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GUNS AND SNOWSHOES

Or

The Winter Outing of the Young Hunters

by CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL

AUTHOR of "FOUR BOY HUNTERS," "FOR THE LIBERTY OF TEXAS," "THE WINNING RUN," "FLAG OF FREEDOM SERIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

BOY HUNTERS SERIES

By Captain Ralph Bonehill

FOUR BOY HUNTERS

Or The Winter Outing of the Young Hunters.

GUNS AND SNOWSHOES

Or The Outing of the Gun Club

GUNS AND SNOWSHOES

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PREFACE.

My DEAR LADS:

This story is complete in itself, but forms volume two of a set known

under the general title of the "Boy Hunters Series," taking the heroes through various adventures while out hunting and fishing, in the woods and mountains, and on rivers and lakes.

The boys are bright, lively lads of to-day, with a strong liking for a life in the open air and a keen taste for hunting both big and little game, and for fishing in various ways. In the former volume, entitled, "Four Boy Hunters," they organized their little dun Club and obtained permission to go a number of miles from home and establish a camp on the edge of a lake. From this spot they were driven by enemies, and then settled at another camp, where they had various adventures and not a little fun, and in the end cleared up a mystery which had bothered them not a little.

In the present story we have the same boys and almost the same locality, but the time is now winter, and in the pages which follow are related the sport the boys had in the snow and on the ice, and something about a new mystery, which ended in rather a surprising fashion.

As I have said before, hunting, especially in our eastern states, is not what it was years ago. Almost all of the big game has disappeared, and the fellow who can get a deer or a moose without going a good many weary miles for the game is lucky. Yet in some sections small game is still fairly plentiful, and a bag full of rabbits or wild ducks is much better than nothing.

With best wishes to all who love the woods and waters, a gun, a dog, and a rousing campfire, I remain,

Your sincere friend,

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL.

GUNS AND SNOWSHOES.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING FOUR BOYS

"Hurrah, boys, it's snowing at last! Aren't you glad?"

"Glad? You bet I'm glad, Snap! Why I've been watching for this storm for about six months!"

"There you go, Whopper!" answered Charley Dodge, with a grin. "Six

months indeed! Why, we haven't been home six months."

"Well, it seems that long anyway," said Frank Dawson, who was usually called Whopper by his chums, because of his exaggerations when speaking. "I've just been aching to see it snow."

"So that we can take that trip we proposed," put in Sheppard Reed, quickly. "I guess we are all waiting for that."

"I am anyway," came from Will Caslette, the smallest lad of the four, who had gathered at their usual meeting place in the town where they resided. "Our camping out last summer was immense. If only we have half as much fun this winter!"

"We will have, Giant," broke in the boy called Whopper. "Didn't I tell you I was going to bring down sixteen deer, twenty bears, two hundred wild turkeys, a boatload of wolves, and--"

"Phew, Whopper! Every time you name 'em over the list gets longer!" cried Charley Dodge. "If you bring down so much game there won't be anything left for other hunters."

"Well, I'll leave you a bear or two," said Whopper cheerfully.

"Thanks awfully."

"Leave me one lone wild turkey, Whopper dear," came mournfully from Shep Reed.

"Say, if you're going to talk like that I won't leave anything," burst out Frank.

"Whopper may bring down all the game, but I'll wager he can't throw a snowball as straight as I can," said Charley, taking up some snow.

"See that spot on the fence yonder? Here goes for it!"

The snowball was launched forth with swiftness and with a thud struck the spot directly in the center.

"Hurrah! A bull's-eye for Snap!"

"Humph! I can do that too!" cried Whopper, and forthwith proceeded to make a good hard snowball. Then he took aim, let drive, and the ball landed directly on the top of the one Charley had thrown.

"Good for you, Whopper!" said Charley enthusiastically.

"Ah, I could do that a thousand times in succession," answered the youth given to exaggeration, coolly. "Why, don't you know that one day there were six Tom cats on a fence and I took a snowball and hit 'em all?"

"What, with one snowball?" queried the little lad called Giant.

"Sure thing, Giant."

"But how?"

"Why, I made the snowball bounce from the head of one Tom cat to the head of the next," answered Whopper, unabashed.

"Well, if that isn't the worst yet!" roared Shep. "Say, we ought to roll Whopper in the snow for that!"

"Right you are!" cried Snap. "Come on!"

"Hi! hold on!" yelled Whopper in alarm, but before he could resist he was landed on his back in the snow, and the others proceeded to roll him over "good," as Shep expressed it. The rolling process at an end, a general snowball fight ensued between all of the boys, and also several others who chanced to be passing.

The scene was the town of Fairview, a place containing a main street and also another thoroughfare running to the tidy little railroad depot, where eight trains stopped daily. The town was made up of fifteen stores and shops, three churches, a hotel, and a livery stable, while just outside were a saw mill and several other industries. The place was located on the Rocky River, which, ten miles below, flowed into a beautiful sheet of water called Lake Cameron.

To those who have read a previous volume of mine entitled, "Four Boy Hunters," the lads skylarking in the snow need no special introduction. For the benefit of others let me state that Charley Dodge was the son of one of the most influential men of that district, a gentleman who was a school trustee and also part owner of a big summer hotel and one of the saw mills. Sheppard Reed was the son of the best-known local physician, and he and Charley,--always called Snap, why nobody could tell--were such chums they were often spoken of as the Twins.

Frank Dawson had come to Fairview a little over two years before, and had speedily made himself a prime favorite. As we have seen, he loved to exaggerate when telling things, yet with it all Whopper, so called, was as truthful as anybody. As Snap said, "you could always tell Whopper's whoppers a mile off," which I think was something of a whopper in itself, don't you?

The youngest lad of the four was Will Gaslette, always called Billy or Giant. He was the son of a French widow lady, who thought the world of her offspring. Although Will was small in size, he was sturdy and self-reliant, and promised to become all that his mother hoped for him.

During the previous summer the four boys had organized the Fairview Gun Club and obtained permission to go camping for a few weeks in the vicinity of Lake Cameron. They had started in high spirits, and after

a number of minor adventures located on the shore of the lake. From this spot, however, they were driven by a saw mill owner named Andrew Felps, who ran a company that was a rival to the concern in which Mr. Dodge had an interest. The boys were made to give up their comfortable camp, and then they went to Firefly Lake, a mile away. Here they hunted and fished to their heart's content, being joined in some of their sports by Jed Sanborn, an old hunter and trapper who lived in the mountains between the lakes. They had some trouble with Ham Spink, a dudish youth from Fairview, who, with some cronies, located a rival camp across the lake, but this was quickly quelled. Then, during a forest fire, they captured a long-wanted criminal, and came home at last loaded down with game, and with the firm determination to go out camping again during the winter.

"We couldn't spend our time more pleasantly," was what Snap said. "Just think of a cozy camp in the snow, with a roaring camp-fire, and plenty of game on all sides of you! Um! um! It's enough to make a fellow's mouth water!"

"Oh, we'll have to go!" had been Shep's answer. "Of course we'll have to go to school, but we are going to have a long vacation around the holidays--"

"And we can ask for our Christmas presents in advance," Giant had interrupted. "If we go out, I know what I want?"

"What, Giant?"

"A pair of snowshoes."

"Oh, we'll all want those," had come from Whopper. "And sleds, too--for our traps."

"That's right."

"And another shot-gun."

"Yes, and plenty of blankets. It's no fun to camp out in winter if you can't keep warm."

And so the talk had run on, until the winter outing of the Gun Club became almost a certainty to them. But there were certain restrictions, one of which, placed on all of the boys by their parents, was that they should end the term at school with good averages in all their lessons.

"You must get at least eighty-five per cent. out of a possible hundred in all your lessons," said Doctor Reed to Shep, "otherwise you cannot go," and the other parents said practically the same thing to Snap, Whopper and Giant. And then the boys pitched in with a will, resolved to come out ahead, "or know the reason why," as Snap said.

CHAPTER II

A QUARREL IN THE SNOW

The snow lay on the ground to the depth of four inches and was still coming down thickly. It was the first fall of the season, and was late,--so late, in fact, that the boys had been afraid there might come no fall at all. Fast and furiously flew the snowballs and each lad was hit many times.

"How is that?" sang out Whopper, as he planted a snowball directly in Snap's ear.

"And how's that?" returned Snap quickly, and sent a chunk of soft snow down Frank's collar.

"Wuow!" spluttered Whopper. "Hi! that isn't fair! Oh, my poor backbone!"

"Here you are, Giant!" called out Shep, and hit the little lad in the back. "Sorry, but it can't be helped. I--Oh, my!" and Shep bent double as a snowball thrown by Giant with much force took him directly in the stomach.

"Just to remember me by!" sang out Giant. "Here's another," and the ball struck Shep in the elbow. "Small favors thankfully received and big ones granted in return. There you are!" And still another snowball landed on Shep's neck.

Five other boys had come up, and now the contestants were lined up on both sides of the street not far from a corner, where there was a turn running down to the depot. As the snowballing went on a distant locomotive whistle sounded out and the afternoon train from the East rolled into the station. Several passengers alighted and among the number was Andrew Felps, of the Felps Lumber Company, the man who had caused the boy hunters so much trouble the summer previous.

Mr. Andrew Felps was in a bad humor. He had gone to the city on business and matters had not turned out as he had expected. Now he had gotten back, dressed in his best, and wearing a new silk hat, and he had no umbrella with which to protect himself from the snow-storm. More than this, his coachman, who generally met him when he came in on the train, was not in sight.

"Bah! I'll have to walk I suppose," muttered the saw mill owner, as he looked around for a carriage and found none. "Just the time you want a rig you can't find one. I'll discharge Johnson as soon as I reach home."

With his coat buttoned up around his neck, and his head bent low to

escape the scudding snow, Andrew Felps hurried away from the depot and up to the main street of Fairview. Then he made another turn, presently reaching the spot where our heroes and the other lads were having their sport.

"Hi! here comes old Felps!" cried Giant. "We ought to give him something to remember us by!"

"Don't you do it!" returned Snap quickly. "He doesn't know what fun is, and he'd be sure to make trouble."

Some other boys were coming up, and the snowballs began to fly more furiously than ever. Snap, Shep, Whopper and Giant were on one side, and a boy named Carl Dudder and five other town lads on the other side. In the midst of the rallies came a yell of alarm, followed by several loud cries of rage.

"Hullo! look there!" exclaimed Whopper. "Old Felps has been knocked into the middle of next month. There goes his hat in the snow too! Who threw at him?"

"I didn't," answered Giant, promptly.

"Neither did I," came from Snap.

"Nor I," added Shep.

The saw mill owner was flat on his back, his silk hat on one side of him and a package of books and papers on the other.

"Maybe he slipped on some ice," suggested Snap.

"Hi! hi! who threw that snowball!" roared Andrew Felps, savagely, as he arose to his feet. "You young villains! I'll have the law on you for this!"

He scrambled to his feet and glared around him. All of the boys had stopped throwing at once and gazed at him curiously.

"Ha! I know you!" went on Andrew Felps, striding up to Snap. "It was you who hit me in the ear and knocked me down!"

"No, sir, I did not," answered Charley.

"I know better! I saw you do it!"

"You are mistaken, Mr. Felps! I was throwing across the street."

"Don't tell me! I know better, Dodge. You hit me and you did it on purpose."

At this Snap merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll have the law on you," fumed Andrew Felps.

"Snap didn't hit you," said Shep.

"Ha! then perhaps you threw the snowball," said the saw mill owner suspiciously.

"I did not."

"I know you boys, and I have not forgotten your work against me last summer," growled Andrew Felps.

"And we haven't forgotten you," answered Snap, coldly. "You have no right to accuse me of something I didn't do."

"Bah! If I find out who hit me I'll make it warm for him!" And having thus delivered himself Andrew Felps picked up his silk hat and his bundle and went on his way, in a worse humor than ever.

"Isn't he a darling?" observed Whopper sarcastically. "How I would love to own him for a brother!"

"I wonder who did hit him?" mused Snap. "The snowball couldn't have come from over here."

"I know who hit him," said a little boy named Benny Grime.

"Who was it, Benny?"

"Ham Spink."

"Ham Spink!" cried Snap and Shep in concert.

"Yes."

"Why, he isn't here," said Whopper.

"He just came up, threw one snowball, and ran away. I guess he meant to hit somebody else and the snowball hit Mr. Felps instead," went on the small boy. "Don't let him know I told you, or he'll wax me good for it."

"I shan't tell Ham," said Snap. "But this is strange," he continued.

"Thought Ham was too much of a dude to throw snowballs," was Whopper's comment. "Why, he wears a new necktie every day now, and new patent leather shoes, and new gloves, and--"

"Don't pile it on too thick, Whopper," laughed Shep. "But I admit, he is a dude and no mistake."

"And a sneak--to run away as soon as he hit old Felps," finished Giant.

There was no time to say more, for the snowball battle was again raging, more furiously than ever. The balls flew on all sides, and grown folks, coming in that direction, kept out of the way as much as possible.

"Here comes old Mammy Shrader!" cried Snap, presently. "We must be careful not to hit her."

The woman he referred to was old and feeble and very short sighted. She had a faded shawl over her shoulders and carried a market basket on one arm. She went out nursing among the poor people and was well known throughout the entire neighborhood.

As the old woman came on a snowball was thrown at her from the other side of the street.

"Say, don't do that!" called out Snap, angrily. "Leave Mammy Shrader alone!"

He has scarcely uttered the words when another snowball was thrown at the aged female. This hit her on the cheek and caused her to utter a cry of pain. She tried to save herself from falling, but could not, and went down in a heap.

"For shame!" ejaculated Shep and ran to help the old woman to arise. In the meantime Snap, with flashing eyes, hurried across the street and confronted Carl Dudder. As my old readers know, Carl Dudder was a close crony to Ham Spink and had done his full share in making our young friends uncomfortable during the summer outing.

"Dudder, aren't you ashamed of yourself?" said Snap.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Carl Dudder, although he trembled a little as he spoke.

"You threw those snowballs at Mammy Shrader."

"I didn't."

"You did--I saw you."

"That's correct--I saw him too," put in Giant, who had followed Snap. In the meantime Whopper had followed Shep, and both were doing what they could for the old woman.

"See here, Snap Dodge, I don't want you to talk to me," blustered Carl Dudder. "I know my own business."

"You ought to be knocked down for throwing at Mammy Shrader."

"You can't knock me down!" growled Carl, doubling up his fists.

"A fight! a fight!" cried several boys, always ready for an affair of that sort.

There was an awkward pause. Snap did not wish to fight, and yet he wanted Dudder to understand that he was not afraid.

"I think I owe you something from last summer," said Dudder, coming closer and sticking his chin in Snap's face. "I haven't forgotten that."

"Yes, but you seem to have forgotten that we about kept you from starving to death," answered Snap calmly.

"And that's no joke," came softly from Giant.

"You keep your oar out, little one," grunted Dudder, turning to glare at Will.

"You and your crowd acted very meanly last summer and you know it, Dudder," said Giant, not in the least abashed. "Your treatment of Mammy Shrader is on a par with your other actions."

"Shut up!" roared the other boy, and made a quick pass at Giant's head. But the small boy dodged and the fist struck Snap on the shoulder.

The next instant Snap hauled off, struck out, and Carl Dudder measured his length in the snow.

CHAPTER III

THE RESULTS OF SNOWBALLING

Carl Rudder had not expected this telling blow and he was so dazed it was several seconds before he turned over in the snow and arose to his feet.

"Good for you, Snap!" cried Will. "That's the way to serve him."

"Wha--what do you mean by hitting me like that?" demanded Dudder, glaring at Charley, but still keeping a safe distance.

"What do you mean by hitting me?" demanded Snap.

"I'll punch your head good for you!

"Try it--if you dare," answered Snap, defiantly, and he took an aggressive step forward, at which Dudder retreated.

"I'll fight you another time--when you haven't so many friends around," said Carl Dudder lamely, and then turning on his heel he started away, followed by one of his cronies.

"If old Mammy Shrader is hurt, you'll be to blame," called Snap after him.

"He's a coward," was Giant's comment. "I wish I had got a whack at him. He is much larger than I am, but I am not afraid of him."

While this scene was transpiring Shep and Whopper had helped old Mammy Shrader to a seat on the porch of a house not far from where she had gone down. The old woman complained of a pain in her side and it was next to impossible for her to take another step.

"I'll have to go home," she panted. "But how am I to get there?"

"Here comes Mr. Sell in his grocery wagon," cried Whopper. "Perhaps he'll give you a ride."

"Maybe he will--I buy my things from him," answered the old woman.

The grocer was stopped and the situation explained, and he readily volunteered to take Mammy Shrader to her home, located at no great distance. He and the boys helped her into the wagon.

"The boy who struck her ought to be horsewhipped," said the grocer. "Fun is one thing, but hitting an old woman is quite another."

"Just what I say," answered Shep.

"Well, I knocked him down anyway," said Snap, coming up, and Giant told the details of the brief encounter.

Snap volunteered to go with the grocer, and between them they soon had Mammy Shrader at her home and lying on a couch. Shep hurried home and told his father the particulars of what had occurred.

"I will drive over and see her," said the doctor, and as his horse was hitched up he went immediately.

"She is suffering from a sprain and from the jar," said the physician, after an examination. "She must take it easy for a week or so." Then a neighbor, who had dropped in, said she would look after the patient during that time.

"Carl Dudder ought to be made to pay for this," said Doctor Reed.

"The Dudders won't pay anything--Mr. Dudder is as miserly as they make him, even if he is well off," said Whopper.

"Perhaps he can be forced to pay," replied Snap.

When Carl Dudder heard that a doctor had been called in to attend Mammy Shrader he was much frightened. He went to consult Ham Spink about it. The two were hand-in-glove in everything.

"Are they sure you threw the snowball?" asked Ham Spink, pointedly.

"They say they saw me."

"Who says so?"

"Oh, Snap Dodge and that crowd."

"Always that crowd!" muttered Ham Spink.

"They say they know you knocked Andrew Felps down," went on Dudder, finding some consolation in the fact that Ham was in difficulties too.

"They didn't see a thing!" roared the dudish youth.

"Well, that is what they say."

"Humph! Carl, they are bound to get us into trouble."

"Of course. They haven't got over last summer's trouble yet. I suppose they will make it as hot for us as they can."

"Well, let us stick together and maybe we can face them down," was Ham Spink's comment, and then he lit a cigarette and offered one to his crony, and both fell to smoking.

That very evening both youths had to "face the music," and in a manner which did not please them in the least.

Coming home just before supper Mr. Spink, found a note awaiting him. It was from Andrew Felps and ran, in part, as follows:

"I have a complaint to make against your son Hamilton. To-day while I was on my way through the streets of our town I was assailed in the fashion of a ruffian by your son, who threw snowballs at me, knocking me down and ruining my silk hat and a rare volume of history I was carrying. I demand that your son apologize to me for his actions or I shall make a complaint to the authorities."

"Hamilton, what does this mean?" demanded Mr. Spink, after perusing the communication several times.

"I don't know," answered the undutiful offspring brazenly.

"Did you snowball Mr. Felps?"

"No. I didn't snowball anybody."

"He says you did."

"He must be mistaken."

"It is mighty queer," muttered Mr. Spink. "I will look into this to-morrow."

"The old Harry take Felps anyway," muttered Ham to himself. "How did he learn I threw that snowball? That Dodge crowd must have told him."

It was Mammy Shrader's neighbor, Samuel O'Brien, who called upon Mr. Dudder.

"Sure, Mr. Dodder, yer son ought to be locked up, so he ought," said the Irishman. "It's him as is wantin' to kill old Mammy Shrader."

"Why, what do you mean, sir?" demanded Mr. Dudder, in amazement.

"Sure an' wasn't it Carl as knocked the old lady down to-day and laid her on a sick bed, wid a doctor, an' me wife to nurse her till she gits betther? Sure it's a bastly shame, so it is, an' Carl will go to the lock-up onless ye pay all the bills."

"I do not understand you."

"Thin I'll be after explainin'," answered Samuel O'Brien, and gave his story in full, to which Mr. Dudder listened in a nervous fashion. Then Carl was called into the room.

"What do you mean by making trouble in this fashion?" demanded Mr. Dudder wrathfully.

"I didn't make trouble," said Carl, sullenly.

"Sure an' he did that," said the Irishman.

"Mr. O'Brien says you knocked Mrs. Shrader down."

"I didn't."

"He was seen--several b'ys saw him," put in Samuel O'Brien.

"I--er--it was an accident," stammered Carl, quailing before the stern gaze of his parent. "The--er--the snowball slipped. It didn't hit Mammy Shrader hard, and she fell down of her own account, not because of the snowball."

"She says th' snowball knocked her down," said Samuel O'Brien. "If ye was my b'y I'd be afther givin' ye a good walloppin', so I would!" he added pointedly.

"I will go and see Mrs. Shrader," said Mr. Dudder. "Carl, you remain at home until I get back."

"Can't I go over and see Ham?"

"No."

"I promised him that I would be over."

"Well, you can't go. You study your lessons, unless you prefer to go with me to Mrs. Shrader's."

"I don't want to go to her house," said Carl.

Mr. Dudder lost no time in paying Mammy Shrader a visit, and then he called on Doctor Reed. When he came home again he was very angry.

"Carl, I have a good mind to punish you severely," he said. "I did not think you would treat a woman as Mrs. Shrader has been treated. I shall have to pay her doctor's bill and also something more--at least fifteen or twenty dollars." Mr. Dudder sighed at the thought of parting with so much cash. "I shall take the amount out of your spending money, and out of the money I was going to give you for Christmas"

"Can't I have the five dollars you promised me for Christmas?" gasped Carl.

"Not a cent of it."

"Oh, you're a mean thing!" burst out Carl, and ran from the room before his father could stop him.

CHAPTER IV

THE EXPLOSION

On the following afternoon Snap was walking down to the river front, on an errand for his father, when he caught sight of Ham Spink and Carl Dudder, under a lumber shed. The pair were conversing in an earnest fashion, but ceased their conversation as Snap came closer.

Snap knew that Ham and Carl were in far from a friendly humor. Through one boy he had learned how Carl had been treated by his father, and through another how Andrew Felps had discovered that Ham had been his aggressor. There had been a lively interview when Mr. Felps and Mr. Spink had met, and in the end the latter had said he would stand for all damage done. Then he had gone home and laid down the law good and hard to Ham.

"To punish you I will cut off your spending money," said Mr. Spink, and thus Ham and Carl found themselves in the same trouble so far as

cash was concerned. It galled them exceedingly, and, as was their habit, they laid the blame entirely on others.

As Snap passed the shed both Ham and Carl scowled at him. Then, after he had gone a dozen steps, Ham called out:

"Come back here. I want to talk to you."

"Did you address me?" demanded Snap, wheeling around.

"I did. Come here, I want to talk to you."

Snap did not budge.

"If you want to talk to me you can come where I am," he said.

"Oh, you needn't get so mighty high and lofty!" sneered Ham Spink.

"I am not your servant."

"Nice stories you and your crowd have been telling about me and Carl," went on Ham, coming closer.

"Trying to get us into trouble," put in Carl. "It's a jolly shame and you ought to be thrashed for it."

"See here, Dudder, and you too, Spink," answered Charley firmly, "I want no quarrel with you. Ever since our outing last summer you have been like bears with sore heads. If your camping out was a failure it wasn't our fault. When you hadn't any game we let you have some of ours, and we did a great deal more for you than you deserved. Now--"

"Oh, don't preach!" cried Ham.

"What do you want of me?"

"I want to give you fair warning that neither I nor Carl will stand for the way you are acting. Either you keep your distance, or it will be the worse for you."

"I am not afraid of you."

"Well, you had better be."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Snap. He fancied there might be some hidden meaning to Ham Spink's words.

"Oh, you'll find out one of these days," came from Carl, significantly.

"If you try any of your underhanded tricks you'll get the worst of it--just as you did up to the camp," answered Snap, and went on his way.

"Oh, I wish I could mash him!" muttered Ham Spink, between his set teeth.

"Yes, and mash the whole crowd of 'em," added Dodder. "I hate the very sight of 'em!"

"Do you know that they are talking about camping out again?"

"What, this winter?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"That I don't know."

"I'd like to spoil the trip for them."

"So would I. Maybe we can do it too, if we watch our chances."

The two talked the matter over for some time and when they separated it was with the fixed determination to play some underhanded trick and do "the Dodge crowd," as they called our friends much harm.

All of the boys who attended the local school had been waiting impatiently to learn when the present session would come to an end. Now it was announced that school would close the following Friday afternoon and remain shut up for three weeks and a half.

"Hurrah! that will give us just time enough for a dandy outing!" cried Whopper.

"You'll have to kill a bear a day to make up the number you said you'd bring down," answered, Giant.

"Pooh! I never kill bears singly," sniffed Whopper. "I always kill them in pairs or by the half dozen."

"We've got to make sure that we can go first," said Shep. "Remember the school averages."

They did remember, and all were very anxious concerning the examinations to come off before the term closed. They studied hard, and came out with an average of eight-eight to ninety-four per cent.

"Good!" said Snap. "Our folks can't find fault with such records." And nobody did find fault. On the contrary, the boys received not a little praise, and permission to go on the winter outing was readily granted.

"Let us start next Monday," said Giant, who was impatient to get away.

"I doubt if we can get ready so quickly," answered Shep. "There is a

good deal to do, you know."

"Then make it Tuesday," pleaded Giant.

"The ice on the river is perfect, so it will be the easiest thing in the world to skate to the lake and drag our sleds after us."

It had already been decided that they should go into camp at Firefly Lake, where they had left their summer shelter only a few months before. Firefly Lake was a beautiful sheet of water, or ice, located a mile from Lake Cameron, and about eleven miles from Fairview. To get to this spot they had to go to Lake Cameron first and then along a narrow watercourse which united the two sheets of water.

The news quickly spread through the town that the Gun Club was going away on another outing, and many envied our friends their coming pleasures. Ham Spink and Carl Rudder looked sour over the prospects.

"Where are they going?" asked Carl.

"To Firefly Lake, to their old camp."

After this announcement both boys looked at each other suggestively.

"It will be moonlight to-night, and we can easily skate twenty or twenty-five miles," suggested Ham.

"So we can, Ham. Let us do it, and--_fix things_."

"We will," said Ham firmly.

As soon as it was settled that our friends were to go away before Christmas, and remain away over the holidays, they received from their parents several gifts in advance. All obtained snowshoes--picked out for them by their old hunter friend, Jed Sanborn--and they also procured an extra gun, an extra sled, and some warm camp blankets. They still possessed their old camp outfit and so it was an easy matter to gather the things together and get everything ready for the start. The outfit was packed upon two good-sized sleds and well fastened.

"I suppose we ought to have skated up to the camp and inspected things," observed Snap. "But I have been too busy to do so."

"Oh, I reckon everything is as we left it," answered Whopper.

"The camp was all right two weeks ago," said Jed Sanborn, who chanced to be present. "Of course you'll have to fix up some kind of a chimney in the cabin, for you can't keep your fire outdoors in this weather."

"It's as much fun to fix up the cabin as it is to camp out," said Shep, and the others agreed with him.

On Monday afternoon the boys got their things together and stored them in an old boathouse on the river front. They had looked to their skates and each pair had been sharpened and put in first class condition.

"We may use our skates as much as the snowshoes," said Whopper.

With everything stored in the old boathouse the door was carefully locked by Shep, who put the key in his pocket. The old boathouse had two windows, but each of these was nailed shut.

"I don't believe anybody will get in there," observed the doctor's son.

"Oh, I don't think there are any thieves around," answered Whopper.

The evening was devoted to final preparations, and it was after ten o'clock before any of the boys thought of retiring. Snap was over to Shep's house, and the doctor's son saw his friend to the front door.

"Now remember, seven o'clock sharp," said Shep. "We want to get away as early as possible, so we'll have plenty of time to fix up the cabin when we get there."

"Oh, I'll be up early enough," said Snap, with a smile. "Fact of it is, I am so worked up I don't expect to do much sleeping."

After a few words more the boys separated, and Snap started to walk home. He had almost reached his gate when something prompted him to halt. He looked down the roadway in the direction of the old boathouse.

"I have half a mind to go down and see if everything is O. K.," he murmured to himself.

Then he thought it would be foolish, and started to enter the house. But he was undecided, and at last hurried down the roadway in the direction of the river.

He was still some distance from the old boathouse when he discovered two persons running across an open field which lined the roadway. He could not make out anything excepting that they were either men or big boys.

"That's queer," he reasoned, and then started forward again.

Snap was still two hundred feet from the old boathouse when a most extraordinary thing happened. There was a rumble as of thunder, followed by a fierce flash of fire, and then the end of the boathouse arose in the air and came down with a crash, completely wrecking what was left of the building!

CHAPTER V

OFF FOR THE CAMP

The sudden and unexpected shock nearly threw Snap from his feet, and it was several seconds before he could collect his senses.

Then, in a dim and uncertain way, he realized two things--that there had been a terrific explosion and that the old boathouse containing their precious camping outfit was in ruins.

"What in the world can it mean?" he asked himself, as he stared in a bewildered fashion at the ruin in front of him. "It sounded as if some dynamite went off."

The noise and shock of the explosion was heard all over Fairview, and soon people came flocking to the scene from all directions.

"What blew up?"

"Hullo, the Cramer boathouse is down!"

"Fire! fire!"

Such were some of the cries which arose on all sides. Then the crowd came closer, staring at the fallen building, as Snap had done.

In the meanwhile Snap ran forward until he was less than a rod away from the wrecked building. He saw a small fire start up among some splintered boards and, quick to act, picked up some chunks of snow and attempted to put it out.

"That's a good idea," said John Sell, the grocer, who had arrived, and he, too, began to throw the snow, and so did others.

"Our camping-out things are in that place," said Snap.

"Is that so. What blew up, some of your powder?"

"I--I don't think so," faltered Snap. He had up to that moment not thought of the cartridges they had stored on one of the sleds.

"Must have been pretty powerful," said another man. "That noise was like a regular blast over to the stone quarries."

In the crowd was Shep, who had just been on the point of going to bed, and soon Whopper and Giant arrived. In the meanwhile large quantities of snow were hurled on the ruins and soon the fire was completely under control.

"Snap, do you think our cartridges went off? questioned Whopper.

"No, I don't. How could they go off, unless they were fired, from a gun or otherwise?"

"A rat might have gnawed them," suggested Giant.

"Those cartridges wouldn't cause such a wreckage as this," said Snap firmly. His senses were now coming back to him. "Well, I never!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"What's up now?"

"I just thought of something."

"What is it?"

"When I left Shep's house I walked in this direction, because I was worried for fear somebody might steal our traps. As I walked along I saw two persons running across Hecker's cornfield. I couldn't make out who they were, but I fancy they came from this direction."

"Then they must have caused the explosion," said Whopper quickly. "But why should they do it?"

"Maybe it was an accident," said Giant.

"I'd like to know how much our outfit is damaged," said Shep, anxiously. "I don't care about the old boathouse. It wasn't worth much anyway."

From a nearby store several lanterns were brought, and men and boys proceeded to make an inspection of the ruins. Some boards and timbers were hauled aside, and soon the boys discovered the sleds with the outfit practically as they had left them. One load was a bit damaged at the end, but that was all.

"I'm thankful it is no worse," was Snap's comment.

"If the fire hadn't been put out when it was everything would have burnt up," said Shep seriously.

While the boys were taking care of their sleds and the other things the men folks looked around for traces of what had caused the explosion. Among the men was Jerry Corwin, one of the blasters at the stone quarry.

"Dynamite did this," said he. "Dynamite and nothing else."

"It certainly sounded like dynamite," said another man.

"How would dynamite get here?" asked Mr. Dodge, who had arrived on the scene.

At this question Jerry Corwin shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Once in a while some dynamite is missing from our store at the quarry," he answered. "The laborers steal it, for they can sell it to farmers for blasting out stumps, and to others. During the past six months we have lost at least a dozen sticks."

"As the boathouse was not worth much, why was it blown up?" asked Doctor Reed, who had been summoned by somebody who thought a man had been hurt.

"That's the question," said Mr. Dodge. "Evidently it contained nothing of value outside of the outfit belonging to our sons."

"Hum!" murmured the physician, and said no more.

It was a bitter cold night, so after the fire was put out and the ruins examined, the majority of the crowd went home. The members of the Gun Club put their outfits in a neighboring barn, where a friend promised they should be safe, and then, after a short talk, went to their respective abodes. It was a good hour before any of the lads got to sleep.

Whopper was just dreaming of another terrific explosion when he awoke with a start, to hear a loud pounding on the side of the house, directly under his bedroom window. Opening the sash cautiously he caught sight of Giant below, hitting the clapboards with a snow shovel which happened to be handy.

"Oh, what a racket!" murmured Whopper. "I must pay him for that!" And scooping up some snow from the window sill he gave a low whistle. Then as Giant looked up, he let the snow drop.

"Wuow!" spluttered the little lad, as the loose snow filled his mouth and nose. "Say, do you want to smother me?"

"Then stop that infernal racket," answered Whopper. "Do you want the neighborhood to think that there are more explosions taking place?"

"Time to be moving," said Giant, and passed on, to arouse Shep.

"Now, my son, be very careful and keep out of danger," said Mr. Dodge to Charley, when the latter was ready to leave. "I shall send old Jed Sanborn up to see you once or twice, and if you need anything from here you let him know and he can bring it to you." And then, after a warm handshake from his father and a kiss from his mother, Snap almost ran from the house, fearful that he would be late.

At the barn where the things had been stored he found Giant and Shep, but nothing was to be seen of Whopper.

"I woke him up," said Giant. "Something has gone wrong, or he would be

here by this time."

They waited five minutes longer, and Snap was on the point of going to Whopper's home when they saw the missing club member approaching on a run.

"What in the world kept you so long?" cried Shep.

"Oh, I had a little set-to with Barney Hedge," answered Whopper. "He said some things I didn't like and I rolled him over in the snow and put some down his back to help him cool off."

"Barney Hedge," repeated Snap. He knew the fellow mentioned to be a crony of Ham Spink and Carl Dudder. "What was it about?"

"Oh, about our outing last summer. It seems Hedge and the others are starting a report that we didn't shoot the game we brought in, but that Jed Sanborn brought down the most of it for us."

"How mean!" cried Giant.

"He said we couldn't shoot but that we were all blowers--and if left to ourselves in this cold weather we would starve to death and freeze in the bargain. I couldn't stand for that, so I pitched into him."

"Good for you!" shouted Giant. "I hope you gave him something to remember."

"I wonder if we will have trouble with that crowd during the present outing," mused Snap after a pause.

"I don't think they are going camping," answered Whopper. "They haven't got enough real sporting blood in them."

After that the topic of conversation quickly changed, as they looked over their things for the last time, to make certain that everything was there.

The boys carried a good supply of clothing, including extra underwear and extra pairs of boots. Each had a pair of warm blankets and also a rubber sheet, to be used in case of sudden rain.

The stores were made up of a variety of things, including flour, bacon, beans, some canned goods, and coffee, chocolate, sugar, salt, pepper and condensed milk. They had their old "nest" of pans and kettles, tin cups and plates, and likewise enough knives, forks and spoons to go around. In a waterproof case were several boxes of matches, and they also had along an acetylene bicycle lamp, which they thought they might use in bringing down game at night, and an axe and a hatchet.

All of the young sportsmen were armed with shotguns and they also took along Mr. Dodge's rifle, as they had done before, and the trusty

pistol belonging to Doctor Reed. Their snowshoes were placed on the tops of the loads, and they put on their well-sharpened skates as soon as the river front was reached.

"Good-bye to Fairview!" cried Shep, when all was in readiness for the start.

"Good-bye, boys, and the best of luck for you!" shouted Doctor Reed, who had driven down in his sleigh, to see them off.

"Don't let the bears eat you up!" called out a riverman who stood on the dock.

"No danger of that," answered Snap.

And then with a shout and the waving of caps, the members of the Fairview Gun Club set off on their winter outing, never dreaming of the many surprises and perils which awaited them.

CHAPTER VI

CHICKENS AND MINCE PIE

It was a perfect winter day, with a dull golden glow in the sky and only a faint breeze from the north blowing. On the ground the snow lay to the depth of ten inches or a foot, but the wind of the week past had almost cleared the ice on the river. Here and there were long ridges of snow across the glare, but that was all.

The young hunters had tied long ropes to the sleds, and while Whopper and Shep pulled one turnout, Snap and Giant dragged the other. The sleds had polished runners, and slid over the river surface so easily that pulling was more sport than work.

The course was down the river towards Lake Cameron, and in a very few minutes the town neighborhood was left behind. On either side of the frozen stream were trees and bushes, with here and there a cleared patch or an orchard. Some boys accompanied them a short distance, but then these dropped back, and our four young friends were left to themselves.

"Do you remember how we stopped at Pop Lundy's orchard when we went to the camp in the rowboat?" observed Shep.

"Yes, and how he caught us and then got us to go after the negro who stole the watch," put in Whopper.

"I shouldn't mind having some of his apples now," said Giant. "We ought to have taken apples along."

"There is the orchard now," cried Snap. "But there are no apples to be had this time of year."

"As if we would dare to take them," said Whopper, with a wink of his eye.

As they neared the spot where the orchard ran down to the river shore they heard the sound of an axe and saw Simon Lundy chopping down an old apple tree for firewood. The man was a very close-fisted farmer and was rarely known to do a charitable act.

"How are you, Mr. Lundy!" called out Snap, as he brought one of the sleds to a halt.

"How do ye do," grunted the farmer, and then gave a closer look. "Oh, so it's you fellers ag'in, hey? Goin' campin' once more?"

"We are."

"How are your apples getting along?" asked Shep, also halting.

"Didn't have sech a big crop as I expected."

"Thought you might spare us a few," suggested Whopper. "Of course we'll pay for them, if you wish."

"Well, there hain't much profit in givin' apples away," said Simon Lundy, pursing up his thin lips. "Got some putty good golden russets left. How many do ye want?"

"Give us all you can spare for a quarter," said Shep, who had been chosen treasurer of the club for the outing.

Simon Lundy led the way to his barn, and there the boys picked out some russets and some greenings. While this was going on Mrs. Lundy came from the house to see the visitors.

"Why, if it ain't them same boys as helped to catch that nigger!" she cried. "Want some apples, hey? Give 'em all they want, Simon. They deserve 'em."

"I was a--er--a--sellin' them the apples," answered the husband, lamely, and growing a bit red in the face.

"What! Simon Lundy, ain't ye ashamed! You shan't take a cent from 'em, not a cent! Why, the idee!"

"All right, all right, if you say so," said the farmer hastily.

"I do say so." Mrs. Lundy turned to the young hunters. "Where be you a-goin'?"

"We are going camping," answered Snap. "At the same place we were last summer."

"Ain't you afraid o' being frizz to death?"

"Oh, I think we can stand it."

"What have ye took along to eat?"

Snap told her and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Ye ought to have brung more, boys. Now, I've jest been a-makin' some mince pies. Wouldn't ye like one o' them?"

"Yes, indeed!" shouted Whopper, who had a weakness for that dainty. "I can eat mince pie in the middle of my sleep."

"Then you shall have the biggest pie o' the lot," said Mrs. Lundy.

"And, Simon," she added, to her husband, "you jest kill a couple o' fat chickens fer 'em. Maybe they won't find no game the first day they be in camp, an' they ought to have some kind o' meat."

"It's drefful expensive!" groaned Simon Lundy.

"Shucks! These boys did us a real service, an' want 'em to know we appreciate it," answered Mrs. Lundy briskly.

She told her husband what chickens to catch and kill, and helped pull the feathers. Then she brought forth the still steaming mince pie, leaving it in the stone dish in which it had been baked.

"You can leave the dish when you come back--if you think o' it," she said, "and if ye don't, 'twon't matter much."

A little later saw the four boy hunters on their way again, the precious mince pie resting on the top of one of the sled loads and the apples and chickens on the other. Mrs. Lundy waved them a cheery adieu and Simon smiled somewhat grimly.

"It nearly broke old Pop Lundy's heart to give the things away," was Giant's comment.

"It wasn't any more than fair, after what we did for him," answered Shep. "Say, boys, camping out with chicken and mince pie won't be bad, will it?"

"Yum! yum!" was the only answer the others gave.

By noon they found themselves on Lake Cameron. On one shore were the grim evidences of that terrible forest fire which had nearly cost the saw mill robber and the Felps' crowd their lives. A few spots on the lake were clear, but at other points the snow lay from a few inches to a foot and a half deep.

They skated to the opposite shore and stopped near the shelter of some pines and hemlocks. All were willing to rest, and a small campfire was built, over which they made a pot of coffee. They had brought with them some sandwiches and some cake, and these made up the brief noonday meal.

"Here goes for a first shot!" cried Snap, leaping to his feet with a part of a sandwich still in his mouth. He had discovered several rabbits near some bushes up the lake shore. Catching up his shotgun he took careful aim and blazed away.

"Two of them!" exclaimed Shep. "Good for you, Snap!"

Snap ran forward and picked up the game. They were plump and heavy and he held them up with pride.

"We shan't starve just yet," remarked Giant. "We are sure to get rabbits, and partridge and wild turkeys, and there must be plenty of fish under this ice."

All of the party were anxious to reach the former camp, to see what it looked like, so the noonday rest did not last long. Skirting one shore of Lake Cameron, they came to the narrow waterway that connected it with Firefly Lake. Here the water, which usually flowed swiftly between the rocks, was frozen up in a lumpy fashion that made skating impossible.

"We'll have to walk the rest of the distance," announced Whopper. "We couldn't skate on this in a million years."

"I wish we could try the snowshoes," said Giant. He knew very little about using the articles.

"Can't do it," answered Snap. "But just you wait, we'll have more snow before long and then the snowshoes will come in mighty handy."

They took off their skates, put them on the sleds, and started up the rocky and frozen watercourse. The walking was treacherous and soon Whopper went down, with Shep on top of him. The bag of apples came over both.

"Hi! get off of me!" roared Whopper. "Do you want to crush me into a pancake? Who threw that bag of apples?"

"You want to be careful of the loads," admonished Snap. "Don't throw off the mince pie as you did the apples."

"Look!" yelled Giant, who had been gazing to the north of the watercourse. "Am I mistaken, or is that a deer?"

"A deer! A deer!" cried Shep, and on the instant all of the boys forgot about the tumble and each caught up his shotgun. It was indeed

a deer, standing among some young trees about two hundred yards distance.

"Oh, if we can only bring it down!" said Whopper, in a whisper.

"We must bring it down," answered Shep, in an equally low voice.

"Get out of sight," warned Snap. "If he sees us he'll be of in a jiffy."

They dropped behind some convenient bushes and then moved forward with great caution, each with his shotgun ready to blaze away instantly.

The forward movement lasted for fully five minutes and then all raised up cautiously and looked for the deer.

The game had disappeared!

"Where is he?" whispered Giant, gazing around in bewilderment.

"Bless me if I know," answered Snap.

The young hunters gazed in all directions and then came out into the open.

"He is surely gone," said Shep.

"There he goes!" sang out Giant, and pointed up the lake to a clearing an eighth of a mile away.

"And streaking it like greased lightning," added Whopper. "He'll reach the Canadian line before he stops."

"Too bad!" growled Shep, in disgust. "I fancied we'd get him sure."

"This puts me in mind of what Jed Sanborn says," said Snap, with a sickly grin. "Be sure of only what is in your game bag."

The young hunters looked around for more deer but none were in that vicinity and so they returned to where they had left the sleds.

"If it hadn't been that we want to get to camp we might have followed up that deer," was Giant's comment.

"Not much use of that," answered Snap. "By the way he was running he must have been pretty well woke up, and when that happens you know a deer will run for miles without stopping."

All were glad when they came in sight of Fire-fly Lake. About one half of the surface was a smooth glare of ice, the other half being covered with ridges of snow.

To reach their old camp they had to go up the shore and around a bend

where the bushes and trees were thick. Once more they donned their skates and went forward rapidly.

"Let us have a race!" cried Whopper, and he and Giant set off with one sled, while Snap and Shep set off with the other.

"An extra piece of mince pie to the winning team!" cried the doctor's son merrily as he put on an extra spurt.

Soon the turn of the shore was gained, with the sleds side by side. Then all of the young hunters gazed ahead.

"Well, I never!"

"If this isn't too bad for anything!"

Such were the exclamations uttered. And there was good cause for their consternation and dismay. Instead of the tidy cabin they had expected to see, nothing but a heap of blackened logs confronted them.

The log cabin had been burnt to the ground.

CHAPTER VII

A DISMAYING DISCOVERY

The hearts of the four young hunters went "down in their boots" as they surveyed the desolate scene before them.

They had spent much hard labor over the cabin which had been their home during a large part of the summer outing, and they had fully expected to find it in the same condition as when they had locked it up and come away.

"Boys, what can this mean?" said Snap at last. Who has played us this shabby trick?"

"Can the cabin have burnt down right after we left it?" asked Giant.

"Why, no, it has been burnt down since the last snowstorm," answered Shep, "otherwise the snow would cover the ruins."

"This fire isn't over three or four days old," came from Whopper.

"Do you think it could start up of itself?" asked the small member of the Gun Club.

"No, I don't."

"Then somebody must have set it on fire."

"Yes."

"Who?"

"That remains to be found out," said Snap. "Oh, I wish I had the fellow here now," and he banged a fist into the palm of his hand, to show what he would do in such a case.

The boys walked around the ruin several times and lifted up a few of the half-burnt logs. It was easy to see that the cabin was a total wreck. Snap heaved a mountainous sigh and so did the others.

"We'll have to clear all this stuff away and build a brand new cabin," said Shep. "All these old logs are good for is firewood."

"That is true, Shep," answered Snap. "What I am thinking of is, what are we to do to-night? We can't stay out in the open air. It is growing colder every minute."

"Well, I am not going home," came quickly from Giant. "I'd rather freeze!"

"Who said anything about going home?" demanded Whopper. "Why, I wouldn't go home in a thousand years, cabin or no cabin. We can rig up some sort of shelter of pine boughs and then build another cabin."

"I know a dandy spot for another cabin," said Snap. "Don't you remember I mentioned it to you, Shep, last summer? The spot where the young trees stood so close together in a circle?"

"Just the place," answered the doctor's son.

Standing around was cold work and the young hunters lost no time in cutting some dry brushwood and building a fire, on which they placed several of the half-burnt logs. It was now the middle of the afternoon and they knew they must work vigorously if they wanted any sort of a suitable shelter against the cold before nightfall.

The spot Snap had mentioned was less than two hundred feet up the lake front. Here, behind some bushes which would keep off considerable wind, was an almost perfect circle of trees, the diameter inside being about fifteen feet. The trees were mostly young and not very tall and the lower branches were not over ten feet from the ground on an average.

"We can cut off the tops of the trees and then bind in some of the branches for a roof," said Snap. "Over those branches we can bind others, with strips of bark between. We can cut the trees higher on one side of the circle than on the other, so the snow and rain can run off. Then we can bind in brushwood and bark for the sides, between the trees, leaving one spot open for a rough sort of chimney, which we'll

have to build up of flat rocks. It won't make as nice a cabin as the other was, but it is the best we can do in this wintry weather, and I think, with a good fire going, we can make it fairly comfortable inside."

There were a great many things to take into consideration, but in the main Snap's idea was voted a good one, and the sleds were brought to the spot and the axe and hatchet gotten.

"Giant, you bring up that camp-fire," said Snap. "We'll want it here later. Bring all those half-burnt logs, too, so that we'll have plenty of firewood."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" answered the little lad, in true nautical style and touching his cap.

While Giant re-built the camp-fire the others set to work on the new cabin. First Snap and Shep, went up in the trees and marked off the top of the new shelter. Then down came one tree top after another and then the limbs that could not be used above. In the meantime Whopper took a hunting knife and cut some strips of bark.

"Now let us begin to bind in the branches," said Snap, and he and Shep set to work, with Whopper helping them. Giant passed up some branches which had fallen to the ground, and also some long, pliable withes to be used as rope. Fortunately some of the branches left on the trees were long and supple and could be twisted around one another with ease.

"We are going to have a regular mat of a roof," observed Whopper. "Why can't we pile a lot of dead leaves on top, to make it air tight?"

"Because they might possibly shake down and catch fire," answered Snap. "We can bind in some more brushwood and some more bark. Then the next snow will do the rest."

At last the roof was finished and the workers dropped to the ground. It was now night and all were tremendously hungry.

"We'll have to let the sides of the shelter go until morning," said Snap. "We can pile up some tree branches on the windy side and put the rubber blankets over them. Then, during the night, we can build a fire right in the middle of the hut. But we'll have to take turns at guarding, to prevent the place from catching fire and to prevent those sleeping from smothering, if the wind should change."

While Snap and Shep continued to work on the shelter, Whopper and Giant started to cook the evening meal, which consisted of a broiled chicken, a loaf of bread they had brought along, and a slice of cake, washed down with hot chocolate. They spent an hour over the meal, and in the meantime discussed their future plans and the burnt cabin.

"Do you know I have an idea that the same person who burnt down our

cabin wrecked the old boathouse," said Snap.

"I was figuring it that way, too," answered Whopper. "The question is, Who would be so mean!"

"Perhaps it was Carl Dudder," answered Giant.

"Or Ham Spink," came from Shep.

"It was certainly done by an enemy," said Snap. "But I shouldn't dare to accuse anybody unless I was certain."

"You are right there," answered the doctor's son. "Burning a building is a serious piece of business."

"Yes, and blowing up a place with dynamite is serious, too," added Whopper. "Why, it's a wonder the whole town didn't sail skyward!"

The floor of the shelter had been cleaned up and on one side were placed several piles of fresh pine boughs, which in camping out make the best kind of a couch. Then the fire was brought in and placed where the smoke could drift out between the trees. The blaze soon warmed the place up, and the ruddy glare made the boys feel quite at home.

To keep out still more of the cold the two sleds were stood up between some of the trees and the canvas coverings and rubber blankets were stretched around as far as they would go. By that time all of the boys were worn out with their labors and their journey and glad enough to retire.

"Each member of this club will have to remain on guard two hours," said Snap. "We'll draw lots for turns."

This was done, and it fell to Whopper to take the first turn, from nine o'clock to eleven. Giant was to follow him, and then Snap and Sheep.

"Just my luck!" grumbled Whopper. "And when I am so sleepy I can scarcely keep my eyes open."

"Well, don't you go to sleep until your two hours is up," said Snap sharply. "Keep an eye on the fire, and don't wake Giant up until his turn comes."

"I am going to fix up a pot of beans to cook," answered Whopper. "That will help to keep me awake."

Leaving Whopper fussing with the bean pot, the others turned into their blankets and threw themselves on their pine bough couches. Inside of five minutes Shep was asleep and Snap and the small member of the Gun Club quickly followed.

Whopper filled the pot half full of bean, soaked them a little in ice water, and then hung them over the fire to bake, putting some bacon with them, to give the proper flavor. Then he brought in some extra sticks and sat down. He was indeed sleepy and it was all he could do to keep his eyes open.

"Guess I had better walk around," he told himself, and not to disturb the sleepers, passed through one of the openings between the trees to the outside of the shelter.

It was a moonlight night, and he could see across the lake with ease. All was quiet saving for the distant hoot of an owl and the occasional bark of a fox. The wind had gone down and not a tree branch was stirring.

"What a glorious night for skating," mused the boy. "There must be a good many out at Fairview, now that the ice is so solid."

He walked around the shelter four times and then came to a halt once more in front of the lake.

As he did this, he saw some object move across the ice of the lake. One object was followed by another, and then a third and a fourth.

"Animals of some kind," he thought. "But what?"

He watched the objects for several minutes.

They kept coming closer slowly, stopping every now and then, as if to deliberate. Then of a sudden, a lonely, mournful howl rent the air.

"Wolves!" he muttered. "They have discovered our camp and are coming towards it. I wonder what I had better do?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST NIGHT IN CAMP

Whopper was not much frightened. He had met wolves before and he did not think that the pack on the ice would dare to attack him and his friends. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, he watched the beasts closely, and when they came still nearer he rushed into the shelter and grabbed up his shotgun.

"What's the row?" asked Shep sleepily, disturbed by the unusual bustle.

"Four wolves are on the ice in front of the shelter," explained Whopper. "Reckon I'll give them a shot."

"I'll go along," and the doctor's son sprang up and reached for his own firearm.

When Whopper got outside again, followed by Shep, he saw the wolves had approached still closer. There were now seven of them, and they stood in a semi-circle, sniffing the air suspiciously. The man-smell was strong, and this they did not like, for to them it betokened only danger. Yet mingled with the man-smell was the smell of chicken and rabbit meat, and this pleased them, for they were hungry.

"Let us both fire together," suggested Shep. "Each of us ought to bring down at least one. You can fire to the right and I'll fire to the left of the line."

"All right."

They took careful aim, and at the word from Whopper each pulled the trigger of his shotgun.

Bang! Bang!

The two guns spoke up in rapid succession, and as the smoke cleared away it was seen that two of the wolves lay on the ice, twisting and turning in their death agonies. The others were scuttling away, one limping painfully.

"Hullo, what's up?" came from Snap, as he rushed from the shelter, followed by Giant. "What are you firing at?"

"We just brought down a couple of wolves," answered Whopper, with considerable satisfaction in his tone.

"Wolves!" ejaculated Giant. "I didn't think they'd find us as early as this."

Taking a brand from the fire, Whopper led the party out on the ice to where the two wolves lay. One was already dead and the other quickly breathed its last. They were large and gaunt looking creatures, with cruel teeth, and Shep shivered as he looked them over.

"I am glad they didn't get into the shelter," he observed. "If they had, we should have had the fight of our lives."

"I doubt if they would have attacked us," answered Snap. "They were after those rabbits and that chicken. They must have followed the sled trail from Lake Cameron."

As the young hunters did not want the wolves, they were left where they had fallen. The other beasts did not show themselves again.

The remainder of the night passed without anything unusual happening. Once the wind veered around a little, threatening to suffocate them

with smoke from the camp-fire, but by the time they prepared to vacate the shelter the wind veered back to where it had first come from and gave them no more trouble.

"I saw a beautiful owl," said Giant, when they were preparing breakfast. "I'd like to get him and have him stuffed."

"To eat, I presume," said Whopper, innocently.

"Eat? What do you take me for!" cried the smaller member of the Gun Club, and picking up a chunk of snow he shied it at Whopper, taking the latter in the ear.

Whopper could not stand that and threw some snow in return. Then ensued a regular snowball fight all around, which came to a sudden termination when Shep hit the coffee pot and spilled half of the hot beverage in the snow.

"Hi! that's going too far!" cried Snap. "Don't waste good coffee like that!"

"I move we fine Shep one cent for a bad throw," murmured Giant.

"He can make another pot of coffee, that's what he can do," grumbled Whopper.

"All right, I will, but no more snowballing for the present," answered Shep, and set to work without delay.

For breakfast they had some chicken, some bread and butter and hot coffee. The bread was pretty dry, but nobody minded it, for hunger and a clear, cold atmosphere are wonderful appetite builders.

"The first thing to do to-day is to finish building our shelter," said Snap.

"Oh, gosh! can't we go hunting?" demanded Whopper, who was itching to get out after big game.

"He wants to bring in a few of those bears he has been talking about," said Giant, with a wink of his eye.

"No hunting until the shelter is good enough to use in all kinds of weather," answered Snap.

The bracing air kept the boys moving lively, and directly after breakfast they set to work in earnest. A large quantity of tree branches were cut down, and with these they made the sides and top of the hut or cabin as tight as possible. Around the bottom of the shelter they heaped up all the snow that was close at hand.

The building of the chimney bothered them a great deal. Fortunately they found some stones which were fairly flat, and these they managed

to pile up into something of a square, with an opening in the center and another at the bottom, next to the shelter. On the outside they heaped up some dirt and above this plastered the cracks with mud. When tried, the chimney drew very well, and there seemed to be little danger of it setting fire to the shelter proper.

"We ought to have a name for this camp," observed Snap. "Every really first-class camp has a name."

"This is such a very high-toned camp let us call it Hotel Millionaire," suggested Giant.

"The Lakehouse," came from Whopper.

"I've got something better than that," said Shep. "Half of these trees are birch trees, and we used birch bark on the roof. What's the matter with calling the place Birch Tree Inn?"

"That's all right!" cried Snap. "Hurrah for Birch Tree Inn!"

"Good enough," assented Whopper. "Let's run up a napkin for a flag, for here is where we feed."

"Not much!" came from Giant. "What's the matter with this?" And from an inner pocket he produced a small silken flag. "I brought this along for our camp."

"Hurrah for the stars and stripes!" came from Snap. "We'll raise the flag by all means."

This was an easy matter, for directly in front of the camp, on the lake front, grew a tall and slender sapling. From this they cut the extreme top and the branches, and then ran up a thin rope, to which they attached the flag. Floating in the breeze it looked very pretty, and taking off their caps, the members of the Gun Club saluted the national emblem. Then Whopper and Shep began to whistle the Star Spangled Banner and the others joined in.

The making ready of the camp had taken longer than they had expected, and it was nightfall before they had everything as they wished it. In addition to making the shelter weather tight and warm, they had cut a good sized pile of wood for the fire. All were tired out, and Shep admitted that his back felt pretty stiff and lame.

"I don't think we'd want to work so hard around home," said Giant frankly, and the others admitted that this was so.

They were too tired to do more than prepare an ordinary supper, but this included the beans previously put in soak and then baked and these went very well. Then they brought in some wood, and closed up the doorway of the Inn.

"No need to remain on guard," said Snap. "The fire and the sides of

this shelter will keep away all wild animals."

"That's true."

During the afternoon it had begun to snow again, and this made it all the more cozy in the shelter. After supper the boys piled wood on the fire and lounged around, telling stories and talking over the prospects of getting game. All were enthusiastic, and determined not to return home until they had brought down "something worth while," as Snap expressed it.

When the lads came out in the morning, they found that the snowstorm had cleared away completely. The air was clear and cold, with scarcely any wind.

Whopper could hardly wait to get his breakfast, so anxious was he to go after game. Giant suggested that they go on their snowshoes, but Snap demurred.

"Not the right kind of snow yet," he said. "Let us skirt the lake this morning and see what we can pick up near camp."

Before they left the Inn they saw to it that every spark of the fire was extinguished, for the dreadful conflagration of the summer season had taught them a useful lesson. They also placed their matches in a tin can, so that they might remain dry and also to keep them from being lit by some prowling wild beast.

"I once heard of a place being burnt down by a fox," said Giant. "The animal knocked the match box from a shelf on which some rabbits were hanging."

"Well, I've often heard of rats setting fire to buildings by igniting matches," answered Snap.

"Millions of times," came from Whopper. "Rats sometimes do that for a regular business. They make a deal with people who want to get a fat insurance; you know, and then--Oh!" And the remarkable story came to a sudden end as Shep shied a snowball at the youth who loved to exaggerate.

They were soon on the way, Snap, Shep and Giant with their shotguns and Whopper with the rifle. They headed directly along the shore of Firefly Lake, intending to make the complete circuit of that sheet of ice.

They had proceeded only a short distance when Snap held up his hand.

"Rabbits," he whispered. "We are in luck!"

"Humph! I wanted to see a bear," grunted Whopper.

"Now, dolt you spoil this for us," remonstrated Snap.

"Let us fire together," whispered Giant. "I see at least a dozen."

The bunch of rabbits were close to the lake front, nibbling the bark from some young shoots growing in that vicinity. Without delay Snap, Shep and Giant brought their shotguns around in position to fire.

"I'll give the signal," said Shep. "Shep, you fire to the left. I can fire to the right, and Giant can blaze away at the middle of the bunch."

"There they go!" screamed Whopper just then, and he spoke the truth, the rabbits had discovered the hunters and were making mighty bounds to gain the thickets beyond lake shore.

All the boys with shotguns blazed away, and four of the rabbits dropped in their tracks. Another went limping along painfully and Snap caught it with ease. But there was no time for a second shot.

"Well, that's not so bad, for a start," observed Giant, as they took up their game.

"If I hadn't yelled you'd have lost the bunch," said Whopper. "Why, I was most tempted to bring one down with the rifle."

CHAPTER IX

INTO A HOLE AND OUT

Inside of an hour the young hunters had passed to the extreme end of the lake and were coning down on the other side.

"Here is where the Ham Spink crowd stole our boat," said Snap, indicating the spot.

"Phew! and what a time we did have on the lake afterwards," was Whopper's comment. "Say, I can't understand yet why some of us weren't drowned."

"Don't make so much noise," said Shep. "We'll never get any game if you keep on talking."

After that they went on a distance of a hundred yards in perfect silence. Then Giant came to a halt, and pointed up two trees in front of him. On the branches were half a dozen fat, gray squirrels.

Again those carrying shotguns discharged their fowling pieces, and down came three of the largest of the squirrels. Then Snap let Whopper have his gun and down came another squirrel just as he was about to

enter his hole.

"Squirrels and more!" shouted Giant, rushing forward.

"More?" queried Shep. "We shot only the squirrels."

"True, but you've forgotten what the squirrels hide away."

"Nuts!" exclaimed Whopper. "Just what we want, to eat in front of the camp-fire at night."

It was an easy matter to locate the storehouses of the squirrels, and from each they took a quantity of nuts. They did not take all, for they did not wish the squirrels that were still alive to starve.

"I guess we have got all the game we'll find around here," observed Shep, as they went on once more. "The banging away will make the rest of the game keep under cover."

"Well, let us go around the lake anyway," answered Snap. "There is no fun in crossing over on the ice without skates."

Down at the lower end the lake made several turns, winding in and out among the rocks, and here the boys left the ice and walked under the trees and between the bushes.

"This isn't so pleasant," said Whopper, as he stumbled on a rock and rolled over on his side.

"Look out, that your gun doesn't go off!" cried Snap, warningly. "Keep the muzzle pointed at the ground."

"That's what I always do," answered Whopper.

They had almost reached the end of the lake, at the point where it emptied through the rocky gorge into Lake Cameron, when Giant came to a sudden halt and uttered a low whistle.

"What is it?" questioned Snap and Whopper in a breath.

"Saw something through yonder trees--something big," was the answer of the small member of the Gun Club.

"You did?" said Snap. "What did it look like?"

"Looked like a cow--but of course it couldn't be that."

"Maybe it's was a moose!" cried Shep. "Let's go after him."

The thought that a moose might be so close at hand thrilled all the boys, and without a moment's hesitation they started off in the direction in which the strange animal had been seen.

"If it is a moose let me take a rifle shot at him," whispered Whopper.
"A bullet is what he'll want to lay him low."

"I'm willing you should have the first shot," said Snap.

The others also agreed that Whopper should be the first to fire--if the game was really as large as expected--and the boy who loved to exaggerate went to the front.

They had to climb a small hill, which came to an abrupt end beside another gully. Here the bushes had been bent low by the wind and were covered with drifted snow.

"Be careful--walking isn't very good here," cautioned Whopper. "The ground seems to be spongy."

All ranged up to the edge of the gully and prepared to leap across. As they did this, some of the bushes and the snow gave way, and down they went in a heap, a distance of ten or a dozen feet. As they fell Giant's shotgun went off with a bang that scared them greatly.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Snap, when he could free himself from the snow.
"What a tumble? Is anybody hurt?"

He gazed around, to find Whopper head first in a snow drift. He pulled his chum out, and in the meantime Shep and Giant scrambled up.

"Did--did my shot hit anybody?" questioned the smaller member of the club, anxiously.

"I'm safe," announced Snap.

"So am I," came from Whopper. "But say, I thought I was going to plow through the snow clear to China!"

"The discharge went pretty close to my ear," announced Shep. And then, as he began to realize the escape he had had, he grew slightly pale.

"I tried to keep the gun barrel pointed to a safe place," said Giant.
"But the fall came so quickly I had hardly time to think. I am thankful nobody was struck. Had I hit anybody I should never have forgiven myself!" And he shuddered.

"Be careful of the rest of the guns," said Whopper. "We don't want to be blown out of this hole--we prefer to climb out--at least I do."

They looked to their firearms, and then gazed around the locality in perplexity. The gully was long and narrow and both sides were covered with ice and snow. The ground above, also covered with ice and snow, was well out of their reach.

"Getting out is going to be no easy task," announced Snap. "Maybe we'll have to, walk to the end of the gulch."

"Wait, perhaps I can climb out--if one of you will give me a boost," said the doctor's son.

The others were willing to have Shep make the trial, and Snap and Whopper put down their guns and aided him by putting his feet in their hands. Shep caught hold of some bushes and began to haul himself up with all his strength.

"Hurrah! he is going to make it!" cried Giant, when snap! went the bushes, and down rolled the doctor's son and plunged once more into the snow.

"Whow!" he spluttered, as he arose and worked the snow from his collar and his coat sleeves. "No more of that for me! Snap, don't you want to try it?"

"No, I prefer to walk to where the gully is not so deep."

They struck out, to find the bottom of the gulch filled with boulders, bushes and snow. More than once one or another went down into a hollow and had to be hauled out.

"Phew! but it's cold down here!" murmured Whopper. "My feet feel like two cakes of ice."

"One of the delights of hunting in the winter time," observed Snap.

"Want to go home, Whopper?"

"Not for a million dollars and a mince pie thrown in," was the prompt answer.

"Say, a piece of mince pie wouldn't go bad just now." said Shep, smacking his lips.

"Don't mention it, please."

It took a quarter of an hour's hard journeying to reach a point where the gully was only four or five feet deep, and here they left the hollow with ease. They were now further away from the lake than ever and in a locality that looked new to them.

"I don't remember this spot, although I thought we were all over this ground last summer," observed Snap.

"A place looks different in winter from what it does in summer," said Shep.

"Then that must be it."

"I reckon that moose must be 'steen miles from here by this time," said Whopper. "He must have heard Giant's gun go off."

As they could see nothing of the strange game, they agreed that Whopper must be right in his surmise and so determined to look around for other game. They circled the end of Firefly Lake, and then walked a short distance in the direction of Lake Cameron.

"Wait!" called out Whopper, presently, "Snap, let me have your shotgun." And he reached for the weapon.

"What do you see?"

"A wild turkey, and a big one, too."

Snap was willing that Whopper should have a try at the turkey, since he seemed so disappointed at losing track of the big game, and so passed over his shotgun. The wild turkey was roosting near the top of a silver maple tree. Taking careful aim, Whopper blazed away.

To the astonishment of all, the wild turkey gave a flutter, sank back on the tree limb and then became quiet.

"What in the world does that mean?" gasped Whopper, hardly believing that he saw aright.

"Maybe you didn't hit him," suggested Giant.

"Didn't hit him--at such a short distance?" said Whopper, in disgust. "Of course I hit him."

"Then why didn't he tumble down or fly away?" came from Shep.

"He'd fly quick enough--if he could," said Snap. "There is something wrong with him. Maybe he is caught fast in the crotch of the limb."

Guns in hand the four boy hunters ran forward until they stood directly under the silver maple. Here they could see the head and the tail of the wild turkey, but that was all. The game did not offer to move, even when Whopper set up a shout.

"He's dead and caught fast, I am sure of it," said Whopper. "If it were otherwise he would surely flutter down or fly away."

"You'll have to do some climbing to get your game," said the doctor's son.

"Well, I can do that, too--if you'll give me a boost," answered Whopper, passing over the shotgun and laying aside his rifle.

The others assisted him to reach the lower limbs of the silver maple, and up he went from one branch to another until he stood directly beneath the wild turkey. He put forth his hand with caution.

"Be careful," cried Shep. "If the turkey is still alive he may show fight and try to peck out your eyes."

Shielding himself as best he could, Whopper presently caught the turkey by one foot. He pulled gently at first and then gave a strong yank. Down came the game from the crotch of the tree, and Whopper almost lost his balance. To save himself he let the game drop to the ground and clutched at the tree branches nearest to him.

"Dead as a door nail!" he announced, as soon as he felt safe. "And I knew it from the start. He didn't fall because he got caught, that's all."

"Now you are up in the tree you had better take a look around and see if any more game is in sight," called up Snap.

"I will."

While the others stamped around to keep warm, Whopper mounted to the topmost branches of the silver maple. From this position he could overlook a wide expanse of country. He gazed first to the northward and then over to the west.

"Hullo!" he yelled suddenly. "I see something worth going after."

"What?" questioned the others in concert.

"Two deer."

CHAPTER X

OUT AFTER DEER

"You see two deer?" queried Snap.

"Yes."

"How far from here?" questioned the doctor's son.

"A good quarter of a mile."

"Oh, that's not so far!" exclaimed Giant. "Come on after them, fellows."

"Wait till I get down," said Whopper, coming as quickly as he could.

"Don't go ahead yet."

"How are we going ahead, since you are the only one that knows where the game is?" answered the doctor's son.

As soon as Whopper was on the ground, they set off, taking the wild

turkey with them. The shot had entered the heart of the turkey, killing it instantly, and its single flutter had only served to wedge it fast in the tree crotch.

"Boys, it is growing colder," announced Snap, as they proceeded.

"As if we didn't know it," answered Giant, slapping his hands together.

"And I think it is going to snow some more," went on Snap.

"Pooh! who cares!" cried Whopper. "I am going to get one of those deer if I die for it."

"So say I!" put in Shep. "Remember, we ought to get quite some game on hand, in case we get snowed in at the camp."

The sky had become overcast, and this was what made it seem colder. The wind, too, was springing up, and they were glad to keep to the sheltered portions of the ground so far as the journey after the deer permitted.

Inside of fifteen minutes they covered more than a quarter of a mile. Yet no deer were to be seen.

"Whopper, didn't you make some mistake?" asked Snap, coming to a halt.

"I am sure I saw the deer."

"Whopper must have been deceived in the distance," said Giant. "Things look closer on the water, or when the ground is covered with snow."

"Perhaps that's it," answered Whopper. "Anyway, the deer were somewhere out here, I'm sure."

Again they went on, but soon came to a series of rocks, where walking was difficult. Giant slipped on one of the rocks and barked his left shin.

"Oh dear!" he cried, in pain. "I don't like this much. It is a regular Rocky Road to Dublin!"

"I don't feel like going much further," said Snap. "I think we ought to go, back. See, it is starting in to snow," he added, as the flakes began to fall.

The four boy hunters held a consultation, which almost ended in a quarrel. Whopper was determined to go ahead after the deer and so was Shep, while Snap and Giant insisted upon returning to the camp.

"I'll tell you what's let do," said Whopper. "Two of us can go on and two go back. That's fair."

"And the two to go back can take the game to camp," added Shep. "There is no use of our carrying it with us. And, besides, if we get a deer, that will be a big load for us."

"Aren't you afraid of a big snow coming on?" questioned Snap.

"Oh, this snow won't amount to anything," declared the doctor's son.

"Perhaps it will."

Snap and Giant took possession of all the game, and turned over to Shep and Whopper the lunch that had been brought along.

"We can get what we want when we reach camp," said Snap. "And you may need this before you get back."

"If I were you I wouldn't stay out too late," cautioned Giant. "If you do, you may lose your way in the dark."

"We'll be safe enough," answered Whopper confidently.

It was no light load for Snap and Giant to carry, for the turkey, rabbits and squirrels were all big. They saw Shep and Whopper depart and rested fully five minutes before taking to the back trail.

"I wish they had come with us," said the leader of the Gun Club. "I doubt if they get a deer--the wind is blowing directly toward the game."

"Well, they wanted to go so let them," answered Giant.

The barked shin hurt considerably and he was anxious to get back to camp, that he might wash it and bathe it with witch hazel.

"Let us go up the lake and across on the ice," suggested Snap. "It will be shorter, and we'll avoid that nasty gully and the rough rocks."

They took to the course mentioned, and inside of half an hour reached the lake front once more. It was now snowing steadily and the wind was gradually rising.

"I said it was going to snow hard," grumbled Snap. "They should have come with us. It won't be fit to be out in another hour."

"Well, they wanted their own way, so let them have it," answered his companion.

They wished they had their skates to skate across a cove which separated them from the camp. The bare spots on the ice were as slippery as wet glass and they had to walk "as if on eggs," as Snap expressed it. Once his right foot went from under him, and he measured his length on his back, while his gun slid a dozen feet away.

"Come here and I'll pick you up," sang out Giant merrily, as soon as he saw his chum was not hurt.

"That was a peachy fall," grumbled Snap, as he turned over and got up. "Glad the gun didn't go off."

"Do you know what I am going to do--if it doesn't snow too hard?" said Giant, as they walked on again. "Try my luck at fishing through a hole in the ice. Fish will taste good for breakfast."

They were directly in the middle of the lake when a distant gunshot reached their ears, followed by another. They halted and listened.

"Whopper and Shep must have found something to shoot at," remarked the smaller member of the Gun Club.

"Or else there are other hunters in this vicinity. I shouldn't be surprised if Jed Sanborn is out."

"Yes, and a dozen others, for the matter of that."

By the time they had crossed the lake the wind was blowing furiously, sending the snow whirling over the smooth ice in long white streaks. More than half out of breath, the two young hunters were glad enough to reach the shelter of the trees and bushes.

"It's going to be a corker," was Snap's comment. "Just listen to the wind whistling through the trees!"

"I don't think I'll try fishing just yet," said Giant. "I might get frozen fast to the ice."

"Fishing will have to wait, Giant. Come on into the Inn."

They were glad enough to enter the shelter and rest for a few minutes. Then, when they had regained their breath, both set about building a fire. Luckily they had saved some dry bark and brushwood, so starting the blaze was comparatively easy. They heaped on several medium-sized sticks and then a good back and a front log, and soon the fire was roaring merrily. The home-made chimney was wide open at the top, so a good deal of heat was lost, yet enough remained below to warm the shelter nicely.

"I tell you, a fire makes all the difference in the world!" declared Snap, as he pulled off his outer coat and cap and sat down close to the chimney. "No matter how forlorn or lonely a fellow feels, a fire is bound to brighten him up and make him feel on better terms with himself."

"Right you are, Snap. I pity the fellow who gets left in the woods without a match, or the wherewith to start a camp-fire," answered Giant, who was using the witch hazel on his ankle.

As soon as they were warm, the two boys set to work to cook themselves a substantial meal. They prepared sufficient for all hands, thinking that Shep and Whopper would be back in an hour or two at the most.

"They won't stay out very long--with this snowstorm on," remarked Snap. "They know what such a storm means as well as we do."

Before leaving camp that morning Giant had made some bread dough and set it for raising. This was now in good shape and he kneaded it over and made some loaves and some muffins. The muffins they used for their meal, along with more beans and some stewed squirrel, and a pot of hot chocolate. They ate leisurely, at the same time keeping their ears on the alert for the coming of their companions. Three times during the meal Snap went to the doorway, to gaze out.

"They are foolish not to come back before it gets night," he said. "If they don't look out they'll be snow-bound."

"Oh, Snap, do you think so?" cried the smaller member of the club, in alarm.

"It might happen, Giant. Just look how it is snowing! Why, I can't see a hundred feet from the Inn!"

Giant came to the opening and peered forth. Snap was right, the snow was coming down thickly, and the fierce wind sent it swirling in all directions. The landscape on all sides was completely blotted out.

"Oh, if only they had come back with us!" murmured Giant.

Both of the boys sighed and returned to the fireside, finishing their meal in silence. They were much worried, more than they cared to admit to each other.

The meal over, Giant warmed some water and washed the few tin dishes and other things which had been dirtied. Snap put another log on the fire, and then got out the acetylene bicycle lamp that had been brought along.

"What are you going to do with that?" questioned Giant.

"Light it and hang it out for a searchlight," answered Snap. "It may aid them in finding the Inn."

The gas lamp was soon fizzing and then Snap applied a match. As it flashed up, he regulated the light and then the affair was taken outside and hung where its rays might flash forth through the storm and across the cove of the lake.

"They can see that quite a distance, even through the flying snow," said the leader of the Gun Club. "And they'll want all the light they can get, to find their way back."

He and Giant sat down again in front of the roaring fire. They watched the sparks fly upward and the ruddy glare showed a concerned look on the face of each. They did not care to read or play any game, and talked in low tones, each with his ears strained to catch any sound from without.

Slowly one hour after another went by, until the darkness of night lay over the camp. The snow came down as thickly as ever and the wind shrieked dismally through the leafless trees. Time and again the two boys had gone to the doorway to look out, and Snap had even run down to the very edge of the lake.

"It's no use," he said finally. "They are snowbound and can't get here. If only they are safe!"

"Yes, if only they are safe!" echoed Giant.

CHAPTER XI

SNOWBOUND

Left to themselves, Shep and Whopper started off briskly after the deer that had been seen from the top of the tree.

"We must get at least one of 'em by all means," said Shep. "It won't do to go back to the camp skunked."

"We shan't be skunked," answered Whopper, confidently. "If there are a dozen, we'll bag the lot of them!"

The trail was by no means as easy as they had anticipated, and they had to pick their way around the rocks and through the brushwood with care. Once Whopper slid down one of the rocks and landed on his back with a thump that took the wind out of him completely.

"Cats and carrots!" he gasped. "Say, but that was a hard one, right enough!"

"Trying to split the rock?" asked Shep, helping him up.

"No, I was only testing it, to see how soft it was," growled Whopper.

Soon the two boys found themselves going up a small hill. The climb was rather discouraging, until Whopper let out a soft cry, and then motioned for silence.

"See 'em?" queried his chum, in a whisper.

"No, but there are the tracks, as plain as day!"

Whopper was right, the deer tracks were there, although partly covered by the falling snow. At the sight of them the spirits of the boy hunters arose wonderfully. They forgot how tired they were, and pushed forward at a faster gait than ever before.

"Won't we surprise them when we come back with such game!" said Shep.

"I think so, Shep. They didn't really think we'd get anything," answered Whopper.

On and on went the boys, the trail of the deer becoming plainer at every step. They did not notice how much ground they were covering nor in what direction they were moving. They had "deer fever" and had it hard.

Presently they came to the top of the rise of ground. Beyond was a patch of scrub timber, where, years before, a forest fire had wiped out the best of the trees. Looking ahead they saw four deer walking slowly along near some brushwood.

"There they are!" cried Shep, and brought his gun around for use.

At that moment the deer turned partly around and looked squarely at the boys. They were evidently taken completely by surprise and their heads went up high as they discovered the enemy. Then, without further hesitation they leaped forward, toward the dense timber ahead.

Bang! went Shep's shotgun, and crack! came the sharp report of Whopper's rifle. Before the echoes had died away the last of the deer leaped high in the air, made a part turn and then came down heavily. Then it got up, ran several paces and fell again and began to kick.

"I hit him!"

"So did I!"

"Let's try for another!"

But to try for another was out of the question. With the fall of the hind one, the others reached the shelter of the dense timber and in a second more were completely out of sight, and running as only frightened deer can run when they know it is a case of life or death for them.

When the two young hunters reached the side of the fallen deer it was just breathing its last.

The bullet from the rifle had entered its side and the buckshot had struck in the neck and shoulder.

"We both brought him down," said Shep.

"Pity we didn't get the others," grumbled Whopper.

"Well, one is better than nothing."

"Oh, I know that, and I am thankful as far as that goes. Will it be worth while to go after the others, do you think?"

"No. They'll run too far before they stop."

The deer was of fair size, and looked as if it would make good eating. They inspected the game with much interest, turning it over and lifting it up.

"Pretty heavy," announced Whopper. "We'll have all we want to do to carry it to camp."

"Just what I was thinking. And say, just look how it is snowing!"

The two young hunters gazed about them and were a good deal startled. It was growing dark and the leaden air seemed to be filled with snow. They had paid little attention to the wind, but now realized that it was rising steadily.

"The best thing we can do is to make for camp," said Shep. "If we don't--" He did not finish.

"You think we'll be snowbound?"

"Doesn't it look like it?"

"I must admit, it does."

Alarmed more than they cared to mention, both boys prepared to return to the Inn without delay. They selected a slender sapling and cut it down with a hunting knife Shep carried. They trimmed off the limbs, thus making of it a pole. To this they slung the deer, tied fast by the front and the hind legs. Then Whopper took the front end of the load and Shep the rear end, and thus they set off in the direction they had come.

For perhaps a quarter of a mile all went well, for, despite the falling snow, they managed to keep to the tracks they had made in following the deer. Then, of a sudden, Whopper came to a halt and Shep, of course, had to do likewise.

"What's up?" asked the latter.

"I can't see the trail anymore. The falling snow has covered it completely."

Whopper was right, as Shep realized with much alarm. Both of the young hunters gazed around in perplexity. The whirling snow hid the

landscape from view. In a moment more, turning this way and that, they were completely bewildered.

"Well, I declare!" burst out Shep. "Hang me if I know where I am!"

"I think the lake is in that direction," announced Whopper, after a painful pause.

"Maybe you are right--I don't know." There seemed to be no sense in standing still, with the snow coming down thicker every minute and the wind whistling dismally all around them. On they went, for at least a quarter of a mile further. The rocks bothered them a great deal and twice both fell, dropping their load as they did so. "This is the finest pleasure stroll I ever took in my life," was Whopper's rather sarcastic comment. "Such level walking, and such nice bright sunshine, with birds singing and--Oh!" And his speech came to an end as he went down again, this time into a hollow of snow and dead leaves up to his knees.

"Are you hurt?" asked Shep.

"Not enough to weep over," was the answer. "But, no joking, this is fierce! I wish I was back to camp."

"So do I, Whopper. But wishing won't take us there--we've got to walk."

"Isn't it getting dark!"

"Yes, and just listen to that wind!"

By this time, both of the young hunters were scared, although neither mentioned it. Again they went on, but only for a dozen rods. Then both halted and stared in front of them in amazement.

"What's this?"

"We aren't going toward the lake at all!"

Before them was a slight hollow and beyond a cliff of rocks all of twenty to thirty feet high. On the top of the cliff grew a number of large trees and several of these had, in times past, been blown over, their tops resting in the hollow below while the roots still clung fast near the top of the cliff.

"Did you ever see this spot before?" asked Shep.

"Not that I can remember," answered his chum. "But I am sure it is not near the lake."

The young hunters were more alarmed than ever. They felt that they must be miles from camp. Night was now upon them, and the storm, instead of clearing away, was growing worse every minute.

"I don't think we can reach camp to-night," said Shep, as bravely as he could, although his voice trembled slightly. "We'll have to try and make ourselves as comfortable as possible elsewhere."

"What, right out here in the woods!"

"No, we can hunt for some sort of shelter, Whopper."

"Don't you think we can find the lake? If we once found that we could keep on along the shore until we struck our camp."

"I don't believe we can locate the lake in this darkness and with the snow coming down so thickly. Why, look around! You can't see at all!"

Whopper did gaze around, and had to admit that Shep was right. They were shut in by the storm, which seemed to grow wilder and wilder.

With heavy hearts the boys drew closer to the cliff, as that seemed to afford some shelter from the wind, which cut like a knife. In the darkness they stumbled into the hollow and then between two of the fallen trees.

"Well, if we have got to seek shelter, this place may prove as good as any," observed Whopper. "It's warmer under the rocks, and we can use some of these tree branches for a fire."

"Yes, we must have a fire," answered the doctor's son, who did not relish the darkness. He wondered what they would be able to do should wolves attack them, but did not mention this to his companion.

Dropping their load in the snow, they felt their way between the trees, and then broke off some of the small branches for firewood. They got the driest they could find.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" came suddenly from Whopper.

"What's up?"

"I haven't a single match! Have you any?"

In haste Shep felt in his pocket. There were two matches there, but one felt as if it was no good.

"I've got two, but one feels as if the top was off," he announced.

"For gracious sake, don't let the good one go out, Shep! Here, I've got an old letter in my pocket. Light that first."

The doctor's son felt in his other pockets and brought forth part of an old railroad timetable. The papers were bunched together and held low, while Shep tried to strike the match that had lost part of its head. It made a faint streak of light, but that was all.

"Is that the good one?" asked Whopper, hoarsely. Never before had he been so anxious about a light.

"No. I'll try the good one now," answered the doctor's son.

"Don't let the wind blow it out," pleaded his chum. "Here, use my cap."

The papers were placed beside the cap, and Shep struck the match several times. Both of the boys hardly dared to breathe. Then came a flash, and a tiny flame sprang up, and the papers were set to blazing. They put on the smallest and driest of the twigs and then the small branches, and both tended the fire with as much care as an infant receives from its nurse. Soon it became stronger and stronger, and they breathed a deep sigh of relief and put on some big pieces of wood.

As Snap had said at camp, the fire brightened things up wonderfully and both boys felt lighter-hearted as the ruddy glare lit up the scene. They found something of a circular hollow under the cliff with a big fallen tree just beyond it. They brought the fire to one side of this hollow, and banked up the snow on the other side, and soon the shelter began to grow warm. Then they brought in the deer and hung the game in a fork of the fallen tree.

"Lucky we brought that lunch along," said Shep. "I am as hungry as a bear."

"So am I," returned Whopper, "and I don't think that little lunch is going to satisfy me. What's the matter with broiling a venison streak?"

"Do you want to cut up the deer before we get back to camp?"

"Most likely we'll have to. If this snow keeps on there is no telling how long we'll be snowbound."

"That is true, too. Well, we needn't cut up the whole deer--only cut out what we want to use."

CHAPTER XII

A CRY FOR HELP

Fortunately for the boys, they knew how to cut up a deer to advantage and it did not take them long to trim away a portion of the pelt and get out the steak they wanted. Then they fixed up a rude fork on which to cook the meat, and soon the appetizing odor of broiled venison

filled the hollow.

"This is much better than nothing but a cold lunch," said Whopper, as he divided the steak. "Fingers were made before knives and forks, and as nobody is looking on, we can eat as suits us."

"Let us broil another steak, before the fire gets low," suggested the doctor's son. "If it goes out on us we won't want to be without something to eat?"

"That fire isn't going out--not if I know it. Why, it would be awful to be left without a light, and without warmth. We might freeze to death--if it got much colder!"

Another and larger steak was well cooked, and then the boys set to work to gather a generous supply of firewood, breaking and cutting it as best they could. This was hard work, but it kept them warm, and neither complained.

"I suppose Snap and Giant are worrying about our not getting back," said Whopper. "I hope they don't come out to look for us."

After they had cut all the wood they wanted, they sat down again by the fire. Both boys were very tired, yet the strangeness of their situation kept them awake for several hours. They watched the snow, as it came down as thickly as ever, and listened to the shrieking of the wind as it tore through the trees on the top of the cliff.

"Do you think more of the trees will come down?" questioned Whopper.

"I am sure I don't know," was Shep's reply.

At last both boys began to blink and stretch themselves, and then Whopper said they had better go to sleep.

"You turn in first," said Shep. "I'll watch the fire. When I can't keep awake any longer, I'll call you."

Whopper laid down and was soon slumbering. Shep continued to guard the fire, and, to keep himself awake, walked up and down the narrow confines of the temporary shelter. He often paused to listen to the roaring of the wind, which, outside of the crackling of the blaze, was the only sound that broke the stillness.

"Well, I am glad no wild animal has come to disturb us," he thought, as he continued to pace up and down.

Presently he sat down and his eyes closed. For a moment he dozed, and then started up. A low moan had reached his ears.

"What in the world is that?" he asked himself, and felt his hair standing on end. Then he heard the moan again, and turning half around, began to grin to himself. The moan had come from Whopper, who

was having a nightmare.

"Hi, Whopper! Wake up!" he called, and shook his companion.

"Get out--don't chew me up!" groaned Whopper, and then sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Wha--what's the matter? Oh, I--er--I guess I was dreaming," he said sheepishly.

"You were, and groaning fit to raise the dead," answered the doctor's son, who now felt that he could afford to laugh.

"I dreamt about a million wolves were after me, and one was going to chew my foot off," said Whopper. He stretched himself. "Time for me to stand guard?"

"I think you had better. I am so tired I feel like sleeping standing up," answered Shep.

Whopper arose, and waiting to make certain that his companion was wide awake, Shep threw himself on the couch, which had been formed of some leaves found at the rear of the hollow. He soon fell into a troubled sleep, which lasted about three hours, when he awoke at the sound of Whopper's voice calling him.

"Is it time to get up?" he questioned, sleepily.

"Shep, I hear wolves!"

"Wolves!" and now the doctor's son leaped to his feet and glanced toward his shotgun, which rested against the rocky wall. "Are you certain?"

"Listen!"

Both boys bent their ears and for a full minute neither made a sound. Then Shep shook his head.

"I can't hear anything now," he said.

"Well, I heard them before," answered Whopper, positively. "Must have been a million of 'em, too!"

"Whopper, you've got a million wolves on the brain."

"Have I? Well, I know--Listen!"

The young hunter stopped short, and both listened a second time. From a great distance came the howl of a wolf, followed by an answering howl not so far off.

"Now, what did I tell you!"

Shep did not answer, but picked up his shotgun. Whopper had already

gotten the rifle, and with the firearms fully loaded the young hunters stood on guard for at least a quarter of an hour.

"I don't hear them any more," said the doctor's son, at length.

"They may be sneaking up on the sly," answered Whopper, and it was hard for him to keep his voice from trembling.

Neither of the boys cared to go beyond the light of the camp-fire, and again they waited. But a good half hour went by and nothing more was seen or heard of the wolves.

"You may as well take another nap, Whopper," said the doctor's son.

"I'll give you about two hours, and then I'll lie down for the same length of time. That will about finish out the night."

Whopper agreed to this, but it was some time before he could get to sleep, and then he had another nightmare and groaned as before. But this time Shep "let him have it out," as he told Whopper afterward.

Daylight found them still under the cliff. Their fitful naps of the night just passed had only about half rested them and they did a good deal of gaping as they stirred up the fire and prepared a morning meal. Fortunately Shep had a pocket cup with him, and in that they had to melt snow to get water to drink.

"Well, I am glad the night is over," declared Whopper. "I declare, I don't want to pass another like it!"

"Let us be thankful that it was no worse," answered the doctor's son. "Supposing we had not found this shelter, or supposing that match had gone out, or supposing we hadn't shot the deer--"

"Stop, Shep! I am blue enough already. I'll tell you what it is: By hook or by crook, we must get back to camp before to-night. If we don't the others will be worried to death about us, I am sure."

"That's easy enough to say. But look at the snow."

Whopper looked beyond the shelter. The snow had stopped coming down but it lay to the depth of several inches in some spots and in drifts three and four feet high in others. He gave a sigh.

"Tough traveling and no mistake. Maybe we can't get through at all!"

"I know what I am going to do, first of all," said Shep. "I am going to climb a tree on the top of the cliff and locate myself."

"That's a good idea."

Breakfast over, both boys scrambled up one of the fallen trees to the top of the cliff. Not far away was a tree with low branches and up this went the doctor's son, Whopper boosting him all he could. All the

boys could climb well, and soon Shep was far enough up to look around on all sides.

"There is the lake, about three-quarters of a mile off," he said, pointing with his hand. "I can see our camp, too. The smoke is coming up out of the chimney."

"Is it on the other side of the lake?"

"It is across the big cove."

"Do you think we can signal to the others?" questioned Whopper.

"We might try it--with some wet wood," answered Shep.

He came down again, and soon they placed several wet sticks on the fire. This created a dense smoke, which, as the wind had fallen, went straight up into the sky.

"That will tell them somebody is over here with a fire," said Shep.

"But I reckon we had better start for the camp without delay. Just past the cliff is a ridge of high ground running almost to the lake, and the wind has swept it clear of snow, so walking will not be so very difficult."

It gave them something of a pang to put out the fire, yet they did not dare to leave it burning, for fear of setting fire to the forest.

Placing the deer on the pole as before, they set off toward the ridge Shep had mentioned.

With the going down of the wind, the air seemed warmer. The sky was still dull and heavy, and they were afraid it might snow again at any moment. Where the footing was good they almost ran, so eager were they to get back to Birch Tree Inn.

They had almost gained the shore of Firefly Lake when Whopper came to a halt. At the same time a distant cry reached the ears of both young hunters.

"What was that?" asked Whopper.

"Somebody calling for help, Whopper. Listen!"

"Help! help!" came faintly to their ears.

"Don't leave me, please! Help!"

"It's some person calling," said Shep. "But where is he?"

Both boys gazed around in perplexity. Then the cry was repeated, and following the sound they made their way to some brushwood growing between several trees. Here they found a man crouched before a tiny fire. He was dressed in a tattered suit and an even more tattered

overcoat, and his shoes were bound up in potato sacking. A slouch hat full of holes was drawn down over his forehead, and he looked to be exactly what he was, a tramp.

"What's the matter?" asked Shep, not unkindly, for the fellow was evidently suffering.

"Don't leave me," cried the man. "I'm sick and I'm hungry, and I nearly froze to death last night. Please don't leave me!"

"Have you had anything to eat?" asked Whopper.

"Not a mouthful since yesterday noon. I had some stuff wrapped in a newspaper, but I lost it in the snow." The man did not add that he had been intoxicated and had not known where he was going or what he was doing.

"Well, here is a piece of venison steak and some crackers," said Shep. "That's all we can give you just now."

"Ain't you got anything to drink?" asked the man, wistfully.

"No, we don't carry liquor."

"Oh!"

"We can get you some water if you want that," put in Whopper.

"What?"

Whopper repeated his words.

"No, I don't want any cold water--I'm cold enough now," said the tramp.

CHAPTER XIII

IN CAMP ONCE MORE

The boys imagined the man was not well and they dropped their game and set to work to get breakfast for him. They took the venison steak and warmed it up, and also warmed the few crackers which still remained from the lunch. The man ate greedily, and then consented to drink a little water.

"Where are you going?" he asked, while eating the last of the venison. They had found out that, in spite of being a tramp, he was fairly well spoken. Evidently drink had brought him down in the world.

"We are bound for our camp," answered Whopper.

"Oh, so you've got a camp around here?"

"We have one on the other side of the cove--over yonder, where you can see the smoke drifting above the trees."

"I wish you'd take me over to it, boys. I can't stay here--I feel too sick."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know--only I get sharp, shooting pains now and then across my back."

Whopper and Shep looked at each other. They had no desire for the companionship of such a disreputable looking person, yet they did not wish to see the tramp suffer.

"What's your name?" questioned Whopper. "And where do you belong?"

"My real name is Kidlaw Leech, but most of my friends call me Kiddy for short. I came from--er--New York, but I have been up to Fairview and other places looking for work. Yesterday I started to walk to the next town, but I reckon I got lost on the road, and I fetched up here."

"You must have tramped a good distance," answered the doctor's son. He was far from being favorably impressed by the tramp.

"I did," answered Kiddy Leech. "But, say, you'll help me to your camp, won't you?"

"Yes. I have some medicines over there, and one of them may do you good. I'm a doctor's son."

"Got any liquor? That's the best medicine for my back."

"No, but I can give you some peppermint and some ginger."

Again the tramp's face fell. He got up slowly and prepared to accompany the boys. There was nothing more to say, and kicking out the fire, the young hunters told Kiddy Leech to follow them. He came slowly, and caught hold of Shep's arm to steady himself. His breath still smelt of liquor, something that disgusted both lads.

The ice reached, Shep and Whopper cut a long bush and on it placed the deer.

"What's that for?" asked Kiddy Leech, in curiosity.

"It is easier to drag the deer than to carry it," answered Whopper.

"The branch will act as a kind of sled."

"Wish I had a sled to ride on, my back is pretty lame"

Both boys looked at the tramp closely, wondering whether or not he was speaking the truth or shamming. For all they knew he might be as lazy as he was good for nothing. Then Shep whispered to Whopper.

"All right, it won't be for far," whispered Whopper in return.

"You can sit down on the branch beside the deer," said the doctor's son to Kiddy Leech. "We can easily pull you along."

"Thanks, boys, that's kind of you," answered the tramp, and dropped down with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

With their double load the two young hunters did not make very rapid progress across the lake cove. When they came in sight of the flag, which still flew from the sapling, they set up a loud and ringing shout.

"Hullo!" came back from Snap, as he rushed from the shelter, followed by Giant. "Back at last, eh? Are you all right?"

"Yes," answered Whopper. "But we've had quite an adventure, I can tell you. And we've got a deer!" he added, with pride.

Snap and Giant came to the shore to help pull the load up to the camp and then noticed the tramp.

"Hullo!" cried Giant. "How is it you are getting a free ride?"

"Do you know him?" questioned Shep, quickly.

"Not exactly. He came to our house begging--the day before we left home," answered the smaller member of the club, in a whisper.

"We found him half frozen, in the snow," said Whopper. "He says there is something the matter with his back."

The shelter gained, Shep and Giant were glad enough to go in and rest and so was Kiddy Leech. The tramp gazed around the cozy place with keen satisfaction.

"This is a bang-up bunk," he observed. "A fellow could stay here a long time and enjoy himself."

While the three newcomers rested, Giant and Snap bustled around and prepared them a substantial meal, with plenty of hot coffee, for the trip across the cove had been a cold one and they wanted something for "thawing out purposes," as Shep said. Kiddy Leech was not backward in eating a big meal, washing it down with all the coffee offered him.

"Coffee is the next thing to liquor for warming a fellow," he

observed.

"We think it is far better," answered Snap. "We carry no liquor of any kind, only a little alcohol for special purposes."

"Humph!"

After the meal Shep got out some liniments for the tramp, but he said he would try a good sleep first. He sought out a comfortable corner of the shelter, and in a very few minutes was snoring away lustily.

"He certainly takes things easy," said the doctor's son.

"I believe he is thoroughly lazy, and a heavy drinker," answered Giant, and hit the nail squarely on the head.

"What are we to do with him?" questioned Snap. "We certainly don't want him to stay at this camp."

"Not much!" cried Whopper. "As soon as it clears off, we'll fix him up some provisions and start him on his way." And this was decided upon unanimously.

During the afternoon it cleared off to such an extent that Snap and Giant determined to go out for a short walk.

"Let us put on our snowshoes," said Giant. "It will give all of us a chance to get used to them."

Snap was willing, and soon the boys had fastened on their snowshoes, which were long and narrow and first-class in every particular. Both had worn snowshoes before, but not sufficiently to feel thoroughly at home on them.

"Come on!" shouted Giant, who was the first ready, and off he started in fine style, and soon Snap came after them. Shep and Whopper watched them depart and then returned to the shelter, feeling still too tired out to do, more than sit around and take it easy.

Snap and Giant walked on through the woods until they came to a place that showed quite a cleared spot.

"Come on--I'll race you!" cried the smaller lad, and away he went as fast as he could on his snowshoes, and Snap came after him.

The two boys thought they were going over a level sheet of snow, but it was down grade and soon they struck a small hollow. Over went Giant on his face into the snow below, and an instant later Snap followed.

"Whow!" spluttered the small youth, when he could make a sound. His nose and mouth were filled with snow, and some was also down his sleeve. "I say, this isn't so pleasant, Snap."

"Pleasant! I should say not, Giant. Ugh! but this snow is cold!"

"I can't get up!"

"We'll have to do the best we can."

With a great effort, Snap managed to rise to his feet again and then he went to Giant's assistance. After that the two boys were careful how they stepped out and so got along fairly well.

"I don't think I'd care to travel more than a mile or two on snowshoes," remarked Giant, as they turned back towards the Inn. "It is too tiring on the ankles."

When the two lads arrived at the shelter they were tired out and glad enough to take off the snowshoes and hang them up. Shep and Whopper wanted to know how it had felt to walk on snowshoes and they related their experience.

"We'll all have to go out to-morrow," said Whopper. "Just wait till you see me walk! I'll wager I'll walk ten miles with ease."

"Make it a hundred while you are at it," answered Shep. "I am not saying what I shall do."

"If we go out what is to be done with that fellow?" whispered Snap, pointing to the sleeping form of Kiddy Leech.

"I don't know," replied Whopper. "I don't like the idea of leaving him alone in camp."

When night came on they put some fresh logs on the fire and cooked another meal of venison steak. Then, later on, they sat around the blaze, talking and eating nuts and apples. The tramp slept soundly and they left him where he was, even when they retired.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH A TRAMP DISAPPEARS

"I know what I am going to do to-day," said Giant, on the following morning. "I am going fishing through a hole in the ice. I am just hungry for a bit of fresh fish for breakfast."

"I want to fish myself," answered Whopper. "If you don't mind, I'll go with you."

Snap beckoned his chums to the outside of the shelter. The tramp still lay on his couch but was awake.

"Let us take turns at fishing," said the leader of the Gun Club, in a low tone. "Two can fish and two watch the tramp,--until he clears out."

"Let us give him a hint that he is not wanted here," suggested Shep.

"Will you give him the hint?" asked Giant.

"Certainly--I am not afraid."

They prepared breakfast, and when they were ready to sit down and eat the tramp arose and stretched himself lazily.

"That smell good," he said. "Reckon you've got some for me, eh?"

"Yes, you can have your share," answered Shep. "After breakfast we'll give you some lunch in a paper bag and then you can be on your way."

"What, going to throw me out in such weather as this?" cried the man, reproachfully.

"The weather is all right to-day," put in Snap.

"My back hurts a good deal."

"I guess you are able to walk. We'll give you plenty of lunch, so you won't starve."

"It's hard lines on a fellow who hasn't a cent to his name," whined the tramp. His manhood had evidently deserted him completely.

The young hunters looked at each other questioningly. They did not want to be hard on anybody who was in distress. Snap put his hand in his pocket.

"I'll give you a quarter," he said, and passed over the silver coin.

"So will I," added Shep. And then Giant and Whopper also handed over twenty-five cents each, making a dollar in all.

"Much obliged," said Kiddy Leech, pocketing the silver with satisfaction. "But if you don't mind, I won't start out until about noon time. By then I reckon my back will feel better."

"Very well, make it noon then," said Snap. Giant and Whopper were soon down on the ice. They took with them their fishing outfits and an axe.

"I've got an idea we'll find pretty good fishing around yonder bend of the shore," said Giant, pointing with his hand.

Reaching a spot that looked favorable to them, they threw down their fishing outfits and began to cut two holes in the ice, about fifty

feet apart. Cutting the ice was no light task, and they took turns until they had each hole about a foot in diameter.

"Now then to bait up," said Giant.

He had prepared himself for this by cutting out certain portions of the deer meat and small patches of the skin. He soon had his line in trim for use, and with the aid of a light sinker allowed it to sink close to the bottom of the lake.

Whopper was using some bait brought from home, something Jed Sanborn had said might be effective in luring the finny tribe. The two boys stood by the holes patiently, waiting for a bite.

Fully five minutes passed and Giant felt a small nibble. He pulled the bait around a bit and then felt a sudden tug. Up came his line with a rush, and out on the ice flopped a pickerel of fair size.

"Hurrah! first haul!" sang out the small member of the Gun Club, proudly. "Who says we can't catch something?"

After that came another spell of silence and then Whopper gave a yank on his line. Up came a good sized fish, but as it fell on the ice it broke loose from the hook and flopped back into the water with a splash that covered Whopper with the icy drops.

"Oh, hang the luck!" gasped Whopper. "He got away and gave me a shower bath in the bargain."

"Wish I could get a maskalonge," said Giant. "Do you remember the big one I caught last summer?"

"Indeed I do," answered Whopper. "And I remember how the fish pulled you overboard and nearly drowned you."

They continued to fish and presently Whopper got another bite and brought up a good-sized pickerel, of a variety that is known to many as a lake trout. Then both boys got a second and a third bite, and inside of an hour had a fair mess of fish to their credit.

In the meantime Snap and Shep remained near the shelter, fixing up a number of things. Shep made a fresh batch of bread dough and also prepared a pot of beans and baked a plain cake. He likewise tried his hand at an apple pie, but the crust was not right, and later on, when the pie was tested, Whopper said the "lid" might do for a shingle but not for eating. The cake, however, turned out well, and all of the young hunters praised it.

As Snap and Shep moved around, in and out of the shelter, Kiddy Leech watched them closely, although without letting them see it. The tramp had on his ragged overcoat and, when he got the chance, he put a number of things into the pockets on the sly.

Suddenly from the lake there came a loud shouting, and Snap and Shep ran out to see what was the matter.

"Maybe Giant and Whopper are in trouble," said the doctor's son.

They ran out on the ice and then around the bend, to find those who had been fishing running toward them.

"We just saw some big game," panted Giant. "Get the rifle and the shotguns!"

"What game?" queried Snap.

"At least a dozen deer, big ones," answered Whopper. "Oh, hurry. We'll never get such a chance again!"

"Did you really see a dozen?" asked Shep.

"I saw five or six," answered Giant.

"I saw more than that--right across the lake," came from Whopper. "Hurry up!"

With such game so close at hand the four boy hunters were in a fever of excitement. All rushed to the shelter and got their firearms, Whopper and Giant throwing their fish and lines in a heap on the floor. For the time being the tramp was practically forgotten.

"Where are you going?" he shouted after them.

"After some deer. We'll soon be back," answered Snap.

At that moment Shep sighted one of the deer--directly on the opposite shore of the lake. But as soon as the game was seen it disappeared from view.

"They are there, sure enough," exclaimed the doctor's son.

"Shall we go back for our skates?" asked Snap.

"No, there isn't time."

Without further words the four boy hunters started to cross Firefly Lake, stepping as much as possible on the portions that did not look extra slippery. Yet more than one went down with a thump, and this delayed them not a little.

"Where are the deer?" queried Snap, when the other side of the lake was gained.

All looked around, and while one went up the shore, another went down, and then two hurried into the forest, which at this point was extra thick.

"Here are the tracks!" cried Snap, and began to run forward, with the others close at his heels.

But alas! the tracks soon came to an end, on a series of rocks which the wind had swept clear of snow. Beyond this point the ground was so uneven that progress was difficult.

The boys gazed around in perplexity. They had expected some easy shooting. Now the game was gone and they did not know where to look for it.

"May as well go back to camp," said Snap at last. "Remember, we left that tramp in full possession."

"Oh, let us look around a little longer," pleaded Giant.

To please the small member of the Gun Club, the others remained in that vicinity for quarter of an hour longer, looking in every possible direction for the deer. But the animals had made themselves scarce, and that was the end of it.

"Too bad!" sighed Whopper. "I thought we'd get a full dozen this time!"

They had stirred up absolutely nothing in the way of game, and so retraced their steps without firing a single shot. Nobody felt in particularly good humor, and the walk back to camp was a rather silent one.

"Might better have kept at fishing," grumbled Whopper.

"What did you get?" asked Shep, who had not taken time to look at the catch.

"Oh, we've got enough for several meals."

"That's good."

"I hooked one big fish, but he got away."

"The big fish always do," remarked Snap, significantly.

"Oh, I'm not exaggerating," growled Whopper.

When they came in sight of the camp it looked particularly lonely.

"It's a wonder Mr. Kiddy Leech didn't come out to welcome us," remarked Giant.

"He's too lazy," said Shep. "More than likely you'll find him snoring in front of the fire."

"He certainly is a lazy one," said Whopper. "We must clear him out right away."

They came up to the Inn and entered, to find the fire smouldering dimly. The tramp was nowhere to be seen.

"Hullo!" called Snap, but there was no response.

"Maybe he went out to find us," suggested Giant.

"Not much!" exclaimed Snap. "I don't like this," he went on.

"What, Snap?"

"Look around you and see what is missing."

"Missing!"

"That is what I said."

At these words all made a hasty examination of their belongings. Some underwear was gone, also a storm coat, and a number of other things. The tramp had taken a game bag full of provisions, and the pair of skates belonging to Snap.

"He's a thief!" cried Giant.

"I wish I had my hands on him," muttered Snap.

"So do I," put in Whopper, to whom the storm coat belonged.

"We must go after him, and at once," came from Shep. "He must not be allowed to get away with the things he has taken!"

CHAPTER XV

SOMETHING OF A CHASE

"It is easy enough to say go after the tramp, but where are you going to find him?" said Whopper. "We went after those deer, but we didn't get any."

"If he put on the skates, he must have taken to the lake," answered Snap. "Anyway, I don't think it will hurt to look around."

"Somebody ought to stay at camp and watch things," said Shep.

"Whopper, will you do that?"

"Yes."

"Then you can lend your skates to me, while I go after Mr. Kiddy Leech," said Snap.

So it was arranged, and a few minutes later Snap, Shep and Giant set out to look for the tramp who had so unceremoniously disappeared.

"If he took to skating he most likely went down to Lake Cameron," said Snap. "From there he could get to the river and go wherever he pleased."

Once on the ice the three boys skated around on the lake until they saw other skate marks. These they began to follow and soon saw that they led down towards the neck that connected Firefly Lake with Lake Cameron.

"I believe he did not imagine we'd get back so soon," said Giant. "He reckoned on getting over Lake Cameron to the river before we could spot him."

Wherever there was a ridge of snow on the ice they could see the marks left by the tramp quite plainly. They skated with vigor, for they felt that Kiddy Leech would do all in his power to escape.

"He may be lazy, but he'll hump himself now," declared Shep.

"And to think he'd do such a thing as this, afar what we did for him," said Giant. "He can't have any sense of gratitude."

On they went until they entered the rocky passage between the two lakes. Here they had to walk through several ridges of snow and saw that the tramp had done the same.

Out on Lake Cameron the ice was tolerably free from snow, so it was not so easy to follow the trail. But they watched the ice closely, and kept their eyes open for the tiny scratches made by the skate runners. At one point, in a snow drift, they saw where the tramp had taken a tumble and rolled over.

"Served him right," grumbled Snap. "I wish he had taken a dozen falls."

They were nearing the end of the lake when they swept around a curve of the shore. At once, Snap, who was in the lead, set up a shout:

"There he is!"

"And skating for all he is worth!" added Shep.

"Hi, you! stop!" yelled Giant. "Stop, you rascal!"

At first Kiddy Leech did not hear, but presently, as they drew closer, he turned in a startled way. Then he tried to skate harder than ever.

"Stop where you are, or I'll shoot you!" called out Snap, who had brought his shotgun along.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" yelled the tramp, in wild alarm.

"Then stop," went on Snap.

The tramp skated a few strokes more and then halted. Soon the three boys swept up to him.

"Don't shoot!" cried Kiddy Leech again. It's--er--all a mistake. I--er--I didn't mean any harm."

"You didn't?" said Snap, indignantly. "No harm to steal our things? You're a rascal if ever there was one. We ought to hand you over to the authorities."

"No! no. I--er--I wasn't stealing anything. It's all a joke. I was coming back. I thought I'd scare you a little, that's all."

"Hand over that game-bag," said Shep.

"And that storm-coat," said Giant.

"And my skates," put in Snap. "And all the other things you took. And be quick about it, too."

"You'll not go near our camp again," answered the leader of the Gun Club.

Finding himself surrounded, Kiddy Leech gave up the things he had taken, including the skates.

"Now hand over the money you got from us," continued Snap, sternly.

"Why, can't I keep that?"

"Not a cent of it."

Kiddy Leech tried to, protest, but the young hunters would not listen to what he had to say.

"We ought to give you a good thrashing," said the doctor's son. "If we were near town I'd have you arrested."

"Don't you ever show your face near our camp again," said Giant, who, even though small, was bound to have his say.

"If you do, we'll make it red-hot for you," added Snap.

Stripped of all he had taken, the tramp stood glaring at the boys in a sullen manner.

"I'll fix you for this," he began, when Snap cut him short.

"Say another word and we'll thrash you good," he said. "Now get--just as fast as you can walk." And he pointed toward the river.

Muttering under his breath, Kiddy Leech moved on, and the three young hunters watched him until a distant bend hid him from view.

"Doesn't walk as if his back was lame," was Giant's comment.

"Oh, I guess that was all put on--just to arouse our sympathy," answered Snap.

The boys turned back in the direction of their camp, talking about the affair and glad that they had had no worse trouble in getting back their things. In the meantime Kiddy Leech walked on, fast at first and then more slowly, until Rocky River was reached. Here he came to a dilapidated building once used as an ice-house and sat down on a bench in the sun to rest.

"I'm having bad luck right along lately," he muttered to himself.

"Thought sure I'd get away to-day with those things. Gee, but I'm glad they didn't shoot me! That fellow they call Snap looked mad enough to do it. And to think they took that money back too--after giving it to me! Say, I'd like to fix 'em for that!" And he shook his head savagely.

Kiddy Leech had been sitting on the bench less than quarter of an hour when he saw several boys coming along the frozen river on their skates. He looked at them indifferently at first, but soon became interested in two of the number. These boys were Ham Spink and Carl Dudder. The third youth was Barney Hedge, one of Spink's cronies.

"The same boys!" muttered the tramp to himself.

"Hullo, look at the scarecrow!" called out Ham Spink, as he swept up on an elegant pair of silver-plated hockey skates.

"Wonder what cornfield he came from," put in Carl Dudder.

"Got any old clo's' to sell!" cried Barney Hedge, imitating a street merchant.

Kiddy Leech scowled at the trio and said nothing at first. Then, as Ham Spink threw a snowball at him, he arose and beckoned the boys nearer.

"I want to talk to you two," he said, motioning to Carl and Ham.

"We haven't any money for you," answered Ham.

"You can't get a drink out of me," added Carl Dudder. "And by the

way," he added suddenly. "You're the tramp my father fired out of our barn one night last week."

"That's true," answered Kiddy Leech, calmly. "But he won't do it again."

"I know he won't--you won't dare to come around," jeered Carl.

"Humph! I We'll see about that, sonny. Maybe I'll call on your father to-morrow."

"The scarecrow is crazy," said Barney Hedge.

"No, I ain't crazy. But I know a thing or so, and I want to talk to you two in private," went on the tramp, and motioned again to Ham and Carl.

"What do you want?" asked Ham, curiously. He could see that the tramp was not crazy.

"Come here,--or send that other boy away."

"Gosh, got a state secret, eh?" said Barney Hedge. "All right--I'll keep out of it. If you want help, call," he added, as he circled away to a distance.

"What do you want anyway?" questioned Carl, half angrily. "We are not in the habit of associating with tramps."

"We are gentlemen's sons," added Ham, drawing himself up proudly.

"Say, do gentlemen's sons blow up boathouses?" asked Kiddy Leech, in a low but distinct tone.

At this question consternation seemed to seize both Ham Spink and Carl Dudder, and their faces grew pale as they stared at the tramp.

"Wha--what's that?" stammered Ham, faintly.

"I asked you if gentlemen's sons blew up boathouses."

"What do you know about blowing up a boathouse?" asked Carl.

"I don't know much about doing the job. But I saw one blown up not long ago, and--"

"And what?" came eagerly from Ham and Carl.

"And I know you two boys did the job," finished Kiddy Leech, significantly.

CHAPTER XVI

AN EVIL COMPACT

For the next moment Ham Spink and Carl Dudder stared at the tramp in amazement not unmixed with terror.

"You--er--you saw us?" faltered Ham, at length.

"I did."

"You were mistaken," put in Carl. "You--"

"No, I wasn't mistaken, for I saw you with the dynamite, and I saw you go into the boathouse and then come out. And then--"

"Hush, not so loud," interrupted Ham, looking over to where Barney Hedge was skating up.

"Then don't say I don't know anything about it," insisted Kiddy Leech. "I know all about it. You two boys did the job, and nobody else."

"Where were you?" asked Ham.

"Oh, I was just knocking around."

"You can't prove we did it," said Carl, a little of his courage returning.

"Can't I though? Just you try me and see. I don't know your names, but I can soon find them out. I know you belong in Fairview."

"Oh!"

Ham's face grew pale again, and if the truth were known he was trembling in his shoes.

"Say, I--er--I don't want you to say anything about this to anybody," he added, hastily.

"Oh, I am not the kind to tell all I know," answered the tramp.

"Thank you."

"But it will cost you a trifle."

"Eh?"

"How much money have you got with you?" went on Kiddy Leech, calmly.

"Only some change--less than a dollar."

"How much have you got?"

"What is that to you?" demanded Carl.

"I want what you've got, that's all."

"I'll not give it to you."

"All right then, I'll walk to Fairview and tell what I know about that explosion."

"We'll say you did it!" cried Carl, struck by a sudden inspiration.

"Won't do no good--I can prove you're guilty," answered Kiddy Leech.

He spoke with such positiveness that both boys believed him, and after a few words more both agreed to give him all the money they carried if he would keep silent about the matter.

"The boathouse wasn't worth anything," explained Ham. "We only knocked it down to play a trick on some other boys we don't like."

"Some other boys?"

"Yes, some fellows who came up this way to go camping. They had their traps stored in that boathouse."

"Did those boys come to a camp up here?" asked the tramp, with interest.

"Yes."

"What were their names?"

"Snap Dodge, Shep Reed, a fellow called Whopper Dawson and a little chap named Caslette."

"Humph! the very same crowd," muttered Kiddy Leech. "So you played the trick on them, eh? I am glad of it."

"Say, what are you chaps gassing about anyway?" demanded Barney Hedge, who was growing tired of waiting for his cronies.

"Say, Barney, excuse us for awhile, will you," called out Ham, skating towards his friend. "We want to find out something from this tramp. He knows something about the Dodge crowd I am sure."

"Oh! Well, I want to find out about them too," said Hedge and came closer.

"Don't say anything about the boathouse," whispered Ham Spink to Kiddy Leech, to which the tramp replied with a knowing wink of his bleery

eye.

"Have you been up to the Dodge camp?" questioned Carl Dudder.

"Yes, and those chaps treated me shamefully," answered Kiddy Leech. "I never touched a thing they had, yet they accused me of trying to steal some of their traps."

"Just like 'em," said Ham. "They are a mean set, every one of 'em. What kind of a camp did they have, a regular log cabin?"

"No, a sort of shelter patched up among some trees," and at this information Ham and Carl winked at each other.

"Thought we were to go up there some day and play a trick on them," came from Barney Hedge, who, during the summer, had done his full share of trouble-making for all of our friends.

"How would you like to go to that camp and make trouble for that crowd?" said Ham, to the tramp.

"Me?"

"Yes. We'd like to have their outing spoilt. We'd pay you for your trouble."

"Say, Ham, can you trust this fellow?" whispered Barney, half in alarm.

"I think so. He's only a tramp and he will do anything for a little money. If he does the job we won't have to dirty our hands, and if he gets into trouble we can deny that we had anything to do with it."

This view of the matter suited Barney Hedge and also Carl Dudder, and all joined in getting Kiddy Leech to tell them what our friends were doing and how they were situated. Then it was suggested again to the tramp that he go back to the vicinity of the camp on Firefly Lake and make matters uncomfortable for the campers.

"I'll do it, if you'll pay me what it is worth," said Kiddy Leech.

"But I can't go back to-day. It's too cold and I ain't dressed warm enough. And I'll want some provisions."

"I can get you some better clothing," said Carl Dudder. "I think one of my father's old suits will fit you. Maybe I can get you an overcoat, too."

"I can get you some shoes, and a hat," said Barney Hedge.

"I'll furnish the provisions, and we'll pay you some money," put in Ham Spink. "Come along to Fairview if you want to."

So it was agreed, and Kiddy Leech accompanied the young conspirators

back to the town. Here the tramp was given some more money, and he put up at Bamling's Tavern, a low resort near the river. The boys brought him the clothing and other things promised, and he had several talks with them on what was to be done when he went back to the vicinity of the camp on Firefly Lake. He promised to do all they wished; but on the following day he was missing.

"What do you suppose had become of him?" said Ham to Carl, in considerable alarm.

"I am sure I don't know, and Bamling says he doesn't know either," was the answer.

Ham Spink made numerous inquiries and soon learned from some rivermen that Kiddy Leech had yielded to his weakness for strong liquor and gone off on a spree.

"We are out our money," he said to Carl Rudder, in disgust. "He'll never do a thing for us, I am certain, and we dare not prosecute him."

"Maybe he'll do what we want when he gets sober," answered Carl. "He will want more money, and then we can tell him that he can't have a cent until he goes up to the camp and does what we want him to."

When at last they saw the tramp again he looked more battered and disreputable than ever,--so much so, in fact, that the rather fastidious youths were afraid of him. But he would not let them get away from him, and insisted on keeping to the bargain that had been made.

"I am sorry I took to the liquor--but it's a weakness I get once a year or so," he said blandly. "But I'll keep as sober as a judge now, you see if I don't--no more drink for Kiddy Leech until this job is done. All I want is what you promised to me, and you can rely on me doing the rest."

"We are not going to trust you," said Ham, putting on as bold a front as he could, although he was trembling. "You go and do the work as promised and we'll pay you afterwards."

This did not suit Kiddy Leech, and a lively discussion followed, and the matter was compromised. The tramp was given something of another outfit and a third of the money promised to him, and he agreed to accept the rest of the money when he had done the "job" at Firefly Lake.

"Mind you now," said Ham, "I want you to make it just as disagreeable for that crowd as you possibly can. You can soak their firewood with water, hide their guns and provisions, and fix it so the snow will break in their roof--and things like that."

"Oh, don't you worry," declared Kiddy Leech. "I'll make it so uncomfortable for them that you'll see them back home in no time, mark

my words."

"And see that they don't bring any game with them either," said Carl Dudder.

"I'll fix that too," answered the tramp.

CHAPTER XVII

FUN IN THE CAMP

"Boys! wake up! Are you going to sleep all day?"

It was Snap who called out. He had just crawled out of his cozy sleeping place near the fire and looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock.

It was the morning after the day when they had had their trouble with Kiddy Leech, and as they brought in some wood, stirred up the smouldering camp-fire, they talked over what had occurred.

"I don't think he'll bother us any more," said Shep. "He's too much of a coward at heart."

The boys had planned for a day "at home," as Snap put it. They were going to try their hands at cake and candy making, and for dinner were going to have baked turkey, beans and apple sauce. For breakfast Giant and Whopper had prepared some of the fish caught through the ice, and the repast proved a delicious one--quite a relief from the monotony of game.

All of the boys were in exceptionally good humor that day, whistling and singing and "cutting up" generally. Right after breakfast they opened up the Inn to let in some fresh air and during that period of time had a snowball match, using as a target a saucepan lid set up on a tree stump at a distance of a hundred feet. Each took ten trials and Snap knocked the lid down seven times, Shep six times and Giant and Whopper each five times. Then the boys got to snowballing each other, running round the shelter for protection, and at last Giant followed Shep inside, each carrying a chunk of snow.

"Hi! that won't do!" sang out the leader of the club. "No snow allowed inside. Come out, or I'll fine you each five sticks of wood." Which meant that each culprit would have to go out into the woods and chop down five fair sized sticks for firewood. This was a system of fines Snap had instituted and it seemed to work very well.

"No wood chopping in mine," called out Giant, and threw his snow outside. Whopper attempted to do the same, but the chunk fell and

spread all over one of the couches.

"Whopper you are fined five sticks, and you must at once clean the couch, before the snow melts," said Snap.

"Just my luck," grumbled Whopper. "Every time I start out for fun I end up with a funeral!" Yet he set to work willingly, whistling as merrily as ever.

The sport at an end, all of the boys set to work, cake and candy making. They cracked some of the nuts taken from the squirrels' hiding places and then while Snap and Giant made a big nut cake, Shep and Whopper made nut candy. The boys had learned the work at home (for camp purposes) and the results were decidedly appetizing. In the meantime the turkey was roasting, and then Snap and Shep peeled some apples for apple sauce.

"Listen!" cried Whopper. "Am I mistaken, or did I hear a whistle?"

All listened and from a distance heard a clear, sharp whistle, thrice repeated. They knew that signal well, and all rushed to the doorway of the shelter, getting in a jam in consequence.

"I'm the one to get out ahead!" cried the Giant, and the small form slipped deftly between the others. "Hullo, Jed Sanborn! How are you?"

"Hullo, yourself!" came from off the ice of the lake, as the well-known old hunter strode forward. "Thought I'd find you to hum--by the look of the smoke from your chimbley."

"Where did you come from, Fairview?"

"Yes,--got letters fer all of you."

"Oh, letters!" was the cry, and then all the young hunters rushed forward to shake hands and escort the old hunter into the shelter. Jed Sanborn looked around in perplexity.

"Why, say, this ain't the camp I expected," he stammered.

"The other was burnt down when we got here," answered Snap.

"Burnt down? 'T wasn't burnt down when I was here last, lad."

"So you told us. It must have been burnt down after that. The work of some enemy," put in Shep.

"You don't suspect Felps, do you?"

"Either he or the Ham Spink crowd," answered Whopper.

"Humph! Dog mean, wasn't it? Some fellers is too mean to live. Say, that turkey smells good. Ain't starvin' none, eh?"

"Not a bit of it," declared Giant. "We've got more than enough."

"Then kin I get dinner?"

"A dozen of them!" cried Snap.

They made Jed Sanborn make himself at home, and then read with pleasure the letters. All was going along well at Fairview, and the boys were cautioned to take good care of themselves.

"We must send letters in return," said Shep, and this was agreed to instantly, and the communications were pencilled that afternoon.

Jed Sanborn had quite some news to tell, and he listened with interest to the tale the young hunters had to relate about their various quests of game. His brow darkened when they related their experience with Kiddy Leech.

"Sech rascals ought to be run out o' the deestrick," he observed. "An' I'd like the job of runnin' 'em out. I hope he doesn't bother you again."

It was one o'clock when the Gun Club and their guest sat down to their turkey dinner. All took their time over the repast, and as a consequence the meal was not finished until some time after two. Then they took it easy, while Jed Sanborn told them a story about a bear hunt, and how he had once gone fishing on the St. Lawrence and got caught in the rapids.

"It's snowing again!" called out Shep, who chanced to go out, to bring in some more firewood. "Coming down pretty thick, too, I can tell you!"

"I allowed it was going to snow before nightfall," answered Jed Sanborn. "I'll take a look at the sky myself."

As a man who spent nearly all of his life out of doors, he was keenly interested in the weather at all times. He studied the sky carefully for several minutes and then shook his head.

"What do you think?" was Whopper's query. "Going to snow all night, I reckon--an' putty good too."

On account of the snow, it grew dark rapidly, and they had to stir up the fire for light as well as for warmth. Jed had brought with him a small bag of corn for popping, and also a popper, something Shep had meant to bring but had forgotten. While some of the boys cleared away what was left of the meal, Giant and the old hunter popped a pan full of corn, and of this and the cake, candy, and apples they made, later on, what they termed supper.

"My! but it is snowing to beat the cars!" exclaimed Whopper, as he

looked out of the shelter before retiring. "Can't see the end of your nose. I'll bet the snow will be eight or ten feet high by morning."

The evening was spent in playing various games and in singing some of the home songs. The boys could sing fairly well and Jed Sanborn listened with pleasure.

"Wish I could sing myself," he said. "But I ain't got no more voice nor a black crow."

At last it came time to turn in, and they provided the old hunter with a comfortable corner. The fire was fixed for the night, and presently all went to sleep, little thinking of the excitement so close at hand.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNEXPECTED PERIL

The snow continued to come down thickly. The weather had moderated to a great extent and this made the snow heavy and clinging. It came down on the shelter steadily until the top of Birch Tree Inn resembled the top of some large sugar-coated cake.

The roof of the shelter was not as strong as it should have been, for the young hunters were amateurs in the construction of such an affair. It held up bravely until the weight of snow became too heavy, and then it began to bend lower and lower and commenced to snap and crack, as one tree after another gave way.

The boys and the old hunter slept on, unconscious of their danger, until an extra loud crack awoke Whopper. The lad sat up, looked around him and listened. Then came another snap.

"Must be a log on the fire," said Whopper to himself. "But it didn't seem to come from there. Perhaps--Oh!"

Whopper heard a crack directly over his head, then down came a heap of snow that all but buried him.

"Hi! Wake up, everybody!" he yelled, in alarm. "The roof is coming down!"

"What's that?" called Jed Sanborn, rolling out of his blanket and struggling to his feet, only to be hurled flat by the snow that came down on his head.

By this time the boys were all awake and trying to get up. They heard several cracks, and then more snow came down and with it several sticks of good size.

"We must get out! If we don't we'll be hurt!" cried Whopper. "Come on," and he leaped for the doorway, which had been well closed, to keep out the cold.

Before Whopper could gain the outer air the entire roof of the shelter seemed to come down, and Snap and Shep were buried beneath the ruins. Giant was caught against the wall, not far from the rude chimney. Jed Sanborn reached the doorway, and he and Whopper managed to push down the barrier and leap outside.

Some of the snow tumbled into the fire and this created a smoke which all but stifled poor Giant, who, for several minutes could hardly move. In the meantime Snap and Shep were flat on their breasts, trying to squirm from under the mass that was pressing them to the earth.

"The others have been caught!" exclaimed Whopper, in horror, as he gazed behind him. "Oh, what shall we do?"

"Tear the stuff apart as fast as we can," answered the old hunter, and set the example by springing back and pulling on branches, poles and chunks of snow. Whopper set in to do likewise, and the pair labored like Trojans for several minutes. Then they caught sight of Snap and actually hauled him from the wreckage feet first!

"Who's out and who's caught?" demanded Snap, as soon as he could speak, and having learned he went on: "We must get Shep and Giant out, before the fire reaches them!"

"Help! help!" came faintly from Giant.

"Where are you?" asked Snap.

"Here--next to the chimney. I am wedged fast. The smoke is choking me!"

"We'll git him out!" spoke Jed Sanborn, who had not stopped in his labors, and he pitched in harder than ever, with Whopper and Snap doing all they could to aid him. Snap had his face and one hand badly scratched, but paid no attention, just then, to the blood which was flowing from the wounds.

It was not long before the three outside were able to aid Shep. Using all his strength, which was considerable, Jed Sanborn held up a portion of the fallen roof and Shep crawled forth until Whopper and Snap could get hold of him and raise him up. He had suffered but little, although the breath had been forced out of him.

"Get poor Giant!" were the first words. "Don't--don't mind me. I'll be all ri-right when I--I get m-my wind!"

The others were already laboring to release Giant. Through the tangle of branches the smoke was pouring, for more snow had fallen on the

fire.

"Giant, can't you turn and get some air through the cracks of the side?" called out Whopper.

"That's what I am trying to do, but I am caught fast," was the gasped-out answer.

"I'll try to do something around near the chimney," said Jed Sanborn.

"Where's the axe?"

It was given to him and soon he was at work close to where Giant was held a prisoner. Fortunately a slender tree of the shelter frame was located at this point and a few well-directed blows cut it off. Then Jed shoved the tree upward, thus making a hole through which Giant fell rather than crawled.

"Are you burnt?" asked Whopper and Shep, in a breath.

"No, but I am about ha-half smoked!" declared the smaller member of the Gun club and coughed.

"Boys, we must put the fire out, or all of your things will be ruined," said Jed Sanborn. "I reckon I know how to do the trick, now Giant and the rest are out."

"How?" asked several.

"Fill up the chimney with snow."

This was a good idea and soon, by forcing the snow down the chimney, they had the fire all but out. Of course it smoked a great deal, but this did little damage.

It was three o'clock in the morning and the snow was coming down as thickly as ever. They scarcely knew what to do, until Jed Sanborn suggested they build a camp-fire outside.

"So long as you've got plenty of firewood why not use it?" said he.

"We want a light, too."

"Here is the acetylene gas lamp," said Snap, picking it up from where it had fallen, near the doorway.

"And the can of carbide," added Shep. "This will help us to start a fresh fire, even if the wood is wet," he continued.

"How?" questioned Jed Sanborn, who had never used such a "new-fangled consarn," as he called the bicycle lamp.

"I'll show you," answered Shep. "just heap up some of the wood, with the little sticks on the bottom."

The wood was heaped up and then, in a hollow in the snow underneath, Shep dumped out some of the carbide from the can. Then he lit a match, held it to the snow, to melt the latter a little, and up blazed the gas, at first slowly and then more furiously, until the fire was roaring.

"Why, how is that!" cried the old hunter. "Never knew snow to set fire to anything in my life."

"It is very simple, Jed," explained Shep. "As soon as the snow melts it turns to water, and the water, soaking the carbide, generates acetylene gas, which burns about the same as gas in a city."

"Well, it's an easy way to start a camp-fire," was the old hunter's comment. "I've had lots o' trouble sometimes, when the wood was wet as it is now."

The roaring fire made matters a little more cheerful, yet the boys felt discouraged, with the roof of the shelter broken down. Jed Sanborn did all in his power to cheer them up.

"When you go camping like this you can't expect everything to go just right," he said. "You have to take the lean with the fat an' the bitter with the sweet. Now, I knowed a crowd o' men went camping out in the North Woods a few years ago. First one of the men took sick an' had to go home, then the boat they had got to leakin' so they couldn't use it, then came a forest fire, and in running away one of 'em up an' broke his leg. Thet was an outin' fer you!"

"Thanks, but I'd rather stay home," said Snap. "But I believe you,--there is no use of crying over spilt milk, as the saying goes. What do you advise?"

"Cleaning out the place and puttin' up a good, strong roof. We can do it by night."

"Night!" cried Whopper. "What is it now but night?"

"No, it's morning, lad, but rather early, I admit."

Under the old hunter's directions they went to work, and by seven o'clock had the shelter cleaned out. This gave them a chance to get at their stores and also use the fireplace once more, and they cooked a fish breakfast and made a generous pot of coffee and another of chocolate.

"We'll cut all these branches away and then build a regular pole roof," said Jed Sanborn. "Build it right and it will withstand any pile o' snow you kin git on it."

He told them just what poles to cut and how to place them, and showed them the best way to put in strips of bark and bind the whole together. By nightfall they had the new roof finished, and all of the

boys admitted it was much better than the other roof had been.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIGHT WITH THE BUCK

Jed Sanborn had promised to remain long enough in the camp to go out on at least one deer hunt with them, and, on the following day, the whole party started out, shutting up the shelter as best they could, so that no wild animals might get inside during their absence.

The snow had ceased to come down. It covered the ground to the depth of a foot and a half on the level and Jed said it was just the right kind of weather for deer.

"If we spot 'em they won't have much chance to git away," he told them, "They can't run in sech deep snow nohow."

Of course they went on their snowshoes. Jed had brought his own along--a pair rather the worse for wear, but on which he covered the snow as rapidly as any of them. He said he had frequently been out on snowshoes for days at a time and they did not bother him in the least. He grinned when Shep took a tumble, but aided the lad to arise without any comment.

The old hunter had seen some deer at a place called Doorknob Valley, a hollow to the southwest of Firefly Lake, and led them in that direction. The trail was by no means an even one, and often they had to force their way through bushes half buried in the snow.

It was noon before they came in sight of Doorknob Valley, with some hills running around one side and a series of cliffs and rough rocks and scrub pines on the other. To the boys' dismay, not a deer was in sight. Snap looked questioningly at the old hunter.

"I think we'll find 'em somewhere around here," said Jed. "Come, follow me, and don't make any noise. I haven't seen a winter yet when there weren't deer in Doorknob Valley."

They pressed on, over one of the hills, and then towards the cliffs and rough rocks. Soon Jed held up his hand.

"Have you spotted any?" whispered Shep, eagerly.

The old hunter nodded, and then pointed to the edge of one of the cliffs. Under, in something of a shelter, they could see several deer and not far away a big, sturdy buck, all feeding on some tender saplings which they were stripping of bark.

"Oh, what a shot!" whispered Giant, excitedly.

"We'll try to git a bit closer," said Jed Sanborn. "But don't make any noise, or we'll have to follow 'em until they get winded."

Hardly daring to breathe after that, the boys followed the old hunter in and out among the cliffs and rough rocks. This was the hardest part of the journey and both Snap and Whopper went down, the latter twice, much to his disgust.

"Now, don't make a sound," cautioned Jed Sanborn. "And don't show yourselves till I tell you to."

They were passing down between the rough rocks, and soon came to a spot where there were several thick clumps of bushes. Here the old hunter went ahead again. Then he motioned for the boys to drop down low and they did so. Peering forth through the bushes they could now see the deer close at hand. The big buck, however, was not visible.

"Where is the buck?" whispered Snap in Jed's ear. The young leader of the Gun Club wished very much to lay that magnificent beast low.

The old hunter pointed to a nearby cliff.

There was the buck, standing between two saplings, eating the bark of one and rubbing himself against the other.

"Can I hit him, do you think?" went on Snap.

"You can try. But wait."

In a low tone Jed Sanborn instructed the lads to aim and fire to the best advantage. Each was to shoot at his own game, and Sanborn said he would take a shot or two afterwards.

"I'll give the word," said the old hunter. "Are you all ready?"

They were, and he ordered them to fire. Bang! bang! bang! went the three shotguns, and crack! went the rifle. The deer Shep had aimed at was killed outright and the two aimed at by Giant and Whopper were badly wounded. The buck, upon which Snap had tried his skill, was hit in the flank, and he gave a snort of rage as he swung around, breaking one of the saplings as he did so.

"Hurrah, I've got one!" cried Shep, in exultation.

"Mine is down, but it isn't dead," said Giant.

"Neither is mine, but I guess we can get 'em both," answered Whopper. And then the lads ran forward to secure the two struggling deer, that were floundering furiously in the snow.

Snap had turned toward the buck, but now he got a sudden attack of

"buck fever" as it is called and stood stock still, with eyes staring from his head.

"Look out there, he'll horn you!" yelled Jed Sanborn, and raised his gun to fire. But as he did so, Shep bumped against him, and the buckshot intended for the buck only rent the empty air.

By this time the buck was less than a hundred feet from where Snap was standing. That he was wild with rage could be seen from the look out of his wide-open and bloodshot eyes. He lowered his antlers, as if to pierce poor Snap through and through.

"Run! run!" yelled Shep. "Run, Snap!"

It was then that Snap awoke to the peril which confronted him, and turning, he made a leap to one side and around a clump of the bushes. The buck turned too, and at that moment Jed Sanborn discharged the second barrel of his shotgun, this time taking the game in one of the rear legs.

For the moment the buck was halted and he raised the wounded leg and let out a moan of pain. Then his fury increased, and with a mighty effort he arose in the air, intending to leap directly over the clump of bushes and on top of Snap.

But now Shep was ready for another shot and he let drive at the buck, hitting him along the left side. This served to bring the leap to a halt in midair, and doubling up, the buck sank down directly in the midst of the bushes.

"Good for you!" shouted Snap, and rushing forward he, too, took a second shot. This was too much for the buck, and crashing out of the bushes he rolled over and over and then stretched out, dead.

It was fully five minutes before the excitement was at an end. Snap was a trifle pale.

"What a narrow escape!" he murmured. "I thought sure he was going to horn me!"

"A buck will fight sometimes and when he does he's as ugly as any critter on four legs," said Jed Sanborn. "I might have fixed him with my first shot only Shep bumped into me. But I know he didn't mean to do it," added the old hunter hastily.

"I didn't see you--I was looking at the other deer," explained the doctor's son.

"Can we get any more of 'em?" demanded Whopper.

"Whopper always wants a dozen or two," laughed Giant.

"No more deer to-day, lad," said Jed Sanborn. "I think we have had

remarkable luck. Why, sometimes a crowd like this can tramp all day and not get a sight of a deer. As it is, we're going to have some fun getting our game home."

"Oh, we can't carry such a load!" cried Giant.

"We'll cut some drags and get 'em to camp that way," said the old hunter.

He pointed out two saplings which might do for drags, and they cut them down with the axe the old hunter had brought along. Then they placed the two largest of the deer on one and the buck and the smallest deer on the other, thus making the loads about even. Some of the branches of the saplings had been cut off, so that they trailed over the snow rather flatly, which was what was desired.

They had brought lunch with them, and before they started on the return they built a small campfire and made themselves a pot of chocolate, something of which Jed was exceedingly fond.

"I don't go much on candy," said he, "but chocolate seemed to hit the spot, better'n coffee or tea."

"I like them all," answered Snap.

The repast over, they started on the return, Jed helping with first one drag and then the other. He also pointed out what he thought would be the easiest route to follow. This was over two hills.

"Well have to climb, but we won't fall down between any o' the rocks," he said. "It's dangerous walking over rocks with snow on 'em, for if you go down in a hollow you're liable to twist an ankle or break a leg."

"We certainly don't want any accidents," said Shep.

"How the eyes of Ham Spink and his crowd would stick out if they knew we had bagged so much game!" exclaimed Whopper. "If they had such luck they'd never get done talking about it."

"Do you think they'll come out this winter?" questioned Giant.

"I don't know," answered Snap. "If they do come out I hope they keep away from us."

"So do I," put in the doctor's son.

CHAPTER XX

SHOOTING WILD DUCKS

When the boys and Jed Sanborn reached camp a surprise awaited them. Seated at a small fire in front of Birch Tree Inn was an elderly man dressed in the outfit of a mountain guide.

"Why, it's Jack Dalton!" cried Shep.

"Hullo, boys!" called the man at the fire, rising. "Thought as how you'd be back some time to-day. How are ye, Jed?" he added, to the old hunter.

Jack Dalton, as my old readers know, was a guide of that vicinity, well known to all the inhabitants for miles around. He had visited the boys' camp during the summer and had been friendly in more ways than one.

"Thought I might get a shakedown here for the night," said Jack Dalton. "Been hoofing it sence five o'clock this morning--over from Philbrook's preserve--and I'm too tuckered out to make Fairview."

"Certainly you can stay with us," answered Snap. "Had any luck?"

"A few rabbits and some ducks, that's all. Gee shoo! Do you mean to say you got them deer an' that buck to-day?"

"We did."

"Gosh all hemlock! No wonder a feller like me can't get nuthin! That's rare luck; eh, Jed?"

"It was," answered the old hunter. "They don't expect to do it again in a hurry."

The shelter was opened up and all went inside and prepared a generous supper. Jack Dalton insisted upon giving the boys one of the ducks he had brought down, in return for the accommodations received. On their part they gave the guide a generous chunk of venison, for which he was exceedingly thankful.

"I'd like to go out duck shooting," said Whopper. "It would be something different."

"No ducks around Firefly Lake," answered Giant. "I asked Jed."

Jack Dalton was questioned and said that there were plenty of wild ducks below the Philbrook preserve--at a locality known as the Marshes--and he told them how to get there.

"But you want to be careful about walking over the Marshes," he said. "In the summer time there are lots of bog holes, an' it ain't none too safe in the winter time."

As Jack Dalton was going on to Fairview with Jed Sanborn, it was decided by the boys to send the buck and one of the other deer home, which would be easy, with two men to draw the load. All spent a comfortable night in camp, nothing coming to disturb them. Breakfast was a substantial one, and by nine o'clock Jed and Dalton set off with their load, the old hunter also carrying various letters for the folks at home. The boys went out on the lake to see them off, and gave them a rousing cheer on parting.

"Tell everybody we are having the time of our lives," shouted Snap after the pair.

There was more snow in the air, and the young hunters spent the remainder of that day in camp, cleaning the game they had brought in and also their firearms, and mending a couple of snowshoes that had become a little broken. A portion of the chimney also needed attention, and before they knew it, night was once more upon them.

"I'll tell you what," said Snap. "Out here the time seems to fairly fly."

"Boys, do you realize that day after to-morrow is Christmas," came from Whopper.

"So it is!" was the cry.

"Gracious, I almost forgot about it!"

"We must celebrate!"

"Sure thing! Oh, we'll have a dandy time. We can have fish, fowl and venison, and pudding and cake and nuts and apples, and lots of good things," finished Giant.

"Let us go duck hunting to-morrow and spend Christmas here," said the doctor's son, and so it was agreed.

Everything was prepared for an early start, and the four boy hunters were "up and doing" by seven o'clock in the morning.

"Phew! but ain't it cold!" ejaculated Snap, as he slapped his hands together. "I didn't calculate on such a drop in the thermometer."

It certainly was freezing weather and they bundled up well before leaving the shelter. As before, they shut up tightly, to keep out all wild animals. The deer and other game had been hung high by ropes from several tree limbs.

Of course all were on snowshoes, and they carried in their game-bags provisions enough for two good meals. Every day they found walking on snowshoes easier, and all got over the ground, or rather snow, very well.

Once over the hills back of Firefly Lake, they took to a route that was new to them, leading through a heavy belt of spruce timber and then over a sloping stretch running down to the lowlands. On the way they stirred up some rabbits and Whopper could not resist the temptation to bring one of them low.

"Now I won't have to go back empty-handed, even if I don't see another thing," he declared.

It was fully noon by the time they reached the edge of the Marshes, wide stretches of lowlands, dotted here and there with clumps of bushes. At a great distance they heard gunshots, but failed to discover the gunners.

They tramped on to a point where Jack Dalton had said the wild ducks were apt to be found. The wind was coming up, and out in this wide open plain it cut like a knife.

"We won't want to stay out here more than an hour or two," said Shep. "My backbone feels like an icicle!"

"Do you know what I think?" said Giant. "I think it is going to snow."

"So do I," came from Whopper.

A few minutes later the first flakes fell, and fearful that the snow would interfere with their sight of any wild ducks they hurried forward until they reached a circle of bushes Jack Dalton had mentioned.

"Wait, I see some ducks!" cried Giant. "See, they are rising and coming this way!"

"Be quick!" cried Snap, and brought around his shotgun. The others also aimed their weapons, and as the wild ducks sailed almost over them they let drive in a scattering volley. Two of the ducks were killed outright and came straight down, while a third circled around badly wounded. The others swept out of range before any harm could be done to them.

"We've got two, anyway," said Shep.

"I'm going after that wounded one!" cried Whopper, and went off on his snowshoes behind the fluttering game. The duck touched the snow and then arose again and did this several times. Giant followed Whopper, bound to get the third duck if it was possible to do so.

"Beware of holes!" yelled Snap, after the pair. "Remember what Jack Dalton said!"

The others were too interested in pursuing the wounded duck to pay attention to his words. Thinking he saw a chance, Whopper discharged his weapon but it did no damage. Then Giant took a shot, and this was

likewise of no avail.

"Gracious, ducks seem to be harder to hit than deer!" cried the smaller member of the Gun Club. "It will get away after all, Whopper!"

"Not if I know it," was the reply. "Come on!"

The pair continued to run, until fully a hundred yards more had been covered. The wounded duck had now fluttered down into some bushes and both felt sure they would be able to bag it. So eager were they that they did not notice the softness of the snow before them until, without warning, they sank up to their knees.

"Hi! what's this?" sputtered Whopper, as he floundered around.

"We're in a hole!" gasped Giant. "Say, we had better get back!"

They tried to turn back, but it was impossible, and soon both young hunters were up to their waists and then to their breasts. They forgot all about the wounded duck and began to call lustily for help.

CHAPTER XXI

A TOUCH OF A BLIZZARD

"Those boys ought to be more careful," said Snap, as he watched Giant and Whopper plunge along after the wounded duck.

"Well, you told them to beware of holes," answered Shep.

The two ducks that had been killed were picked up and put in the game-bags, and then Snap and Shep started to follow their comrades, but at a more moderate rate of speed.

"Hark! they are calling for help!" exclaimed the leader of the Gun Club, a moment later.

"They are in a hole!" said the doctor's son. "Look, I can just see their heads!"

"We must help them out! My! how the wind is blowing!"

The increase in wind was rapid and by the time Snap and Shep drew close to where Whopper and Giant were still floundering, it carried the loose snow around in a perfect whirlwind.

"Can't you crawl out?" asked Snap, coming as close as he dared.

"Every time we try we seem to sink deeper!" gasped Giant.

"Then keep still and I'll aid you," answered the leader of the Gun Club. "Come, Shep."

"What we you going to do?"

"I'll show you. Be quick."

Walking to the nearest bushes, Snap cut them down with the hatchet he had insisted upon carrying. Shep now understood, and both lugged the bushes to the edge of the fast sinking snow. Then more bushes were brought, and at last, almost exhausted, Giant and Whopper crawled forth on their hands and knees, their snowshoes held in the air. Then they got up on their feet and lost no time in gaining a point of safety.

"I told you to be careful," said Snap, rather severely. "And Jack Dalton warned you, too. It is a lucky thing you didn't sink into the marsh up to your head."

"We were after the duck and didn't think," answered Whopper. "But you can bet I'll be careful next time."

"So will I be careful," came from Giant. "Where's the duck?"

"Flew away--I saw it," answered Shep. "Gracious, how the wind is rising!" he added, pulling his coat collar closer to his neck. "It's going to be a hammer of a snowstorm."

"I think we had better get off the Marshes," said Snap, after a look at the sky and the whirling snow. "This looks to me as if it was going to turn into blizzard."

"Going to leave with only two ducks?" asked the doctor's son. "It seems a pity--after tramping such a distance, too!"

"Maybe we'll strike some more going back," said Snap, cheerfully.

All of the young hunters were willing to leave the Marshes, for the increasing wind made the situation decidedly unpleasant. When they turned back they had both the wind and the pelting snow in their faces and could scarcely see where they were going.

"Isn't this fierce!" gasped Shep, after they had walked less than fifty yards. "I never felt the wind blow so strongly!"

"We get the full sweep of it out here," answered Shep. "It won't be so bad when we reach the timber again."

The mind was fairly whistling around them now. They could not tell how much snow was falling, for much of it was caught up from where it lay and sent hurtling along, now in straight dashes and then in mad circles that blinded and bewildered them. More than once they had to

turn around to catch their breath and clear their eyes.

"I wish we we-were to th-the timber!" gasped Giant. "I feel as if the wind was going to pick me up and carry me away!"

"Let us keep close together," said Whopper. "There is no telling what will happen with such a wind tearing down upon us."

They were all scared and with good reason, for to be caught in a blizzard on that wide stretch of marshland was a serious matter. Sticking as closely together as possible they hurried on, as fast as the gale and the flying snow would permit. The air was growing darker and heavier every moment.

"Are you sure you are heading for the timber?" questioned Whopper, presently. "I must confess I am completely turned around."

"So am I," added Shep.

"I--I think the timber is in that direction, but I am not certain," answered the leader of the club, pointing with his hand.

All stared around them in bewilderment. They scarcely knew how to turn.

"Well, one thing is sure, we can't stay here," said Shep. "Come on," and he started off in the direction his chum had pointed out.

"Mind you, I don't say I am right," called out Snap.

"We'll go that way anyhow--if we can make it," said Whopper.

It was slow traveling, and they had to rest frequently, for the wind seemed to fairly take the breath out of their bodies. Once they came up to a clump of bushes and were half tempted to make a prolonged stop there. But Snap demurred very strongly.

"It won't do, fellows," he said. "The snow is piling up fast and the bushes will be snowed under in another hour or two. We have got to reach the timber somehow. It's our only chance of safety."

Again they struggled on, so out of breath and weak they could scarcely draw one snowshoe after the other. Giant fell down and had to be raised up.

"I--I am afraid I ca--can't go another step!" he blurted out. "I am as we--weak as a--a cat!"

"We'll help you," said Snap, kindly. "Come, Shep, you take one arm and I'll take the other. Whopper can go in front, to break the force of the wind for us."

At the end of ten minutes more all were ready to drop. They were

numbed with the cold and their breath came in quick, short gasps. It looked as if they must give up and perish.

"Oh, if only we were back at camp!" sighed Whopper.

"Don't give up!" urged Snap. He stopped and gazed over his left shoulder. "Am I mistaken, or is that a tree yonder?"

"I'll soon see," answered Shep and turned in that direction. "Yes, it's a tree and the timber is back of it!" he cried in delight.

This announcement put renewed courage in the young hunters, and once again they struggled on against the fierce wind, which was now blowing little short of a hurricane. The trees came into sight dimly through the swirling whiteness, and a minute later they sank down under the overhanging boughs of a big spruce.

"Safe at last!" murmured Shep.

"Oh, how glad I am of it!" added Giant. "I--I thought we'd be lo--lost sure!"

"We must have a fire, first of all," said Snap. "My feet are half frozen already!"

"I brought some carbide along, so we can easily start a blaze," added Whopper. "But we've got to be careful in such a wind as this. Just listen!"

They listened, and it made them shiver to hear the shrieking of the wind as it went ploughing through the forest, often snapping off a bough here or a tree top there. The spruce they were under bent and swayed, but it was strong and healthy and it did not give way.

Leaving his companions for a few minutes, Snap did his best to look around the vicinity. He could see but little, but made out three big trees growing somewhat close together on the edge of the marshland. At one side of the trees was an irregular rock five or six feet in height.

"That will have to do," he told himself, and called for his companions to join him. But they did not hear, owing to the raging of the storm, and he had to go after them.

"We'll fix up some sort of shelter among the trees," he said. "And we can build a fire against that rock. Let us get to work at once, before it grows colder and the snow gets worse."

The brief respite had rested them, and while Whopper and Giant cut some wood and built a fire, Snap and Shep broke down some spruce branches and piled them up around the clump of trees. Then they kicked up the snow into something of a wall leading from the side of the rock to the nearest tree.

"There, now we can keep fairly warm if nothing else," said the leader of the Gun Club.

It was still very dark and the fire did little to dispel the gloom, the wind having a tendency to blow the smoke in several directions at once. But the fire kept them fairly warm and for that they were thankful.

"If this isn't a blizzard it is next door to it," remarked the doctor's son, as he gazed at the display of the elements. "And the worst of it is, there is no telling how long it is going to last."

"Will we be snowed in?" asked Whopper.

"It looks like it."

"And with nothing but a rabbit and two ducks!" cried Giant. "Boys, it doesn't look as if Christmas was going to be such a cheerful day after all."

"Never mind Christmas," put in Snap. "Let us be thankful if we are not snowbound so completely that we starve to death!"

CHAPTER XXII

A REMARKABLE CHRISTMAS NIGHT

Night came on rapidly after that, and with the coming of utter darkness the fury of the elements appeared to increase. The wind shrieked and whistled through the timber and hummed in the tops of the spruces overhead. Occasionally they would hear a crash, as some mighty tree would be laid low, and they trembled for fear the storm would damage their shelter.

They were tremendously hungry and ate rather more of the lunch brought along than Snap thought right. One of the ducks was cleaned and broiled with care and half of the meat divided into four equal shares. For drinking water they melted some snow, a little at a time, in a drinking cup.

After the meal there remained nothing to do but to mind the fire and go to sleep. They took turns at watching the blaze, each boy remaining on guard two hours.

All night long the storm raged and the snow came down as thickly as ever. As a consequence, when it began to grow a little brighter they found that they were completely snowed in. On all sides the spruces were nearly broken down with their weights of whiteness, and on the

opposite side of the rock where the fire was built was a drift of snow eight to ten feet high. This gave them a little more shelter but cut off a good share of the outlook.

"Merry Christmas!" cried Snap, as he got up and stretched himself as well as he could under the low boughs.

"Merry Christmas!" cried all of the others, and then Whopper added: "But it isn't very Merry, is it?"

"I don't see that broiled fish, and stuffed turkey, and cake and pudding and candy and--" began Giant.

"Hold on, Giant, don't make us any more hungry than we are!" interrupted the doctor's son. "We're here and we've got to make the best of it, so don't croak."

"Oh, I'm not croaking," answered the smaller member of the Gun Club. "I shall be satisfied if we get back to camp alive with such a snow all around us."

"Giant, why didn't you hang up your stocking last night?" asked Whopper, jokingly, and this brought forth a general snicker, and then all the lads felt a trifle less blue.

Breakfast was certainly a slim affair, each person getting a small bite of duck, two crackers, a spoonful of cold beans Shep had brought along, and a drink of melted snow. Several gazed wistfully at the rabbit, but Snap shook his head at them.

"We've got to save that," he said. "You know that as well as I do."

"Don't you suppose there are some birds or squirrels or rabbits around here?" asked Shep.

"We can look--if the storm will let us."

Breakfast over, one after another of the young hunters went beyond the clump of spruces to look around. But the weather was so wild, and the snow so deep, all were glad to come back.

There was little of the holiday air in the gathering. All of the boys were sober, for they fully realized the peril of their situation. Their food would not last long, and where were they to get more?

At noon they had little more than a rabbit lunch--something that made Whopper sigh as he thought of the big Christmas dinner he had thought to feast upon.

"I think it is clearing a bit," said Shep, about three o'clock. "If we want to move now is our chance to do so."

It was voted by all hands to move, and they started without delay.

They could not locate the exact route toward their camp, but made it as nearly as possible. The snowdrifts were truly terrific, and even on snowshoes they made slow progress.

"Wait, I see a rabbit!" cried Shep, presently, and he pointed to a clump of bushes. Then he unslung his shotgun and pushed his way forward. A gray head appeared over the rim of snow and he blazed away. The rabbit gave a leap and fell dead.

"A little more to eat anyway," said the young hunter, as he put the game in his bag.

"Wait, where there is one rabbit there are sometimes more," said Snap. "Let us stir around a little and see."

They did as he suggested, and soon sent two rabbits skipping from under a low-hanging tree. The rabbits could not run very well in the deep snow and were secured with ease. But that was the last of the game in that vicinity.

"Now we won't starve right away," said Snap, and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

They were less than half way through the belt of timber when they came to a spot where a big tree had been blown over by the wind. As they walked around this Giant gave a cry, and, stepping between the branches, brought forth a couple of dead squirrels.

"Killed by the fall, I suppose," he said.

"It's lucky for us," answered Shep, "for it means just so much more food."

"Let us look for nuts,--the squirrels must have had some," came from Snap.

They made a search, and soon found a hollow half filled with nuts and took them all. Then they went on as before.

By the time they reached the end of the timber belt all were too exhausted to go further and they looked around for another shelter of some kind. They found several trees growing close together and in something of a row.

"That will shelter us from the wind," said Snap, "although it is not as good a place as the one we used last night."

They cut some tree branches, placed them from tree to tree and packed on some snow. Then they lit another fire and banked up the snow on the other side. By this time it was dark again and they were as hungry as bears. They broiled two of the rabbits and ate every morsel and then cracked a quantity of the nuts and picked out the meat.

"This is certainly a Christmas to remember," said Shep, as they sat in front of the fire that evening. "I should like to know what the folks are doing."

"Don't mention it," cried Giant. "It makes a fellow feel homesick."

They cut plenty of firewood, and in honor of the day built a blaze that was to be seen a long distance off. This made them a little more cheerful and they even cracked a few jokes. But with it all that Christmas was far from a bright one. They were still miles from their camp on Firefly Lake and all wondered if they would get back in safety.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN TROUBLE ONCE MORE

The next day it snowed again and the four boy hunters were almost in despair, for they had calculated to strike out for Firefly Lake as soon as it grew light.

"It would be foolish to try it just now," said Snap, looking at the sky. "just see how fast the snow is falling!"

The heavy snow kept up all day, but cleared away as evening came on. Looking out about eight o'clock Shep gave a shout:

"Boys, the stars are shining. It is as clear as crystal!"

All rushed forth to verify the glad tidings. It was indeed clear and the glittering stars made a scene of royal splendor.

"We'll start for camp early to-morrow," announced Snap. "Now let us get to bed and get a good night's rest. It is going to be no picnic walking on this snow."

They turned in, after fixing the fire, leaving Giant on guard for the first three hours. After Giant came Whopper, and then Snap took his turn.

Snap had scarcely commenced his vigil when he heard the bark of a fox at a great distance.

Presently the barking of the fox ceased and utter silence reigned for all of half an hour. Then came another sound which made the leader of the Gun Club listen with intentness.

"Wolves, as sure as fate!" he murmured. "I trust they are not coming here!"

Another period of silence, and the mournful howls came still closer. There were many more of them and Snap came to the conclusion that a regular band of wolves were closing in on the little shelter beside the spruces.

"Guess I had better wake up Shep," he told himself. "He has got to take the next watch anyway."

He aroused his chum and told Shep of what he had heard. Then came more of the howls, still closer.

"They are certainly coming this way," said the doctor's son, picking up his gun. "And I'm afraid there must be quite a number of them."

After this came another period of silence. Both boys kept on the alert, Snap on one side of the camp and Shep on the other. They felt sure that the wolves were coming closer and they were not mistaken.

"I see one!" cried Snap, as a pair of gleaming eyes showed themselves over a rim of snow.

"I see three or four," responded Shep. "Call Giant and Whopper."

The words had scarcely left his lips when Snap took aim and fired at one of the wolves, wounding it in the shoulder. The report of the shotgun brought Giant and Whopper to their feet without delay.

"What's up?" came from both.

"Wolves!" answered the leader of the club, laconically. "Get your guns!"

The shot had caused the wolves to fall back a little, and taking advantage of this, Snap reloaded the empty barrel of his shotgun and stirred up the fire still more.

Bang! went Shep's shotgun, and a wolf was taken directly in his throat. He turned to run away and then fell dead. Without hesitation his fellows fell upon him and rent the carcass asunder.

"What horrible cannibals!" muttered Whopper. "Say, how do you like that?" he went on, and fired a bullet from the rifle into the mass of wolves, hitting one in the leg and another in the side. The first wolf was merely wounded but the second was killed.

The death of another of their band made the other wolves retreat and they kept away for fully a quarter of an hour. But then their numbers were increased by the arrival of more equally hungry, and they came on in a wide semi-circle, as if to pounce upon the four boy hunters and eat them up.

"Shoot 'em--don't let 'em come any closer!" called out Whopper, and

banged away with his shotgun, hitting a wolf in the breast. Then the others fired and another of the ugly beasts went down. Still another was wounded just sufficiently to make him ugly, and with bloodshot eyes he leaped straight into the camp and at Snap's very feet!

It was a moment of extreme peril, and for the instant Snap's heart seemed to stop beating. Then little Giant turned swiftly and pulled the trigger of his shotgun and sent the load into the wolf's ear. There was one short yelp, a leap of agony, and the wolf landed in the fire, dead, scattering the burning embers in all directions.

"Good for you, Giant!" cried Snap, when he could speak. He caught the dead wolf and threw the body among the trees.

"Fix that fire up!" yelled Whopper. "It's our best protection!"

He ran for some sticks, and they built the fire into a roaring blaze that illuminated the forest for a considerable distance. Then Shep and Whopper fired more shots, wounding two more wolves, and the pack slowly retreated, growling and howling savagely.

"What an attack!" said Whopper, wiping the cold perspiration from his forehead. "I don't want to experience another."

Further sleep was out of the question, and for the remainder of the night the boys kept a good fire going and watched all around the temporary camp for their enemies. But the wolves did not show themselves again.

"And now for Firefly Lake and Birch Tree Inn!" cried Shep, when they were preparing breakfast. "My! the Inn will seem like home, after such experiences as we have had!"

It was clear and mild, with hardly any wind blowing. As the sun came up it made the great drifts of snow glitter and sparkle in a manner which was dazzling.

"Oh, look!" screamed Giant, just as they were getting ready to set out. "There's a shot for somebody!" and he caught up his gun.

Over the spruce trees a flock of wild ducks were soaring, evidently searching for food. They came quite close, and all of the young hunters blazed away, in rapid succession. Six of the ducks came down, one so straight that it hit Whopper directly on the head, almost knocking him over.

"There's luck for you!" cried Snap, gleefully, "We've got a few ducks anyway."

They placed the game in their bags, and a few minutes later bade farewell to the shelter of the spruces. It was so clear they could see the distant hills and mountains with ease and Snap regulated the course accordingly.

Some of the snowdrifts were truly immense, one, they reckoned, measuring twenty feet in height. They had to proceed with care, for they did not want to break through and sink out of sight. Once Whopper fell over and it was all the others could do to set him straight on his snowshoes again.

They had thought to take almost a direct course to Firefly Lake, but after covering a mile found this impossible.

"We'll have to take something of a round-about way," said their leader. "It will be longer, but it can't be helped"

"That will bring us between Firefly Lake and Lake Cameron, won't it?" asked Giant.

"Yes."

They hurried on for another mile. It was certainly hard work and made them warm in spite of the lowness of the thermometer. Then they came to a big drift of snow and found it no mean task to get over the same.

"Hark I what was that?" said Shep.

"A gunshot," answered Whopper. "There goes another."

After that they heard several more shots, coming from some point ahead.

"Some other hunters must be out," said Snap. "Wonder who they can be?"

CHAPTER XXIV

A DISAGREEABLE MEETING

They had reached a point directly between Firefly Lake and Lake Cameron when they came to a little patch of woods surrounding a pond less than a hundred feet across. As they entered the woods they heard a slight noise and saw a small deer running swiftly across the snow on the pond. At once Whopper let drive and so did Snap, and the deer went down, kicked for a moment, and then lay still.

The game had been struck in the rump and in the neck, but there was another wound in one ear and still a fourth near the tail.

"Must have been hit before she came this way," said Giant.

As the young hunters surrounded the game they did not notice the approach of three men on snow-shoes, all carrying guns and gamebags.

The three men were Andrew Felps and two of his particular friends, Giles Faswig and Vance Lemon.

"Hi! what are you doing here?" demanded Andrew Felps, striding up angrily. "Didn't I warn you off of my land last summer? You have no right to hunt here."

"They have the deer!" put in Giles Faswig. Hang the luck anyhow."

"Never mind, the deer belongs to us--it was shot on my land," muttered Andrew Felps.

"Certainly it is your deer if it was shot on your land," put in Vance Lemon.

The four boy hunters listened to the talk in considerable dismay. Evidently the three men intended to appropriate the game.

"Is this your land?" asked Whopper.

"We didn't see any fence," put in Snap.

"The fences are there anyway--I had them put up last fall, after the fire. You have no right to even cross my land, much less do any shooting."

"Felps, ain't you going to claim the deer?" asked Giles Faswig.

"Certainly I am. But I want these young rascals to understand that they can't come on my land," answered the lumber dealer.

"Mr. Felps, we are not young rascals," said Shep, with flashing eyes. "We shot the deer in good faith and if you take it from us I shall consider it stealing."

"Listen to that!" ejaculated Vance Lemon. And after we wounded the deer first, too!"

"I won't talk to you," cried Andrew Felps, savagely. "Leave that deer alone, and get off of my land as quick as you can--and stay off!"

His manner was so savage and threatening that the young hunters felt compelled to retreat. Yet they were very angry.

"Mr. Felps, I think you'll be sorry for this some day," said Snap.

"When I get back to Fairview I shall tell everybody just how meanly you have acted."

"Hi! don't you threaten me!" roared the irate lumber dealer. "I know my business. You clear out--and be quick about it."

"I suppose you and your friends want our deer because you're not able to shoot one yourselves," called out Whopper, and with this parting

shot the young hunters withdrew. All of the men shook their fists at the boys.

"Now, wouldn't that jar you!" exclaimed Shep, as they turned toward Firefly Lake. "Did you ever hear of such meanness?"

"He's as bad as he was last summer, when he drove us away from Lake Cameron," said Snap, bitterly.

For some time after that the young hunters were silent, each busy with his own thoughts. Driven away from the vicinity of Lake Cameron, they had to make another wide detour, and it was one o'clock before they came in sight of Firefly Lake, nestling so cozily among the hills.

"It will take at least an hour and a half to get down to the lake and up to camp," said Snap. "Shall we go on or stop for dinner?"

"I am as hungry as two bears," said Whopper. "Let us rest up a bit and get something to eat."

The others were willing, and soon a fire was blazing and over this they broiled one of the wild ducks. The meal and the rest occupied an hour and a half, but they all felt it was time well spent.

Their hearts beat rapidly as they walked down the hill to the edge of the lake. They had to pass a bend and then came in sight of the camp.

"The flag is down!" cried Giant, in some disappointment.

"I reckon the blizzard was too much for it," answered Snap. "But let that go, so long as the shelter itself is all right."

They almost broke into a run on the last quarter mile, so eager were they to see the condition of things. At last they caught sight of Birch Tree Inn. It looked to be exactly as they had left it.

"Thank fortune for that," began Shep, when Whopper uttered a cry.

"I really believe the doorway is open!"

The barrier to the doorway was certainly gone, and with hearts that fairly thumped in their breasts they ran for the shelter, to learn what this meant. All was dark inside and very cold, and with trembling fingers Snap struck a match and looked around for the acetylene bicycle lamp.

"It's gone!" he cried.

"And most of our things are gone too!" gasped Shep.

Then the match went out and they had to light another. A scrap of paper was found and some dry sticks, and they kindled a blaze, heaping up the fire so as to get as much light as possible.

"One sled is gone!"

"So are all the cooking utensils!"

"And the extra clothing!"

"And the grub!" wailed Whopper. "Not a bit of coffee, chocolate, sugar, or anything left!"

"Boys, this is awful!" wailed Giant. "Who could have done it?"

"Maybe the Ham Spink crowd."

"Or the Felps crowd."

"Or that tramp who made trouble for us before," came from Snap.

Then they made a more careful inspection--to find their skates also missing and--most precious of all--all the extra matches and extra ammunition.

"This is the worst blow of all," said the leader of the club, referring to the matches and the ammunition. "We can't stay here without ammunition and the wherewith to make a fire when we want it."

"What's to do?" asked Giant and Whopper, in a breath.

"Either catch the fellow who has stolen our things, or go home."

CHAPTER XXV

AT THE CAMP ONCE AGAIN

The announcement Snap made cast a gloom over all the boys. Each felt that their leader spoke the truth.

"Well, as I don't want to go home, I vote we go after the thief," said Shep, who was the first to speak.

Fortunately not all of their stores had been taken--they had been too plentiful to pile on one sled--so they had enough left with which to get a substantial supper. But all of the boys did not wait for the meal.

"If we are going to follow that thief up we ought to do it right away," said Snap. "The more time that is wasted the less will be our chance of catching him. Shep, if you say so, we can go after him and leave Giant and Whopper to look after what is left here."

"Why can't I go along?" asked Giant.

"Two ought to stay here," said Snap. "And I've got another plan," he went on. "How much money have we got on hand?"

The amount was counted and found to be nearly five dollars.

"That's enough," said the leader. "If we can't find the thief, we can slip over to Riverside and buy the things we actually need. I wouldn't go to Fairview, because that would cause too much talk."

Snap and Shep put some provisions in their game bags, readjusted their snowshoes, and soon set off.

"Have you any idea when you will be back?" called Whopper after them.

"No--maybe not till to-morrow," was the answer.

In the deep snow it was easy to follow the direction the thief with the sled had taken, and they soon became convinced that but one person had done the deed.

Left to themselves, Whopper and Giant did what little they could to restore order to the camp. They saw that the thief must have remained in the shelter one or two days--probably during the blizzard. On leaving he had attempted to break down one wall of the place and ruin the chimney, but had not succeeded.

"They'll last as long as we want to stay," said Giant. "But how mean it was to try such things!"

In coming to the shelter Whopper had twisted his ankle and this hurt him not a little, and he was perfectly willing to rest the member all he could. Giant prepared supper and they ate it leisurely, in the meanwhile talking over the outlook from every point of view.

Morning found the two young hunters stirring early. There was little, however, to do, and they took their time over breakfast. Giant had found where a bag of beans had been spilled on the ground and he picked them up with care one by one.

"I think I'll make some bean soup for a change," he said. "I'll throw in some meat to give it a flavor."

"That rascal--whoever he was--took all the flour, otherwise we might make some pancakes," grumbled Whopper.

"I might try my hand at fishing through the ice again," said Giant. "Baked fish will go fine for a change."

"Hadn't I better stay here, Giant? Somebody ought to mind the camp until Snap and Shep get back, and my ankle is quite swollen."

"Yes, stay by all means, and if you want me, yell or fire your gun."

So it was arranged, and after dinner Giant sallied forth, with the axe, which had not been confiscated, and his fishing lines and such bait as he could scrape together.

As Giant had found his former fishing place a good one he went to the same spot again. The snow was deep and he had to sweep it away with a spruce branch he cut for that purpose. Then he chopped a round hole in the ice as before, and sat down on some snow and the tree branch to wait for a bite.

Fishing proved slow, and it was a good quarter of an hour before he got a bite and then the fish slipped the hook just as he was hauling the catch to the surface. But he kept on and in an hour had a catch of three, all of fair size.

After that, however, try his best, he could not get another bite. Then he determined to go further down the lake, where there was another cove.

"There ought to be fish at the bottom of that cove," he told himself. "And if there are, I am bound to have some."

Finding a spot that suited his fancy, he again swept off the snow and began to cut a hole in the ice. This proved quite a task, and by the time he had finished he was pretty well winded. He baited up and sat down on a bank of snow he had swept together.

Just then some noise reached his ears, and he looked around and listened. But the noise was not repeated.

"What could that have been?" he mused. "Some bird?"

He strained his ears, but the stillness of the forest lay all around the lake. Of a sudden Giant began to feel lonely, and he gave a little shiver. Then he braced up.

"Pshaw, I'm getting as nervous as a cat," he murmured. "And all on account of nothing. I'd better go to fishing and forget it."

He dropped in his line, properly baited, and waited for a bite. He was lucky, for soon up came a nice maskalonge. Then, a few minutes later, came a rock bass--something for which he had not been looking. He grew interested, and forgot all about the noise he had heard, until the cracking of some bushes caught his ears.

"There's that noise again," he muttered. "What in the world can it be?"

For the first time since leaving the shelter Giant wished he had brought along his shotgun. What if some game should suddenly appear?

"If a deer should come along and I couldn't shoot it, it would make me sick," he told himself. "And game is always sure to come along when you haven't a gun."

Giant had now seven fish, four of good size. He decided to wait for just one more, then wind up and go back to the shelter. It was rather cold sitting at the fishing hole and his feet were beginning to feel very much like the ice under them.

He had baited up with care, and allowed the line to sink almost to the bottom of the lake, when a fresh noise startled him. This was another crackling sound. There followed a low, suppressed growl, and turning in the direction of the shore Giant was horrified to see a big, black bear come lumbering into view!

"A bear! I'll have to get out of here!" he ejaculated, and snatching up his fish and line and the axe he started on a run for the shelter.

The bear came out on the ice and toward the hole. Then it smelt the fish, and a moment later started on a clumsy run after the fleeing youth!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRAIL THROUGH THE SNOW

Snap and Shep followed the trail of the stolen sled to the end of Firefly Lake with ease. The track was clearly to be distinguished, and it pursued its course in almost a straight line.

"I hope we can follow it thus easily to the end," said the leader of the Gun Club. "I'd hate to lose it."

"Let us hurry as much as possible," returned the doctor's son. "We want to overtake the thief before night."

They did hurry, and at length came to the outlet of the lake. Before them was Rocky River, a hundred and more feet wide at this point and frozen over solidly.

"Hullo, he didn't go towards Fairview!" cried Snap, pointing to the track the sled had left. He went the other way."

"He must have gone to Riverview, or else beyond," returned the doctor's son.

They passed the old icehouse where Kiddy Leech had met Ham Spink and his cronies and kept on steadily in the direction of Riverview. Then

of a sudden Snap set up a shout.

"I see a man ahead--with a sled!"

"So do I! It must be the thief, Snap!"

"Perhaps, although I can't make out at this distance. I'll tell you what I'll do, Shep--put on the skates and skate on the clear ice. I'll soon catch him that way. You can follow on your snowshoes or take them off, if you'd rather."

Shep decided to run without the snowshoes and both lads took off the articles. Then Snap donned the skates and hurried off at his best rate of speed.

"If he won't stop--shoot at him!" called Shep after his chum.

"I certainly will!" responded Snap, who was worked up more than he cared to admit.

Snap had quite a stretch of clear ice, but further on was a long drift of snow over which he made but slow progress. But then came another clear stretch and he spun along, his skates skirring merrily at every sturdy stroke.

Snap was within a hundred yards of the man with the sled when the latter chanced to look around. At once the youth yelled at him.

"Stop, you thief! Stop!"

The man was startled and slackened his pace. Then, when he saw the youth raise his shotgun, he let up a cry of fear.

"Don't shoot! Please don't shoot!"

"Kiddy Leech!" ejaculated Snap, recognizing the tramp. "Stop, you rascal, or it will be the worse for you!"

To this the tramp did not reply. Instead, he ran to one side of the river, and plunged into some bushes. Beyond was a thick growth of trees, and he lost no time in hiding himself among these.

At first Snap was on the point of shooting, but he hesitated, as he was afraid he might kill the thief. Then it was too late to fire, and he dropped his gun on its strap. He took possession of the sled, turned it around and skated slowly toward where his chum was coming up on a decidedly lively run.

"Did you catch him, Snap?"

"No, but I know who it was--that tramp, Kiddy Leech."

"Is that so! Are all the things here?"

"I don't know."

"Where did he go?"

"Ran for that woods like a frightened deer. I would have fired, only I was afraid of killing him."

"Do you think we ought to go after him? We might be able to trail him in the snow."

"We might try it. He was pretty well scared when he saw me with my shotgun."

Leaving the sled by the river side, both young hunters made their way through the bushes and into the forest. For a short distance they followed the trail with ease. But then they reached a pond containing some clear ice and here the footprints were lost.

"Might as well give it up," said Shep, looking around. "It is growing dark and he will know enough to keep hidden. Besides, if we corner him he may play some trick--tumble a rock on us, or something like that."

Slowly the two young hunters retraced their way to the river. They were now so tired they could scarcely drag one foot after the other. The excitement over, reaction set in.

"I don't think I want to walk all the way to camp to-night," remarked Shep. "It's too far."

"We'll put up somewhere over night," answered Snap.

They examined the things on the sled with interest and were glad to ascertain that nearly every article stolen was there. The few things missing were of scant importance.

"I'll wager that scamp intended to take the things somewhere and sell them," said Snap. "We were lucky to catch him as we did."

Having looked the load over, they repacked it with care and then looked around them, to find out their exact location.

"There is a farmer named Masterson, who lives just beyond this woods," said Snap. "My father sold him the lumber for his new barn. Perhaps he'll take us in for the night, if we offer to pay him."

"Well, we can try him anyway," answered the doctor's son.

They skated along the river until the field leading up to the farmhouse was reached. It was now quite dark. A dog came out to greet them, barking furiously.

"Hope he isn't of the biting kind," said Shep, drawing back.

"Down, Rover, down!" came in a man's voice, and a moment later Aaron Masterson appeared. He was a man of sixty, bent from age and hard work.

"Good evening, Mr. Masterson," said Snap. "I don't know if you remember me or not. I am Charley Dodge. My father sold you the lumber for your new barn."

"Oh, yes, I remember you," said the old farmer, with a smile. "You came to the raising, didn't you? Who is this with you?"

"My friend, Shep Reed. He is Dr. Reed's son."

"Oh, yes, I know the doctor, too. He attended my wife when she had pneumonia--brought her around, too. Well, lads, what brings you in such a snow?"

In a few words Snap and Shep explained the situation. When they mentioned the tramp Aaron Masterson shook his grizzled head and his fist vigorously.

"The pesky critters! I wish you had shot him! They're a terrible nuisance, tramps is. One day my wife give two on 'em a dinner an' they up afterwards an' stole my new sickle an' whetstone. Tramps ought all to be hung. Come in the house."

"Can you keep us until to-morrow morning?"

"I think so--I'll have to ask my wife first though."

Mrs. Masterson proved to be a motherly lady of fifty, and she readily consented to keep the boys and give them their supper and breakfast.

"You won't have to pay a cent," she declared. "I am glad to do Doctor Reed's son a favor, and your friend a favor too. The doctor is a wonderfully fine man."

"An' Mr. Dodge treated me right on that lumber fer the barn," put in Aaron Masterson.

The boys were invited to sit down to a well filled table, and did so, after washing their hands in the kitchen at the sink. They had a real homecooked supper and enjoyed it immensely.

They were just finishing up when there came a loud knock on the dining room door of the farmhouse. Aaron Masterson answered it.

"What's wanted?" he asked, of a man who stood on the porch.

"Please, sir, I am a poor man looking for work. Would you mind giving me a bit to eat?" came from somebody outside.

"It's Kiddy Leech!" whispered Snap. "Now, what do you think of that?"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CAPTURE OF THE TRAMP

It was indeed Kiddy Leech who had applied for assistance at the home of Aaron Masterson. The tramp had taken it for granted that Snap and Shep had started for the camp on Firefly Lake and would make no further effort to bring him to justice.

"What nerve!" whispered Shep. "What shall we do?"

"Let's capture him. I'll go outside, and you can remain in here."

So speaking, Snap caught up his shotgun, which stood near the kitchen door, and slipped out of the entrance to the woodshed. From there he ran around the corner of the house, coming up behind Kiddy Leech.

"Out o' work, eh?" Aaron Masterson was saying. "Wot's your trade?"

"I'm an electrical worker," answered the tramp. "The factory I worked in shut down, and I can't get a thing to do anywhere."

"Humph! Well, I reckon we can give you a meal," answered the farmer. "Come in."

"Thank you very much," said the tramp, and followed through the doorway. Then Aaron Masterson noticed Snap with the shotgun.

"Hullo, how did you git out there?" he cried.

Kiddy Leech turned swiftly and he started on beholding the young hunter.

"Wha--what do you want?" he stammered.

"Go on in, Leech," answered the leader of the Gun Club, firmly. "If you try to run away I'll surely shoot you."

"What does this mean?" demanded Aaron Masterson.

"This is the rascal who ran off with our outfit, Mr. Masterson," answered Snap.

"And we mean to make him a prisoner," added Shep. "Kiddy Leech, don't you dare to resist, or it will be that much worse for you."

The tramp was caught between two fires, as it were, and did not know

what to do. As we know, he was a good deal of a coward at heart, and the sight of the shotgun in Snap's hands made him quake.

"Don't shoot me!" he whined. "Please don't shoot me!" And he held up his hands in token of submission.

"So you are the pesky rascal the lads was a-tellin' me about," said Aaron Masterson, sternly. "Nice doin's, I must say!"

The door was closed and locked, so that Kiddy Leech might not make his exit in a hurry. The tramp was in a decidedly perplexed frame of mind and blamed himself roundly for not having been more careful.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked, as he stood in a corner.

"We are going to hand you over to the police," answered Snap. "It is no more than you deserve."

"I didn't mean no harm,--indeed, I didn't!

"I suppose you think it no harm to steal!" said Shep, sarcastically.

"I wasn't stealing your things."

"You were!"

"No, I wasn't. I was--er--only going to hide 'em on you."

"You went a mighty long way to do it," said Snap, coldly. "Where were you going to hide them, at the second-hand shop or the pawn-broker's?"

"I'm telling the plain truth. Why, I never stole a thing in my life!" exclaimed Kiddy Leech.

"Not even when you ran away from our camp that first time," said the doctor's son. "How can you expect us to believe you? It is a waste of breath on your part."

"If I can prove that it wasn't my doings--that is--that I am not the responsible party, will you let me go?" demanded Kiddy Leech, eagerly.

"We want to hear your story first," said the doctor's son.

"If this here feller stole them things, as you say he did, the best thing to do is to tote him off to the lock-up," interposed Aaron Masterson. "He's evidently tryin' to make up a slick yarn so as to git off."

"Aaron, you can't take him to the town jail to-night, it's too late," said the farmer's wife. Remember, the travelin' is powerful bad, too."

"Then I reckon we can tie him up in the barn till mornin'," answered her husband, with an inquiring look at the two young hunters.

"We can do that," said Snap. "But first we might listen to what he has to say."

"You won't let me go--if I tell you something very important?" asked Kiddy Leech.

"Not yet"

"All right then, I won't say a word," answered the tramp, and a set look came over his somewhat besotted face.

He realized that he was in a serious situation and made up his mind that Ham Spink and Carl Dudder must help him out of it. He knew the two boys were well-to-do and reasoned that their parents would do almost anything to keep their sons out of jail.

"Going to tie me up in the barn and starve me to death, eh?" he said sourly. "I wouldn't treat a dog that way."

"If we keep him all night I suppose we can give him a little something to eat," said Mrs. Masterson, relenting.

"Sit down there and eat," commanded her husband and pointed to a chair. Kiddy Leech dropped into it and was given a fair supper, for which, it must be confessed, he had little relish. Several times he acted as if he wanted to talk, but as often changed his mind.

"I'll make them young dudes get me out of this," the tramp told himself. "Maybe their folks will pay me handsomely to keep mum and take what's coming to me. That's their way of doing."

The supper over, Aaron Masterson lit his lantern and led the way to the barn. Here the tramp had to submit to having his hands bound behind him, and then he was placed in a large harness closet. The closet was fairly warm, so there was little danger of his taking cold.

"Now, you keep quiet until morning," said Aaron Masterson, as he threw in several blankets.

"Do you think he can break out of the closet?" asked Snap.

"I'll fix it so he won't want to," answered the farmer.

When Snap and Shep had come he had tied up his dog. Now he released the animal and brought him into the barn.

"Watch, Rover, watch!" he said, pointing to the closet, and the dog gave a sniff and a short bark, and then lay down in front of the locked door.

"My dog is here--don't try to get out," called Aaron Masterson, to the tramp. "If you do--well, I won't be responsible, that's all!"

"Mighty kind," growled Kiddy Leech, and that was all he said.

After that the farmer and the two young hunters returned to the house and talked the matter over for a full hour. It was decided to take Kiddy Leech to the Riverside jail the first thing in the morning. Then Snap was to go home and tell his father of what had occurred, and Shep was to take the news to the camp on Firefly Lake.

The two boys were given a comfortable room in which to sleep. It felt more than good after "bunking around" in camp and forest, and despite the excitement of the tramp's capture, they slept well.

"Hi! boys, got up!" they heard Aaron Masterson call, at about six o'clock.

"Oh, dear, I wish he'd let us sleep an hour longer," grumbled the doctor's son.

"Remember, we are to take that tramp to the lock-up this morning," answered Snap.

"Boys, are you awake?" went on the farmer. "I've got news for you! The tramp's got away!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOUR BOYS AND A BEAR

"ESCAPED!" ejaculated Shep.

"How in the world did he manage it?" queried Snap.

Then both young hunters leaped up and dressed as rapidly as possible.

"He was a slick one," said Aaron Masterson. "He got free of the rope around his wrists somehow and then he clum to the top o' the harness closet and into the loft. From the winder he dropped onto the shed an' then to the ground."

"But what of your dog? Didn't he go after him?" questioned the doctor's son.

"No, the barn door was shet, to keep out the wind, so Rover couldn't follow him."

"When do you suppose he got away?"

"Some time during the night."

"Can't we follow him?" asked Snap.

"We can try."

All went outside and down to the barn. The tracks left by Kiddy Leech were plainly to be seen from the barn to the highway, but there the footprints were hopelessly lost in the multitude of others.

"Ain't no use to try to follow him," said Aaron Masterson. "The road branches off four times between here an' town an' there ain't no tellin' wot road he tuk. More'n likely he's travelin' as fast as all git-out, too."

"He certainly will do his level best to get away--after such experiences as he has had," answered Snap. "Perhaps he will never show himself in this locality again."

They remained out on the road, looking up and down, for five minutes, and then returned to the house.

"Did he steal anything?" asked Shep.

"By gum! I didn't think o' that!" gasped Aaron Masterson.

He took a thorough look around and then came in and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"Nothin' missing, so far as I can see," he said. "Reckon he was too scart to pick up anything. The dog must have barked, but I didn't hear him."

"Neither did I," answered Snap. "It was so cold I rolled up as tight as I could, ears and all, in the blankets."

With the tramp gone, there seemed nothing to do but for Snap and Shep to return to the camp. Mrs. Masterson served them with a fine breakfast of sausage, and, wheatcakes with molasses, and the boys "filled up" as only growing boys can. Then the lady of the house gave them a mince pie and some crullers to take with them. Neither she nor her husband would take any pay for what they had done.

"It's too bad thet tramp got away," said Aaron Masterson. "But I did wot I thought best to hold him."

"Oh, we don't blame you, Mr. Masterson," said Snap. "But it is a pity such a rascal should be at large."

It was pleasant enough when the sun showed itself, and by eight o'clock the two young hunters were on their journey to Firefly Lake. It must be confessed that they found their load a heavy one, and by noon they were still some distance from camp.

"We'll have to stop, to rest and get a lunch," said the doctor's son.

"No use of killing ourselves."

"I suppose Giant and Whopper are wondering what has become of us," said Snap.

They came to a rest in the shelter of some pine trees and ate a lunch Mrs. Masterson had prepared for them, in the meantime keeping warm by a fire they built of tree branches. The rest occupied half an hour and then they went on as before.

"Wonder what the boys are doing?" said Snap, as they reached Firefly Lake.

"Giant said something about fishing through the ice," answered his companion. "He appears to love that sport."

"Well, it is nice--when you can catch anything--and Giant is always lucky."

They had proceeded less than half the distance up the lake to the camp when Snap came to a halt.

"Listen, Shep!"

"It is Giant calling," answered the doctor's son. "He must be in trouble!"

"Whopper! Whopper!" came to their ears. "Help me! A bear is after me!"

"A bear is after Giant!" gasped Snap. "Come on, Shep, we must aid him!"

"There he is." said Shep, as they swept around a bend of the lake.

"And look, a big bear is after him!"

"Let us shoot the bear!" cried Snap, and dropped his hold of the sled rope, while the doctor's son did the same. Then both young hunters brought around their shotguns and aimed at the big bear. But Giant was also in range and they did not dare to fire.

"Giant, run to one side!" sang out Snap. "Give us a chance to shoot! I think I can hit him."

"Snap!" gasped the smaller member of the Gun Club. "Shoot him! shoot him! He wants to eat me up!"

"Hullo! hullo!" came from the camp, and now Whopper appeared, rifle in hand. "By ginger, a bear!"

By this time the bear was closing in upon poor Giant. The beast was hungry and the smell of fish was very tempting. With nothing else to do, Giant threw his mess of fish directly in the bear's face.

The movement was a surprise to Bruin and he stopped short. Then he caught up the string of fish, turned swiftly but clumsily, and lumbered off in the direction of the forest bordering the lake.

It was now that Snap and Shep, as well as Whopper, got a chance to fire at the bear, and all did so hastily. But they were excited over Giant's narrow escape and their shots did no more than to wound the bear slightly, in the ear and the side. Bruin gave a growl, made a turn as if to come back, and then dove into the forest and was lost to view.

"He--he wanted my fish!" gasped Giant. "Well, he is welcome to them, so long as he doesn't chew me up!"

"What a pity that we didn't nail him," said Shep.

"Shall we go after him?" demanded Whopper. "The four of us ought to be able to lay him low."

"I am not going after him just now," answered Giant, who was still as white as a sheet.

The others talked it over for a few minutes and it was decided to follow up the bear some other time, if it could be done. Whopper and Giant were anxious to hear what Snap and Shep had to tell, and all took themselves to the Inn, dragging the sled after them.

As soon as the excitement was over, Snap and Shep told their tale in full, to which Giant and Whopper listened with close attention. The latter were sorry that Kiddy Leech had escaped, but glad that the outing had not been broken up.

"I'd rather say here than go to court and testify against that tramp," said Whopper. "I don't like to go to court."

"Oh, so would I," answered Shep. "But it was our duty to bring him to justice, if it could be done."

Giant was sorry he had lost his mess of fish, but he had no desire to try his luck again for the time being.

"That bear may be watching around here," he said. "And I don't want him to make a meal of me!"

With it all, the boys were happy to be together again, and equally happy to have their outfit back. That evening they cooked themselves what Whopper declared was "a stunning supper," and enjoyed it to the utmost. It was nine o'clock before they turned in, worn out but happy.

But they did not sleep long. Snap had just gotten into a doze when he heard a scratching outside. He sat up and listened, and soon the scratching was repeated.

"What can that be?" he mused, and then of a sudden his hair seemed to stand upon end. "It must be that bear, and he is trying to get in!"

CHAPTER XXIX

UNEXPECTED VISITORS

For the moment Snap thought to rouse up the others. Then he checked himself, arose with caution, and felt for his shotgun. The fire had burnt low and only a faint flickering of light told him where the firearm was located.

In the meantime the scratching outside had ceased. But soon it began again. It was at the doorway, where the logs set up to close the opening left a crack two inches wide for fresh air.

Snap waited, his heart almost in his throat. Then he saw a shaggy paw pull one of the logs slightly.

He could wait no longer, and aiming straight at the crack he pulled the trigger of his shotgun. Bang! went the weapon, with a noise inside of the shelter that was almost deafening.

"Hi! what's up! Who's shooting!" yelled Whopper, leaping up and then sprawling down in his blanket, which was wrapped completely around him.

"What's attacking us?" came from Giant.

"Did you hit it?" asked Shep.

"It's a bear, I think," answered Snap. "He was at the doorway, trying to get in."

A low growl at this juncture reached the ears of all. The other young hunters ran for their firearms. The growl came from a distance, showing the would-be intruder was retreating.

"I've a good mind to go after him," said Shep.

"Don't you do it--it's too dark outside," warned Whopper. "Wait till daylight."

They waited several minutes, but no further sound came to disturb them. Then, with caution, they pulled the logs of the doorway aside and peered out. The clouds had drifted over the stars and it was dark, so that they could see but little. Snap took a firebrand and gazed down into the snow.

"Blood," he said, pointing to the spots. "I certainly hit him."

"And it must have been a bear, by the big tracks," said Giant. "Very likely the one that attacked me on the ice."

"We must get that bear," said Whopper. "But not to-night."

"Yes, we must get that bear by all means," added the doctor's son.

"I vote somebody remain on guard," said Snap. "That beast may come back at any time. Doubtless he is very hungry, and a hungry bear is usually pretty desperate."

It was decided that they should take turns watching, and this settled one after another the young hunters went to rest again. But for the balance of the night only an owl came to disturb them and they paid no attention to this.

With nothing special to do the young hunters were rather lazy about getting around in the morning and it was after ten o'clock when the breakfast dishes were cleared away. Whopper went outside to bring in some firewood and presently called to the others.

"What's wanted?" asked Snap.

"Two men are coming this way, from over yonder. Unless I am mistaken they are the two men who were out hunting with Andrew Felps."

"So they are!" exclaimed Shop. "What can they be wanting now?"

"Maybe they want to drive us away from this lake," suggested Giant. "They are just about mean enough."

"No, they can't do that," answered Snap. "I made sure of it before I left home."

"They are carrying something between them," said Whopper, as the men came closer. "Looks like a deer."

"It is half of a deer--the very deer we killed!" cried Giant.

Soon the men were within speaking distance.

"Good morning, boys," said Giles Faswig, blandly.

"Good morning," returned Snap, briefly. Instinctively he felt that something unusual was in the air.

"We've come to the conclusion to let you have half of that deer," said Vance Lemon.

"Better keep it," said Giant, curtly.

"That's just what I say," murmured Whopper."

"No, boys, we want to do the fair thing," said Giles Faswig, smoothly.

"As it was shot on Mr. Felps' land he thinks he is justly entitled to it, but at the same time--"

"I don't think we want the deer--now," said Snap. "We have plenty of other game, and you acted so hateful about it you can keep it."

He looked at his chums and they nodded, to show that they agreed with him. The two men looked rather dissatisfied.

"So you won't take the deer meat, even after we carried it away over here?" said Vance Lemon.

"No."

"That isn't a very friendly way to act."

"Well, you didn't act very friendly in the first place," answered Shep.

"Having pretty good luck, you say?" asked Giles Faswig, curiously.

"The very best of luck," answered the leader of the Gun flub, and mentioned some of the game brought down. "So you can easily see we don't need this venison at all," he added.

At this the two men looked at each other and murmured something the boys could not catch.

"We came over to--er--to do a little trading," said Giles Faswig. "Got plenty of ammunition on hand, I reckon."

"All we wish," answered Snap, and then he suddenly "smelt a mouse," as the saying goes, and winked at his chums.

"We thought so, and we thought we'd help you out by buying some from you. What sizes have you got?"

"Snap, you don't--" whispered Shep.

"Hush, Shep. Let me run this," whispered the leader of the club, in return. Then he turned to the two men again and mentioned what kinds of ammunition they used and how much they had on hand.

"Thought so," said Giles Lemon. "We'll take half of what you've got and pay you double price for it."

"What!" came from Giant and Whopper, but Snap merely shook his head and winked at them, and then they said no more.

"That's a fair deal, isn't it?" asked Giles Faswig, oilily. "You'll make a clean dollar and a half by the operation."

"We don't want your money," said Snap, decidedly.

"Eh?" came from both men.

"I wouldn't sell you our ammunition at any price, and I don't think my friends care to either."

"That's the talk," put in Shep.

"You don't get anything out of us," murmured Giant.

"Not by a jugful!" added Whopper.

"Then you won't sell us any ammunition?" asked Vance Lemon, and his face grew as sour as the fruit his name represented.

All of the young hunters shook their heads with vigor.

"We'll pay you triple price," said Giles Faswig. "Come, that will be easy money for you."

"Not if you offer us a hundred times the value of the ammunition," said Snap, firmly. "You treated us as mean as dirt before. Now, if you want any ammunition, you can tramp back to town and get it."

At this the men broke into a rage and began to threaten the young hunters in various ways. They had brought over the deer meat merely to smooth matters over, so that they could get the ammunition, which they needed sorely.

"Look here, if you threaten us any more, I'll have you up before the squire," said Snap, at last. "You clear out and leave us alone." And then, in high dudgeon, Giles Faswig and Vance Lemon departed, taking the deer meat with them. On their way back to their own camp they met the big bear, and in fright dropped the meat and ran for their lives. When they got to the camp they told Andrew Felps of the result of the trip.

"Well, we can't stay here without ammunition," said the lumber merchant, in disgust. "I bought up all Riley had, and Jackson said he wasn't going to get any more of those sizes of cartridges until next week. We'll have to give up. Hang those boys anyway!"

And deeply disgusted, the lumber dealer had to give up his outing and go home, and his friends departed with him. They had been more than mean, and, right or wrong, the young hunters had paid them back in their own coin.

CHAPTER XXX

A SURPRISE--GOOD-BYE

After that two days went by without anything unusual happening. The boys enjoyed every minute of the time, and with the bear scare at an end, they went hunting and fishing to their hearts' content. Giant and Whopper caught a mess of sixteen fish, large and small, and Shep and Snap laid low half a dozen rabbits, some squirrels, and also a beautiful brook mink of which they were very proud.

"It is too bad that our outing must soon come to an end," said the leader of the Gun Club. "But as we have had a glorious time I suppose we ought not to complain."

"I saw some silver tail foxes at the ridge to-day," said Shep. "I think we ought to go after them."

"And after that bear," put in Whopper. "We don't want to go home until we lay low his bearship."

"Maybe his bearship will lay us low," put in Giant. "That wouldn't be so nice."

During their spare time the boys had set several traps, and in these they caught some animals of more or less importance. They also brought down two wild turkeys, and resolved to eat one for their New Year's dinner and take the other home.

"Happy New Year!" was the cry, on a beautiful morning, and the young hunters got up to put in a "full day," as Snap expressed it. Right after breakfast they set the turkey to roasting, and made a pie and some other good things. They had a bountiful dinner early and by one o'clock started out for their last hunt.

They had already resolved to cross the lake in the direction Shep had seen the silver-tailed foxes. They went over on their skates, and then donned their snowshoes and were soon deep in the forest. Here they soon struck the trail of the foxes and discovered them in an angle, between a cliff and a series of sharp rocks.

"There's a shot for you!" cried Snap, as four of the rather beautiful creatures came to view, and without hesitation all took aim and fired. As the various reports died away two of the silver-tailed foxes gave a whirl upward and came down lifeless. The others turned tail and started to rush past the young hunters, but Snap and Shep were too quick and brought them down limping and then the others finished the creatures.

"One apiece!" cried Whopper. Just what I hoped for!"

"So did I," said Giant.

They tramped on after this, and managed to bring down a big owl, which Snap said they could stuff and put it in their clubroom--providing they ever got one. Then they came to a peculiar trail that bothered them not a little.

"Do you know what I think it is?" said Snap, at last. "It's the trail of a bear and the beast was carrying something pretty heavy."

"Maybe it is our bear!" cried Giant enthusiastically.

"Gracious, I didn't know we owned a bear," answered Shep.

"Well, Shep, you know well enough what I mean."

"Come on after his bearship!" cried Whopper. "We'll blow him into a million pieces and then take him home as a trophy of our skill."

"Who's going to carry the million pieces?" asked Snap, innocently, and then Whopper shied a chunk of soft snow at him.

All felt in excellent spirits and willing to go after the savage animal. They advanced with caution among the rocks, until they came to a narrow defile, partly choked with snow and ice. On one side was a big shelving rock, with a dark hole beneath.

"Be careful, that may be the bear's den!" cried Snap softly, and just then a loud and deep growl came from the hole. It rather scared all of the young hunters and they retreated several paces.

"Wonder how we can make him come out of his hole?" asked Shep, after an awkward pause.

"Go in and invite him," suggested Whopper, who felt in particularly bright humor that day.

"All right, you go."

"Not on your life!" And Whopper took another step backward.

"Let us get up on yonder rocks," suggested Snap. "Then I'll throw a stone into the den." They crawled up the somewhat slippery rocks and then the leader of the Gun Club did as he had mentioned.

The stone struck something soft, and a moment later out of the den lumbered the big black bear, bristling with rage. As he came forth all of the young hunters blazed away, and the bear was struck in various places. But the shots were far from fatal, and with a grunt of rage and pain bruin started to climb up the rocks after them.

"Give him another shot!" yelled Whopper, who had the rifle. "Quick, or

he'll chew somebody up!"

Again Snap and Giant fired, and the bear received more buckshot in his anatomy. But he was tough as well as big, and the wounds seemed to merely increase his rage.

"He's coming up the rocks sure!" gasped Giant. Then he started to run, lost his footing and began to roll down one of the steep sides of the rock!

"Giant! Giant!" yelled Snap. "Stop, you are rolling right toward the bear!"

"He'll be chewed up sure!" screamed Shep. "Shoot him, somebody! Shoot him!"

In feverish haste Whopper had been reloading his rifle. Now he swung the weapon to his shoulder. He was greatly agitated but by sheer force of will power calmed himself sufficiently to take aim. Then the rifle cracked out and the bullet hit the bear full in the chest. It made bruin stagger, and he fell back on his side, kicking up a shower of snow in all directions.

"Good! That's the way to do it!" sang out Snap. "Now run, Giant!"

By this time the youngest member of the Gun Club had reached the bottom of the rocks and was scrambling to his feet. He had his gun still in his hands, and as the bear lurched toward him he caught the weapon by the barrel, swung it around and let the beast have such a crack on the head that the gun stock was completely shattered. Over went the bear again, kicking up another shower of loose snow.

By this time the young hunters were sure they had the best of the fight, and withdrawing to a safe distance each of those having available weapons let the beast have another shot. This was too much for bruin, and with a final roar and a gasp he plunged forward on his head, gave several convulsive kicks, and lay still.

"Hurrah! We've got him!" cried Shep. "That's the best haul yet!"

"You are right," said Whopper, "even if it did cost Giant his gun."

"Never mind, we'll chip in and buy another for him," said Snap. "Say, that was a sharp fight," he added.

It was no easy matter to get the big bear on a drag and haul the carcass down to the ice. But once on the lake they made good progress towards the camp.

"Hullo, boys, been looking for you!" came the call, and Jed Sanborn appeared. "By Christopher Peter! Got a black bear, have yet! Now ain't thet prime!"

"What's the news, Jed?" asked Snap.

"Lots o' news," said the old hunter. "First thing is, you're to go home to-morrow."

"Oh, we know that already," said Whopper.

"Next thing is, do you know that tramp feller with the name o' Kiddy Leech?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's tuk--caught him yesterday. Aaron Masterson spotted him hanging around Riverview. He's arrested."

"Good!" cried Snap. "Now he'll get what he deserves."

"An' that ain't all. Who do you think the tramp sent fer when he was in jail?"

"Who?" asked the four young hunters, simultaneously.

"Ham Spink and Carl Dudder. It ain't leaked out jest why, but some folks thinks young Spink and young Dudder got the tramp to steal your things. An' there's more news, too."

"What more, Jed?"

"It's come out that Ham Spink and Carl Dudder blew up the old boathouse, jest to ruin your things. There was a lively row, but Mr. Spink an' Mr. Rudder settled the bill--to keep Ham and Carl out o' jail, I expect."

This was indeed news and the boys listened with interest to all of the details. The discovery about the boathouse had come through a workman who had let Ham Spink have the dynamite.

"If Ham Spink got that tramp to come here, he ought to suffer for it--and Carl Rudder ought to suffer too," said Snap.

"They shall suffer for it," added Shep.

That evening they told Jed Sanborn of their various experiences, and showed him the game they were going to take home. He declared the bear to be the largest he had ever seen in those parts, and said the game would create a stir when exhibited at Fairview.

"Don't know as you'll ever have so much fun hunting again," he said, "or so many adventures." But he was mistaken, they did have an equal amount of fun, excitement and thrilling adventures the very next summer, and how and where will be told in the next volume of this series, to be entitled "Young Hunters of the Lake; or, Out with Rod and Gun."

The home-coming of the young hunters made quite a stir in the quiet town and when they showed the big bear at one of the stores crowds came to inspect the game. The lads were greatly praised and if their parents were proud of what their sons had done, who can blame them?

The truth about the doings of Ham Spink and Carl Dudder soon leaked out, so far as our friends were concerned, although the matter was kept from the general public. Both Mr. Spink and Mr. Dudder were anxious that no charge of theft should be made against Kiddy Leech, so the tramp was merely given thirty days in jail for vagrancy, and was then given some money by Mr. Spink and told to go elsewhere, which he did. In the meantime Mr. Spink and Mr. Dudder paid for all damages our friends had sustained, including the burning down of the log cabin, which the bad boys admitted, and promised to take Ham and Carl vigorously in hand. As a result both of the misguided boys were sent to a very strict boarding school, where their parents hoped they would see the error of their ways and do better. Hearing of this Snap and the other Gun Club members said they were satisfied; and there the matter rested.

"Boys, we had a dandy time," said Shep one day, as they were talking the outing over. "Hope we go again soon!"

"And shoot more bears," put in Giant.

"And deer," added Snap.

"And a hundred or two other things," came from Whopper. "The next time I go camping--"

"We'll all go with you!" interrupted Snap. "Hurrah for the Fairview Gun Club."

And the cheer was given with a will.

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