now it is gone."

"I didn't touch your boat," growled Andrew Felps.

"Nor did I," put in Vance Lemon.

"You had better be gone about your business," came from Giles Faswig.
"We didn't come up here to be bothered by a lot of kids."

"We want our boat---and we are bound to get it," said Snap, firmly.

"Well, go find it," cried Andrew Felps.

"We want to know if anybody in this camp knows anything about the boat."

Just then a boy of eight or nine years of age came out of one of the tents, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Uncle Giles," he said, walking up to Faswig, "where are we going to-day, and what are you going to do with that boat you brought in when I woke up last night?"

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE CAMP OF THE ENEMY

Snap and Whopper listened to the words of the small boy with keen interest. Instantly they came to the conclusion that the lad must be speaking of their own craft.

"Hush, Dick!" cried Giles Faswig, hastily. "You go back in the tent and stay there until these strangers go away."

"What boat did your uncle bring in last night?" asked Snap, walking up to the lad.

"See here, you leave my nephew alone!" roared Faswig.

"Can't I speak to him?"

"No, I don't want him talking to the likes of you."

"He said you brought in a boat last night when he woke up," came from Whopper. "Was it our boat?"

"None of your business!" snapped Giles Faswig, and as he spoke he took his nephew by the arm and turned him back into one of the tents. "Stay there, now mind!" he added, in a low, tense voice.

"It's a good deal of our business," said Snap, "if it was our boat."

"Come on and take a look around," added Whopper, and started for the other side of the cove, where a mass of brushwood and overhanging trees screened a portion of the water from view.

Giles Faswig strode up to the two young hunters and caught Snap by the arm. The next instant the hand was shaken off violently and the

youth stood before the man with blazing eyes and doubled-up fists.

"Don't you try that again, Mr. Faswig," said Snap, in a cold, measured voice. "You have no right to touch me."

"And you have no right in this camp."

"You clear out!" came from Andrew Felps. "I don't want you around another minute."

Faswig stepped in front of the boys and so did Felps and Lemon. All three of the men looked ugly, and Snap and Whopper did not know what to do.

"Mr. Felps," began Snap, after a painful pause, "I want you to listen to what I have to say. Last night our rowboat with our outfit on board disappeared. I don't know if it drifted off or was stolen. If it was stolen, and we find it out, somebody is going to be arrested for the theft."

"Ha! do you call me a thief!" burst out the lumber dealer, in a rage.

"Not at all I am only telling you a few plain facts. We have every reason to believe our boat is somewhere around this camp. If it is I want to know if you are going to give it up peaceably, or if we'll have to send down to town for an officer of the law?"

"You---you---" commenced Andrew Felps, and then looked at Giles Faswig, who had turned slightly pale.

"This may not be a serious business to you but it is to us," continued Snap. "There are four of us in our party, and if you have our boat, we can all testify to that fact. Three of us can stay here and watch you while the fourth goes for the officer."

"Do you think we'd steal a measly rowboat?" asked Vance Lemon, but he glanced at Faswig as he spoke, and his tone was an uneasy one.

"I don't know what you'd do. But that boy, said something about bringing in a boat last night, and I want to know if it is our boat."

"How do I know whose boat it is?" growled Giles Faswig.

"Has it got the name _Snapper_ on it?" asked Whopper.

"I didn't notice. I saw a boat drifting on the lake and hauled it in, that's all," answered Giles Faswig, curtly. "For all I know, you are trying to get somebody else's property away from me."

"You let us see that boat, and we'll soon tell you if it is ours or not," said Snap.

"I was out on the shore last night and I saw something drifting by and drew it in," explained Giles Faswig. "I hauled it back of yonder bushes. If you can prove it is your property you can take it, but not otherwise."

"We'll soon find out," answered Snap, and walked over in the direction pointed out. As he did this, Whopper put his little fingers in the

corners of his mouth and gave a piercing whistle.

"What's that for?" demanded Andrew Faswig, in alarm.

"We want our crowd down here---and some others," said Whopper.

"Some others? Who?" asked Faswig, and now he was also alarmed.

"Some folks who will give us all the help we want," said Snap, quick to understand the ruse his chum was playing.

"How many people are up here?" asked the rich lumber dealer, nervously.

"Oh, seven or eight," answered Whopper, but did not add that he was counting in Felps's own party.

Behind a thick mass of brushwood rested the _Snapper_, as the boys' craft had been christened. The boat was very much as the lads had left it, but Snap was quick to detect that the painter, which had before had a frayed-out end, had been cut by some sharp instrument, probably a knife.

"This is our boat," said Snap, as he looked the craft over.

"Humph, can you prove it?" growled Giles Faswig.

"Yes, and I can prove more if I have to," added the leader of the hunting club.

"What?"

"That the rope has been cut."

"What does that signify?" asked Andrew Felps.

"It shows that the boat didn't drift away. Somebody cut the rope and made off with her."

"See here---" began Giles Faswig, and then stopped short. There was a shout, and Giant and Shep burst into view.

"Got the boat, eh?" cried the doctor's son. "Good!" And then he looked curiously at the men, and so did Giant.

"Come on and shove the boat out," said Snap. "We'll talk this over later." And before anybody could stop him he was in the craft and pushing out of the bushes.

"Say look here---" began Andrew Felps, but the boys paid no attention. All got on board the _Snapper_, and in a moment more the craft was out in the middle of the cove.

"Don't you try to make any trouble for me!" shouted Giles Faswig. "I simply found that boat adrift and brought her in here for safety."

"And I don't believe a word you say," answered Snap. "I think you visited our camp and stole the boat."

"And that is what I think," added Whopper.

A wordy war followed lasting fully ten minutes. It was plainly to be seen that Giles Faswig and his companions were much disturbed, thinking the boys would make trouble for them. At last the young hunters rowed away and went back to their own camp. It was now growing quite light.

"Did you ever hear of such meanness," was Snap's comment. "They meant to keep our boat hidden until we had left this vicinity. Then maybe, they'd cast it adrift and say they had nothing to do with taking her."

"Well, we found out how mean they were last year, so it is nothing new," said Shep. "You were lucky to locate the craft."

"It was all through that boy," returned Whopper. "I pity him if he has Giles Faswig for an uncle."

"I think the best we can do is to leave Lake Cameron at once," said Giant. "We don't want to run into that crowd again."

The others agreed, and by eight o'clock that morning the tent was taken down and stored away and the journey to Firefly Lake was begun.

It was a clear, warm day, with bright sunshine overhead. The woods were full of birds that sang sweetly, and being so near to nature's heart, the young hunters soon forgot their troubles.

The stream leading from Lake Cameron to Firefly Lake was a tortuous and rocky one, and more overgrown with bushes than it had been the summer previous. At one point the spring freshets had rolled in a number of big stones and these the boys had to roll out of the way before the rowboat could get through. Not wishing to damage the _Snapper_, they proceeded with care, so by dinner time less than half the distance to the smaller body of water was covered.

"We won't get to Firefly Lake until to-night," said Snap. "But who cares? We have plenty of time."

All were hungry for a taste of roast duck, and so they stopped off long enough to cook a fine dinner. For dessert they had some blackberries which they chanced to find growing near the watercourse, and they stopped so long over their midday meal that it was after two o'clock before the journey was resumed.

"Do you remember the awful windstorm we once struck up here?" queried Shep, as they rowed along.

"Will we ever forget it," cried Whopper. "Gosh! I thought I was going to be blown into the next century! Say, did I ever tell you how it blew my socks inside out?" he added, with a grin.

"Hardly," answered Giant, and laughed.

"Fact, and the next morning I had to turn my shoes inside out to accommodate the socks," finished Whopper. "Yes, that was a wind to remember."

"Hurrah, Whopper is coming to his own!" cried Snap. "Whopper, what

would you do if you couldn't tell stories now and then?"

"Why, I'd---" began Whopper, and then leaped to his feet. "Well, I never! Give me a gun, quick! There's a bear!"

CHAPTER XIV

DELAYED BY A STORM

"A Bear!"

"Where is he?"

"Let me get my gun!"

Such were some of the exclamations uttered after Whopper made his declaration that he had seen a bear. In the meantime the youth who loved to tell big stories had caught up his shotgun and was aiming it to the right of the watercourse, where there were several big rocks overgrown with brushwood. He took aim and blazed away. A grunt followed, and then came a thrashing in the bushes, growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

"You hit him!" ejaculated Snap.

"Yes, but he is running away for all he's worth," answered Whopper, disappointedly.

By this time every one of the young hunters had his firearm. The boat was turned to the bank of the creek, and then each youth looked at the others. Not a trace of the bear was to be seen anywhere.

"No use of going after him," said the doctor's son. "More than likely he's half a mile away by this time and he'll be so shy he won't let us get anywhere near him."

"If only we could have gotten a shot at him!" said Giant, wistfully. "Think of bringing a bear down first lick!" And his eyes glistened.

"We might have crawled up on him, only I thought he saw us," explained Whopper. "That's the reason I called for my gun."

"I guess he kind of scared you," said Snap.

"Well, I admit I was startled. I didn't think we'd find a bear along here---I thought they hung up in the mountains."

"They may come down to gather some stuff that grows in this water," answered Snap. "They love to eat certain roots, so Jed Sanborn told me, and sometimes they travel a long distance to get them."

After a little more talk the journey was resumed, and nothing out of the ordinary came to their notice until late in the afternoon. Then Shep, who was in the bow looking forward, held up his hand for silence.

"What is it?" whispered Giant, who was next to him.

"Some small animals squatting on yonder rocks," replied the doctor's son. "I don't know what they are."

The young hunters stopped rowing and took up their shotguns with care. They allowed the boat to drift behind a screen of bushes on the side of the watercourse. Then they looked through the bushes with care.

"I know what they are---muskrats," whispered Giant.

"I see two of them," added Shep. He raised his gun and Giant did the same. Bang! bang! went both pieces, one directly after the other. The muskrats gave a leap upward and fell with a splash into the stream.

"We hit them, that's certain," said the doctor's son. "But they may get away."

Eagerly the boys rowed up to the spot where the muskrats had sat. Around the rocks the clear water was churned up into mud. But on the surface floated the two bodies of the creatures.

"I don't know what we are going to do with them," said Snap. "The skins are not very good this time of year."

"I couldn't resist bringing one of 'em down," said Shep.

"Just the way I felt," added Giant.

They continued on their way, and a few minutes later came to something of a cleared spot along the watercourse. Here Snap leaped up, shotgun in hand.

"Here's our chance, fellows!" he whispered. "All together."

He pointed to some low trees beyond the clearing. The branches were thick with quail. All understood and took up their firearms.

"I'll shoot high, Shep can shoot low, Giant to the left and Whopper to the right," commanded the leader of the club. "All ready?"

"Yes," was the low answer, and the four weapons went off almost as one piece. There was a great fluttering in the trees and five quail were seen to drop. Then two others flew around in a fashion that told plainly they were seriously wounded.

"Come on, we must get them!" cried Giant, and leaped forward. As the two wounded birds flew close together he blazed away a second time, and the game dropped like a stone. The rest of the quail were now out of sight.

"Seven quail!" cried Snap, enthusiastically. "I don't call that half bad."

"I call it very good," declared the doctor's son. "To-morrow we can have quail on toast."

"Where are you going to get the toast?" questioned Whopper.

"Well, we'll have quail on crackers then," put in Giant.

Stowing the quail away in the bow of the boat, they went on through the gathering darkness. The sun had gone down over the hills in the west, casting long shadows across the little watercourse.

"It will be pretty dark by the time we reach Firefly Lake," said Snap, and he was right. It was cloudy too, and a stiff breeze from the east had begun to blow.

"We'll have to take care how we pitch our tent to-night," was Whopper's comment. "Unless I miss my guess, we'll have rain by to-morrow morning."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Giant. "I don't want it to rain yet."

"It won't hold off for you or anybody else," returned Snap. "Whopper is right, we must stake our tent well and allow for the water to run off---if rain does come."

When they at last rounded the final turn and swept into Firefly Lake it was so dark they could see little or nothing ahead. But they remembered the locality and had little trouble in reaching a spot where they had camped once before. But the snows of the previous winter had played sad havoc with the fireplace they had built, and they had to build a fire in the open. While Whopper and Giant prepared a substantial supper Snap and Shep put up the tent, on a bit of high ground. Around the tent they dug a small trench, to carry off the water, should it storm.

"We want to make sure that our boat doesn't get away from us again to-night," said Whopper.

"Here is a cove---we can haul her up in that," said Snap, and this was done, and the craft was tied fast to two trees.

Having had but little sleep the night before, all the young hunters were tired out, and it was not long after getting supper that they crawled into the tent and went to sleep. On account of the wind they did not dare to leave the campfire burning, for they knew only too well how easy it is to set a forest on fire through such carelessness.

At about two o'clock in the morning Giant awoke, to find the rain coming down steadily on the tent. He crawled to the front of the shelter and looked out. All was pitch dark, and, somehow, the prospect made him shiver. The wind had gone down, and only the fall of the rain broke the stillness.

"This is lonely enough for anybody, I guess," he mused, and crawled back to his corners. "Shouldn't wonder if we have to stay in came tomorrow. But I don't care---it will give us all a chance to rest up."

He struck a match, to see how the others were faring, and as he gazed around he saw a small stream of water coming in through a hole in the tent. The stream was falling close to Whopper's head. Just then Whopper turned and the stream took him directly in the ear.

"Wh---wow!" spluttered Whopper, awakening and squirming around.

"What's the matter here? Has Niagara Falls broke loose, or who's playing the hose on me?"

The noise aroused the others, and all sat up. By this time the match had gone out, but Giant promptly struck another and then lit the camp lantern. Whopper gazed at the hole in the tent ruefully.

"That's too bad," said Snap. "We'll have to mend that, the first chance we get."

"We can't mend it to-night," answered Shep.

Gracious! Just listen to it rain!

The boys sat up for quite awhile listening to the rain, but presently they grew tired again and one after another dropped off to sleep. Whopper found a dry spot next to Giant; and thus they rested until daylight.

It was certainly a dismal outlook that confronted them when they arose for the day. The rain was coming down steadily, and no dry firewood was to be had with which to cook breakfast.

"We should have put some wood in the tent," said Snap. "We'll know better next time."

It took a deal of coaxing to start a blaze, but once it got going to keep it up was easy. They took their time, for traveling in such a storm was out of the question. The meal over, they washed up the dishes, and then huddled down in the tent once more.

"This is the only drawback to camp life," said Snap, with a sigh. "A storm knocks everything endways. But there is no help for it, and a fellow must take the bitter with the sweet."

The storm continued all day, and the only thing the lads did was to fish. At this they were very successful, and a fine supper of fresh lake trout put them in much better humor. They put in a peaceful night, and the next morning, the storm having cleared away, they set off for Lake Narsac.

CHAPTER XV

LOST IN THE SWAMP

"This is certainly a wilderness!"

It was Snap who uttered the words, as he stood in the bow of the rowboat, taking in the scene before him. They had left Firefly Lake five miles behind them and were on the winding stream leading to Lake Narsac. On one side of the watercourse were rough rocks and on the other a tangled mass of underbrush, backed up by rocks and tall cedars.

"A fellow could never make his way through such a woods as that," said Whopper, nodding in the direction of the forest. "Why, you'd

tear your clothing all to pieces!"

"I can tell you one thing," put in Shep. "I think there must be plenty of game up here---if only one can get to it."

They had taken turns at rowing and poling the craft along. For the most part the poling was better than rowing, for the stream was too full of rocks to admit the free use of oars. Twice they had bumped on the projections under water, once with such violence that Giant, who had been standing at the time, had almost gone overboard. Once they had to carry craft and outfit around a sharp bend. The boat had started to leak a little, but not enough to cause anxiety.

Noon found them encamped on a point of land where the stream appeared to divide into two parts, one running to the northeast and the other to the northwest. Which branch to take to get to Lake Narsac they did not know.

"This is a fine how-do-you-do!" was Whopper's comment. "I wish we had questioned Jed Sanborn about it."

"From what I thought he said I imagined there was but one stream leading to the lake," said the doctor's son.

"Perhaps there is, Shep; but which is the one?"

"Don't ask me. One looks as good as the other."

"On the map Lake Narsac is to the northwest of Firefly Lake," came from Giant. "Consequently I should say that we ought to take the stream flowing in that direction."

"That sounds reasonable," answered Snap, and the others nodded.

Coming along the watercourse they had managed to shoot several quail, of the sort known by many as partridge, and also some other birds. Shep had likewise brought down two squirrels. They had scared up several rabbits, but these had gotten away in the underbrush.

"Let us take a good rest before we go further," said Shep, while he was eating. "There is no use of our killing ourselves with rowing when we are only out for fun."

The others agreed, and as a consequence they took a nap after the meal and did not get started again until three o'clock.

They soon found the stream they were on broad but shallow, and felt sure it would lead to the lake. They kept on steadily until six o'clock, and then came to a halt at a point where the watercourse narrowed and ran between a series of jagged rocks.

"We ought to be getting to the lake pretty soon," was Snap's comment. "Jed Sanborn told me we could make the trip from Firefly Lake in a day if we didn't fool along the way."

"Well, don't forget that we stopped for a nap," answered Whopper. "Perhaps we'll get there before it gets dark."

Having passed the rocks, they found the stream broadening out once more. The bottom was now muddy, and here and there grew large clumps of reeds and cattails.

"This seems to be more of a swamp than a lake," was the comment of the doctor's son. "From what Jed Sanborn said I thought it was a narrow stream all the way to the lake."

"So did I," added Giant. "I begin to feel that we have made a mistake."

"If we have, you're to blame," grumbled Whopper.

"Oh, you were willing enough to come this direction," answered Giant sharply. "If we are wrong, you needn't blame me."

"It's your fault!"

"Oh, don't quarrel about it," interposed Snap. "We were all willing to come this way. If we have made a mistake---" He did not finish.

"Don't croak until you are sure we are mistaken," said Shep.

A silence followed, and they moved on, the stream growing broader as they advanced. It was a lonely spot, and as it grew darker the loneliness seemed to increase. On all sides were the immense trees and dense brushwood, while the stream was dotted with little islands, covered with reeds and rushes and small, thorny bushes.

The sun had gone down, and as the darkness increased the boys looked at each other wonderingly. This was not at all what they had expected.

"If this is Narsac Lake I don't want to stay here," remarked Shep. "Why, it can't hold a candle to Cameron or Firefly."

"No wonder nobody comes here," grumbled Whopper. "It's nothing but a swamp."

"This can't be Lake Narsac," answered Snap. "Don't you remember what we heard---that it is a very deep lake, set right in among the mountains. We have made a mistake."

"I see something ahead," said Giant, who was standing in the bow. "It looks to me like a signboard. Let us row up to it."

"A signboard is just what we want," said Snap, and took up the oars. Soon they reached the board, which was nailed to a post set on one of the reedy islands. The board read as follows:

Hooper's Pond S. Hooper, Owner No campingers allowe

"Hooper's Pond!" cried Snap. "We certainly have made a mistake!"

"No campingers allowed," read the doctor's son. "His spelling and grammar are not very strong but he knows what he means."

"Well, we don't want to camp here," said Whopper in disgust. "Mr. S. Hooper can keep his pond to himself and welcome."

"I think we'll have to camp here for to-night," said Shep. "We can't go back to where we took lunch with darkness coming on. And I am hungry, too."

They were all hungry and tired, and after a brief talk decided to remain at the pond over night and in the morning retrace their way to where the stream had forked.

"Shall we camp on one of the islands, or on the shore?" questioned Shep.

"The main thing is to find some dry spot," answered Snap. "To me all the ground around here looks spongy and wet."

They tried several of the islands, but found them soft and uncertain, and so rowed over to the shore on the west. Here was a little hill, covered with dewberries, and having cleared a spot, they erected their tent and built a campfire.

"If Mr. S. Hooper is around he may chase us away," said Snap. "But we'll take the chance of his not being in this vicinity."

The swamp was full of flies and mosquitoes, and they were glad enough to keep near the fire, to get rid of the pests. After the cooking was done they built a smudge, of wet reeds, and this helped to keep the insects away. But it was not a cheerful spot and when the boys went to bed all felt depressed.

Snap was the first up in the morning, and while he was getting breakfast ready, Giant took his shotgun and went off in quest of game.

"There ought to be plenty of wild fowl around a swamp like this," said the small member of the club. "I am going to see what I can bring down before we leave."

"If you bring down much you'll have Mr. S. Hooper in your wool," answered Snap.

"I don't believe he is around. And, another thing, I didn't see any fences."

"Nor I. I guess you are safe in bringing down whatever you can hit. But don't stay out too long."

Giant walked to the other side of the little hill and then along a cove of the big swamp. Far ahead he saw some birds, resting close to the water's edge. He felt they might be quail or perhaps some wild turkeys.

The ground was anything but firm, and Giant soon had to leap from one dry patch to another. He was half tempted to turn back, but now he was almost within gun-shot of the game and he hated to give up the quest.

"I'll go back a bit from the water and come around on the other side," he reasoned. Then he took to another course, only to find, presently, that it was worse than the first. He was now between clumps of reeds, and almost before he knew it one of the clumps

turned over on him, sending him into the water and mud up to his knees.

"Gracious! this won't do!" he muttered, and tried to turn back. He found the water and mud very treacherous, and in a few seconds he went down again, this time to his waist. His feet were in the mud so firmly that he could scarcely budge them. He let out a cry for help. Then the mud below the surface commenced to sink, and in a few minutes poor Giant was up to his armpits. What to do he did not know, and it looked as if he would surely be drowned.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RESCUE OF GIANT

Snap had the breakfast well underway when Shep came out of the tent.

"Hello, you're at it early," remarked the doctor's son. "Why didn't you call me and I would have helped you."

"Oh, I didn't want to disturb you, Shep, you were snoozing so comfortably."

"Where is Giant?"

"Gone off to see if he can get some game before we leave."

"Do you want me to help with breakfast? If you don't, I'll try for some game myself."

"Go ahead---only come back when I whistle," answered the leader of the club.

The doctor's son was soon on his way, with his shotgun trailing in his hand. He, too, crossed the little hill as Giant had done. Hardly had he done this than he caught sight of a wild turkey and let drive, bringing the game down some distance ahead of him.

"Now I am going to have some fun getting that turkey," he told himself, as he surveyed the mud and water before him.

It was no light task to bring in the game, and the doctor's son got both feet wet. But the turkey was a gobbler and of good size, and he was very proud when he had the game over his shoulder in true sportsman's style.

"Guess I'll go on a little further and see if I can stir up anything else," he thought. "If game is plentiful around here maybe it will pay us to stay for a day or two after all."

He trudged on, and had just caught sight of what looked like some wild ducks when a cry reached his ears. At first he imagined it came from behind him, and thought it might be Snap calling him to breakfast, but then he concluded it came from in front.

"Must be Giant," he told himself. "What can he want?"

"Help! help me!" came presently, in a fainter voice.

"It is Giant, and he is in trouble!" burst from Shep's lips, and then, without waiting, he gave a loud whistle, repeated several times. This was the old signal among the young hunters that assistance was wanted immediately.

Shep broke into a run, or rather a series of hops, for he hopped from one bunch of reeds to another, until he came close to where Giant was struggling in the water and mud. The small member of the club was now almost up to his chin and trying with might and main to pull himself from the treacherous mass that held him a prisoner.

"What's the matter, can't you get out?" asked the doctor's son.

"N---no!" gasped Giant. "Th---the mu---mud is li---like g-g-glue!"

Much alarmed, Shep looked around for something with which to aid his chum. Nothing was at hand, but not far off he saw a small sapling growing. He made towards it, and by a supreme effort pulled the sapling up by the roots. Then he ran back and threw the top of the little tree towards the unfortunate young hunter.

"Got hold?"

"Yes."

Shep began to pull, and after a mighty effort succeeded in raising Giant several inches out of the sticky mud. But try his best, he could not budge the small lad further.

"It's no go!" he gasped. "I am going down myself!"

"Do---don't le---leave me, Shep!"

"Leave you? Not much, Giant! I'll get you out somehow. But I'll have to try some other way."

While the doctor's son was looking around for some other means to employ in the rescue, a shout was heard, and Snap came running up, followed by Whopper.

"What's the matter?"

"How did Giant get in that hole?"

"I don't know how he got in, but we must get him out," returned Shep. "Can you fellows help pull on this tree?"

"Wait, here is a small rope," said Snap. "I picked it up as I left camp, thinking it might be needed. We can tie that to the tree end and stand further back."

The rope was speedily adjusted, and then the three young hunters were able to brace their feet on ground that was fairly firm.

"Now, hold tight, Giant!" sang out Shep.

"I'll hold as ti---tight as I ca---can," was the gasped-out answer, for the small youth was all but exhausted by his struggles.

The others began a steady and strong pull, and inch by inch Giant came up out of the sticky mud. To make his hold firmer he twined his arms around the slender branches of the sapling.

"He's coming!" cried Snap. "Now then, one more haul and we'll have him out!"

"Or broken in two," panted Whopper.

The final pull was given, and with a sucking sound and a splash the small member of the club came to the top of the water. He fell on the sapling and the others dragged him to a spot where it was comparatively safe. Then he got up and looked at himself ruefully. He was plastered with mud from his waist down.

"Never mind---be thankful that you're out," said Shep.

"I---I am thankful," was Giant's answer. "Bu---but I don't want any o---of S. Hooper's mud. He ca---can have it all himself!" And this was said so dolefully that all the others had to roar.

When they got back to the camp Giant told how he had chanced to get into the mud. He was thankful that Shep had come along just in the nick of time, and thankful that the others had come also. Luckily he had a change of garments with him, and he lost no time, when he was rested, in putting on clean clothes and in washing out those which were soiled.

"After this I am going to be careful where I walk," he said, while he was eating his breakfast.

"It puts me in mind of the time you and I got in the snow hole, last winter," said Whopper, referring to an incident related in detail in "Guns and Snowshoes."

"Yes, and I was just as lucky to get out," answered Giant.

After an hour's rest, and a good breakfast, Giant declared himself as strong as ever. The tent was packed, and soon the young hunters were on their way from Hooper's Pond.

"I hope we don't make any more false turns," observed Snap, as they rowed and poled their way along. "I am getting a bit anxious to see Lake Narsac."

So were the others, and that noon they allowed themselves only half an hour for lunch. During that time some of the boys went fishing in the stream and were lucky enough to catch some trout and several suckers. Once Whopper got a strong pull, but it only proved to be a mud turtle, much to his disgust.

"Thought I had a ten-pound fish," he said.

The middle of the afternoon found them on a clear, deep stream, which broadened out constantly as they advanced. This made them certain

that they were nearing Lake Narsac, and they were correspondingly elated. At one point in the stream they came to a beautiful island, with elderberry bushes lining the shore and a patch of trees in the center. As they drew closer they saw several rabbits and squirrels, but did not get a chance to shoot the game.

"If we run short of food we can come here," observed Snap. "That game can't get away from the island."

"Shall we stop off now?" asked Whopper. "We'll be sure to get something."

"No! no! Let us go on!" cried Giant. "We want to make Lake Narsac by to-night, if we can possibly do it."

The others agreed with Giant, and they kept on until the long shadows over the mountain to the westward told them that night was again approaching.

"Looks as if we'd have to camp in the woods along this river," said the doctor's son.

"Oh, let us keep on until it is really dark," replied Giant.

"I'd like to see Lake Narsac, I must confess," answered Snap. "But even if we get there inside of the next hour we won't be able to see much."

Nevertheless, they kept on, until it was really dark. Then, by mutual consent, they drew up to the bank of the stream, leaped from the boat and stretched their limbs.

"We may be less than a mile from the lake, and we may be five times that distance," said the leader of the club. "I suppose the best thing to do is to camp where we are."

So it was decided, and once more the tent was hauled forth, and preparations were made to start a campfire. Whopper and Snap went to cut the wood. They had just stepped into the bushes when Shep and Giant heard several wild cries.

"A snake!"

"A dozen of them! This is a regular nest! Run, they are after us!"

And then both boys came running out of the bushes with all possible speed.

CHAPTER XVII

ON LAKE NARSAC AT LAST

It was true, they had struck a regular nest of snakes, and in less than a minute the camp seemed to be fairly overrun with the reptiles, which were from a foot to three feet in length.

Now, if there was one thing which the young hunters hated worse than anything else, it was a snake, and consequently there was a lively rush to get out of the way of the reptiles. The snakes were dark brown in color, with lighter stripes, and what variety the young hunters did not know. They might be poisonous, and the youths did not care to run any chances.

The snakes seemed to be fearless, and the fact that several were speedily killed did not daunt them. Whopper cut one in two with his hatchet and Snap crushed another with his heel. Then, as they came close to the tent, Shep hit a third with a saucepan and Giant kicked a fourth into the water. But by this time at least thirty snakes were in sight, and not knowing what else to do, the young hunters ran for the rowboat and tumbled into that. One snake went with Whopper, twined around his foot, but that youth kicked it loose and sent it squirming into the water.

"Did you ever see the like!" gasped Giant. "Why, the woods must be full of snakes!"

"We must be close to Lake Narsac," answered Snap. "Don't you remember what they said about snakes being plentiful?"

"If they are as plentiful as all this I want to go right back," declared Whopper firmly. And then he looked up his trouser legs, to make certain no reptiles had gone above his ankles. The other boys were also busy, scanning the rowboat, to clear it of possible visitors.

The craft was tied to the shore but had drifted several feet from the bank. They had rushed away so quickly that all of their firearms were in or near the tent, which was but partly raised, one end flapping idly in the faint breeze that was blowing. The campfire had been started with a few dry twigs and cedar boughs and cast only a faint gleam around in the gathering darkness.

"I didn't know snakes could be so active in the dark," observed the doctor's son.

"We stepped right into their nest," answered Snap. "First Whopper went into it and then I followed. That is what made the snakes so mad and made them come right after us."

"Some of them have gone into the tent," cried Giant. "I just saw three of them wriggle under the canvas."

"And to think all the guns are ashore!" murmured Whopper. "What are we to do?"

"Walk ashore and get them," suggested Snap, with a wink.

"Not for a million dollars! You do it."

"Thank you, but I---er---I'm lame."

"I guess we are all too lame to go ashore among those snakes," said Giant, with a short laugh. "But we have got to do something," he added, seriously.

"I move we remain on the boat until morning," said Shep. "Even if we clear out some of the snakes now, we may not be able to get at all of them. And who wants to go to sleep with snakes around? Not I!"

"I couldn't sleep if I tried," said Whopper. "I'd be seeing all kinds of snakes in my dreams!" And he shuddered.

Fortunately they had cooked some extra fish that noon and this food had not been taken from the boat. They dined on the fish and some crackers, and that was all. By this time it was night and the tiny campfire was a mere glow of hot ashes.

"We might try the other side of the stream," suggested Snap.

"There may be snakes there too," said Giant. "You can do as you please, I am going to stay on the boat until daylight."

"But what are you going to do when you get to the lake? We must camp somewhere?"

"We'll hunt up a snakeless place in the broad daylight. The snakes can't be everywhere."

There seemed to be no help for it, and having anchored the rowboat in the middle of the stream, the young hunters proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as possible on board. They had the rubber cloth, and this they propped up on half-raised oars, making a sort of awning. They had to rest on the hard seats, with boxes and bundles between, and it was anything but comfortable. They were so close together Giant said it reminded him of sardines in a tin box. A sound sleep was out of the question, and they slumbered only by fits and starts.

"Now to clear out those snakes," said Snap, when it was daylight. "I wonder what we had best do first?"

"I have an idea," said Shep. "Let us go to yonder shore and cut some cedar boughs. We can set them on fire and each take one. Snakes hate fire, and they'll be sure to crawl away if we advance with the burning boughs close to the ground."

The suggestion was deemed an excellent one, and they lost no time in carrying it out. They got the driest cedar branches possible and set them into a blaze with little trouble. Then they went ashore with caution, advancing in a semi-circle on the places they thought the snakes must be.

To their amazement not a reptile was in sight! "Did you ever see the like?" ejaculated Whopper. "Is this true, or am I dreaming?"

"I know what has happened," said Snap. "The snakes have simply gone back to their nest."

"Well, leave them there by all means!" interposed the doctor's son. "I wouldn't disturb their nap for the world."

With caution they moved around the camp, and lifted up the ends of

the tent, and raised their cooking utensils.

"Who wants to stay here for breakfast?" asked Snap, dryly. "Don't all speak at once."

"Thanks, but I've engaged a place about a mile from here," answered Whopper. "You can stay if you wish---I'll move on."

It did not take them long to get their things aboard the _Snapper_, and keeping their eyes open, they moved along the stream. They had scarcely covered half a mile when Snap, who was at the bow, gave a shout.

"The lake! The lake!"

"Where?" came from the others.

"Right around the bend, on the left. Pull on, fellows, and we'll soon be there."

Whopper and Shep bent to the oars and the turn mentioned was soon passed. Then all saw before them a clear, deep body of water, the farther end lost in the distance. On both sides were tall mountains, covered with pines and other trees which came down to the water's edge. The surface of the big lake was as smooth as glass, and just in front of them they could see the bottom, twenty or thirty feet below.

"What a beautiful lake!" murmured Shep.

"But how wild, and how lonely!" added Giant, after a look around.

"It looks lonely because we are not used to it," answered Snap. "I felt the same way the first time I went up to Lake Cameron and to Firefly Lake."

"That's it," put in Whopper. "After we have tramped along the shore, and rowed around the lake a few times, it will lose a good deal of its strangeness."

As they advanced they noted that the lake grew deeper and they could no more see the bottom. But the water was as clear as crystal and quite cold, showing that the water came, at least in part, from springs.

"I see a little stretch of sand," said Giant, presently, and pointed it out. "We might go ashore there for breakfast---if there are no snakes."

They turned the _Snapper_ in the direction mentioned, and soon beached the craft. A hasty hunt around revealed no snakes and the young hunters felt easier. They made a campfire and cooked a substantial breakfast, for the meager supper the evening previous had left them tremendously hungry.

"I feel sleepy enough to take a good snooze," said Shep, stretching himself. "What's the matter with staying here for to-day, and then hunting a regular camping spot to-morrow? I guess you fellows are as tired as I am."

They were tired and the proposal to rest met with instant approval. It was decided to roast the wild turkey for dinner and to spend several hours in fishing,---all after a sleep of several hours.

"There ought to be some fine pickerel in this lake," said Snap, and he fixed his rod and line for that specimen of the finny tribe and Giant did the same. Shep and Whopper went in for whatever they could catch. The fishing was highly successful and the boys soon had all the fish they would want for several days.

"Might as well give It up," said Snap, when a call from Whopper interrupted him.

"Somebody is coming down the lake," was the announcement. "A very old man in a canoe."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE OLD HERMIT'S TALE

All of the young hunters watched the approach of the old man with interest. He was a very tall individual, with snow-white hair and a flowing beard. He was dressed in a suit of rusty black, and on his head he wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, with a big hole in the top. His canoe was of birch bark, light and strong, and he propelled it with a short, broad paddle.

"I'll wager he is a character," said Snap, as the man drew closer.

"Shall I hail him?" questioned Whopper, as it looked as if the occupant of the canoe was going to pass without speaking.

"Might as well," was the answer, and the boys set up a shout. At first the old man paid no attention, but presently he turned his craft toward shore and came to a halt directly in front of the camp.

"How are you?" said Snap, cordially. A look told him the Stranger was at least seventy or eighty years old.

"Pretty well, for an old man," was the answer. "Who are you?"

"We are four boys from Fairview. We came up here to go camping. Who are you?"

"Me? Don't you know who I am? I am Peter Peterson."

"Oh!" exclaimed the boys. They remembered having once heard Jed Sanborn speak of Peter Peterson as an old fellow who lived among the hills bordering Lake Cameron. Peterson was a hermit, and having been crossed in love when he was a young man, he hated the sight of a woman.

"My name is Charley Dodge," said Snap. "My father owns a share in the Barnaby saw mill." And then the leader of the club introduced his chums. In the meantime the old hermit allowed his canoe to

drift to shore and he stepped out and sat down on a rock.

"I know your father," he said to Snap, "and I know your folks," and he nodded to Shep. "Your father gave me some medicine when I was sick. So you came up here to go camping?"

"Yes."

"You are pretty brave lads to do that."

"Oh, we've been out camping before. We came out last summer and also last winter."

"Up here?"

"No, to Lake Cameron and Firefly Lake."

"That's different from Lake Narsac. Don't you know this place is haunted?" And Peter Peterson looked at the boys very solemnly.

"We've heard something about that, but we aren't afraid," said Shep.

"We are more afraid of snakes than we are of ghosts," added Whopper. "We met a lot of them just before we reached the lake."

"To be sure you did,--- the river is full of them, and so is the north side of the lake shore---anybody who has camped up here can tell you that. But I don't mind the snakes---but I do mind ghosts." And the old hermit shook his head in a manner to prove he meant what he said. "I would stay up here to do some fishing and hunting only---"

"Only what?" asked Giant.

"I don't like the ghosts, or spirits, or whatever you may call them."

"Have you seen any ghosts?" asked Snap.

"Well, I've seen something, and heard it, too. I don't know what it was,---but it didn't suit me," answered Peter Peterson. "But maybe I hadn't better tell you about it---it might only worry you," he continued, thoughtfully.

But the boys wanted to hear the old man's story, and so they invited him to take dinner with them. During the meal he told his tale, which was certainly a curious one.

"The first of it happened day before yesterday," said Peter Peterson. "I was up to the very end of the lake, in a little cove, looking for wild turkeys. I was tired out and I rested against a tree and went into a doze. All at once I felt something cross my face. What it was I couldn't make out. I jumped up and just then I heard somebody cry out: 'I am dead! Who will bury me!' or something like that. I thought somebody was fooling me, and I called back: 'Who is there?' Then, as true as I am sitting here, I heard somebody in the air laugh at me! I called again, 'Who are you?' And the party, or ghost, or whatever it was answered: 'They murdered me! Who will bury me!' Then I got scared and leaped into my canoe and paddled away. When I was out on the lake I looked back into the woods, but I could not see a soul."

"Are you sure you weren't asleep and dreamed all that?" asked Snap.

"No, I was wide awake. But that isn't all. Early this morning I was asleep over on the shore yonder, just where you can see that blasted pine. It was, I think, about three o'clock, and quite dark. I heard a cry and I sat up to listen. Then I heard the most hideous laugh you can imagine. Then a voice called out again, 'I am dead! Come to my grave! He is dead! I am dead! He is dead!' Then I looked out on the lake and I saw something like a ghost, only it was yellow instead of white. It moved over the water like a spirit, and in a few minutes I couldn't see it any more. Then I made up my mind I wouldn't stay up here any longer. You can camp here if you want to---I am done with Lake Narsac."

The young hunters of the lake looked at each other. What the hermit had to say coincided in many respects with the story told by Jed Sanborn. Certainly there was something queer in these strange calls, and in the appearance of the ghost or spirit in yellow.

"I must say I don't like this," said Shep, after they had questioned the old hermit to ascertain that his story was a straight one. "There seems to be something supernatural about it; don't you think so?"

"Perhaps it can be explained," answered Snap, slowly.

"We promised ourselves not to be afraid of any ghost," put in little Giant. "I, for one, don't believe in turning back until we have seen and heard these things for ourselves."

"I'd like to have my shotgun handy when that yellow ghost shows itself," said Whopper. "I'd soon find out whether it was real or not."

"I don't think your shotgun would do you any good," answered Peter Peterson, with deep conviction. "You can't shoot a spirit."

"Well, if I aimed right at it and it wasn't touched, I'd know it was a ghost for sure."

"That's true, but I reckon when you came to fire on that ghost your hand would be so shaky that you couldn't hit the side of a barn," answered the old hermit. "After I saw that spirit I felt like I had a chill. I am not going to stay up here another night---it's bad enough to be here in the daytime."

The old hermit remained with the boys two hours, and then embarked in his canoe and was soon out of sight down the stream leading to Firefly Lake. The young hunters watched him out of sight with some regret. He had told them he did not think anybody was now on the lake but themselves.

"Well, if we really are here alone we ought not to be troubled by anybody," was Shep's comment. "Still, it does seem tremendously lonely."

"Just listen to the stillness," remarked Whopper. "You can cut it out in chunks!"

"No use of listening---I can feel it," answered Giant. "But what's the use of acting like that?"

"You'll give us all the blues. Let's be cheerful," and he began to whistle a merry tune, and one after another the others joined in. Then they started to fix up the tent for the night and cut a quantity of wood for the fire, and this put them in better spirits. For supper they had some fine fish, baking them to a turn on some hot stones, in a fashion Jed Sanborn had taught them. They also had hot biscuits---the first since leaving home.

"I think somebody ought to remain on guard after this," said Shep, when it came time to retire.

"We don't know what to expect in such a place as this. There are the ghosts, and the snakes, and unknown wild beasts, and other things we know nothing of."

"I am willing," answered Snap. "We can divide the night into watches of two hours and a half each, and draw sticks for turns," and so it was arranged.

It must be confessed that the boys were a trifle timid that night, and those that tried to sleep had hard work to close their eyes. But no alarm came, and when the sun came up all felt relieved.

"We may stay up here for weeks and never see or hear of that ghost," said Snap. "I don't believe it shows itself very often."

"Oh, I don't suppose it appears and disappears by the clock, like a cuckoo," said Whopper. "It will most likely lay low and scare us to death when we least expect it."

It was the middle of the forenoon before they were ready to embark on a tour of the lake. They decided to skirt the entire shore, or at least such a portion of it as looked inviting, and then pick out a spot for a regular camp. They proceeded slowly, for there was no need to hurry and they did not wish to miss any spot that might be of especial advantage.

It was not yet noon when they turned into a little cove, bordered by low-hanging bushes. They looked ahead, and then Shep ordered the others to stop rowing.

"I just saw something, back of yonder bushes," he whispered, excitedly. "I am not sure, but I think it was a couple of deer!"

CHAPTER XIX

A DANGEROUS DEER HUNT

"Deer!" came from the others.

"Let me get a shot at 'em," added Whopper, excitedly. "That's what I came for---to bring down a dozen deer or so!"

"Make it two or three dozen, Whopper," answered Snap. "What would you do with a dozen in this warm weather?"

"Send 'em down to the poor folks of the town."

The announcement that deer were in that vicinity thrilled all the young hunters, and they at once resolved to go ashore and see if they could not bring down the game.

"Let us go back a bit," suggested Shep. "We don't want this breeze to carry our scent to them. If it does, they'll be off like a shot."

The others knew that the doctor's son spoke the truth, and so the _Snapper_ was turned around, and they went ashore at a point where the trees were thick. Snap carried the rifle and the others had their shotguns, and all looked to the firearms to be sure they were in condition for immediate use. With great care the four boys started to stalk the deer, as it is called. Snap led the way, and never was an Indian hunter more careful of his steps. He knew that the deer's ears were wide open for any unusual sound and even the cracking of a dry stick would attract their attention.

The journey over the rocks and through the timber was a laborious one. In some spots the undergrowth was so thick that further progress seemed, at first, impossible. Once Giant got caught so completely that the others had to help him free himself. Hardly a word was uttered, and then only in the faintest of whispers.

At last Snap felt they must be close to where Shep had seen the game, and he motioned for the doctor's son to take the lead.

"You saw 'em---you ought to have first chance at 'em," he whispered.

"I want you all to fire," was the reply.

An instant later came a faint sound ahead, and looking through the trees, the four boy hunters saw three deer walking swiftly along. One was a beautiful doe not more than half grown.

"There is our chance!" cried Shep, excitedly. "Now then, all together!"

Snap wanted to know what animal he was to fire at, but got no chance to ask, for just then one of the deer raised its head and sniffed the air suspiciously. Then the two large ones began to run with the doe at their heels.

Crack! bang! went the rifle and shotguns, as the young hunters took hasty aim. When the smoke cleared away they saw the doe stretched on the ground and one of the deer limping forward painfully. The other deer was out of sight.

"Come on---we can get that wounded one!" cried Whopper, and ran forward with might and main.

As it happened the wounded deer was the mother of the doe, and the wound, and the loss of its offspring, made the animal savage. As Whopper turned towards it, the deer suddenly made for the boy.

"Look out!" yelled Snap, but before Whopper could turn aside the deer was on him and had knocked him to the ground. Then the deer struck out with its hoofs, landing on Whopper's shoulder and cheek.

It was a moment of extreme peril, for there could be no doubt but that the deer meant to kill the young hunter. Shep raised his shotgun to fire, but was afraid to do so for fear of hitting Whopper, who was trying to rise.

"He'll be killed!" shrieked Giant, but just then Snap, using his rifle as a club, struck the mother deer in the side. The creature rolled over.

Bang! went Giant's shotgun, and the report of Shep's firearm followed. The deer struggled for a moment, then gave a final kick and expired.

When the boys ran to Whopper's side they found his eyes closed. He was breathing faintly and that was all.

"Is he---he dead?" asked Giant hoarsely, for Whopper was very dear to the small youth.

"No, but he is badly hurt," answered Snap. "Shep, run and fill your cap with water. I'll loosen his coat and collar."

The blood was pouring from the sharp cut in Whopper's cheek and his coat was torn on the shoulder from the deer's hoofs. When the water was brought, Snap bathed him tenderly, and Giant fanned him with a cedar branch. In a few minutes he opened his eyes.

"Ta---take the de---deer away!" he murmured.

"It's all right, Whopper, the deer is dead," answered Snap.

"Oh!" Whopper breathed a sigh of relief.

"I am gl---glad of it!"

"You've had a close call of it," said Shep. "I was scared to death." And his still pale face showed that he spoke the truth.

It was several minutes before Whopper felt like sitting up. He was "all of a tremble," as he expressed it, and standing on his feet was out of the question.

"You take it easy," ordered Snap. "We'll bring the boat around to that cove below here and then carry you down."

"Do---don't leave me!" pleaded the hurt one. "That other deer may come back!"

"No danger," said Giant. "But I'll stay with you, Whopper, while Snap and Shep get the boat."

It was a good half hour before they had the hurt one and the game aboard the _Snapper_. Here the doctor's son opened up the medicine case which his father had insisted he should take along, and Whopper was given a little stimulant, and the cuts on his cheek and his

shoulder were properly plastered up. He was made comfortable on some cushions in the stern and told to take it easy.

"I had no idea a deer would fight so fiercely," he said, when the others had resumed their rowing. "Those hoofs were mighty hard and sharp, I can tell you!"

By one o'clock the young hunters reached a spot that looked good enough for a midday camp, and going ashore they lit a fire and prepared dinner. They made themselves a pot of rich cocoa and of this Whopper partook freely and it seemed to strengthen him wonderfully.

"I think we ought to stay here until to-morrow," said Snap. "It will give Whopper a chance to recover," and so it was decided, and the tent was gotten out and erected between two small trees which stood handy.

That night they treated themselves to venison steak, cut from the doe, and never was deer meat more tender or sweeter. They also had hot bread, made by Giant in a little stone oven. In the same oven Snap made a pan of baked beans, which were put away for future use.

The entire afternoon of the next day was spent in rowing around Lake Narsac. They did not linger around the north shore, for it was wild and uninviting, and they had no desire to make the acquaintance of the snakes said to swarm there. They spent two hours inspecting a large cove to the westward, and finally concluded that this spot offered the best place for a permanent camp. There was a sandy beach, where swimming would be good, plenty of the right kind of growth for firewood, and from the rocks some distance back gushed a spring of cold and pure water.

"This is good enough for anybody," said Snap, after a careful inspection. "We can use the tent if we wish, or we can erect a cabin."

"Oh, let us put up a cabin!" cried Giant. "It is such fun building one. Don't you remember the other shelters we built?"

"If you build a cabin you'll have to count me out," said Whopper. "I think I'll be on the retired list for at least a few days more."

"Whopper shall be the general boss," cried Snap. He took off his cap. "In honor of our wounded comrade, I move we call this spot Camp Whopper. All in favor say aye!"

"Aye!" came from Shep and Giant promptly.

"Camp Whopper it is," said Snap. "Three cheers for Whopper and his namesake!" And the cheers were given with a will.

"Whopper, you ought to make a speech," said Giant. "Tell us how grateful you are, how you appreciate the deep honor, and all that---and then invite us all out to cake, lemonade, ice cream soda, strawberry shortcake, cocoanut pie, cream puffs, and a few more delicacies."

"Ice cream!" murmured Whopper. "Say, some ice cream would be great,

eh? But we can't have it out here, so what's the use of talking about it? As for a speech, I haven't got anything to say, excepting that I appreciate your kindness in naming the camp after yours truly. When I am a rich man and retired, and own a castle among the Thousand Islands, I shall surely call it---let me see---Snap-Shep-Giant Villa. There now, how's that?"

"Fine!" was the cry.

"Hark!" added Shep, a moment later.

"What did you hear?" questioned the others.

"I thought I heard somebody calling. There it goes again. Listen!"

All listened, and from out of the forest behind them came a cry, followed by a blood-curdling laugh. Then they heard as plain as day these words:

"I am dead! He is dead! Who will bury me? I am dead! He is dead! Ha! ha!"

CHAPTER XX

THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE

The four boy hunters were so astonished that for the moment they did not move or speak. The voice seemed to come from the trees behind the camp, and it was so uncanny and ghostlike it made them shiver from head to foot.

"It's th---the ghost!" whispered Giant at last. "Le---let's get out of here!" and he started for the shore.

"Don't run away," answered Snap. "I don't believe in ghosts, and neither do you."

After that the boys remained silent for several minutes, waiting to hear that mysterious voice again. But only the mournful hum of the breeze through a clump of cedars reached them.

"I believe I'll investigate this," said Snap, arising and reaching for a shotgun. "I don't believe in ghosts, so there!"

"I'll go along," put in the doctor's son.

"Please don't leave me alone!" pleaded Whopper. "I can't go and I don't want to be left behind."

"Giant, will you stay with Whopper?" asked the leader of the club.

"Yes, but I hope you won't be gone long," answered the small youth, in a voice he tried in vain to steady.

"If anything happens, whistle or fire a shot," added Snap, and

walked slowly to the rear of the camping place, with Shep by his side.

The two young investigators soon found themselves beside the spring, and here both stopped for a drink, for their throats seemed to be suddenly, parched. They looked on all sides with extreme care, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Once a bird flew up directly in front of them, causing them to jump and raise their guns. But they were not after game just then, so the bird got away.

"We certainly heard that voice, just as plain as day," said Shep. "What do you make of this, Snap?"

"I am sure I don't know."

"Can somebody be fooling us?"

"I don't know. It's very queer proceedings, that's all I have to say."

"Listen! I thought I heard it again!"

They came to a sudden halt and strained their ears. Sure enough, there was the voice again, apparently coming from no place at all.

"I am dead! He is dead! Go away! Go away!" repeated the voice a dozen times or more, and then it grew fainter and fainter and presently died out altogether.

It would be hard to tell whether the boys were frightened or not. They were much disturbed, but they had a strong curiosity to know what the mysterious voice really was. Had it been night they might have experienced more fear, but it was still daylight, although the sun was well over in the west.

Holding their guns ready to shoot anything on sight, they advanced slowly through the forest, making a circle first to one side and then to the other. As they advanced they stirred up several birds and also two squirrels but did not fire at them. Thus an hour passed, and at last they came back to the spring utterly baffled.

"I can't understand it at all," declared Snap. "There must be some reason for this."

"It's a trick, that's what it is, and some day somebody will get to the bottom of it," added the doctor's son.

They returned to where they had left Whopper and Giant. As it grew darker they built a good campfire and resolved to keep it burning brightly all night.

"Maybe if this particular spot is haunted, we had better go somewhere else," suggested Giant.

"I move we stay right here until we find out what that thing means," said Snap, stubbornly.

"I agree with Snap," added the doctor's son. "We all know well enough there are no such things as ghosts. Some day we'll solve this mystery."

Both Snap and Shep spoke so positively that Whopper and Giant were reassured. The tent was fixed up for the night, and Whopper was soon fast asleep. The others took turns at standing guard, but nothing came to disturb them.

In the morning it was decided to begin building a cabin without delay. As Whopper could not work he went out to fish, but remained within easy calling distance.

The young hunters worked all of that week and also Monday of the next, and during that time nothing came to disturb them. Once they sighted a deer up the lake shore and went after the game, but without success. Whopper spent most of his time fishing and brought in, besides trout and perch, several good sized maskalonge, although no particular fish as large as the maskalonge Giant had captured the summer previous.

As the days went by and nothing more was heard of the mysterious voice, the young hunters grew more confident and almost forgot about the affair. The building of the cabin interested them very much, and although the structure was foursquare and plain, it was waterproof and fairly comfortable. It had two small windows, and the door opened on the lake side. In the rear a small opening was left near the ground, and here they constructed a rude fireplace and chimney of such rocks as they found handy, smearing the cracks full of clay. Their work on the fireplace and chimney might have caused a regular mason to smile, but the chimney drew well, and that was all they wanted.

As soon as the cabin was finished the young hunters moved in and proceeded to make themselves at home. Then they cut enough firewood to last for a week or more, stacking it up so that it might keep dry even in rainy weather. This done, they felt they could now take it easy, and fish and hunt whenever it pleased them to do so.

A hard rain, lasting a day and a night, was followed by a clear, warm spell and during that time the boys enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content. Whopper was now practically well, although the cut on his cheek still sported several bits of court-plaster. Every morning the young hunters got up at sunrise and took a dip in the lake, following this up by a good rub-down, for they had brought the necessary coarse towels with them. This always rendered them wideawake and gave them appetites which could not have been better. They took turns at cooking and baking, and at washing dishes and keeping the fire supplied with wood. They were certainly happy, and the time seemed to "fairly fly," as Shep expressed it.

One afternoon, when Snap and Giant were fishing just below the camp, both boys chanced to glance down the lake and saw a large boat hugging the shore. It contained several persons, but was too far off for anybody to be recognized. The boat remained in sight several minutes and then disappeared into one of the numerous coves along the shore.

"More campers," was Snap's comment. "Well, I suppose they have as much right up here as we have."

"I'd like to know who they are," answered Giant.

"Perhaps they'll come this way later in the day, or to-morrow."

"I always like to know if other hunters are in the woods, and I like them to know I am there, too," went on the leader of the club. "Then there is not so much danger of an accident. I don't want somebody to take me for a deer or a bear and shoot me."

"If we find they are stopping around this vicinity we'll have to notify them that we are here," answered Giant.

That day went by and also the next, and they, saw no more of the strangers. Then Shep came in with the announcement that he had seen four or five deer up the lake shore.

"I am sure we can get one or more of them if we hurry," declared the doctor's son.

They were all willing to go after the deer, and having shut up the cabin and kicked out the campfire so that it might not set fire to the woods should a stiff breeze spring up, they set off on foot, taking to a deer trail, which ran a short distance back from the water's edge.

The walking was by no means good, but this the boys did not mind. The life in the open was making them strong and able to endure almost anything. Their cheeks were full and round and their complexions a healthy tan. All felt like whistling and singing, but they knew they must make as little noise as possible.

If anybody was nervous it was Whopper and the others said nothing when he dragged a little behind. But all kept on steadily until they knew they must be close to the spot where the game had been seen.

"Suppose I go ahead and take a look?" asked Shep, and the others nodded. A moment later the doctor's son disappeared among the bushes lining the lake shore.

When he came back he said the deer were moving up the lake front and as a consequence all hands followed with all possible speed. They kept up the chase for nearly an hour and once saw the game, but the deer were too far away to take a shot. Then the game started to run, and speedily disappeared.

"That's the time we got left," grumbled Shep. "Too bad!"

"It can't be helped," answered Snap. "We can't expect to bring down something every time we go out. If we did that there would be no fun in hunting."

Then the young hunters started back for camp, never dreaming of the disagreeable surprise which awaited them.

IN WHICH THE ENEMY APPEARS AGAIN

On the way back to camp Shep brought down a squirrel and Whopper knocked over a rabbit, so the quest after game was not altogether fruitless.

The boys had covered a good stretch of ground, and they were pretty well tired out when they came within sight of the cabin.

"Oh, fellows, look!" screamed Giant suddenly. "The cabin is on fire!"

He pointed ahead, and a glance showed his chums that he spoke the truth. All broke into a run, and they reached the shelter almost in the time it takes to tell it. Smoke was coming out of the door and windows, but as yet the fire had gained little headway. It was confined to some brushwood which had been thrust inside, against one of the log walls.

"Some enemy has done this!" cried Snap, angrily. "Look out, I am going to drag this fire outside."

With his bare hands Snap caught at one end of burning brush and hauled it through the open doorway. As soon as he had done this the doctor's son leaped into the cabin and kicked out the rest of the fire. He could stay but a minute, for the smoke almost strangled him. Then Whopper and Giant went in and made certain the fire was out. Soon the smoke commenced to clear away; and the momentary excitement was over.

"Now, what does this mean?" demanded Snap, and his voice was full of anger.

"It means that we have been cleaned out," answered the doctor's son, after a hasty glance around. "Look!"

He pointed to a shelf in a corner on which they, had placed some of their stores, and then to the fireplace, and to the log that had contained their cups, plates and cooking utensils. Everything was gone.

"Robbed!" said Whopper, laconically. "What a shame!"

"And they were going to burn down the cabin on us, too," added Giant, bitterly. "I wonder if they touched the boat?"

At this question all ran outside and down to where the Snapper had been tied to an overhanging tree. The rowboat had disappeared.

"Well, if this isn't the limit!" groaned Shep.

"Boat gone, cooking utensils gone, supplies gone---everything gone but our firearms! Who could have done it?"

"Maybe the Felps crowd," suggested Whopper.

"Or Ham Spink's gang," added Giant. "Or the ghost."

"I don't believe the ghost had anything to do with this," said Snap. "I think it was either the Felps or the Spink crowd. It looks just like some of their dirty work."

"Well, this thing was done within the last three hours," came from the doctor's son. "The question is, what have they done with the boat and our stuff? Of course, we must get them back."

"We ought to have somebody arrested for this," put in Whopper.

"Perhaps, Whopper, but we've got to catch them first," answered the leader of the club.

All looked eagerly up and down the lake, and across to the other shore. Shep imagined he saw a boat pulled up in the bushes on the other side, but was by no means sure.

"If we can't get our things back we'll have to go home," said Giant, soberly.

"I am not going home!" cried Snap. "We've got our guns and some ammunition, and the deer."

"I wonder if they touched the deer?" All rushed back to where the big deer had been left, hung up in a cool spot in the forest. Evidently the enemy had not seen this game, and it was untouched. Looking around near the water front they found a small box of salt, a spoon, and some scattered cartridges for the rifle. Evidently the marauders had left in haste and dropped the things on the way.

"I am glad we have the salt," observed Snap. "Those thieves ought to have the salt down their throats," muttered Whopper. "They are altogether too fresh!"

The young hunters walked around the camp for half an hour and more. They did not know what to do. They were hungry, but in no humor for eating. They wanted to get on the track of their stolen belongings, but did not know how to strike out.

"Maybe some tramps came along and did this," suggested Snap, dropping on the ground to rest. "Some of that class of fellows would think it fine sport to clean us out."

"One thing is certain," said Shep, "and that gives me an idea," he added suddenly. "The boat must be somewhere on this lake, and it can't leave excepting by the river that runs into Firefly Lake. Perhaps it would be a good idea for us to go down to the river and set a watch for the thieves."

"It's a long tramp," answered Giant. "And don't forget the snakes down there. If we-----"

Giant broke off short as a distant gunshot sounded out. It was followed presently by a second shot. Then all became as quiet as before.

"Those shots came from across the lake!" cried Snap.

"Yes, and right close to the spot where I thought I saw that boat," added the doctor's son.

Fellows, I believe there is a camp over there, and if we can manage to get across perhaps we'll learn something about our belongings."

"How are we to get over without a boat?" demanded Whopper. "It's too far to swim. The water is so cold a fellow would get cramps before he was half over."

"We might build a raft," suggested Snap, who had been favorably impressed by Shep's words. "There are a number of logs lying around that we cut for firewood, and I saw some wild grapevines back of the spring which will do very well for ropes. We could take off the most of our clothing, so it wouldn't matter if we got wet."

The proposal to build a raft was approved by all, and they set to work without delay. It had been after four o'clock when they got back to the cabin and it was dark by the time the raft was ready for use. It was a clumsy affair, made of rough logs, spliced together with grapevine shoots, and it was barely large enough to carry the four boys. They took off their coats and shoes and socks, and rolled their trousers up to the knees.

"Talk about a life on the ocean wave!" sang out Whopper. "This steam yacht would take the first prize at any cattle show, eh?" And this quaint remark caused a general laugh.

In the center of the raft a small log was set upright, not as a mast but as a support for their guns, for they did not wish the weapons or their ammunition to get wet. Nobody thought of crossing the lake without the firearms.

"We may have to fight to get our things back," was the way Snap expressed himself. "And our guns may come in mighty handy."

"Let us try to reach a point some distance below where Shep thought he saw the boat," suggested Snap. "Then we can land and not let the others know what we are doing. We don't want to rush in on any crowd that is too large for us. That would simply make more trouble for us."

Snap's proposal was considered a wise one.

Soon the young hunters had poled the raft from shore and then they started to propel it across the lake. Two of the boys had rude paddles and the others cedar branches. The progress made was not great but it was sure, and they were content.

It was pitch dark when the rude raft struck the opposite shore of Lake Narsac. They came in among some brushwood and landed without great difficulty. They donned their socks and shoes, put on their coats, and slung their guns across their backs.

"We'll tie up the raft," said Snap. "For all we know we may have to come back to it."

"Oh, I hope not!" murmured Giant.

With extreme caution they picked their way among the trees and bushes and across the rough rocks. Once Giant rolled over and over down some of the slanting rocks and would have got a ducking in the lake had not Snap stopped him just in time.

"Be careful," whispered the leader of the club.

"Don't let go of one footing until you are sure of the next."

They covered a distance of two hundred yards, when Snap called a halt.

"What now?" questioned Shep.

"I see a small campfire---through yonder trees."

"Then there is a party here beyond a doubt!" cried Whopper excitedly.

"You fellows wait here and I'll crawl forward and investigate," went on Snap. "It may pay us to go at this as quietly as possible."

"Don't get into trouble," warned the doctor's son.

"If I do you'll hear of it quick enough," answered Snap.

Then with great caution he crawled through the brushwood in the direction of the distant campfire.

CHAPTER XXII

A LIVELY TIME IN THE DARK

Slowly but surely Snap got closer to the campfire, which was built in a little hollow and screened from the lake by a wall of rocks.

"They built the fire there so that we couldn't see it from across the lake," reasoned the young hunter, and he was right.

Presently he was near enough to make out six forms around the fire. Then he recognized Ham Spink, Carl Dudder, Jack Voss, and some other of the lads of the town who usually went with Ham and Carl. One boy, named Ike Akley, was a ne'er-do-well, who had once set a barn on fire and burned up two cows. For this he had been locked up, but his father had procured his release by paying heavy damages.

The crowd around the campfire were eating supper and talking in such low tones that Snap could not make out what was said. They seemed to be in the best of spirits, as if something had happened to please them greatly.

Between the campfire and the lake a large tent had been erected. Near the tent, on the ground, lay portions of a camping outfit, and Snap wondered if it could be the things belonging to himself and his friends.

Suddenly the idea struck Snap to take a look at what might be near the water, and he moved in that direction. He had to pass through a fringe of brushwood and then he gained a tiny cove, well screened from the lake proper by a number of overhanging trees. Here it was so dark he could see but little. He felt his way along and soon reached a fair-sized boat, tied to a tree.

The craft was not the one belonging to his party and he was a trifle disappointed. Then he saw another boat and his heart gave a bound.

"It must be the _Snapper_!" he murmured and hurried to the second craft. But this proved to be nothing but a canoe, and again his heart sank.

"Maybe we've made a mistake after all," he thought dismally, but continued to move around the cove. To reach one point he had to push through some more bushes, and in the midst of these he fairly tumbled over a third boat, piled high with various camping things. He gave a close look and almost uttered a cry of triumph.

"Our boat, and all of our things! Here's luck at last!"

As well as he was able in the dark, he looked over the articles in the _Snapper_. The things were in great confusion, showing they had been thrown in in a hurry. But almost everything appeared to be there, and for this he was thankful.

Snap's next thought was to go back and tell his chums of his discovery. But then he reasoned that this would take time and in the meanwhile someone of the other crowd might come down to the boat and take away some of the things.

"I'll take this boat around to where we left the raft," he told himself, and set to work to shove the _Snapper_ into deep water without delay. This was no light task, for the outfit on board was heavy, and Snap had to work like a Trojan to accomplish it.

The _Snapper_ safely floated, another idea popped into the young hunter's mind and made him grin broadly.

"Tit for tat," he murmured, and set to work to float out the other rowboat and the canoe. Once they were free of the shore he tied both to the stern of the _Snapper_, and then settled down to row along the lake shore.

"Hi there!" came a sudden call out of the darkness. "Who are you?"

Snap was startled, but he did not drop his oars nor did he stop rowing. He was just rounding one of the points of the cove, and now he saw somebody running toward the point at top speed.

"I say, who are you?" continued the party on shore, and now Snap recognized Ham Spink's voice.

"None of your business!" answered Snap gruffly and in as heavy a tone as he could command.

"You are running away with our boats!" continued Ham, in consternation.

"Hi, fellows, come here! Somebody is running away with all the boats!" he bawled.

His cries soon reached those around the campfire, and a grand rush was made to the water's edge. By this time Snap had rounded the point of the cove and was rowing as rapidly as possible in the direction where the raft lay.

"Stop him!"

"He has all the boats!"

"Who can he be?"

"Must be somebody from that other camp!"

Such were some of the cries uttered. Then someone ran for a shotgun, but by this time Snap was out of sight around a fringe of brushwood. He continued to row his best, and before very long gained the spot where the raft rested. Then he leaped ashore and ran in the direction of the campfire.

"This way, fellows!" he cried. "I have the boat! Back to the raft! Back to the raft!" And he gave the well-known whistle.

In a few minutes he encountered Giant and Whopper and learned that Shep had gone forward, to find out what the cries at the lake front meant.

"We must get him to come back," he said. "You go down to the boats and the raft and get them ready to shove off on short notice." And he ran closer to the campfire.

The entire camp was now in wild commotion, for each lad present understood that all the boats were gone. Ham Spink and Carl Dudder were in a rage.

"We should have placed somebody on guard," cried Ham. "We were chumps not to do it."

"I didn't think anybody would be over here so quick," answered Carl. "How could they do it without a boat?"

"Maybe they had another boat," put in Ike Akley. "We missed it by not looking around a little closer."

"Whoever he is, he isn't rowing across the lake," said Ham. "Let us run along the shore and see if we can't get at him some way."

As there seemed to be nothing else to do, this plan was carried out. The crowd, however, had only gone a short distance when they literally ran into Shep, who had gone forward as already mentioned.

"Here is one of 'em now," shouted Carl Dudder, as he caught Shep by the arm. The next moment he received a blow in the chest that sent him reeling backward.

"Who is it?" asked several.

"Shep Reed. Stop him---he is running away!"

Carl was right, the doctor's son was doing his best to escape. But before he had gone a dozen steps Ham Spink, Ike Akley and Jack Voss were on top of him and had borne him to the ground. They did not treat him any too gently and he was kicked in the side and the breath was literally knocked out of him.

"St---stop! Do---don't ki---kill m---me!" he gasped, when he could speak.

"What are you doing here, Shep Reed?" demanded Ham, angrily.

"Came over after our things."

"How do you know we have your things?"

"Well, we thought you'd be just mean enough to take our outfit---you did something like that before, if you'll remember."

"Humph!"

"Will you let me up?"

"We will if you'll promise not to run away," answered Carl.

"That's the talk---let us make a prisoner of him!" cried Ike Akley.

"You have no right to touch me," said Shep. "You did very wrong to steal our things, and to try to burn down our cabin."

"We---er---we didn't steal any things---we just ran off with them," said Ham Spink.

"It amounts to the same thing."

"Then your crowd just stole our boat and our canoe," put in Carl Dudder.

"Is your boat gone?" asked Shep, for this was the first he knew of it.

"You know well enough it is."

"Where is our boat and our outfit?"

"Didn't you just take that too?" asked Jack Voss.

"Oh, then Snap-----" began the doctor's son, and broke off short.

"Was that Snap Dodge in the boat?" demanded Ham.

"What boat?"

"Your boat."

"I don't know anything about it."

"But you just said-----"

At that moment came a cry through the dark woods:

"Shep! Shep! where are you? Go back to the raft! It is all right---we have the outfit back! Go back to the raft!"

It was Snap who was calling, and in another minute he appeared and confronted the crowd that was holding Shep a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LOSS OF THE RAFT

It was so dark under the trees that for the moment Snap did not recognize his chum. Then he uttered an exclamation of commingled wonder and alarm.

"Let go of him!" he cried. "Let go, I say!" and he caught Ham Spink by the arm.

"Capture him, fellows!" shouted Carl Dudder, and at once several of the Spink crowd fell upon Snap.

But Snap was not to be made a prisoner thus easily, and hitting out with all his might he sent Jack Voss reeling to the ground. Then he hit Ike Akley in the nose.

"Ouch!" yelled Ike, and put up his hand, to withdraw it covered with blood. "He has broken my nose!" And he fell back in alarm.

A rough and tumble struggle ensued, in which blows were given and taken freely. Snap was struck in the breast and in the cheek, but not seriously hurt. In the melee Shep managed to squirm free from those who held him and he quickly ranged up by his chum's side.

"What did you say about our outfit?" he panted.

"We've got it," answered Snap. "Come, we had better be going."

"Don't let them get away!" yelled Ham Spink, and made a jab for Snap. But just then the doctor's son hit out desperately and the rich youth received a blow in the mouth that loosened two teeth and caused him to retreat in a hurry.

For the moment the enemy were disconcerted, and taking advantage of this, Snap and Shep started on a run through the dark forest, moving as swiftly as the condition of the ground would permit. The Spink crowd came after them, shouting to them to stop. Carl Dudder called out that he would shoot if they did not halt.

"Do you think he'll do it?" asked Shep uneasily.

"I guess it's a bluff---I don't think he has a gun or pistol," answered Snap, and he was right, for no shot followed.

When at last the two boys reached the spot where the raft had been moored they found everything in readiness for departure. Whopper and Giant had strung all the craft together in a line, making quite a flotilla.

"They are after us---we've got to dust out lively!" cried Shep, as he and his chum struck the water's edge.

"You can't get in the _Snapper_," explained Whopper. "The outfit is in such a jumble there is no room."

"You stay where you are," ordered Snap. "I'll get in their rowboat and Shep can get in the canoe. There will be no hurry, once we are away from the shore."

There was little time to say more, for a crashing in the brushwood told them that the enemy was close at hand. They had missed the trail but now found it again. They came out on the lake shore while yet those on the water were close by.

"Here they are!"

"They have the boat and the canoe!"

"Where did that raft come from?"

"Good-bye!" sang out Whopper. "Hope you enjoy yourselves. You can get another boat down to Fairview, if you want one."

"You come back here!" yelled Ham Spink, in great rage.

"If you don't come back with our boats I'll have you arrested," put in Carl Dudder.

"Do so, and we'll have your whole crowd arrested for stealing our outfit," came from Giant.

"And for trying to burn down our cabin," added Shep.

"I didn't burn down your cabin," said Ham, hastily.

"Well, somebody did."

"It wasn't me," said Carl, and he looked at Ike Akley as he spoke. That boy shifted uneasily but said nothing.

While the talking was going on Jack Voss had quietly slipped off a portion of his clothing. Now he made a leap into the lake and swam rapidly for the raft.

"Get back there---unless you want to get hurt!" cried Snap, who saw the movement. But Voss kept on swimming and soon gained the raft. Then he took hold of the rope that connected it with the canoe, untied the raft, and swam with the end of the rope back towards shore.

"That's the way to do it!" sang out Ham. "Bring the rope in and we'll pull them back!"

"Pull! pull!" shouted Snap, and he and his chums did their best to send the two rowboats and the canoe away from the shore. But the boy in the water had gained a good footing on the rocks and he held fast.

"Come in here and help me!" he panted, and Ham and Carl prepared to do so. All had a good hold of the rope when something unexpected happened.

Taking out his pocketknife Shep leaned over the rear of the canoe and severed the rope that had been dragging the raft. As the rope parted down went the boys holding on with a loud splash! All disappeared beneath the surface of the lake and each came up with his mouth full of water. In the meantime, relieved of the weight of the clumsy raft, the two rowboats and the canoe shot out into the lake a distance of a hundred feet or more. There our friends rested, wondering what the enemy would try to do next.

In the darkness the water seemed extra cold, and the lads who had received a ducking could not help but shiver as they crawled to the shore. They had gained possession of the raft, but they did not appear to be very happy over it.

"Are you coming back with our boat or not?" demanded Ham Spink, after an awkward pause, during which our friends remained silent.

"Why should we come back?" answered Snap. "You treated us very shabbily."

"Well, didn't you deserve it?" came from Carl Dudder. "You shot off our fireworks on the Fourth of July. We heard all about it."

"Didn't you try to steal our clothing when we were in swimming?" said Whopper.

"It was a mean piece of business to try to burn down our cabin and to run away with all we had," said Giant. "Perhaps you wanted to starve us into going home."

"It was only a bit of fun," pleaded Ham Spink. "We---er---we were going to return your outfit to-morrow."

"I don't believe it," said the doctor's son promptly.

"Ain't you going to give us back our boat and the canoe?" asked Ike Akley.

"That depends," answered Snap. He whispered something to his chums. "We'll let you know to-morrow. It's too late to do anything more to-night."

"Then you are going to take the boat and the canoe away?" asked Carl Dudder.

"For the present, yes. Meet us at this place to-morrow morning at ten o'clock and we'll talk business to you."

"All right---we'll do it," answered Ham, after whispering to his

cronies. "But don't fail to come," he added.

"We'll be on hand," answered Snap, and then he and his chums moved further out into the lake with the boats and the canoe, and were soon lost to sight in the gloom of the night.

"Well, this is the worst yet," growled Ike Akley, when he and his cronies were left alone. "We thought we were going to have the best of it and now they have turned the tables on us."

"Have they?" came from Ham Spink. "That remains to be seen."

"How?" demanded several of the others.

"Do you think I am going to bed, or sit down and suck my thumbs? Not much! I am going to do something."

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

"Go over to their camp, and after they have gone to bed take all the boats away---and take whatever else we can get hold of, too. Then I am going to find a new camp---some place where they can't locate us very easily."

"How are you going to get to their camp?" asked Carl, with interest.

"On the raft---same as they got over here."

"Hurrah, that's the plan!" cried another of the party. "They'll think we are over here, waiting for them to show up at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Won't they be surprised when they get up and find the things minus!"

"They may set a guard;" suggested Ike Akley.

"If they do we'll have to make him a prisoner and gag him."

"When shall we start?" asked one of the boys.

"Let us dry ourselves by the campfire first," said Ham. "And we may as well get something to eat too, for there is no telling how long we'll be gone."

This suggestion was considered a good one, and the whole crowd went back to the camp. While some changed their wet clothes for dry, others prepared a meal and this all took time in eating. Then all hands went down to the raft and embarked for the other side of the lake.

CHAPTER XXIV

OUT ON A SAND BAR

The stars had gone under a cloud and out on the lake it was so dark that Snap and his chums could not see twenty feet in any direction.

"We are going to have our own troubles finding our camp," he said, after about a quarter of the distance across Lake Narsac had been covered.

"It's as black as a stack of cats," murmured Whopper. "Has anybody got a lantern?"

Nobody had, and even matches were at a premium. The boys rowed and paddled on a short distance further and then came to a halt in a bunch.

"I must confess I am more or less turned around already," said the doctor's son. "Is our shore over there?" and he pointed with his hand.

"I think so," answered Giant.

"I think it is yonder," answered Snap, and pointed at right angles to the direction Shep had mentioned.

"And I think it is about between the two," finished Whopper.

"Let us take the course Whopper thinks is right," said Snap. "We can't be so very far wrong anyway."

Anxious to get back to camp and get some rest, they pulled with vigor. They kept this up for fully ten minutes and then the forward boat slid up on a bar of sand, followed quickly by the second boat and the canoe.

"Here, this won't do!" cried Shep.

"Are we near shore?" questioned Whopper. "I can't see any land."

Neither could the others, and all were more or less worried. They had struck the sand bar with such force that they had been carried well up on it when they tried to shove the boats off they found the task too much for them. The canoe, however, came away with little difficulty.

"Shep, you paddle around and see if you can locate the shore," suggested Snap, and the doctor's son sent the canoe first in one direction and then another. He was not afraid to go out of sight, since he could easily hear their voices in the stillness of the night.

"I don't see any shore," he announced, after a search of a quarter of an hour. "We must be stuck somewhere in the middle of the lake."

"That can't be---the middle is far too deep for any sand bars," answered Whopper.

"Well, you can hunt around if you want to," said the doctor's son, rather shortly. The paddling had made him very tired.

Snap and Whopper now got into the canoe, and they went twice as far as Shep had been. At last they struck a point of land in a direction they had imagined was far out in the lake. They followed

this up and soon came to the shore, but where they did not know.

"I think we are either above or below our camp," said Snap.

"Or else on the same side of the lake that we started from," said Whopper. "It would be just our luck to get completely twisted in this teetotal darkness. It's worse than a pocket in a coal mine!"

They paddled back to the others and told them of what they had discovered. Then a portion of the outfit was transferred to the empty rowboat, and another effort was made to float both craft. At last the rowboats slid off the sand bar, and then they pulled to the point of land without further mishap.

No one could tell where they were, but Snap, Giant and Whopper imagined the spot must be half a mile or more below their camp. They had landed in a wild place, and walking along the shore was out of the question.

"We might as well stay where we are until morning," said Snap. "If we try to move in this darkness we may only fall into more trouble."

But the others preferred to get back to camp if possible, and Whopper volunteered to paddle up the shore, while Shep rowed in the other direction. If either found the camp he was to whistle or fire a shot as a signal.

"Listen," said Giant, after he and Snap had been left alone over a quarter of an hour. "I hear voices!"

Both strained their ears, and from the lake they heard a confused murmur. Then came the splashing of oars or paddles, and an exclamation of disgust.

"It is the Spink crowd!" cried Snap. "They are on the lake. They must have followed us on the raft!"

"Yes, and they are stuck on the sand bar, just as we were," said Giant, and grinned to himself in the dark. "I hope they have to stay there!"

The talking out on the lake continued, but presently it died away in the distance. Evidently the party had freed the raft from the sand bar and was paddling in another direction.

When Whopper came back he said he had located the camp only a short distance away. The others then whistled for Shep, who soon came in, and Snap and Giant told what they had heard.

"We'll get to camp and prepare to give those fellows a hot reception," said the leader of the club. And then the two rowboats and the canoe moved off without further delay.

The camp gained, all of the boats were hauled up into the bushes out of sight and the outfit was taken back to the cabin. This had just been accomplished when Giant, who was on guard, announced that the raft was coming ashore not a great distance away.

"Might as well warn them off," said Snap. "Everybody take his gun,

and we'll take torches, too."

This plan was speedily carried out, and just as Ham Spink started to leap to the shore he found himself confronted by the four boy hunters, each with a torch in one hand and his gun held out in the other.

"Stop, Ham Spink!" cried Snap. "Don't you dare to step a foot further!"

"Discovered!" muttered Carl Dudder, in disgust. "I told you to be careful."

"I want to talk to you," murmured Ham, not knowing what else to say."

"To-morrow morning, at ten o'clock, at your camp," answered Snap promptly. "That was the bargain."

"But see here-----"

"We won't waste words, Ham. It's ten o'clock to-morrow and nothing else."

"We want our boat and our canoe, and we want them now," cried Ike Akley.

"It is not for you to dictate, Ike Akley," said Shep. "We want you to leave and be quick about it. We don't intend to stay up all night fooling with you."

"Let us have our boat and the canoe and we'll promise not to molest you again," said Ham, quite humbly.

"To-morrow, at ten o'clock," said Snap, as firmly as ever. "And let me tell you another thing. If you don't leave us alone now perhaps you'll not get the boat and the canoe at all."

The Spink crowd wanted to argue, but our friends would not listen. One of the boys wanted to fight, but the sight of the guns made him hold back. At last those on the raft put off from the shore and disappeared in the darkness.

"They are as mad as wet hens," said Giant. "Do you think they'll come back?"

"Possibly," answered Snap. "We'll have to keep a strict watch."

It was decided that only two boys should sleep at a time, while the other pair remained on guard, one at either side of the camp. This plan was carried out, but nothing came to disturb the young hunters, and all managed to get a fairly good rest after their arduous doing of the early part of the night.

At half-past nine in the morning they started for the other side of Lake Narsac in their rowboat, taking the two other craft with them. They looked for Ham Spink and his cronies but the camping spot was deserted.

"What can this mean?" questioned Whopper. "Is it another trick?"

"Maybe they are at our camp this minute!" cried Giant. "We ought to have left somebody on guard."

But he had hardly spoken when they saw a handkerchief waving from down the lake shore. They pulled in that direction and soon reached a small, cleared spot. Here the raft was beached and here lay the whole Spink outfit in confusion.

"What brought you fellows here?" asked Shep, curiously, for he could see that all those on shore were greatly excited.

"Did you see it?" demanded one of the boys.

"We are going home," declared Ike Akley, and his manner showed that he was frightened almost out of his wits.

"Let us have the boat and the canoe and we won't bother you any more," said Carl Dudder. "You can have the whole lake to yourselves."

"Did we see what?" asked Giant, of the youth who had first spoken.

"The ghost," was the unexpected reply. "It came into our camp last night and we don't want to see it again. We are all going back to Lake Cameron."

CHAPTER XXV

JED SANBORN BRINGS NEWS

That the Spink crowd was thoroughly frightened there could not be the slightest doubt. Even when they told their story many looked behind them, as if they expected the ghost to pop out of the woods and clutch them by the shoulder.

It seemed that the ghost had appeared shortly after they returned to their camp. It came up over the lake silently, a figure in yellow, with waving horns of red. It had stopped directly in front of the camp and had waved a menacing arm at the boys. Then it had disappeared into the gloom of the night.

"It uttered some terrible things," said Carl Dudder. "It said something about being dead and about being buried."

"Yes, and then it uttered a hideous laugh," said Ike Akley. "I shall never forget that---it was awful, and it seemed to go right through a fellow."

"Why didn't you shoot at it?" asked Snap. "That is what I should have done."

"Humph! I guess if you saw that ghost you'd be paralyzed," said Carl Dudder. "Why it was enough to make your hair raise on ends!"

"I thought it was coming ashore and murder the lot of us," said Jack Voss.

"Then you are not going to stay here?" asked Giant.

"Not much! I am going down to Lake Cameron as quick as I can get there!"

"So am I!" said another.

"You had better go down, too," said a third.

"No, we are going to stay here," answered Shep. "We haven't seen the ghost, but we have heard those ghostlike voices and we want to find out what it means."

"Oh, there's a real ghost---I heard about it before I left home," said Carl Dudder. "But I didn't think it would visit us."

"I'd stay, only the rest won't," said Ham Spink, thinking he must put on a bold front before Snap and his chums.

"What are you talking about!" cried Ike Akley, indignantly. "Why, you were the first to propose going home."

"That's true," said another boy.

"Well---er---I thought perhaps you didn't care to stay," stammered Ham. "Anyway, I think it is much nicer down to Lake Cameron," he added, hastily, to change the subject. "The snakes are numerous up here, and game is scarce."

"Well, if you are going you can have your boat and the canoe," said Snap, after a consultation with his chums. "But you must give us your solemn promise not to molest us again."

The others were perfectly willing to do that, and the rowboat and the canoe were turned over to Ham, Spink and his cronies. Then our friends rowed out into the lake and "hung around" until the others loaded their craft and started away.

"Now remember," called Snap after them. "If you come back and molest us you'll do it at your peril."

"We won't come back," muttered Ham.

"You can have that ghost all to yourselves," added Carl. "Hope it visits your camp to-night---I guess you'll be leaving in the morning just as we are doing." And that was all that was said by the Spink crowd.

"That ghost must have been something awful to look at," was Shep's remark, as he and his chums rowed back to camp. "If ever a crowd was scared they were."

"Well, if the ghost visits us maybe we'll be scared too," answered Giant. "I don't believe in bragging until I've experienced a thing."

"Giant doesn't want to be like the man who bragged of what he would do in case of a fire at his house," said Whopper. "He was going to be calm and careful and do things just so. When the fire came he

was the most excited fellow on the block, and he carried the feather bed downstairs and then went up again and threw himself out of the third story window."

The boys were content to take it easy for the rest of the day, and for the balance of that week they did little but fish and "laze around," as Giant put it. Shep shot several birds and tried his skill at cleaning and stuffing them, for he took an interest in taxidermy. Snap hung up the deer skin to be cured.

On Sunday it rained, and the storm continued Monday and the greater part of Tuesday. But the cabin was practically waterproof, so they were comfortable. To pass the time they played games, and cooked and baked many things which would have caused a chef to throw up his hands in wonder. They even made some rhubarb pie from some wild rhubarb found near the camp and this proved to be really excellent. Once Giant concocted a new dish made of fish stuffed with beans and flour paste, but this was not voted a success. Having sufficient sugar they made some candy one evening and this disappeared as if by magic.

On Wednesday morning Whopper, who had been outside to bring in some firewood, came rushing to the cabin in great excitement.

"Somebody has been at our game! Some person or a wild animal!"

"How do you know?"

"The meat is gone! Only a few bones remain!"

"Then it must have been a wildcat or a bear!" exclaimed Snap.

All ran to the spot where the meat had been hung up. The tree was scratched up and there were curious marks in the damp soil under it.

"A bear or a wildcat sure," said Snap, after an inspection.

"Let us go after it---whatever it is," answered the doctor's son.

"Maybe the ghost stole it," suggested Giant, but nobody accepted this idea.

A hasty breakfast was had, and the boys were on the point of going on a hunt when there came a call from the lake. A man in a canoe was paddling toward them.

"It's Jed Sanborn!" cried Snap, and he was right. Soon the old hunter had beached his craft and was shaking hands with them.

"All safe?" was his first question.

"All safe," was the answer.

"Thet ghost didn't eat ye up then? Thought, by what Ham Spink said, ye'd be about dead when I got here," and Jed Sanborn smiled grimly.

"Where did you see Ham?" asked the doctor's son.

"Down to Fairview."

"When?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Then they didn't remain at Lake Cameron!" cried Snap.

"They was a-going to, but they got into some sort o' a quarrel an' that broke the party up," explained the old hunter. "Ham an' Carl Dudder said the ghost came after 'em something terribul. Wall, I believe it---after what I see myself," and jed shook his head slowly. "You ain't had no trouble?"

"We've heard strange voices, that's all," answered Whopper. "We haven't seen the ghost."

The old hunter soon told his story in detail. It seemed that Ham Spink and his cronies had told a terrible tale of being pursued by the ghost, and of hearing awful groans and cries, and this had alarmed Mrs. Caslette very much and also Mrs. Dodge, and both ladies had requested the old hunter to visit the lake and make sure the young hunters were in no trouble.

"This lake is gittin' an awful repertation," said Jed Sanborn. "If it keeps on, afore long nobody will come here no more."

"We'd like to settle this ghost business," said Snap. "We feel sure it can be explained in some way or another."

"Well, maybe, but---" Jed Sanborn drew a deep breath. "Don't you go for to run no unnecessary risks, that's all."

"Oh, we'll certainly try to keep out of danger," answered the doctor's son.

"Your mother wants you to be partickerly careful," said Jed to Giant. "She says she wouldn't know what to do if something happened ye."

"Tell her I shall take good care of myself," answered the small member of the club.

Jed Sanborn told them that everything was going on at Fairview as usual. He had some letters for the lads, which they read with interest. He said he would remain with them until the next morning, and promised to take back such letters as they might write.

"If you stay over you might as well go on a hunt with us," said Snap, and then he related how their meat had been stolen.

"Wildcats did that," announced Jed Sanborn, after a close examination. "Two on 'em---most likely mates. It will be a ticklish job trying to track 'em."

"Oh, we've shot wildcats before," said Whopper.

"Not the kind that's around here, my boy. These are the wildest and strongest kind. Howsomever, we can go after 'em if you say so."

"When do you want to start?"

"Have you had breakfast?" asked Snap.

"Two hours ago."

"Then let us start at once." And so it was decided.

CHAPTER XXVI

A HUNT AFTER WILDCATS

As my old readers know, Jed Sanborn knew all about wild animals and just how to trail them, and the young hunters followed his directions readily.

"Be sure your guns are in prime condition and loaded," said Jed. "And as we may be out until nightfall, better take a lunch with you."

"We have it, in our gamebags," answered the doctor's son.

"Good enough."

They were soon on the way, along a small trail leading directly away from Lake Narsac. It was uphill, but the old hunter knew just how to turn to make climbing easy, so, although they covered a mile or more, they were not greatly fatigued.

"I know we came for wildcats, but if ye want some wild turkeys here's your chance," said the old hunter presently, and he pointed to the left of the trail. The boys gazed in that direction but saw nothing unusual and said so.

"The turkeys are in yonder tree," answered Jed Sanborn. "I jest saw two on 'em movin' around on some branches."

"You certainly have keen eyes," answered Snap, for the distance to the tree was at least a hundred and fifty yards.

"Have to have, lad, to be a good shot," was the reply.

Not to alarm the game, Jed Sanborn told them to walk with care, and led the way in a semicircle through the timber. Then he told the boys to spread out around the tree.

"Fire as soon as ye get a good chance, but not afore," said he.

As they crawled closer they saw the wild turkeys quite plainly. There was a gobbler and six or seven hens, and they were roosting on several limbs close to the ground.

"Must be gittin' lazy, to be on their perches so late in the morning," observed Jed. "Ought to have been scratchin' fer a livin' hours ago."

"Well, this suits us," answered Whopper. "I'm going to try for the

gobbler."

"I'll take the one below him," said Snap.

"I'll take the hen on the left," came from Giant.

"And I'll try for the one on the right," put in Shep. "What will you shoot at, Jed?"

Before the old hunter could answer there was a stir on the tree. The gobbler had heard them and he gave the alarm. Up and out went the turkeys as fast as they could fly. Bang! bang! went the shotguns, and several more shots followed. Jed Sanborn had also taken aim. There was a great fluttering, and down dropped two turkeys like lead. Two hens fluttered around, and the gobbler remained in the tree, caught between two branches and breathing his last.

"Hurrah! let us finish them!" cried Snap, and ran forward. The next instant he felt one of the wounded turkeys strike his face. He caught the game by the legs and then received a peck in the hand that drew blood. Before the turkey could do any more harm the young hunter stunned it by a blow against the tree and then finished it. In the meantime the other hen was killed by Whopper, while Jed Sanborn took his gun and poked the gobbler out of the tree crotch and despatched him.

"Certainly a good haul, boys," said the old hunter, when the temporary excitement was over. "You'll have turkey meat enough to last some time."

"I know what I am going to do with the gobbler, if you'll let me," said Whopper. "I am going to send him home to my folks, if Jed will carry him."

"Sure I will, my lad, and I'll carry some more if you wish," Jed continued, looking at the other young hunters.

"Let each of us send a turkey home," suggested Snap. "That will show the folks that we are not starving." And so it was agreed.

Tying the turkeys in a bunch, they put them in a safe place on a tree and then continued up the mountainside. The recent rains had cleared the sky and washed the bushes and grass, and the view was a most charming one. Soon they came to a small clearing and from this could see over a large portion of the lake's surface.

"It certainly is a wild place," was Snap's comment. "But some day the lumbermen will get in here, and then you'll see this forest melt like magic."

"Yes, and half the charm will be gone," added Jed Sanborn. "Not much left after a saw mill gets started in a place like this."

Noon came and found them well up on the mountain. So far they had seen no game but the turkeys, nor had they seen a further trace of the wildcats. They sat down in an open spot for lunch, and rested for half an hour afterward.

When the hunt was resumed Jed Sanborn turned along the mountainside, where there were a series of shelving rocks. He had gone but a short distance when he uttered a cry:

"A bear! a bear!"

"Where?" asked all of the others simultaneously.

"Over on yonder cliff! There he goes!"

The young hunters looked in the direction indicated, and saw a bear leaping swiftly from rock to rock. Almost before they knew it he was out of sight. They were too far away to take a shot, much to their disappointment.

"Any use of going after him?" asked Whopper.

"Not now," answered Jed Sanborn. "He'll be on guard all day. You can come back some other day if you want to. But be careful he don't chew ye up."

Again they went on, and now came to a slight hollow on the mountainside. Suddenly Snap saw something moving cautiously over the rocks close at hand.

"There's a wildcat!" he cried, and swinging around his gun he fired. The wildcat was hit in the side but kept on. Then Giant fired, hitting the beast in the head, and it rolled from the rocks to a position almost at their feet.

"Is it dead?" asked the doctor's son.

"Dead as a door nail," announced the small youth, after an examination.

"I think that wildcat came from yonder hole in the rocks," said Snap, pointing to the opening in question.

"If he did there may be more of them there," answered Whopper. "How can we find out?"

"Might go up, ring the doorbell, and ask," suggested Snap, with a grin.

"Excuse me, I don't want to walk into any wildcat's hotel," was Whopper's answer. "I heard of a fellow who did that once, and when he came out he was still on the inside."

"Still on the inside?" repeated Jed Sanborn.

"Yes---inside the wildcats," and this answer made the old hunter roar loudly.

"Let us throw rocks into the opening," suggested Giant, and began to do as he had suggested. They heard a growl, but no wildcats showed themselves.

"I'll throw a firebrand in," said Jed Sanborn, and cut a dry cedar bough. "Stand ready to shoot, if anything shows itself."

With interest the boys watched the old hunter prepare his firebrand and light it. Then he swung it into a lively blaze, let fly, and sent it whirling into the hollow among the rocks.

Hardly had the firebrand disappeared when there came a savage growl and some whines, and from the hollow leaped a female wildcat with a little one in her teeth. After the two came another little one.

As soon as the big wildcat appeared the boys blazed away, and the mother and her offspring were shot dead. Then Whopper raised his shotgun to kill the other little one, but suddenly lowered the weapon.

"I can't kill such a baby," he murmured.

"I am sorry we killed the other little one," added Snap, soberly.

"That little wildcat will soon be a big one, so there is no use of letting it get away," said Jed Sanborn, and he discharged a shot that immediately finished the last of that wildcat family. The boys gazed at the small wildcats with interest but did not want to pick them up and carry them away. Somehow, the killing of the little creatures appeared to put a damper on the whole day's outing.

When the party got back to the camp they had the turkeys, several rabbits and also a number of squirrels to their credit. They retired early that evening and slept soundly. In the morning they thought they would arise early but found Jed Sanborn up ahead of them.

"Your folks will enjoy them turkeys, I know," said the old hunter, as he prepared to depart, after eating a substantial breakfast. "They'll be proud to know you shot 'em."

"Well, we are proud of having done so," answered Shep. "Here are the letters," and he handed over various written communications.

"Now mind, don't let that ghost carry you off," warned Jed, as he started to paddle away in his canoe.

"I doubt if we even see the ghost," answered Snap. But he was mistaken, they did see the ghost, and that before very long. And the meeting led to a tremendous surprise.

CHAPTER XXVII

INTO A BEAR'S DEN

"Boys, I move we go after that bear."

It was Snap who spoke, on the morning of the second day after Jed Sanborn had left them. He was eating breakfast and so were his chums.

"You mean the bear we saw up on the mountain, when we were after

those wildcats?" queried Giant.

"Yes. Somehow, I think we can get him, if we try hard enough. And it would be a feather in our caps to bring back a bear."

"All right, I'm with you," said Shep. "Even if we don't get the bear we can climb to the top of the mountain and get a good look at the country for miles around. Maybe we'll be able to see Fairview."

The proposal to go after the bear pleased all the young hunters, and they decided to lose no time in getting ready for the trip.

"As there is no telling what luck we may have on the mountain, or when we'll get back, we had better take sufficient food with us to last all day," suggested the doctor's son.

The sky looked a trifle uncertain to them, but nobody wanted to stay in camp waiting for it to rain. They started off about nine o'clock, taking to the trail they had previously pursued. Snap led the way, with the others following in Indian file. The leader of the club had a rifle while the others were provided with shotguns. They carried with them sufficient ammunition to bring down a dozen bears.

Noon found them well up on the mountain and in the vicinity where the bear had been seen. On the way they had stirred up some quail and Giant had taken two shots before the others could stop him, bringing down four of the birds.

"Maybe that shot scared away Mr. Bear," said Whopper. "If it did we'll have our tramp for nothing."

"I am sorry---I fired before I could think," answered the small member of the club. "I'll not do it again."

They now advanced in silence, knowing that a bear has sharp ears and will run at the first intimation of danger. They kept their eyes and ears on the alert and their firearms ready for immediate use.

"Look!" said Whopper presently, in a strained voice. "Dodge behind the rocks!" and he literally dragged Snap down, and the others came after the pair.

"What did you see?" asked Shep.

"Two bears!"

"Two!" came from the others. "Where?"

"Away up on the mountainside. They were on a shelf of rocks, and seemed to be looking at something out on the lake."

"Can we reach them with our guns?" asked Giant.

"Might reach one of 'em with the rifle. They were a good distance off."

"Let us try to get closer," said Shep, who did not want to miss a chance to aid in bringing down such big game.

"Yes, I don't want to have the only shot," added Snap. "We all want a whack at them."

With extreme caution one after another of the young hunters looked toward the shelf of rocks Whopper pointed out. True enough, two bears were there, looking down toward Lake Narsac. As the boys watched the game they turned slowly and walked to the end of the shelf, disappearing behind some bushes.

"I believe we can get at least one of those bears if we are careful," said Snap.

"Don't you think it would be a good plan to above the bears by taking a roundabout route?" came from Whopper. "I think we can shoot down at them better than we can shoot up. Besides, if we are above them I think we'll be safer. They can jump down on us easily enough, but jumping up is another matter."

"Yes, and if we can't kill them with shots perhaps we can knock 'em over with rocks," said Giant.

As they toiled up the mountainside it grew darker, and they noted that the sun had gone behind a mass of angry-looking clouds. Far off they heard a rumbling that betokened a thunderstorm.

"That storm is certainly coming," said Snap.

"It won't be any fun to be caught up here either."

"Perhaps it will pass off to the westward," returned the doctor's son, hopefully. "The clouds seem to be moving in that direction."

They soon gained a point about on a level with the shelf of rocks upon which they had seen the bears, but some distance to the southward. Climbing now became difficult, and they had to help one another up the steep places. Once Whopper took a tumble and would have rolled down a long distance had not Shep caught him just in time.

"You want to be very careful," cautioned Snap. "A roll down the mountainside might mean death."

By the time they had reached a point about a hundred feet above the shelf of rocks they were so exhausted they had to sit down and rest. They were now on another shelf, and from this location could look out over the entire surface of Lake Narsac. Not a boat or a person was to be seen.

"This is certainly a lonely spot," was Snap's comment. "A hermit wouldn't wish for a more choice location."

"And he could get plenty of fish and game," added Whopper. "And berries too, when they were in season."

"And wild grapes, and honey," came from Giant. "But with all that, who would want to be a hermit?"

"Not I," answered Snap. "An outing like this is all well enough, but when our vacation is at an end I'll be glad enough to get back home."

A few drops of rain were now coming down, but to these the young hunters paid no attention. Having gotten back their wind, they moved along with caution, their eyes wide open for another sight of the bears. Each wished for the honor of discovering the big game.

Presently little Giant held up his hand for the party to halt. He pointed to a spot a little below, and to the right of them. There, on a flat rock, rested one of the bears, gnawing on a bone he held in his forefeet.

"Where is the other?" asked Whopper, in a whisper.

All looked around, but the second bear was nowhere in sight.

"Might as well get one, while we have the chance," said Snap. "Let us all fire at him at once. We'll be sure to lay him low. Then load up as quickly as you can, and we'll see if we can't stir up the second bear."

So it was arranged, and the four young hunters took careful aim at the creature on the rocks. It must be admitted that they were somewhat excited, for a bear is no mean creature to tackle and will sometimes put up a fierce fight to defend itself. But they steadied their nerves as much as possible, and Snap gave the order to fire.

Crack! bang! went the rifle and the shotguns, almost together, and as the smoke cleared away they saw the bear leap up, turn over and over on the rock, and then tumble down the mountainside.

"We've got him! We've got him!" yelled Giant, enthusiastically.

"Don't be so sure of it," said Snap.

"Oh, I am sure we hit him," said Whopper. "Why, I aimed right for his head."

"I know we hit him, but that isn't saying he is killed," said Shep. "Although by the way he rolled over I guess he was pretty badly wounded."

Having reloaded, they began to climb down the mountainside in the direction the bear had disappeared. They had gone less than two rods when Shep, who was in advance, let up a yell:

"Look out for the hole!"

"Where?" asked the others, but before the doctor's son could reply the others saw him sinking down. Then they felt themselves going down also.

"It must be the bears' den!" gasped Giant.

"If it is, we had better beware of the other bear," came from Whopper.

Down and down slid the four young hunters, until they landed on a pile of tree limbs and dead leaves. They had gone down in a hole a dozen feet in diameter and fifteen or more feet deep. This hole opened into a sort of cave and from the cave came a growl that

fairly made their hair raise on end.

"It's the bears' den sure!" cried Whopper.

"Yes, and I hear the second bear!" gasped Shep. "Get ready to shoot him as soon as he appears!"

All scrambled to their feet and brought around their weapons, ready for use. They looked toward the cave-like opening and waited anxiously. Would the second bear leap out upon them and give them battle?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CAVES IN THE MOUNTAIN

One, two, three minutes passed, and still the young hunters stood with their firearms ready for use. But no bear showed itself. The silence was so intense it was positively painful.

"I am sure I heard him," said the doctor's son, presently.

"So did I," added Snap. "I think he must be laying for us, thinking we are following him."

"Excuse me from going into that cave," came from Whopper. "Why, if a fellow went in there the bear would be sure to have everything all his own way."

"And you'd come out and still be on the inside," said Snap, with a short laugh. "Well, I don't know about this," he continued, drawing a long breath.

Again they waited. Then the leader of the club grew a little bolder and approached the mouth of the cave cautiously, holding his rifle in front of him.

"Snap, be careful," warned Shep.

"Let us get out of this hole and then throw fire brands into the cave---like we did when we were after the wildcats," suggested Giant.

"It's going to be no easy matter getting out of this hole," answered the doctor's son.

"Well, the bears must get out."

"Maybe not---that cave may have a back entrance."

Snap walked slowly to the very mouth of the cave and peered inside. Nothing was to be seen. He picked up a stone and threw it inside. Not a sound but the falling of the stone followed.

"I believe the bear has gone," he announced. "I can't hear a thing."

"He may be playing a trick on you, Snap," said Giant.

"No, I think he has run away, by some back door, as you might call it."

One after another the young hunters approached the mouth of the cave timidly and peered inside. As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom they made out that the cave was of good size. The other end was lost in the shadows.

It had now begun to rain steadily, and to keep from getting soaked they stepped into the mouth of the cave, taking with them several dry sticks and some dry leaves from the bottom of the outer hole. These they lit, and used the sticks for torches. They saw at once that the cave was really a bears' den, for the bones of numerous animals lay scattered over the uneven flooring. But no bears were in sight, and this made them bolder and more willing to inspect their surroundings.

"I believe that bear ran away," said Snap, at last. "For all we know, we'll never see him again."

"Well, I want to see him, but not at too close range," answered the doctor's son.

They soon discovered that the cave was very irregular in shape, running around under the mountain in something of the form of a double letter S. In some places the roof was far overhead while in others it came down in sharp rocks that they could readily touch with their hands.

"A fellow could camp out here, if he wanted to," said Snap, as he gazed around in curiosity.

"Providing the bears did not disturb him," answered Giant. "By the way, what are you going to do about that bear we shot?"

"Oh, we'll go after him later on," answered the doctor's son.

"Perhaps he'll get away."

"I think we can trail him by his blood," said Snap. "He was certainly wounded quite a bit. I think he is dead."

They walked on through the big cave, finally reaching the other end. Here they saw a small hole, through which the rain was falling.

"That's the way the bear got out," cried Whopper.

"Just listen to the rain!" exclaimed Shep. "I am glad we are under cover."

It was now raining furiously, while ever and anon they could see a flash of lightning and hear the crack of thunder. All were glad they were not on the mountainside.

"It's dangerous to be in the forest during such lightning," said the doctor's son. "We might be struck, or caught by some falling tree."

"We might as well remain in the cave until the storm lets up," said Snap.

Around the small hole they found some more leaves and tree limbs, and after several failures---for the leaves were wet---they succeeded in building a small campfire. Around this they huddled and ate their lunch, in the meantime keeping on the alert for the possible appearance of the bear or of any other wild beast.

The rain continued to come down as heavily as ever after they had finished their brief meal, and growing impatient they began to wander around the cave, peering into this corner and that. Soon Shep found an opening which led to a cave still higher up, and through this they crawled.

"This must be the second story," said Whopper. "See any bedrooms?"

This little joke made them all smile and put them a little more at ease. The upper cave was not as large as that below, and from an opening at one end they could look out on the mountainside. But the opening was near the top of a cliff, so getting out that way was impossible.

"I guess we'll have to climb down again, to get out," said Snap.

He had hardly spoken when there came a blinding flash of lightning, followed immediately by a thunderbolt that was deafening. The cave was filled with a curious smell, and Giant and Whopper were practically stunned for the moment.

"Gracious, that was a crash---" began Snap, when he broke off short. A crash of another kind outside had reached his ears. A big tree standing directly over the cave was coming down, split in twain by the lightning stroke. It struck the top of the cave with tremendous force, causing a number of loose stones to rattle down on the heads of the young hunters.

"We must get out of this!"

"The place must be caving in!"

"We'll be buried alive if we don't get out!"

The falling of the tree caused some rocks to shift, and a moment later one fell close to the opening, blocking it completely. Then came an other shower of small stones and dirt. Bewildered and badly frightened, the boys ran to another part of the cave and hugged the big rocks. At that moment they all felt the cave might be their tomb.

"I---I wish we had never co---come in here," groaned Whopper.

"I'd give all I am wo---worth to be out," answered Giant.

Snap and Shep said nothing, wondering what would happen next. A few more loose stones came down, and that was all.

"I believe the worst is over," said the leader of the club at last. "The lightning knocked down a tree and that loosened those stones, that's all."

"That's all!" cried Whopper. "Isn't that enough? Did you want us to be buried alive?"

"I move we get out of here as soon as we can," came from Giant. "Rain or no rain, I'm not going to stay in this cave any longer."

"And I am with you," added Whopper.

"It's a question how to get out," answered the doctor's son. "That hole is shut by the rock that fell."

"We'll find some other hole, or else go below," said Snap, who was as willing as anyone to leave the place.

They moved around, examining one spot and then another. At two points they saw openings between the rocks but they were mere narrow slits and not one of the lads could get through them.

"I guess we'll have to go below," said Shep, at last. "I hate to do it, too, for it will be no easy matter to climb out of that hole where we took the tumble."

"It's the only thing to do," answered Giant. "Come on," he added. "Staying here is making me nervous. If another tree should come down we might be buried alive."

They went back, and climbed down to the cave below. They had now but one torch and this was almost burnt out. As quickly as they could, they hurried to where they thought the hole was located. Only a mass of rocks and dirt met their view.

"What does this mean?" cried Whopper.

"We have made a wrong turn---this is not the spot," said Giant.

"It looks like the spot to me," added the doctor's son, doubtfully.

"It is the spot," said Snap, and his voice betrayed his great anxiety.

"Yes, but where is the opening?" questioned the others in concert.

"It is gone."

"Gone!

"Yes, there has been a landslide or something, and the hole has been covered up!"

CHAPTER XXIX

VISITED BY THE GHOST

For the moment after Snap made his dismaying announcement none of

the young hunters spoke. Was it really true---was the hole covered up, and were they buried alive under the mountain?

It was a truly horrible thought, and every one of the lads shivered. They looked at the torch, now burnt so low it was hard to hold, and then gazed at each other.

"Oh, Snap, we must find some way out!" faltered Giant. His voice shook so he could hardly speak.

"Yes, let us get out as soon as we can," added Whopper.

They soon saw that what Snap had said was true---there had been a heavy landslide and the hole beyond the cave was filled up completely. Through the loose rocks and dirt the water was trickling and soon formed a fair-sized stream that flowed over the cave floor and disappeared into a crevice at one side.

"Well, we can't get out this way, that's sure," said Snap, after an examination. "We must find some other opening."

They hurried around, bound to do what they could while the torch lasted. But soon the light flickered up and went out, leaving them in total darkness.

"Let us keep together," said Shep. "It won't do to get separated."

All were willing to follow his advice, and they, slung their firearms over their backs and took hold of hands. Then they moved around the cave with caution.

"I see a light!" cried Whopper, when they had reached a far corner of the cave. "Look there!"

He pointed overhead. Sure enough there was a small hole. Through it ran a tiny stream of water.

"That hole won't do us any good," sighed Snap. "In the first place it is too small and in the second place it is out of our reach. We'll have to find something better."

They moved on, and after a long time had passed Giant found a slit between two rocks. They made an examination and found one of the rocks loose. They rolled it away and felt a rush of pure, wet air.

"Here's an opening!" cried the small youth, enthusiastically. "Oh, if only we can make it large enough!"

"We must make it large enough!" cried Shep, and then all went to work with vigor, pulling back such rocks as they could move and digging at the dirt with their bare hands. They had to make a regular tunnel ten or more feet long and it took them over an hour to do it. Their arms and backs ached from the labor, and their hands were scratched and their finger nails torn, but to all this they paid no attention. Their sole thought was to get out of the cave that looked as if it might become their tomb.

At last the opening was large enough to admit of the passage of Whopper's body and he passed to the outside. Then he dug from that

end, and presently Shep came forth, followed by Giant and lastly by Snap.

"Thank heaven we are out of that!" murmured the doctor's son, and his chums echoed his sentiment. Never had the outer world appeared so glorious to them. At that instant they were all ready to vow they would never enter a cave again.

It was still raining, and the day was fast drawing to a close. The lightning and thunder had passed away to the westward, but they knew the downfall would last at least an hour or so longer.

"If we try to get down to our camp now we'll be soaked," said Snap, as they gathered under the semi-protection of a large hemlock tree. "The underbrush is loaded with water, and if there is anything I hate it is to have a wet bough slash me in the face or breast."

"And we don't want to go back without that bear," put in Shep.

"No, indeed!" cried Giant. "It cost us too much trouble to get a shot at him."

"Wonder what became of the other bear?" mused Whopper.

"Oh, he ran away," said Shep. "More than likely we'll never see him again."

"If we could find a place that was half dry, I'd be in favor of staying on the mountain all night," went on the leader of the club. "We could build a fire and broil those quail Giant shot. We'd have a bird apiece, and that would make a good supper, with what is left of the lunch."

"The thing of it is, to find the place," put in Giant.

"Let us hunt around a little."

They moved around with caution, for they wanted to keep as dry as possible. At last they reached a low, overhanging cliff, well sheltered from the rain. Here were some dry brushwood and a number of cedar trees, and they speedily built a roaring fire and began to broil the birds Giant had brought down.

It was not a particularly inviting spot, but it was better than being out in the open, and they made the best of the situation. They dried their wet coats and took their time eating supper, and none of them thought of retiring until nearly nine o'clock. By that time the storm had cleared away completely and the stars were showing themselves in the blue vault of heaven.

Fearful that some wild beasts might be around, the young hunters resolved to take turns at standing guard. The campfire was kept burning, for nobody wished to remain in such a locality in utter darkness.

Whopper remained on guard first, and about midnight he was relieved by Snap. The leader of the club had just put some fresh wood on the fire when he heard a strange sound some distance from the shelter. Then came a mocking laugh.

"Ha! ha! He is dead! I am dead! Who will bury me?" came to his ears.

"The ghostly voice!" he muttered to himself. He gave a sudden shiver and then steadied himself. "I am going to find out what it means, or know the reason why!" And he gripped his gun tightly.

"Did you speak, Snap?" questioned Whopper, who was just turning in on the pile of dry leaves the leader of the club had vacated.

"Yes---no---I don't know. I just heard something," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"What did you hear?" And now Whopper sat up.

"I heard that ghostlike voice. It was---There it goes again!"

Both boys listened and heard a hideous laugh. Then came the words, repeated many times:

"I am dead! He is dead! Who will bury me? See the lights! I am dead. Beware of the mountain! He is dead! The mountain will kill you! See the lights! Who will bury me? Ha ha!" And then the strange voice died away in the distance.

"What on earth can it be?" gasped Whopper. His face was deadly pale.

"Don't ask me," answered Snap.

"What's up?" questioned Giant, who was a light sleeper, and the sound of his voice awoke the doctor's son. Soon he and the small youth were acquainted with what had occurred.

"Where did the voice go to?" asked Shep.

"It seemed to fade away in the air."

"Why didn't you take a shot at it?"

"How can you shoot something you don't see?" demanded Snap, half indignantly. "Just let me spot that ghost and I'll show you what I'll do!"

"Let us keep quiet," suggested Whopper. "Perhaps it will come back."

All sat down around the fire, for further sleep was out of the question. Thus an hour went by, but nothing came to disturb them.

"Looks as if the ghost business was finished for to-night," remarked Shep, glancing around down the mountainside. Then he leaped to his feet. "Oh!"

"What did you see?" demanded the others, leaping up also.

"The ghost!"

"Where?"

"There---down among those tall trees."

"I don't see anything," said Snap, after a careful look.

"It is gone now. Oh, what a looking thing!" The doctor's son was breathing heavily.

"Didn't you imagine it?" asked Giant.

"No, I saw it as plain as day."

"Yellow or white?"

"Yellow, and it had red horns, just as Ham Spink said."

"Which way was it moving?"

"It seemed to be moving towards us, but it disappeared behind some rocks."

After this the four boys were silent, straining their eyes and ears to see or hear the ghost.

"There it is!" fairly shouted Whopper, a minute later.

There was no need to utter the words, for the strange apparition was now in full view of all. It resembled the body of a man, and glowed with a strange yellow light, while the horns of red waved menacingly toward them.

"Away! away! away!" came a deep voice. "Go away from the mountain and the lake!" And then, raising a warning finger and pointing directly at the four young hunters, the ghostly figure suddenly moved to one side and vanished!

CHAPTER XXX

THE SECRET OF THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE

"What do you think of that?"

Such was the question which several of the boys put to each other simultaneously.

"Why didn't somebody shoot at the ghost?" asked Snap.

"Why didn't you, Shep?" queried Giant.

"I---er---I forgot about it."

"The ghost vanished too quickly," said Snap. "But keep on guard---it may come back."

"If it does it will get something from me sure," murmured the doctor's son, and raised his shotgun.

"What do you think it was?" asked Whopper, after a painful pause of several minutes.

"A man," answered Snap, promptly.

"A man!" cried Giant.

"Yes, a man---and I don't know whether we ought to shoot at him or not," continued the leader of the gun club. "We certainly don't want to commit murder."

"But if it's a man what is he playing ghost for?" queried the doctor's son.

"That remains to be found out."

"Your theory is all well enough," said Whopper, "but it doesn't account for the ghostlike voice."

"I know that. Nevertheless, I think that ghost is a man."

The young hunters continued to discuss the situation from all possible points of view. Snap's positive declaration that the ghost was a man made all feel less frightened, and they were anxious to get better acquainted with the apparition.

"If it's a man I'd like to capture him and give him a piece of my mind," said Whopper. "What right has he to roam around like this, frightening everybody he meets?"

"He ordered us away from the mountain. Most likely, if it is a man, he wants this territory to himself," answered Giant.

"That's the way I figure it," said Snap. "He may be crazy and may think he owns the mountains and the lake."

"It couldn't be that old hermit, Peter Peterson, could it?" queried Shep, suddenly.

"That's who it is!" almost shouted Whopper. "It's a trick of his to keep folks away from here."

"But why should he come to us with that story of his?" questioned Giant.

"He told us that just to scare us. He thought we might go away from the lake at once."

Again there was a lively discussion, and the young hunters agreed that, if the ghost was indeed a man, more than likely it was Peterson.

"A fellow who would play such a trick ought to be tarred and feathered," was Whopper's comment.

"If it proves to be Peterson we'll have him driven out of this neighborhood fast enough," said Snap.

Another hour went by, and as the ghost did not reappear the young hunters grew heavy eyed, and one after another took a short nap. Thus the night passed, and at last the sun showed itself over the mountain top to the eastward, heralding another day.

With the coming of sunlight the boys were inclined to treat the coming of the ghost as a joke. They could not explain the ghostly voice, however, although Snap said he imagined the man playing ghost might be a ventriloquist.

"Some of those ventriloquists are very clever," he asserted, "and they can throw their voices almost anywhere."

The sun soon dried the grass and bushes, and after eating what was left of the quail, and the lunch brought from the camp, the young hunters struck off in the direction whence the bear they had shot had disappeared. They traveled with extreme care, for none of them wished to risk a tumble down the mountainside.

"Look! look!" yelled Snap, presently, and pointed some distance ahead.

"Wolves, and they are at some game," returned Whopper. "I do believe it is our bear!

"That's just what it is," put in Giant. "What gall! Let us open fire on 'em!"

The wolves were at least a dozen in number, all big and powerful fellows. They had just come on the bear, that was dead, and were quarreling among themselves over the carcass.

With great care the four boy hunters took, aim at the wolves, and at a command from Snap, let drive. As the reports died away two of the beasts were seen to be dead and two others were wounded. The other wolves turned and retreated a few paces, then paused and glared at those who had molested them.

"They are coming for us!" shouted Whopper, and the statement proved true. With wild yelps and snarls the wolves leaped forward.

It was a moment of great peril and the young hunters fully realized their critical condition.

"Shoot and jump for the nearest trees!" yelled Snap, and then let drive again. The others discharged the remaining loads in their shotguns, and three more of the wolves were hit, and one killed. Then one after another the young hunters scrambled up into the nearest trees.

The boys thought they would have a hard fight with the remaining wolves, but evidently the pack had had enough of the encounter, for those that were wounded limped off growling savagely and the others followed, leaving the dead where they had fallen.

"We came up in the nick of time," said Snap, as he reloaded and leaped to the ground, followed by his chums. "A few minutes later and those beasts would have torn this bear limb from limb. I

suppose they thought they were going to have the feast of their lives."

The body of the bear was cold and stiff, showing that it had died shortly after being shot. It was a good-sized creature, and the young hunters felt justly proud of their quarry.

"I knew we'd get plenty of small game, but I was afraid we wouldn't get a bear," said Whopper.

"A bear always tops off a hunt," said Snap. "That or a moose," put in Giant. "I'd like to get a crack at a good, big moose."

"I am afraid you want too much in this life," answered Snap, with a laugh.

The problem of how to get the carcass down to their camp was a serious one. They did not want to cut the bear up just yet, nor did they want to spoil the skin by dragging it over the rocks.

"Let us make a good, strong drag of tree limbs," suggested Whopper. "We can bind the limbs together closely, so the skin of the beast won't touch the ground after we have tied the bear on top. Then we can all haul it down between the trees."

"Maybe the bear will go down quicker than we anticipate," said Snap. "But I reckon your suggestion is as good as anything."

It took the best part of the morning to make a drag that was satisfactory and pry the big bear on it then the carcass was bound down with vines and cords.

"Now, everybody be careful," cautioned Snap. "Some of these rocks are very loose, and it will be the easiest thing in the world to take a tumble and break an ankle or your neck."

Then the trip down the mountainside began. It was truly hard work, for the drag caught on some rocks and slid altogether too fast over others. Then, at one point, they came close to running into a nest of hornets. One of the wicked creatures stung Whopper on the hand and another stung Shep on the neck, and there followed a wild dancing and yelling, while the boys allowed the drag to tumble over and over down the rocks and ran for safety.

"Look out for the hornets!"

"We'll be stung to death!"

"Did you ever see the match!" groaned Whopper, after the excitement was over. "Just gaze on that hand---as big as a baseball mitt!"

"And look at my neck!" came dolefully from the doctor's son.

A few of the hornets were buzzing around the fallen carcass of the bear and the young hunters did not dare to approach until the pests had departed. Then the drag was righted and the journey down the mountainside was continued.

"Who ever thought so many things would happen on this trip," was

Snap's comment. "First we shot the bear, then we tumbled into the hole, then we were buried alive, next the ghost came along, and then followed the wolves and the hornets."

"Yes, and we are not back to camp yet," sighed Giant. "I think I'll rest for a week after this."

"We ought to send this bear down to town," said Whopper. "I'd like to put it on exhibition, just to show Ham Spink and some other folks what we can do."

"Well, we might send it down in some way," answered Snap. "But come on, I am getting hungry, and we're a long way still from the lake shore."

"We are coming to a cliff of some sort," announced Giant, who was in advance. "Take it easy now, or the drag will drag you where you don't want to go."

They advanced with caution, and presently saw the cliff. Below were some thick cedar trees, the tops reaching just above the cliff.

"Listen!" cried Snap, and put up his hand for silence.

For a full minute they heard nothing, and the others were just going to ask the leader what he had heard when there came a shrill laugh from the cedars.

"Ha ha! I am dead! He is dead!" said a ghostly voice. "Who will bury me? See the lights! I am dead! He is dead! Ha ha!"

"The ghost!" gasped Giant, and made a movement as if to retreat.

"Don't run," commanded Snap. "It is broad daylight. Let us investigate this matter."

"I am dead! He is dead! Ha ha!" came the voice again, and then followed a laugh that chilled them to the backbone. By this time all of the young hunters had their firearms around in front of them, ready for use.

"Well, if this isn't the queerest---" began Shep, when there was a fluttering in the tops of the cedars and a big bird flew directly over their heads. As quick as a wink, Snap took aim with his rifle and let drive. The bird uttered a shrill cry, almost human, and fluttered down at their feet. Then Shep struck at it with his gun barrel, and it fell over lifeless.

"A parrot!"

"Yes, and he's the one who made the ghostly sounds!"

"Did you ever see the beat!"

"No wonder we couldn't locate that voice in the dark!"

Such were some of the comments of the young hunters as they gathered around the dead parrot. Snap picked the creature up, made certain it was dead, and opened its mouth.

"Yes, he was a talker right enough," he said.

"But I'd like to know who taught him to say such awful things and nothing else?"

"Most likely the fellow who is playing ghost," answered Whopper.

"Yes, and that fellow must be close by," ejaculated Giant. "He and the parrot probably traveled together."

"In that case, let us try to find Mr. Ghost," said the doctor's son. Now the mystery of the ghostly voice was explained he was no longer afraid.

"What will we do with the bear?" asked Snap.

It was voted to leave the carcass where it was, and this decided upon, the young hunters looked around for some way of getting down the cliff.

"Here's a rope ladder!" cried Snap. "Boys, do you know what I think?" he added.

"What?"

"I think we are near to where that ghost lives!"

"Then let us pay him a visit and ask him what he means by his outrageous conduct," answered the doctor's son.

Then all commenced to descend the rope ladder, which led to the bottom of the cliff.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST OF THE GHOST---CONCLUSION

It was a strong ladder and put up with care, so the young hunters had no fear of falling. At the foot they discovered a well-defined trail running along the base of the cliff to where gushed forth a small stream of pure, cold water. Near the spring was an empty can, evidently used as a drinking cup. The boys were thirsty and all took a drink. Then they continued on the trail, until they came in sight of a small log hut, almost hidden among the trees and bushes.

"Perhaps that is where Mr. Ghost lives," suggested Whopper, trying to speak as lightly as he could, although his voice trembled slightly.

"We can knock on the door and ask," answered Snap.

"Beware!" came suddenly, from the vicinity of the hut. "Come not a step nearer, if you value your lives!"

And then they saw the ghost like figure in yellow, with the dangling

red horns, moving among the bushes.

For just one moment the young hunters were badly frightened and inclined to run. Then they gazed at each other questioningly and stood their ground.

"We want to talk to you!" cried Snap. "We know you are a humbug."

"Yes, and we know all about your parrot," added the doctor's son. He did not deem it wise to mention that they had killed the talking bird.

"Go away! Go away!" answered the figure in yellow. "This forest is mine! The lake is mine! Go away, ere it is too late!"

"I believe that man is crazy!" whispered Whopper. "Maybe he thinks he owns the earth!"

"He is certainly no ghost," answered Snap. "But if he is crazy, we'll have to be careful how we approach him. He may try to shoot us."

"See here, sir!" shouted the doctor's son, kindly. "Won't you come and talk with us? We don't want to hurt you, or take your property away from you."

"Ha! ha! I know you! You want to rob me of everything!" cried the man in yellow, harshly. They now saw that what looked like horns was simply a yellow cap with two stuffed red appendages on top. The man had his face smeared with yellow clay.

"We'll not harm you in the least," said Giant, and now, attracted by something in the strange man's appearance, he went several steps closer.

When the small youth of the club spoke the man turned to him. A moment later he started and throw up his hands in surprise.

"Who are you, boy? Speak quickly!" he demanded.

"I am Will Caslette."

"Ha! Where do you come from?"

"I come from Fairview, on the Rocky River."

"And your---your mother?" The man in yellow was now greatly agitated.

"My mother is a widow." Giant had now come closer still and was looking the man over carefully. "What is your name?"

"My name? Ha ha! I have no name. I am a wanderer."

"But you had a name once---what was it?"

"My name---I cannot remember. Yes, I had one once when I was in France fair France the belle of all countries! But the name is gone---gone like the great history I was writing. Yes, and it will never come back, never!" And the man in yellow threw up his hands despairingly.

"Was not your name Pierre Dunrot?" asked Giant, quickly.

The strange man staggered back as if shot.

"Pierre Dunrot? Pierre Dunrot?" he repeated slowly. "Yes! yes! That was my name! How---how did you know it?"

"Because you are my uncle!" gasped Giant, coming to the strange man's side. "You are Pierre Dunrot, my long-lost uncle."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes, my uncle. Do you not remember my mother, Kate Caslette, and do you not remember me---your little Guillaume, the boy you used to ride on your knee?" went on Giant, earnestly and looking the man straight in the eyes.

"Yes! yes! I remember now!" cried the man, and now his eyes searched the small youth's face. "You are my little Guillaume indeed!" He took Giant by the hand. "But how is this---my, mind is in a whirl! I do not understand!" And he gazed from Giant to the others in simple-minded perplexity.

"You ran away from home," answered Giant. "It was after the storm, when the lightning had burnt up the manuscript of your beloved history---"

"Yes, yes, yes! My beloved history! That is true! Oh, it was cruel, cruel! After I had worked so many years and so faithfully! My beloved history! It is gone, never to return!"

And the tears ran down the cheeks of the man.

"Uncle Pierre, you must give up your lonely life here," said Giant, after a pause. "You must come home with me."

At this suggestion the hermit, for the man was nothing less, shook his head vigorously. He was certainly queer---talking sometimes quite rationally and at others in a rambling fashion. He told how he had come to make his home in the mountains, how he had once visited a large city and purchased three parrots and brought them to the wilderness, and how one parrot had died and another had been shot.

"The third is still with me," he continued. "But I am tired of him---he is driving me crazy."

"He shall never bother you again---if only you will come home with me," said Giant. "You must come home---mother wants to see you. All your books are there. Don't you remember how you used to love those books, Uncle Pierre?"

"Yes! yes!" The man's eyes began to glisten. "And so you want me to go home? You look like a good boy, Guillaume."

"Why does he call Giant Guillaume?" whispered Whopper to Snap.

"It's the French for William," answered the leader of, the club.

"Say, but doesn't this beat the Dutch!"

"If giant can get this uncle of his to go home perhaps they'll be able to get possession of that fortune of one hundred thousand francs," was Shep's comment. "I hope they can get it, for Mrs. Caslette certainly deserves the money and needs it."

Giant continued to talk to the hermit, and gradually the other boys joined in the conversation. The young hunters soon saw that Pierre Dunrot's mind was very hazy on some matters while clear on others. Since running away from the Caslette home he had lived in the mountains near the lake and he had taken every precaution to keep other folks away from him. He had taught his parrots to scare newcomers, and had played ghost by rubbing phosphorus and other shining substances on his clothing and cap. He said he owned several canoes, hidden along the lake shore, and in these he sometimes went fishing, usually at night.

"Well, this solves the mystery of the ghost anyway," said Snap. "Won't folks around Fairview be astonished when they hear of it?"

"I don't believe we ought to let folks know all the details," answered the doctor's son. "It would hurt Giant's feelings and also his mother's. We can simply say we caught the ghost and he proved to be a harmless old man with a talking parrot, and that we shot the parrot and the man left the vicinity of the lake after his parrot was dead." And so it was agreed. Of course the boys' parents heard the real story, but that was as far as the tale circulated.

The boys went into the log hut and there saw how the hermit had been living in his primitive way. In a corner he had a box filled with ammunition for his gun and also a large collection of hooks and lines. He had a plate, a cup, and a kettle and pan, and that was all. He ate from a block of wood and slept on a heap of cedar boughs. His clothing was almost worn to rags.

It took a great deal of talking to get him to consent to return to civilization, but finally Giant accomplished his purpose. Then the young hunters told about the dead bear, and the hermit showed them how to get the carcass down to the lake front without much trouble. Once at the camp, Pierre Dunrot was given some clean garments, and before donning them he took a bath in the lake. When he had put on the clean clothing he looked like a different individual.

Of course Giant was anxious to get home at once, and his chums could not blame him. The others wanted to take the bear to town, and so it was decided that the return home should begin the next morning.

The journey to Fairview took three days, the boys pushing along as rapidly as circumstances would permit. The companionship of the lads appeared to brighten Pierre Dunrot's mind wonderfully, and it was only now and then that he relapsed into his former simpleness.

Fairview reached, Giant lost no time in hurrying his uncle to his home. Mrs. Caslette was sitting by a window sewing when the pair appeared.

"Why, Will!" she called out and arose. Then she looked at the man. "Can it be possible? Pierre!" And she stood still, staring at her relative.

"Yes, it is really Uncle Pierre!" cried Giant.

The next moment the man and the woman were kissing each other. Mrs. Caslette was bewildered and it took some time for Giant to tell his story. Then Pierre Dunrot had his say. He was greatly excited over coming back, and that night had to be placed in a physician's care. Dr. Reed attended him, and came to see the former hermit for a week. Pierre Dunrot had quite a severe spell of sickness, mostly due to his weak brain, but when he got over it he was clearer-minded than he had been for years.

"The past is like some awful dream," he said.

"I do not understand how I came to run away."

Later on he spoke of the fortune that was coming to Mrs. Caslette and himself. He remembered all the details, and through the efforts of a lawyer the hundred thousand francs at last came into possession of the rightful owners.

The bringing in of the big bear by the boy hunters caused something of a sensation in Fairview. The bear was put on exhibition for a day at one of the stores, and then cut up and the meat distributed. The skin was properly cured, and to-day forms a rug in the Reed parlor. How the doctor came to gain possession of it will be told in another story. Of course Ham Spink and his cronies were very envious of the young hunters' luck, and they tried to circulate a story that Snap and his friends had bought the dead bear from some old hunter, but nobody would listen to the yarn.

"We know they can hunt," said one man. "They are the best shots in this town," and his opinion was the opinion of the majority.

"Shall we go back to the lake and the woods?" asked Snap, one day. "Remember, the vacation is not yet half over."

"My father wants us to go back," answered the doctor's son. "He's got a plan he would like us to carry out." And then Shep told what the plan was. The others instantly agreed to it, and what they did will be related in the next volume of this series, to be entitled, "Out with Gun and Camera; Or, The Boy Hunters in the Mountains." Taking photographs of wild animals is both exciting and dangerous, and in the new book we shall learn much concerning this new fad.

"Well, we had a dandy time," observed Snap.

"Yes, and we cleared up the mystery of the ghost in great shape," replied Shep.

"I'd like to bring down a few more bears," put in Whopper.

"And I'd like to get a shot at a moose," came from Giant.

"All in good time," answered Snap. "For the time we were out I think we got our full share of game."

"We certainly did!" cried the others.

THE END

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