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THE CAMPFIRE AND TRAIL SERIES  
WITH TRAPPER JIM IN THE NORTH WOODS

BY LAWRENCE J. LESLIE

1913

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WITH TRAPPER JIM IN THE NORTH WOODS.

[Illustration: "THE SILVER FOX!"]

## CHAPTER I.

### WHAT LUCK DID FOR THE CHUMS.

"It was a long trip, fellows, but we're here at last, thank goodness!"

"Yes, away up in the North Woods, at the hunting lodge of Trapper Jim!"

"Say, it's hard to believe, and that's a fact. What do you say about it, you old stutterer, Toby Jucklin?"

"B-b-bully!" exploded the boy, whose broad shoulders, encased in a blue flannel shirt, had been pounded when this question was put directly at him.

There were five of them, half-grown boys all, lounging about in the most comfortable fashion they could imagine in the log cabin which Old Jim Ruggles occupied every fall and winter.

"Trapper Jim" they called him, and these boys from Carson had long been yearning to accept the hearty invitation given to spend a week or two with the veteran woodsman. A year or so back Jim had dropped down to see his brother Alfred, who was a retired lawyer living in their home town. And it was at this time they first found themselves drawn toward Jim Ruggles.

When he heard of several little camping experiences which had befallen Toby Jucklin and his chums, the trapper had struck up a warm friendship with the boy who seemed to be the natural leader of the lot, Max Hastings.

Well, they had been writing back and forth this long time. Eagerly had the boys planned a visit to the North Woods, and bent all their energies toward accomplishing that result.

And now, at last, they found themselves under the shelter of the roof that topped Old Jim's cabin. Their dreams had come true, so that several weeks of delightful experiences in the great Northern forest lay before them.

Besides Toby Jucklin, who stuttered violently at times, and Max Hastings, who had had considerable previous experience in outdoor life, there were Steve Dowdy, whose quick temper and readiness to act without considering the consequences had long since gained him the name of "Touch-and-Go Steve"; Owen Hastings, a cousin to Max, and who, being a great reader, knew more or less about the theory of things; and last, but not least, a boy who went by the singular name of "Bandy-legs" Griffin.

At home and in school they called him Clarence; but his comrades, just as all boys will do, early in his life seized upon the fact of his lower limbs being unusually short to dub him "Bandy-legs."

Strange to say, the Griffin lad never seemed to show the least resentment in connection with this queer nickname. If the truth were told, he really preferred having it, spoken by boyish lips, than to receive that detested name of Clarence.

These five boys had come together with the idea of having a good time in the great outdoors during vacation days.

And Fortune had been very kind to them right in the start. Although Max always declared that it was some remark of his cousin that put him on the track, and Owen on his part vowed that the glory must rest with Max alone, still the fact remained that once the idea popped up it was eagerly seized upon by both boys.

They needed more or less cash with which to purchase tents, guns, and such other things as appeal to boys who yearn to camp out, fish, hunt, and enjoy the experiences of outdoor life.

As the Glorious Fourth had exhausted their savings banks, this bright idea was hailed with more or less glee by the other three members of the club.

It was not an original plan, but that mattered nothing. Success was what they sought, and to attain it the boys were quite willing to follow any old beaten path.

An account of valuable pearls being found in mussels that were picked up along certain streams located in Indiana, Arkansas, and other states, suggested the possibility of like treasures near at home.

Now, Carson, their native town, lay upon the Evergreen River; and this stream had two branches, called the Big Sunflower and the Elder. The boys knew that there were hundreds of mussels to be found up the former stream. They had seen the shells left by hungry muskrats, and even gathered a few to admire the rainbow-hued inside coating, which Owen told them was used in the manufacture of pearl buttons.

But up to that time no one apparently had dreamed that there might be a snug little fortune awaiting the party who just started in to gather the mussels along the Big Sunflower.

This Max and his chums had done. Their success had created quite an excitement around Carson.

When it was learned what was going on, farm hands deserted their daily tasks; boys quit loafing away the vacation days, and even some of those who toiled in the factories were missing from their looms.

Everybody hunted for pearls. The little Big Sunflower never saw such

goings on. They combed its waters over every rod of the whole mile where the fresh-water clams seemed to exist.

When the furor was over, and there were hardly half a hundred wretched mussels left in the waters that had once upon a time fairly teemed with them, the results were very disappointing.

Two or three small pearls had been found, it is true, but the majority of the seekers had to be satisfied with steamed mussels, or fresh-water clam chowder, as a reward for their hard work.

The wide-awake boys who first conceived the idea had taken the cream of the pickings. And from a portion of the money secured through the sale of these beautiful pearls they had purchased everything needed to fill the heart of a camper with delight.

Here, as the afternoon sun headed down toward the western horizon, the boys, having arrived by way of a buckboard wagon at noon, were looking into the flames of Trapper Jim's big fire in the log cabin, and mentally shaking hands with each other in mutual congratulation over their good fortune.

There was a decided tang of frost in the air, which told that the summer season was gone and early fall arrived.

It might seem strange that these boys, who in October might be expected to be deep in the fall school term, should be away from home and up in the wilderness.

That was where Good Luck remembered them again, and the explanation is simple enough.

Even in the well-managed town of Carson, school directors sometimes neglected their work. And in this year, when the vacation period was three quarters over, the discovery was made that the big building was in such a bad condition that certain extensive repairs would have to be made.

In consequence, greatly to the delight of the older scholars, it was decided that school for them could not take up until the middle of November.

As soon as Max learned of this delightful fact he knew the time had come for their long-promised visit to Trapper Jim.

They had been tempted to go during the summer months, but as there was little to do in the woods at that period of the year save fishing, the boys had been holding off.

Now they could expect to use their guns; to see how Jim set his cunning traps that netted him such rich rewards each winter season, and to enjoy to the full that most glorious time of the whole year in the woods, the autumn season, when the leaves are colored by the early frosts and the

first ice forms on the shores of the little trout streams.

As the afternoon passed they recovered from the effects of the long railroad journey overnight and the joggling buckboard experience. A thousand questions had been fired at Jim, who was a good-humored old fellow with a great love for boys in his heart.

"Take things kind of easy to-day, boys," he kept on saying, when they wanted to know why he didn't get busy and show them all the wonderful things he had in store for his lively young visitors. "I want you to rest up and be in good trim for to-morrow. Plenty of time to begin work then. Knock around and see what it looks like where Old Jim has had his hunting lodge this seven years back."

So they did busy themselves prying into things. And between that hour and dark there were very few spots around the immediate neighborhood that they had not examined.

Jim's stock of well-kept Victor steel traps were commented on, and stories listened to in connection with this one or that. No wonder the hunting instinct in the lads was pretty well aroused by the time they had heard some of these stirring accounts.

"If the whole bunch of traps could only talk, now," declared Owen, as he handled a big one meant for bear, "wouldn't they make the shivers run up and down our backbones, though?"

Trapper Jim only smiled.

He had a thousand things to tell the boys, but, of course, he did not want to exhaust the subject in the beginning. By degrees they should hear all about his many adventures. It would be his daily pleasures to thrill his boy visitors with these truthful stories as they gathered each night around the roaring fire and rested after the day's work.

The shades of night, their very first night in those wonderful North Woods of which they had dreamed so long, were fast gathering now.

Already the shadows had issued forth from their hiding places, and the woods began to assume a certain gloomy look.

Later on, the moon, being just past the full, would rise above the top of the distant hills toward the east. Then the woods might not seem so strangely mysterious.

"When you're ready to begin getting supper, Uncle Jim," said Max, "you must let us lend a hand. We don't know it all by a long sight, but we can cook some, and eat--wait till you see Steve begin, and Toby--Why, hello, here we've been chattering away like a flock of crows and never noticed that our chum Toby was missing all the while!"

"Missing!" echoed Steve, jumping up eagerly at the prospect of their first adventure coming along; and no doubt already picturing all of them

stalking through the big timber, lanterns and torches in hand, searching for the absent chum.

"Who saw him last?" asked Max.

"Why, a little before dark," Owen answered, promptly, "I noticed him prowling around out among the trees. He called out that a cottontail rabbit had jumped up and was just daring him to chase after her."

"Looks like he accepted the dare, all right," said Bandy-legs.

"Where's a lantern? I choose a lantern. You other fellows can carry the torches, because I got burned the last time I tried that game."

Steve was already beginning to hunt around as he talked, when Trapper Jim, who had meanwhile gone and opened the door of the cabin, called to them to be still.

"I thought I heard him right then," he said, "and it sounded to me like he was calling for help. Get both those lanterns, boys, and light 'em. We've got to look into this thing right away."

## CHAPTER II.

### HOW POOR TOBY WAS "RESCUED."

Of course the greatest excitement followed this announcement on the part of the old trapper.

Steve darted this way and that, fairly wild to do something; and Bandy-legs, too, showed himself anxious to help. But, as usual, it was cool Max, assisted by Owen, who managed to light the two lanterns.

Steve pounced on the first one that was ready, true to his word.

"Come on, you slow pokes!" he exclaimed, making for the door; "why, our poor chum might be drowning for all we know, and us wasting time here."

"Oh, I reckon it ain't so bad as that," remarked Trapper Jim. "Hard to drown a tall boy in a three-foot deep crick. Besides, he's up the wind from here, while the water lies the other way. That's one reason none of us heard him before."

They were all hurrying along by now. Bandy-legs, being a little timid, and not altogether liking the looks of the dark woods, had picked up the gun belonging to Max.

"My goodness!" he called out after the others, being in the rear of the little procession, "there's no telling how long poor old Toby might 'a'

been letting out his whoops, and with that door shut we didn't hear him."

"Well, we can right now, all right!" called back Steve, who was running neck and neck with the trapper, swinging his lighted lantern in such a reckless, haphazard fashion that he was in momentary danger of smashing the useful article against some tree.

They could all hear Toby calling very clearly now.

"Help! Oh, h-h-help!"

"One thing sure," Max remarked; "Toby hasn't tumbled down into a hollow tree stump! His yells sound too plain for that."

"Oh, shucks; forget it!" said Bandy-legs.

Some time before, while the boys were hunting for Bandy-legs, who had become lost in a large swamp not twenty miles away from Carson, they had finally found him, caged fast inside a large hollow stump. He had climbed to the top of this to take an observation, when the rotten wood, giving way, had allowed him to fall inside.

It had been a bitter experience for Bandy-legs, and his chums never mentioned it without him shivering, as memory again carried him back to the hours of suffering he had spent in his woody prison.

As they advanced the cries grew louder:

"H-h-help! Boys, oh, b-b-boys, come q-q-quick! I can't h-h-hold on much longer!"

"Say, he must be away up in a tree!" exclaimed Steve.

"No, his voice sounds closer to the ground than that," declared Max.

"Tell you what," panted Bandy-legs from behind, "he's just gone and fell over some old cliff, that's what. You know how clumsy Toby is."

That sounded rather queer, since it was the speaker himself who had always been getting into scrapes because of this trait.

"Cliff!" snorted Steve, "like to know how anybody could ever fall up a cliff. You mean a precipice, silly."

"Guess I do," admitted Bandy-legs, "but it's all the same. If you're on top it's a precipice, and if you're down below--"

"Listen to him holler, would you?" interrupted Steve. "Hold on, Toby, we're coming as fast as we c'n sprint! Keep up a little longer! It's all right! Your pards are on the job!"

Max thought he saw Trapper Jim laughing about this time. From this he imagined the other must have guessed the true state of affairs, and that



poor Toby could not be in such desperate straits as they believed.

The darkness was intense there under the trees.

Several times did impulsive Steve stumble over obstacles which in his eagerness he had failed to notice.

Trapper Jim was doubtless sizing the various boys up by degrees, and long before now he had read most of their leading characteristics. But anyone would be able to know the headstrong nature of Steve Dowdy, after being in his company for an hour.

"Where are you, Toby, old fellow?" called Steve.

"H-h-here! L-l-lookout, or you'll f-f-fall over, too," came weakly from a point just ahead of them.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" shouted Bandy-legs. "It is a \_precipice\_ after all, and p'r'aps an awful high one! Hold on, Toby, don't you dare let loose when we're right at hand."

Max had felt a thrill again at the prospect of such a peril threatening Toby. But another look at Trapper Jim reassured him.

"Yes," said Jim, "be mighty careful how you step, boys. Get down on your hands and knees and creep up here to the edge of the awful chasm. Now, hold the lanterns down, so we can all of us see."

Cautiously did the alarmed Steve do as he was told. Four pairs of eager eyes took in the situation. Amazement staggered the boys for the space of ten seconds. Then they burst out into loud laughter.

And no wonder.

Toby was hanging there all right, red of face from his long-continued exertion, and looking appealingly up to his chums. He had caught hold of a friendly stout root as he found himself going over, and to this he clung, digging his toes from time to time into the face of the "precipice," and in this way managing to sustain himself, though almost completely exhausted by the alarm and strain combined.

"Ain't you g-g-goin' to h-h-help me?" he gasped, amazed no doubt to hear his heartless chums laughing at his misfortune.

"Let go, Toby!" cried Max.

"Yes, drop down and take a rest!" added Steve, who could enjoy a joke to the utmost when it was on Toby, with whom he often had words; though all the same they were quite fond of each other.

"W-w-want me to get s-s-smashed, d-d-don't you?" answered back the indignant boy, as he continued to clutch that root, as though he believed it to be the only thing between himself and destruction.

"Look down, you loon!" cried Steve. "Call that a big drop? Why, I declare the ground ain't more'n six inches down below your feet! Shucks; did I ever hear the like!"

Toby did twist his neck the best he could and look. Then with a glad cry he released his hold on the friendly root to fall in a heap.

"Let's get down to him," said Trapper Jim, "he must be pretty well used up, I reckon. Perhaps he's been hangin' thar half an hour'n more."

"But whatever made him do such a silly thing?" asked Steve, as they proceeded to go around the edge of the little "sink," led by the trapper, who knew every foot of ground.

"Well, I don't know that it was so queer after all," declared Jim; "you see, when he fell over here in the dark, how was Toby to know whether he was hanging over a precipice ten feet deep or a hundred? All he could do was to keep hold of that root and holler for help."

"And he did that to beat the band," declared Owen.

"I guess it was all real to him," the trapper went on to say; "and chances are, when he heard the trickling of this little brook that runs through the sink here, he thought it was a river away below him. Oh, I can feel for Toby all right. I once had an experience myself something like his. But here we are down. How're you feeling, son?"

"P-p-pretty r-r-rocky," declared Toby, who was sitting up when they reached him, and seemed to be trembling all over, as the result of the nervous strain to which he had been subjected.

"Don't blame you a bit," declared Max, who saw that the poor chap had in truth suffered considerably. "Lots of fellows would have thought the same as you did, Toby. I might myself, if I'd slipped down that way in the dark. Here, grab hold with me, Steve, and we'll help Toby home."

"Anyhow," admitted Toby, as they put their arms about him, "I'm g-g-glad you did c-c-come. R-r-reckon I'd f-f-fainted if I just had to let g-g-go."

"Rats! I don't believe it," scoffed the unbelieving Steve.

Once they reached the trapper's cabin, and came under the cheerful influence of that crackling fire, even Toby's spirits rose again. He had by this time recovered some of his usual grit, and could afford to laugh with the rest at his recent experience.

It was about as Trapper Jim suspected.

Toby had been tempted to follow the lame rabbit for some little distance into the woods. Finally, finding that he had gone pretty far, and with night closing in rapidly all around him, the boy had started to return.

Becoming a little confused, he had stumbled one way and another, and in the end fallen over the edge of the shallow sink.

Throwing out his hands even as he felt himself falling, he had caught hold of the projecting root. Here he had hung, trying again and again to climb up, but in vain; and quite sure that a terrible void lay beyond his dangling legs.

At first Toby had been too alarmed to even think of calling for help. But as time went by, and he realized the desperate nature of his predicament, he tried to shout.

This was never an easy task to the stuttering boy, and doubtless he made a sorry mess out of it.

But all's well that ends well. Toby had been gallantly rescued, and now the five chums were doing their level best to assist Trapper Jim prepare supper.

Would they ever forget the delights of that first meal under the roof of the forest cabin? Often had they partaken of a camp dinner, but never before had it seemed to have the same flavor as this one did, surrounded as they were with those bunches of suggestive steel traps, the furs that told of Jim's prowess in other days, and above all having the presence of the grizzled trapper himself, a veritable storehouse of wonderful information and thrilling experiences.

And after the meal was finished they made themselves as comfortable as each could arrange it, using all Jim's furs in the bargain.

"Now, let's lay out the programme for to-morrow," suggested Max.

"Me to try for the first deer," spoke up Steve, quickly. "Squirrel stew, like we had for supper to-night, is all very well, but it ain't in the same class with fresh venison. Yum, yum, my mouth fairly waters for it, boys!"

"Some like venison and some say gray nut-fed squirrels," remarked Trapper Jim. "As for me, give me squirrel every time."

"But we ought to try and get one deer anyway, hadn't we?" Steve pleaded.

"Sure we will," replied the owner of the cabin, heartily, "and I hope it falls to your gun, Steve, seeing you dote on venison so. But it might be to-morrow I'd like to set a few of my traps, and reckoned that some of you boys'd want to watch me do the job."

"That's right," cried Owen and Max together, their eyes fairly sparkling with delight at the anticipated treat.

So they talked on, and Trapper Jim told lots of mighty interesting things as he smoked his old black pipe and sent curling wreaths of blue smoke up

the broad throat of the chimney.

"Wonder if the moon ain't up long before now?" remarked Steve, finally.

"Go and find out," suggested Bandy-legs.

Whereupon Steve arose, stretched his cramped legs, and, going over to the door, opened it. They saw him pass out, and as the trapper had started to relate another of his deeply interesting experiences the boys devoted their attention to him. But it was not three minutes later when Steve came rushing into the cabin, his eyes filled with excitement, and his voice raised to almost a shout as he cried out:

"Wolves; a whole pack of 'em comin' tearin' mad this way!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### WHAT WOODCRAFT MEANT.

"Wolves! Oh, my gracious! You don't say!" cried Bandy-legs, making a dive for the two sleeping bunks that Steve had built along one side of the inside wall of the cabin.

Of course there was an immediate scurrying around. All the other boys were on their feet instantly, even tired Toby with the rest.

Max instinctively threw a glance toward the corner where his faithful gun stood. He did not jump to secure it, however, because something caused him to first of all steal a quick look at Trapper Jim. When he discovered that worthy with a broad smile upon his face, Max decided that after all the danger could hardly be as severe as indications pointed.

Meanwhile Steve had managed to slam the door shut, and was holding it so with his whole weight while he tried to adjust the bar properly in its twin sockets.

Steve was trembling all over with excitement. A thing like this was apt to stir him up tremendously.

"Why don't some of you lend a hand here?" he kept calling out. "Plague take that clumsy old bar, won't it ever take hold? Get my gun for me, can't you, Bandy-legs? Listen to the varmints a-tryin' to break in, would you. Wow! Ain't they mad I fooled them, though? Say, I wonder now if they'd think to get on the roof and come down the chimbly. Hand me my gun, Bandy-legs! Get a move on you!"

By this time Jim was doubled up with laughter.

"Hold on you cannon-ball express boy," he remarked, as he stepped over

and began to take away the bar which Steve had managed to get in place with so much trouble; "I guess we'll have to let these critters come in. They look on Uncle Jim's cabin as their home."

"What, wolves!" gasped Steve.

"Well, hardly, but my two dogs, Ajax and Don," replied the trapper. "You see, I didn't want them along when I borrowed that buckboard and team to fetch you all here. So I left 'em with a neighbor three miles off, and told him to set 'em loose to-night. So you thought they were wolves, did you, Steve? Well, I guess they look somethin' that way, and the moonlight was a little deceivin', too."

With that he threw open the door.

Immediately a couple of shaggy dogs bounded in and began barking furiously as they jumped up at their master, showing all the symptoms of great joy.

"Sho, one'd think they hadn't seen me for a whole month, instead of only a few hours," laughed Trapper Jim, as he fondled the dogs.

Then the five boys in turn were introduced, as gravely as though Ajax and Don might be human beings.

"They're quick to catch on," remarked Trapper Jim. "They know now you're all friends of mine, and you can depend on 'em to stand by you through thick and thin."

"What are they good for?" asked Bandy-legs.

"This smaller one is reckoned the best 'coon dog in the woods," replied the other, patting the head of Don. "If there's a striped-tail in the district and I set him to working, he'll get him up a tree sooner or later. And when the animal is knocked to the ground Don knows just how to get the right grip on his throat."

"But his ears are all slit, and his head looks like it had been scratched and gouged a whole lot," remarked Steve.

"Well, old 'coons, they've got pretty sharp claws sometimes, ain't they, Don?" continued the old trapper. "And in the excitement a dog can't always just defend himself, eh, old fellow! They will get a dig in once in a while, spite of us."

Don barked three times, just as if he understood every single word his master was saying.

"And how about Ajax?" Bandy-legs continued.

"He's a general all-around dog, and ain't afraid of anything that walks. Why, boys, I've known him to tackle and kill the biggest lynx ever seen in these parts, and that's something few dogs could do."

"What's a lynx?" asked Bandy-legs.

"A species of wildcat that sometimes strays down this way across the Canada border," replied the trapper. "Generally speaking, he's bigger'n the other and fierce as all get out. Fact is, I believe I'd sooner have a panther tackle me than a full-grown, ugly tempered lynx. Some people call it the 'woods devil,' and they hit it pretty near right, too."

"Hasn't a lynx got some sort of mark about him that makes him look different from the ordinary bobcat?" asked Owen.

"Why, yes," replied Trapper Jim, "there's some difference in the beasts; but I reckon the little tassels that kinder adorn the ears of the lynx mark him most of all."

"Looks like a full house, now," remarked Max, who had not hesitated to make up with both the dogs, being very fond of their kind.

"Oh, while I have company Ajax and Don'll have to sleep in the shed or lean-to outside," remarked the master of the dogs. "Of course, when I'm here all by myself they stay indoors with me. And I tell you, lads, they make a fellow feel less lonely in the long winter days and nights. Dogs are men's best friends--that is, the right kind of dogs. They become greatly attached to you, too."

Toby just then seemed to become greatly excited. Finding it difficult to express himself as he wanted, he pointed straight at Steve, and was heard to say:

"A-a-attached to you! S-s-sure they do; S-s-steve knows! Saw one attached to h-h-him once. Wouldn't h-h-hardly let go."

At that there were loud shouts, and even Steve himself could hardly keep from grinning at the recollection of the picture Toby's words recalled.

"'Spose you fellers never will get over that affair," he remarked, as he put his hand behind him, just as if after all these months he still felt a pain where the dog had bitten him. "Cost me a good pair of trousers, too, in the bargain. It was a bulldog," he added, turning toward Trapper Jim, "and he was so much attached to me that he followed me halfway 'over a seven-foot fence. Would have gone the whole thing only the cloth gave way and he lost his grip."

"Well, that showed a warm, generous nature," remarked Trapper Jim; "some dogs are marked that way."

"This one was," declared Steve. "But I got even with the critter."

"How was that?" asked the other, looking a little serious; for, himself a lover of dogs, he never liked to hear of one being abused.

"I got me one of those little liquid pistols, you know, and laid for my

old enemy," Steve continued; "he saw me passing by and came bouncing out to try my other leg. But he changed his mind in a big hurry. And, say, you just ought to 'a' heard him yelp when he turned around and faced the other way."

"You didn't blind the poor beast, I hope?" remarked Jim.

"Oh, nothin' to speak of," said Steve, gayly. "He was all right the next day. Ammonia smarts like fun for awhile, but it goes off. But, listen, whenever I passed that house, if old Beauty was sitting on the steps like he used to do, as soon as he glimpsed me, would you believe it, he'd turn tail and run quick for the back yard and watch me around the corner of the house."

"You had him tamed, all right," said Max.

"We called it an even break, and let it go at that," said Steve.

When the boys began to yawn, and betrayed unmistakable evidences of being sleepy, their host showed them how he had arranged it so that they could all sleep comfortably.

There were only two wooden bunks, one above the other. Trapper Jim was to occupy the lower one, and turn about, the five boys were to have the other.

This necessitated four of them sleeping on the floor each night. But as there were plenty of soft furs handy, and the boys announced that they always enjoyed being able to stretch out on the ground, Jim knew he would have no trouble on this score.

So the first night passed.

Perhaps none of them slept as well as usual. This nearly always turns out to be the case with those who go into the wilderness for a spell. The change from home comforts and soft beds to the hardships that attend roughing it can be set down as the principal cause.

However, nothing serious occurred during the night calculated to disturb them. It is true Toby did fall out of the upper berth once, landing on a couple of the others with a thump, but then such a little matter was hardly worth mentioning between friends.

And they could understand how Toby must be dreaming of his recent trouble, as he hung over that terrible abyss by his hold on a single root.

Perhaps the root gave way in his dreams, and Toby made a frantic effort to save himself.

Morning came at last.

Breakfast was cooked and eaten with considerable eagerness, for

immediately it was over the boys expected to accompany their host while he made his first tour of the season, intending to set a few traps in places that had been marked as favorable to the carrying out of his business.

They could hardly wait for Trapper Jim to get through his chores.

Presently Jim went over several lots of hanging traps and selected those he wished to use on the first day.

How he seemed to handle certain ones fondly, as though they carried with them memories of stirring events in the dim past.

They all looked pretty much alike to the boys, but Jim undoubtedly had certain little familiar marks by means of which he recognized each individual trap. He mentioned some of their peculiar histories as he picked out his "lucky" traps.

"This one held two mink at a pop twice now, something I never knew to happen before," he remarked.

"And this old rusty one was lost a whole season. When I happened to find it, there was a piece of bone and some fur between the jaws, showing that the poor little critter had gnawed off its own foot rather than die of starvation. Made me fell bad, that did. A good trapper seldom allows such a thing to happen."

"Do mink really set themselves free that way?" asked Owen.

"They will, if given half a chance," was Jim's reply. "That's one reason we always try to fix it so that mink, otter, muskrats, fisher, and all animals that are trapped along the edge of streams manage to drown themselves soon after they are caught. It saves the pelt from being injured, too, by their crazy efforts to break away."

"And what of that trap over there? You seem to be taking mighty good care of it," said Max, who was deeply interested in everything the trapper was doing.

"Well, I hadn't ought to complain about that trap," came the answer.

"Year before last it caught me a silver fox, as the black fox is called. And perhaps you know that a prime black fox pelt is worth as high as several thousand dollars."

"Hear that, will you!" exclaimed Steve.

"H-h-how much d-d-did you g-g-get for it?" asked Toby.

"Well," Jim went on to say, "it wasn't a Number One, but they allowed I ought to get eight-fifty for it; which check was enclosed in the letter I'll show you some day. I keep it to prove the truth of my story."

"A bully good day's work, eh?" remarked Steve.



"Best that ever came my way," admitted the other.

"Gee, wonder now if we'd be lucky enough to set eyes on a silver fox worth a cool thousand or more?" ventured Bandy-legs.

"It is barely possible you may, boys," remarked the trapper; "because I saw a beauty two or three times during the summer. And I'm kind of hoping there may be some sort of magic about this same trap to coax him to put his foot in it."

"A single fox skin fetching thousands of dollars!" remarked Steve, as if hardly able to grasp it as the truth. "Whew, that beats finding pearls in the shells of mussels all hollow!"

"Yes," Owen broke in, "and even Ted Shafter and his crowd hunting wild ginseng roots and selling it to the wholesale drug house at big money doesn't cut so much of a figure after all, does it?"

"One thing I want to ask you, boys, right in the start," the trapper took occasion to say; "while you're up with me you must promise never to shoot at a fox, a mink, a marten, an otter, or in fact any small fur-bearing animal."

"We give you our word, all right, Uncle Jim," said Steve, readily.

"Of course," continued the old trapper, "my one reason for asking this is to keep you from ruining good pelts. It would be pretty tough now if after I caught that black fox I found that his skin had been so badly torn by birdshot that it wasn't worth handling."

"That's right, it would," admitted Owen.

"You can depend on us to hold back," Max added, sincerely.

"Well, this is about all the traps I care to put out to-day," and as he spoke Jim made them up in two bundles, one of which he gave to Toby and the other to Bandy-legs.

He saw that, ordinarily, these two were the least important members of the club. And in the kindness of his heart he wished to make them feel that he needed their especial help.

So Toby and the other chum slung the traps over their shoulders with ill-concealed pleasure in that they had been singled out for such attention by the old trapper.

"Then you don't mean to set Old Tom to-day," asked Owen, pointing to a big trap, whose weight and grim-looking jaws announced that it was intended for large game.

Old Jim smiled and shook his head, as he replied:

"Hardly any use, unless we run across bear tracks. Such a thing might happen, you know; because it did snow last night, and there's a good inch on the ground right now."

"But, hold on," said Owen, "I understood that bears always went to sleep in the fall and stayed in some cave or a hollow tree till spring came."

"They do," answered the trapper, "but generally hang around till the first real hard blizzard comes along. This little snow don't count, and every day a bear is able to be around hunting roots and such things, why, the less he has to live on his own fat, you know, But we're all ready now, so come along, boys."

The dogs were left at the cabin, which Jim did not even shut up. He knew Ajax and Don would stay close at home; for the sight of the strings of traps told the intelligent dogs they could not be allowed to accompany their master on this expedition.

An hour later, and Jim was showing the eager and curious boys who remained at a little distance, so that their scent might not cause the cautious mink to abandon his usual trail, just how he set a trap in order to catch the cunning little animal, and make him drown himself with the weight of the trap.

The snare was set at the mouth of a hole in the bank of a creek, and which, Jim informed them, was one of many visited by the male mink each night as they wandered up and down the stream.

He used some animal "scent" contained in a small bottle to help attract his prey. Then, after destroying all evidences of his having been there as much as he possibly could, Trapper Jim rejoined the boys.

"Now we'll head for the marsh where I put several traps day before yesterday and mean to add a few more to-day," he remarked. "As we go, I'll try to explain just why a man has to be so very careful whenever he matches his wits against those of a wily and timid little beast."

They hung upon every word Jim uttered, for these secrets of the woods were things all of them had long wanted to know. What could musty old school books teach them that could equal the knowledge they imbibed straight out of the fountain of experience.

It was while Jim was holding forth in his most effective manner, so as to thrill every one of his boy friends, that they saw him come to a sudden stop.

His eyes were fastened upon the white ground just in front of them, and as he pointed with his gun he electrified the boys by saying:

"Mebbe after all we might have use of Old Tom to-morrow, for there's the tracks of a big bear."

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE SECRETS OF TRAPPING.

"Bully!" cried Steve, looking almost as happy as he did on that never-to-be-forgotten day when they found their first lovely pearl in a mussel taken from the Big Sunflower River.

"A b-b-bear!" exclaimed Toby. "L-l-let me s-s-see."

All of them were soon eagerly examining the marks so plainly described in the light snow. Bruin had evidently shuffled along here, heading for some favorite place in the neighboring marsh, where he knew food was still to be found.

"We'd better leave the old chap alone for a bit," announced Jim. "When I can make sure by his coming back to his den the same way that he's got a regular trail, we'll lay for him."

"I'd like to get in a shot with my gun," declared Steve.

"H-h-ho! Much g-g-good your N-n-number Seven shot'd d-d-do against his t-t-tough old hide!" jeered Toby.

"Get out! You don't think I'm such a ninny as that, I hope," answered Steve, indignantly. "Hey, take a look at that shell, and this one, too, will you? Know why that black cross is on them? Course you don't. Well, I'll tell you."

"H-h-hurry up then and t-t-tell me."

"They're buckshot shells," declared Steve. "Each one's got just twelve buckshot inside, all as big as pistol bullets. And at short range they're calculated to bring down a deer like fun. I'd be willing to take my chances against a black bear, given a good opening to hit him back of his foreleg. Now you know a heap more'n you did before, Toby Jucklin."

"S-s-sure," answered the other, nodding his head good-naturedly.

"But remember," said Jim at this juncture, "a good bearskin is worth all the way from five to twenty dollars to me. But after you've made a sieve out of it with twelve or twenty-four buckshot from that scatter gun, why, I hardly think I could give it away."

"So Steve, please restrain your bear-killing feeling just now," said Max. "Whether we get him in a trap or shoot him on the run the bear steaks will taste just as good; won't they, Uncle Jim?"

"I reckon you're right," replied the trapper, without any great animation; for doubtless he had found bear meat pretty tough eating, and

given his choice would any day have much preferred the porterhouse steak which Steve had so often at home that he turned up his nose at it.

When they arrived at the marsh where the countless muskrats had their homes, a new species of interest was aroused.

Jim showed them how he had to employ entirely new tactics when dealing with the muskrats than in connection with the mink. The former were banded together in colonies, and the trapper had to be constantly on the alert lest in capturing one prize he frighten the whole family away.

"But I learned my business many years ago," the old trapper declared, with considerable pride, "when beaver lived in the North Woods. There never were more wary little animals than those same beaver, and the man who could circumvent 'em had a right to call himself smart."

After setting three traps he led the way to a place where he had left one baited on the occasion of his previous visit to the marsh.

"You see, here's where I set it on the bank," he remarked, "and the chain ran down there to a stake in deep water."

"But it ain't here now, Uncle Jim," said Steve.

"Because a curious and hungry musquash, anxious to reach the bait I stuck on a splinter of wood just above the trap, set it off."

"And then sprang back into the water, because that was his natural way of doing when alarmed, and soon drowned there. Was that the way it worked, Uncle Jim?" asked Max.

The old trapper looked fondly at him and answered:

"Exactly as you say, son. Men who trap these cunning small fur-bearing animals never get tired of studying their habits; and the one who enters most fully into the life and instincts of mink, 'coon, marten, otter, fisher, or even the humble muskrat, is the fellow who succeeds best in his business."

"B-b-but all the m-m-muskrats I ever saw could swim and s-s-stay under w-w-water's long as they p-p-pleased," Toby broke out with.

"That's a mistake," said Trapper Jim. "None of these animals can live under water all the time like a fish. They have to come up to breathe just so often. Beaver have houses made of mud and sticks. The entrances to these are always down below: but you find the tops of all beaver houses above the surface."

"But," said Steve, "I've seen muskrats dive just as Toby says, and waited with a club to have 'em come to the top of the water again; but lots of times I'd have to chuck it up as no good. How did that happen, Uncle Jim?"

"That is easily explained," answered the trapper. "Just as alligators do, so mink, otter, and muskrats have holes that run up into the bank of a stream, their nest being always above ordinary high water. When you missed seeing your rat it was because he happened to be near enough to dive down, enter his tunnel, and make his way up to his nest. You see, there are lots of queer things to be learned, if you only keep your eyes and ears open when in these woods."

"But show us if you really did get one in your trap," urged Bandy-legs, who knew much less about all these things than any one of the chums, yet felt considerable eagerness to learn.

So with a stick that had a fork at the end Jim felt around in the water at a point he supposed he would find something.

And, sure enough, he presently caught the chain and speedily pulled out the trap. It was not empty. A plump-looking muskrat was caught by both forelegs.

"You got him, all right, sure," commented Steve.

Trapper Jim was taking the victim out, and carefully resetting the trap in the same place it had been before; after which he renewed the bait.

"Like as not I'll have another to-morrow, and for days to come," he remarked; "unless they get suspicious on account of the scent we leave by touching things. I try to kill that all I can. But when animals are unusually timid, it's often necessary to come in a boat, and do it all without setting a foot on shore, because, you know, water leaves neither trail nor scent."

"Yes, the sharpest-nosed hound in the world is knocked out, I've read, when the game takes to the water."

It was Owen who made this remark, and the trapper nodded his head in approval as he added:

"I see you are a great reader, my boy. That's a mighty fine thing. There's only one that's better--proving the truth of things by actual experience. And while you're up here in the grand old North Woods with me I hope you'll pick up a lot of useful information that you never would find in any school books. Now we're ready to visit the second trap that was set a little farther along."

To the satisfaction of the trapper this furnished a victim equal in size to the first one.

"I didn't know muskrats counted for much, Uncle Jim," remarked Steve, who saw the sparkle in the old man's eyes as he handled the second prize.

"Oh well, the skins didn't pay for the trouble years ago," he said in reply, "but of late years good furs are getting so scarce that they are using heaps of muskrat pelts, generally dyed and sold under another name."

It is a good serviceable fur, and if taken up North answers the purpose very well."

"Why do you say 'up North'?" asked Owen.

"Max there can tell you, I'm sure," laughed the trapper.

"Oh, well," remarked the one mentioned, "I do happen to know that the farther north you go the better the fur. And, of course, that means a higher price in the market, since all pelts are graded according to size and quality."

"That means, I suppose," said Owen, "that a muskrat skin taken away up in Northern Michigan or Canada is more valuable than the same sized pelt that was captured down, say, in Florida."

"Often worth twice or three times as much," remarked the trapper. "Stands to reason, too, since the little critters don't have much need of thick hides where the weather is generally warm."

"I can see through that all right," Steve admitted, "but ain't they queer lookin' little rascals, though! Some plump, too!"

"Fat as butter this season," observed Jim. "And I'm just longing to see how they taste. Last year they didn't just seem to suit my particular brand of appetite."

"What's that?" almost shouted Steve, "say, Uncle Jim, you're just trying to give me taffy now, sure you are."

"That's where you're mistaken Steve," said the trapper, smiling at the horrified expression on the boy's face.

"But--you don't mean to say you \_eat\_ muskrats?" demanded Steve.

"Do I? Well, you wait and see how I'll tackle these this very evening. And if we're lucky enough to find a third one in my other set trap, why, you boys can have a look in, too."

"Me eat rats?" cried Steve, scornfully. "Mebbe I might if I had to do it or starve to death; but not when I've got other stuff to line my stomach with, I'm no Chinaman, Uncle Jim."

"Well, you'll change your tune before long," remarked the other, "and it's a mistake to class these clean little animals with common rats. The Indian name for him is musquash, and thousands of people appreciate the fact that his meat is as sweet as that of a squirrel."

"And I've been told," said Max, "much more tender."

"That's a fact," declared Jim, "I've got so I never try to fry a squirrel nowadays unless he's been parboiled first. They're the toughest little critters that run around on four legs."

When they arrived at the third trap it was found to contain another "victim of misplaced confidence," as Old Jim called it.

"Plenty to go around now, boys," remarked the trapper.

"You'll have to excuse me," said Steve, shuddering.

And yet before three days went by Steve had been induced to taste the musquash, as Trapper Jim prepared them, and found the dish so good that afterwards his tin pannikin was shoved forward for a second helping as often as any of the others.

On the way home, after all the traps they had brought had been set, Bandy-legs noticed a tree that stood up black and grim, as though a fire had destroyed it at some time.

"Yes," said Jim, when his attention was directed that way, "quite a few years ago we had a big fire up this way that did heaps of damage. And I've noticed that the conditions this fall are just about the same as that year. Why, we've hardly had any rain at all in the last two months."

"The woods must be pretty dry then, I should think," Max remarked.

"Dry as tinder," replied the other. "This little snow will all disappear, and unless we get a heavy fall soon, it wouldn't surprise me if some careless campers or deer hunters let their camp fire get into the brush when the wind is blowing great guns. Then there'll be the mischief to pay. But I hope it won't be any one of you boys."

Each and every one of them solemnly declared that he was firmly resolved to be unusually careful.

Finally they reached the cabin.

In the afternoon Old Jim skinned the three musquash, and showed the boys how he fastened the hides on stretching boards, which would cause them to retain their shape while they dried.

"We never put skins in the sun or near a fire to dry," he observed, seeing that most of the boys were anxious to learn all they could. "The best way is to stand 'em in the shade where the breeze can play on 'em. But, of course, you mustn't let the pelts get wet while they're drying."

Sure enough, Jim cut up the musquash, and gave evidences of satisfaction at finding them so plump.

As the afternoon began to wane Bandy-legs surprised his chums by actually volunteering to go out and gather wood for the fire.

This was really such an unusual occurrence that Max surveyed the other curiously as he passed out.

He wondered if Bandy-legs, generally quite lazy, had seen the error of his ways and meant to reform.

It appeared that Max was not the only one who thought this action odd, for Owen spoke of it.

"What d'ye suppose struck that boy?" he remarked.

"Never knew him to volunteer to do a thing before," declared Max.

"I should say not," Steve broke in. "Generally speaking, we have to use a stuffed club on Bandy-legs to get him to do anything but eat."

Toby chuckled.

"Gr-g-great s-s-stunt," he ejaculated, "g-g-got him anxious to t-t-try stewed m-m-m-m--" But that name was really too much for Toby, who had to be satisfied by pointing at the kettle in which Trapper Jim had placed the dismembered musquash.

At this the others laughed.

They were lounging around in the cabin at the time. A small blaze burned in the big fireplace at the bottom of the wide-throated chimney.

"What I want to know," remarked Owen, who had been examining one of the skins stretched on the thin board, "is why they fix these different ways. I've read that some skins are cured with the fur out and others with it in; some split and others dried whole."

"Glad you mentioned that," said Jim, looking pleased. "Skins are of all kinds. Some we dry cased, without cutting. I'm going to show you the whole business by degrees, if we're lucky enough--"

He stopped short in what he was saying, and seemed to cock his head on one side, as though listening.

"Say, I guess there must be some kind of bird or animal in your old chimney, Uncle Jim," remarked Steve.

"I thought I heard it, too," Owen declared.

All listened.

"There it goes again," said Steve; "and something dropped down right then. I was thinking of that story you told us where a bear came down through the big chimney of a cabin. Wow! Listen to that, would you?"

As Steve cried out in this way, the rattling in the chimney suddenly grew into an alarming noise. Then a large object fell with a crash into the fire.



## CHAPTER V.

### WHAT CAME DOWN THE CHIMNEY.

"It's a bear!" whooped Steve, as he made a headlong dash for the corner where his double barrel stood.

Forgotten just then was the injunction of the old trapper that they should not shoot any thing that wore fur, as it would cheat him out of all his expected profits.

If a bear became so bold as to enter the cabin by way of the chimney he must surely be treated, with scant ceremony. Buckshot or birdshot, it mattered little which the gun contained, since at close quarters the load would carry like a large bullet.

But Steve had not even managed to lay a hand on his gun, when he was amazed to hear above the barking of the two dogs, loud shrieks of laughter from Max, Owen, and Toby.

Even the hoarser notes of the trapper seemed to join in. And when there chanced to be a little break in all this racket, Steve caught a wailing voice crying aloud:

"Put me out! Somebody throw a bucket of water over me, and put me out! I'm all a-fire! Why can't you help a feller?"

A figure was dancing around like mad, now slapping at his trousers leg, and then trying to reach the middle of his back, where his coat seemed to be smoldering.

It was Bandy-legs.

Steve instantly recognized his chum, and this fact, taken with the noise in the chimney, gave the thing away.

Bandy-legs had tried to play a prank on them, and, as usual, made a sorry mess of it.

While sitting there and looking at the wide-throated chimney, perhaps his mind went out to what Jim had told about the curious bear which, hunting around on the roof of a cabin to ascertain where that fine odor of hams came from, fell down the chimney.

He would climb upon the roof and lower a make-believe wildcat, fashioned out of an old moth-eaten skin Jim had thrown away.

That accounted for Bandy-legs' astonishing announcement that he would go out and gather some of the wood for the night.

It also explained to Max just why he had been stout string that lay upon the trapper's table. This would be needed in the carrying out of his trick.

But, like the incautious bear, Bandy-legs had also leaned too far over the top of the chimney. Perhaps he wanted, not to sniff the smoked hams below, as in the case of Bruin, but to hear the shouts of consternation when his make-believe bobcat landed in the fireplace, apparently jumping up and down as Bandy-legs jerked the string.

The consequence had been that he fell into the opening, and, landing on all fours, scattered the little fire in every direction.

But seeing that the boy's clothes were really on fire in several places, Max grabbed up the first thing he could think of that might be depended on to extinguish the smoldering cloth.

"Hold on, that's my supper!" shouted Trapper Jim, clutching the hand of Max before he could empty the kettle. "Here's the water-bucket; use that."

And Max did so, drenching poor dancing Bandy-legs from head to foot with the contents of the pail.

"That's the time Bandy-legs came near getting more than his share of the grub," declared Owen, who was busily engaged stamping out some of the smoldering brands that had been scattered around so promiscuously when the sprawling figure of the boy landed in their midst.

"Somebody carry that old skin outside," said Trapper Jim. "It's burning more or less, and we'll have the cabin so full of smell we won't be able to stay in it much longer."

Toby volunteered to do this, although he had to handle the thing carefully so as not to get burned.

"I'll go after another bucket of water," remarked Max; "and I'd advise our practical joker here to jump out of those wet duds and get into some dry ones in a hurry."

Bandy-legs, looking disgusted and rather silly, was beginning to shiver, as the door, which now stood open to ventilate the cabin, allowed the chilly air of approaching evening to enter.

"Guess I will," he remarked; "'cause I've got that wood to gather."

"You bet you have," declared Steve; "we don't let you off from that job. And when you've got your hand in, we'll expect you to take care of the fuel business right along, see?"

"See you in Guinea first," muttered Bandy-legs, bristling up.

They could never coax him to tell what he had really intended doing at

the time his treacherous heels slipped on the roof, and he fell down the big opening through which the smoke escaped.

Still, no one needed explanations. The fact of his lowering the old abandoned pelt, bundled up so as to look as much like a live bobcat as possible, spoke for itself.

Somehow or other this trip seemed to be particularly hard on practical jokers. Owen gravely remarked that all who were ordinarily given to playing pranks would take notice.

"Needn't look at me that way when you say that," remarked Steve. "I used to be a great hand for jokes, but never again. I've reformed, I have."

"Y-y-yes, like f-f-fun you have," scoffed Toby, who knew Steve "like a book," and had no faith in his professed change of heart.

After a while things looked comfortable again.

The fire burned cheerily on the hearth and Jim's kettle, hanging from an iron bar that could be let down, steamed and bubbled, and began sending out appetizing odors that even Steve sniffed with less resentment than he had anticipated.

"What d'y'e think of it now, Steve?" asked Uncle Jim.

"Huh, if you mean the smell, why, it ain't so very bad," replied the boy. "Fact is, makes me think of rabbit stew, some."

"Beats any rabbit you ever ate; just wait," prophesied the trapper, who knew that once Steve overcame his prejudice he would admit as much himself.

Bandy-legs had finished dressing, and as he lacked certain garments to complete his attire, the other boys temporarily helped him out. When his own were dry he would return the borrowed articles.

As though desirous of doing penance because of his wretched failure as a prank player, Bandy-legs did work, bringing wood to the outside of the cabin with unwonted zeal.

Indeed, the trapper finally had to stop him.

"Looks like you meant to swamp us with firewood, son," he remarked, surveying the pile that was heaped up against the side of the cabin.

"Huh, thought I'd get enough while I was about it," Bandy-legs replied.

"Well, you've done yourself proud, my boy, and I reckon I'd stop now. We've got all we can use till to-morrow night. And I don't like too big a stack against the cabin wall. A spark from the chimney might set her going, and I'd hate to be burned out."

The supper was a success.

Of course they had plenty of other things to eat besides Steve's pet dish. The boys made sure of this, not fancying the idea of having to depend upon the musquash alone.

All of them but Steve tasted it and declared it fine. He could not be coaxed to even sample it at the time; but Old Jim believed Steve would come around in time.

"It's just because these plump little critters are so common," he remarked, with a smile of satisfaction, as he emptied the balance of the stew into his own pannikin. "If they cost four dollars each, now, and only the millionaires could buy 'em, you'd think they beat anything going."

"Yes," said bookworm Owen, "that's the way it was with diamond-back terrapin. Time was in Virginia and North Carolina, yes, in Maryland, too, when a man hired out to a planter along the coast, he had it entered in the contract that he was not to be fed on terrapin. They were looked on at that time as common stuff. To-day the rich pay five dollars apiece for decent-sized little fellows. You're right, Uncle Jim, it makes a lot of difference."

Talking in this strain, and picking up useful as well as interesting information from time to time, as Trapper Jim explained things to the boys who were his guests, the evening passed pleasantly away.

Even Bandy-legs seemed to forget his recent troubles part of the time.

Max, seeing him rub various portions of his body tenderly, asked whether he had really been burned. And when the baffled joker was induced to show several red marks, Max insisted on applying a soothing lotion, which took out much of the pain.

It was an evening long to be remembered by the boys. Steve's turn to occupy the extra bunk had come around, and he felt in high feather in consequence, while the other boys had to select their places on the floor.

But everyone seemed in the best of humor, and the soft furs promised to make just as good beds as they could wish.

When Max stepped out just before retiring to see how the weather promised for the morrow, he found a clear sky, the moon just peeping into view, and a wholesome tang in the air.

And as Max stood listening to the far-away mournful call of an owl to its mate, and noted the flood of soft moonlight, it was no wonder he said to himself:

"I tell you it's good to be here!"

## CHAPTER VI

### STEVE STARTS GAME.

"Wish you fellows luck!" said Owen.

It was the next morning. Breakfast had been dispatched, and there was still a distinct odor of bacon and coffee in the air.

All of them were getting ready for the duties laid out for the day; and this remark of Owen's had been intended for Max and Steve.

Eager to indulge in a hunt, with the dim prospect of bringing home a fine deer, Steve had begged Trapper Jim to let him go. This was on the evening before, while they sat by the blazing fire in the cabin.

Now Old Jim had, of course, sized up impulsive Steve pretty well before now. He liked the boy very much, for he knew Steve was warm-hearted and a true comrade. But he hardly fancied having so impatient a lad go off by himself.

Accordingly, he had told Steve that if he could get Max to keep him company on a little hunt, he would post them with regard to where they were most likely to run across game.

And Max had only too gladly agreed.

He had a new magazine 30-30 repeating rifle. It was a small bore, but by using the soft-nosed bullets that mushroom out upon striking even the flesh of an animal, it would prove just as powerful as a heavier gun.

And Max was secretly just wild to try it on a deer, though he did not show his feelings the same way Steve would have done.

Both boys were ready to start out when the others left to make a round of the traps. They had received final instructions from Trapper Jim.

"Got your compass, Max?" asked his cousin.

"It's O.K.," replied the other, touching his pocket, suggestively.

"D-d-don't forget your g-g-grub," said Toby.

"Both of us got the snack of lunch stowed away," Steve made answer, as he pointed to the bulging side of his khaki hunting coat that had a game pocket running all the way around inside, "big enough almost to stow a deer in," Steve had laughingly declared.

"But I hardly think Max would ever need a compass," Bandy-legs observed.  
"You know he never yet was lost in the woods."

"Glad to hear that, son," remarked Trapper Jim.

"Sure thing," Bandy-legs went on to say, "Max, he can tell the points of the compass by the bark or the green moss on the trees, by the way the trees lean, and lots of other ways; can't you, Max!"

But the other only smiled, as though he thought there was no need of his wasting breath when, as Steve declared, he could have a loyal chum "blow his horn" for him.

"All ready here, Max," announced Steve, anxious to start.

So, with a few parting words the two hunters left the vicinity of the cabin in the forest. The others were just about ready to start out to learn what the various traps contained.

"Don't forget about that bear, Uncle Jim!" shouted Steve.

"I sure won't," answered the old man, waving his hand.

"If he's been back over that trail you'll lug out Old Tom and give him a chance to earn his keep, won't you!" pursued Steve.

"That's right, I will."

Satisfied with the answer, Steve followed after Max.

Now, although Steve had shot quail and ducks, rabbits and squirrels, he was not a big-game hunter. As yet he had to secure his first deer. And as the sporting instinct was coming on very markedly in the boy, he was anxious to be able to say he had shot a "lordly" buck.

It was always that, with Steve, whenever he boasted of the great things he intended doing on a projected hunt. No ordinary doe seemed ever to enter into his calculations at all.

"And a five-pronged buck, too," he declared. "I wouldn't waste my precious time with anything less."

Knowing that Max had had more or less experience in the line of hunting, Steve was secretly pleased to take lessons. There might be times when Steve was inclined to boast that he knew it all; but when out with Max he felt that this style of bluff would not go.

They headed in the direction the trapper had laid out for them. Since the old man had spent many years around this region it stood to reason that he ought to know a good deal concerning the places where game was most likely to be found.

"Think we'll get one, Max?" asked Steve, after they had been walking for

nearly a full hour through the forest.

"It's a toss-up," replied the other; "hunting always is, because you never know whether the game is there or not. And even if you are lucky enough to start something, perhaps you'll fail to bring it down."

Steve laughed incredulously.

"Trust me to do that same," he avowed, "if only I can get my peepers on a five-pronged buck. Think of what I've got in the barrels of my gun, Max, twelve separate bullets in each shell, and propelled by nearly four drams of powder. Wow! I'd sure hate to be the luckless deer that stood up before all that ammunition."

"Especially when the keen eye and sure hand of Steve Dowdy is back of it all," chuckled Max.

"Oh, well, I don't want to boast, you know, Max, 'cause I might happen to make a foozle out of it. I was only speaking of the hard-hitting qualities of this little double-barreled Marlin of mine, that's all."

"Well, we must wait and see," said Max. "Perhaps you'll make good right in the start; and then, again, something might throw you down. The proof of the pudding's in the eating of it, they say."

"Oh, I do hope we get a deer, even if it doesn't fall to my gun," Steve continued to say. "It'd be too bad now if we spent a whole two weeks up here with Trapper Jim and never tasted any game besides measly squirrel, rabbit, or maybe partridge, if they're still to be had."

"You forget musquash," added Max.

"Bah! I wanted to forget it," declared the other.

"Suppose we knock off talking for a while, Steve," suggested Max. "We're coming to one of the places he said we might find deer. And they've got pretty sharp ears, let me tell you right now."

"But you said we were always hunting up against the wind, so our scent wouldn't be carried to the game," Steve observed.

"That's true enough, Steve, but even then good deer hunters seldom talk above whispers when they expect to run across game. This is one of the times when we can apply that old maxim we used to write in our copy books at school."

"Sure, I remember it well," chuckled Steve, "'speech may be silver, but silence is gold.' I'm dumb, Max."

And for a wonder, not another word did Steve utter for over half an hour. As he was usually such a talkative fellow, this keeping still must have been in the line of great punishment to Steve.

But, then, there are times when the sporting instinct sways all else. And Steve understood that still hunting deer meant a padlock on the lips.

After all, disappointment awaited them.

They put in a solid hour looking over all the territory first mentioned by Trapper Jim, but without starting a single deer.

"They've been around," Max finally observed, "and not long ago either, because you can see the tracks as fresh as anything; but it must have been yesterday, because they're not here now."

"Looky!" exclaimed Steve, "here's where a five-pronged buck must 'a' rubbed himself against this tree, because there's a big bunch of red hair sticking to the rough bark. Glory! Wouldn't I like to have been about over there by the log when he was doing it. Oh, such a shot!"

"You could hardly have missed him from there," laughed Max.

"What next?" asked the disappointed one.

"The sun's getting up pretty near the top of its range. That means it's near noon time," remarked Max.

"And time for grub, eh?" cried Steve. "Well, I won't be sorry, believe me, for several reasons. First place, I'm hungry as all get-out. Then, again, I'm tired of toting all this stuff around. Say when, Max."

"Oh, we'll keep on for half an hour more till we come to a stream where we can get a drink. Then in the afternoon we'll circle around some, so as to reach the other promising section Jim told us about. Come on, Steve."

Nothing rewarded their search; and chancing upon a gurgling creek about the end of the half hour, the two boys found a log to sit down upon.

After eating they rested for quite a spell.

Finally Steve could stand it no longer, but urged his companion to "get a move on him." So once again the two hunters walked on.

Steve was beginning to complain of being nearly done up, when Max asked him not to talk again only in a whisper, as they were now close upon the other feeding ground of the coveted deer.

And this caused Steve to brighten up immediately. In his eagerness to find game his pains were forgotten.

Max arranged that they separate and advance along parallel lines, so as to cover more territory.

He had been going on himself some little time when suddenly he heard Steve's gun roar. A second shot followed fast on the heels of the first, and Max, excited, ran in the direction of the sounds. A few minutes later



he heard the lusty voice of Steve calling out:

"Take care, Max, he knows you're coming! Run for it! He's starting for you! Get a tree, Max, get a tree! He's a holy terror!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE UNWELCOME GUEST.

Max saw what had happened in that one glance he took.

Steve had met his deer at last; and sure enough it was a sturdy buck that had five prongs to his antlers, showing his years.

Whatever upset Steve could only be guessed; but although he had certainly sent in two shots he had failed to bag the game.

Perhaps he wounded the deer with the first shot and the animal had fallen. Flushed with triumph, Steve had given a yell and started to hasten toward his quarry with the intention of bleeding it, as he understood should be done.

Then, when the buck scrambled to his feet, and charged straight at the young hunter, Steve had been so rattled that he missed entirely with his second shot.

After that it was run or take to a tree for Steve.

And sheltered behind an oak, around which he had been chased again and again by the angry buck, Steve had seen his chum appear in sight.

It was then he shouted his warning.

Max had no intention of picking out a tree for himself, as Steve suggested; at least not so early in the game. Time enough for that when he found he had made as bad a bungle of the affair as his chum seemed to have done.

Here was the fine chance to try his new rifle that he had been hoping would come along.

"Look out!"

Max hardly heard this last warning, cry from the boy who looked out behind the friendly oak. He had dropped on his right knee and raised his gun.

The buck was coming on pretty fast, considering the fact that he seemed to limp and be losing blood from the wound Steve had given him.

Max knew he had a difficult task to place his bullet where it was calculated to do the most good. There was little of the deer's breast exposed as with lowered head he charged toward this new enemy. But Max had all the necessary requisites that go to make up the good hunter--a quick eye, a sure hand, and excellent judgment in a pinch.

He took a quick aim, and meant to fire while the buck was still a little way off. This was to give him a chance to pump a new cartridge into the firing chamber of his gun in case the first shot failed to do the work.

After that--well, of course, there still remained the tree Steve recommended, and Steve ought to know a good thing when he saw it, since he had been saved from those really dangerous-looking antlers by a sheltering tree.

But, then, Max did not mean to register a miss.

He pressed the trigger at just the right time as the buck was rising in the air. And when he saw the deer crash to the ground, although he felt a thrill of satisfaction, cautious Max was not like Steve, rushing headlong forward to bleed his game.

On the contrary, his first act was to go through the rapid action that placed his rifle in serviceable condition again.

"Take care, Max," yelled Steve, seeing the buck struggling, "that's how he fooled me, the sharp dodger! He's the tricky one, all right, you bet! Watch him climb up again, now! Take that big tree right alongside you, Max!"

But instead of doing this Max advanced toward the spot where the buck had fallen. He was ready to send in another shot should it be needed. But there was no necessity.

The buck gave one last violent kick and then lay still.

"All over, Steve; you can come along," said Max, beckoning toward the other.

Steve stopped to pick up his gun, examined it with apparent solicitude, as if to make sure it had not been injured, and then carefully replaced the discharged shells with fresh ones.

"You never can tell what them there old five-pronged bucks will do," he said, as he came up to where Max stood, surveying their prize; "and it's best to be on the safe side; so that's why I waited to load my gun."

"And I reckon, Steve," said Max, with a smile, "that if you'd waited before to see if your buck got up again, you'd have downed him for keeps with that second barrel, and then you wouldn't have had to hunt up the safe side of a tree."

"Guess that's all to the good, Max," replied the other, humbly.

"Pretty fine-looking buck, ain't he, Steve?"

"Well, I should say yes," was the answer. "And just to think he's the very five-pronged old boy I've been talking about this long while."

"My, but he acted as though he was mad at you!" Max went on, anxious to hear some of the particulars of what had happened.

"That's straight goods, Max, and he had reason to be mad at me. I plunked him with that first shot and he went down. I thought I had him and started to run in, when, shucks, he got up again!"

"Then you fired again, but so rapidly that you missed; was that it, Steve?"

"Oh, I admit I was some rattled," replied the other.

"And then after you missed him, Steve?"

"Huh, after that things commenced to happen. They came so fast they kind of got me twisted," and Steve made a comical face with this statement that almost set the other off into a roar of laughter.

But he knew that if he gave way it might offend Steve and cause him to bottle up his explanation; so Max held in.

"And then?" he went on.

"Oh," said Steve, "I saw a tree and headed for it kerslam. But the old buck he seemed to be on the high-speed gear himself. First thing I knew he bumped me for fair, and then came back to stick me with his horns. But I didn't just care for knowing him any closer, and I rolled out of the way."

"You managed to get your tree after that, didn't you, Steve?"

"Seems like I did, Max, though honest to goodness, now, if you asked me how I did it I couldn't tell you. Reckon I must have just \_flown\_."

"Yes," laughed Max, "they always say fear has wings."

"Oh, now, looky here, you're mistaken, Max, sure you are. I wasn't afraid right then, only somewhat rattled."

"From the excitement of the thing," remarked Max. "Of course, and anybody would have been about the same. But lend a hand here and let's turn our deer over, Steve. I want to see where you hit him."

This they speedily accomplished; and then Steve, who had been pondering over something, broke loose again.

"Max," he said, with a little quiver to his voice, "I noticed just now that you said our deer. Do you mean to let me claim a share in this thing, then?"

"Why, of course," replied the other, as if in surprise; "we both shot him. See, here's where a buckshot from your gun struck him in the side. They must have scattered more than you thought they'd do at such a short distance."

"Yes," said Steve; "looks like it. But, Max, it was you who killed him."

"Oh, I ended him, that's right," said Max, who was nothing if not generous, "but only for you holding him here after wounding him, where would I have come in? Why, I'd never have had the first sight of the buck."

"Yes, that's so," said Steve, smiling grimly, "I held him all right, didn't I? But when he was chasing me around that old tree so lively, Max, somehow I didn't happen to look at it that way. Fact is, I thought the plagued buck was holding me."

"All the same," declared Max in a tone that settled it, "we got him, and both of us gave him a chance to bleed. You weakened him at first, you know."

"Oh, did I?" remarked Steve, feeling of his ribs, as if to make sure none of them were broken. "Well, you see, I can't help but wonder what would have happened to me if the old beast hadn't been weakened, just like you say."

That was too much for Max. And, besides, having coaxed the whole story from his chum now, he thought it would not matter very much if he did indulge in a good laugh.

To his surprise Steve joined in. Evidently the realization that he had actually helped kill a genuine five-pronged buck, fulfilling his wildest dream, caused Steve to be less "touchy" than usual.

"But we must manage to get him home some way, Max," he remarked after a while, when they had grown weary of admiring their prize.

"Think we could tote several hundred pounds four miles?" demanded Max. "If it was a little doe, now, I might be willing to tie the legs along a pole and try it; but I balk at this big chap."

"Then what shall we do?" asked Steve.

"I'm going to cut it up the best way I know how," his chum replied. "All we want to take along is one hind quarter. Plenty on that for two meals. And like as not we'll find the old chap pretty tough."

Accordingly the boys set to work. Steve knew next to nothing about such things, but was willing to do whatever his comrade asked of him. And

while Max professed to be a clumsy butcher, he certainly did his work in a way to draw out words of praise from the delighted chum.

"There, that job is done," said Max, when the sun was nearly halfway down the western sky, "and I'm glad of it, too."

"We can take turns carrying the hind quarter," remarked Steve, hefting it; "after all, it doesn't seem so very heavy."

"I'm going to wrap it in the skin, which I removed the first thing," Max continued.

"But it's too bad to leave all the rest of our fine buck," sighed Steve.

"Oh, don't think I mean to let the foxes and other animals make way with the rest of the venison! I've got this rope here around my waist; you know it comes in handy sometimes."

Steve laughed.

"For pulling silly fellows out of quicksand and bog holes," he remarked. "Oh, yes, don't think I've forgotten what happened in that Great Dismal Swamp. But do you mean to yank the carcass up in a tree, Max? Is that the way you expect to use the rope?"

Max nodded in reply.

They soon accomplished this.

Max seemed to know just how to go about it, and presently the balance of the deer swung there in space, six feet or more from the ground, and as many below the strong limb over which the rope had been thrown.

"Think it'll be safe, do you?" asked Steve, puffing from the exertion of pulling such a weight upward.

"From every kind of animal but a bobcat. If one of that tribe happens along and is hungry, of course he could drop down on the upper part and munch away," was the reply Max made.

"Which happens to be the fore quarters of the buck, the part we don't care about so much," said Steve.

"Oh, I had that in mind when I fixed the rope, Steve."

"I might have guessed it, because you're always thinking ahead, Max. And shall we start for home now?"

"Shortly. Let's get rested a bit more. And I want to fix directions straight in my mind so we'll hit the cabin first shot," Max answered.

"Four miles, you said, didn't you?" Steve asked, with a big sigh; for now that the excitement was over he began to feel tired again.

"That's what Uncle Jim said," remarked Max.

After a while they started on their way and trudged along nearly two miles in silence, Steve insisting on sharing the load, which Max had made possible by fastening the venison to a pole, so that each could grasp it.

"Max," said Steve about this time.

"Yes, what is it?" replied the other, as they changed places.

"Catamounts and lynx and bobcats like fresh meat, of course; but you don't think now, do you, Max, they'd hurt those beautiful five-pronged horns?"

"Of course not," replied the other, walking on again.

"Because we ought to get those to mount and keep in one of our rooms at home, Max."

"Your room, Steve; you're a thousand times welcome to my share in them."

"Oh, thank you, Max, that's awful kind."

After a wearisome march they approached the cabin. It was late in the afternoon, but no friendly smoke arose from the chimney.

The returned hunters saw this fact with astonishment.

"What does it mean!" Steve remarked, as they came to a halt and set their burden down upon the ground.

"Hi, fellows!" called a voice.

Some one stepped out of the bushes across the little clearing and waved his hand. It was Owen, and he seemed to be beckoning in the most mysterious manner possible.

Max and Steve exchanged puzzled looks.

"What in the dickens is up now!" exclaimed the latter.

"Owen wants us to cross over to where he is," Max went on to say; "and I reckon the quickest way to find out is to join him."

"Ginger, I can see Toby there, too; yes, and now I get a glimpse of Trapper Jim and Bandy-legs! They're all sitting in a row on that log, Max, and lookin' solemn-like at the cabin. What in the wide world is up? She ain't a-fire that I can notice."

"Come along; let's find out," said Max, stooping to his end of the pole upon which the hind quarter of venison was slung.

"I'll just bust if I don't know soon, because I hate mysteries," muttered Steve, as he copied the example of his chum.

When the two victorious hunters came upon the rest, Jim and Toby and Bandy-legs got up off the log. They even smiled a little, but Max thought there was something rather forced about this half grin.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Yes," added Steve impetuously, "what are you all pulling such long faces for, just like it was a funeral or something; tell us that?"

"It is something nigh as bad as a funeral," said Trapper Jim, a twinkle appearing in his eye.

"We're certainly bereft--of our home," added Owen, making a wry face.

"What!" gasped Steve, looking from the speaker across to the cabin.

"It's not exactly a funeral, but an eviction," remarked Owen again.

"He means," said Bandy-legs, "we're kicked out of our cabin--that to-night we'll have to sleep on the cold, hard ground, with only the sky for a blanket. And what's worse, it was my turn to try that jolly old bunk. Hang the luck, why couldn't he stay where he belonged and leave us alone!"

"Say, if it's an animal that's got in, and is holding the fort, why, let's go up and cross-fire him from the windows," suggested impetuous Steve.

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Trapper Jim, catching hold of Steve before he could break away. "That's just what we don't want to do--disturb him too violently or kill him while he chooses to hold the fort there."

"But why are you so careful about his health, Uncle Jim?" asked the bewildered Steve.

"Because our guest happens to be a striped skunk!" was the appalling answer he received.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SMOKING THE INTRUDER OUT.

"A polecat!" gasped Steve. "Thunder! What a nice mess we're in."

"That's just what," echoed Bandy-legs. "It's half an hour now since Uncle Jim sighted the striped beast through the window. He was a-settin' on the

table then, and having a spread all by himself. Then, of course, after that he gets sleepy, and I just bet you right now he's curled up as nice as you please in the very bunk I expected to occupy to-night. Just my luck!"

"But we ought to get rid of him," said Max, hardly knowing whether to laugh or feel provoked, for he was very tired and hungry and did not enjoy the prospect of sleeping out-of-doors without even a solitary blanket, while that saucy little beast retained possession of the whole cabin.

"We've been waiting and watching and hoping this half hour and more," said Owen, with a rather forlorn smile; "but still he doesn't come out of the window where he must have gone in."

"H-h-he likes it in t-t-there. Most c-c-comfortable place he ever s-s-struck," Toby remarked.

"Where were the dogs when he went in?" Max asked.

"Off with us," replied Owen.

"We got back an hour before noon," Trapper Jim remarked. "After lunch we hung around for a while and I fixed all the pelts we brought in."

"Any mink?" asked Steve, eagerly.

"Yes, one good pelt," answered Jim. "Then, about the middle of the afternoon I said we might take a little range around on our own hook and set the bear trap in the bargain, for the old chap had been along the trail to the marsh again."

"Bully!" exclaimed Steve, who was hard to keep quiet.

"We tied the dogs some little distance away from where we meant to set our bear trap, because they'd want to follow the trail and spoil everything," Uncle Jim went on.

"And we helped him set her, too," remarked Bandy-legs, proudly.

"Yes, if we get a bear, it'll be partly yours, boys," the trapper went on to say. "After that part of the business had been carried out we started on our hunt. But to tell you the truth, boys, we never saw a thing worth shooting."

Max suspected that Toby and Bandy-legs made so much noise floundering through the dry leaves that they gave every squirrel and rabbit plenty of warning, so that they could make themselves scarce long before the expedition came along.

But if this was the truth Trapper Jim would not say so. What were a few rabbits or squirrels in comparison with the company of these jolly, interesting boys? The game he had with him all the time, but not so Owen,



Toby, and Bandy-legs.

"Then we came home again," said Owen, taking up the story; "and it was by the greatest luck ever that Uncle Jim just happened to look in at the open window and discovered the skunk. Just think what might have happened if we'd burst in on the little beast and scared it!"

"And me with only one suit, which is bad enough as it is, having holes burned in it, without having to bury the same," Bandy-legs remarked.

"Oh," said Steve, "you wouldn't have felt it much, for p'r'aps we'd have buried you with your clothes. But, however, are we going to coax him out of there, boys?"

"I move Steve be appointed a committee of one to go and ask our friend the skunk to vacate the ranch," said Owen.

"A good idea," added Max. "Steve, he's got a most convincing way with animals. They take to him on sight."

"Yes, that five-pronged buck did, you're right, Max," admitted the candidate for fresh honors. "But I draw the line on skunks."

"They ain't got a line; Uncle Jim says it's a stripe," vociferated Bandy-legs.

"But the day's nearly done and we've got to do something about it," remarked Trapper Jim. "Can't one of you think up a way? He acts like he meant to stay in there as long as the feed holds out."

"Perhaps he's heard the dogs," suggested Owen. "We've got them tied up close by, and every little while one gives a yelp."

"They seem to just know there's something up," declared Bandy-legs.

"S-s-sure t-t-thing," added Toby, seriously.

"Max, haven't you got a plan?" asked the owner of the cabin, turning toward the other eagerly, as though he guessed that if they found help at all it would be in this quarter.

"I was just thinking of something," replied the boy, smiling.

"Yes, go on," Trapper Jim continued.

"We couldn't coax him out, and if we tried to frighten the little rascal it'd be all day with our staying in that cabin again while we boys are up here. But perhaps he might be made to feel so unpleasant in there that he'd be glad to move off."

"Good for you, Max; I can see you've got an idea," cried out Jim, approvingly.

"I don't think skunks like smoke any more than any other wild animals!" Max ventured.

"Smoke!" ejaculated Steve. "Hallelujah! Max has caught on to a bully good idea. Let's smoke the little beggar out. Everyone get busy now."

"Hold on," said Trapper Jim, catching Steve by the sleeve again; "go slow."

"Yes, go mighty slow," complained Bandy-legs. "You know well enough, Steve Dowdy, that I can't smoke at all. There's no use of my trying, because it makes me awful sick every time."

"Listen to that, would you!" laughed Steve. "The simple believes we're all going to get pipes and blow the smoke through some chinks in the cabin walls. Cheer up, old fellow, it ain't quite as bad as that."

"When we've got some stuff that will burn," continued Max, "I'll climb up on the roof, set fire to it, and drop it down the chimney. Then after it gets a good start I'll follow it with some weeds Uncle Jim will gather, and which he knows must send out a dense smoke after I've clapped a board over the top of the chimney flue."

"Bravo!" cried Owen, so loud that the chained dogs near by started barking.

"A very original scheme," said Trapper Jim, patting Max on the back. "And the sooner we start in to try how it works, the better."

"I've got only one objection," Steve spoke up.

"Well, let's hear it," demanded Owen, frowning.

"I think Max ought to let Bandy-legs run that part of the business," Steve went on to say, "he knows more about chimneys than all the rest of the push put together. He's examined 'em from top to bottom inside."

"Oh, rats!" mocked the one upon whose unwilling head all these high honors were being heaped.

"I object," spoke up Toby, bound to have his say. "B-b-bandy-legs never c-c-could resist the t-t-temp-tation to d-d-drop in himself. And think what'd h-h-happen if the s-s-skunk saw him comin' out of the f-f-fireplace a-whoopin'."

"Let's get the stuff to burn, lads," said Trapper Jim, who certainly enjoyed hearing the boys chaff each other in this way. "And everybody keep away from that side of the house where the window stands open."

They were not long in finding what they wanted.

"Make this up in a little bundle, boys, so I can drop it down quick after I've set a match to it," and Max gathered the dry stuff together as he

spoke, waiting for one of the rest to tie it with a cord.

"And this other I'd drop down loose like," said Trapper Jim, as he held up the bunch of half-dead weeds he had collected. "These give out the blackest smoke you ever saw, and if you shut off the draft after they get going good and hard, nothing living could stay long in that cabin."

"That's the ticket!" remarked Steve, enthusiastically.

He certainly did enjoy action more than any one of the chums. Steve was happy only when there was "something doing," even though the source of excitement lay in a miserable little highly scented skunk that had taken a liking to Jim's cozy cabin and seemed ready to remain there indefinitely.

So they adjourned to the rear of the little squatty structure. Everybody took great care to keep away from the one open window. Some of the boys had had little or no experience with the species of friendly animal now occupying their quarters. Still, it was strange how great a respect for his feelings they entertained. Why, no fellow seemed to want to even be \_seen\_ looking rudely in.

Max readily climbed upon the roof.

He purposely made considerable noise while so doing, and for good reasons. It was just as well that the inmate of Jim's cabin knew they were around and objected to his remaining there.

And then, again, Max had a little fear lest the skunk make a sudden appearance, popping out of the chimney before he could really get busy. That event, should it take place, would likely enough upset all his well-planned calculations.

Max under such conditions would wisely seek safety in flight. Indeed, he had already picked out the very place where he could jump from the roof of the cabin and make sure of landing in a soft spot.

As soon as he reached the roof he hurried over to the chimney, intending to start operations by dropping something down.

"I ought to notify the little rascal that the flue is marked dangerous," Max was saying to himself, "so that if he's started up he can just back down again."

Fortunately nothing happened, and Max was not compelled to take that sudden flying leap.

The chimney, as is the case with all log cabins, was built on the outside. It was composed of slabs of wood, secured with a mortar made principally of certain mud.

In process of time this became thoroughly baked, and the heat assisted in this transformation. It was now as hard as flint rock.

That the flue was a generous one we already know. Had that not been the case Bandy-legs could never have fallen down through it to land in the fireplace below.

Max had counted on this fact.

Having notified the intruder to keep away from the fireplace under penalty of getting hurt, and feeling that the way was now open to undertake the carrying out of his little scheme, Max returned to the point where he had reached the roof.

The others had seen to it that the balance of his dry stuff was placed where he could lay hands on the same. So Max by degrees dumped all this down after the first lot.

"Now to set it going," he remarked.

"You seem to be having a bully old time up there all by your lonely," said Steve, half enviously.

"Oh, I'm a cheerful worker," Max replied.

He had arranged some of the best of the stuff so that after applying a match he could send it down upon the top of all that had gone before.

"How is it?" asked Trapper Jim, who was standing on something or other, so that his head came above the low, almost flat roof.

"It's burning all right; I can see it taking hold," came the reply from Max, who had been cautiously peering down the gaping chimney.

"Then take this stuff and follow suit," remarked the other, handing up the armful of weeds he had himself gathered.

"Hurry up about it, too, Max," sang out Steve. "We want the show to begin. It's cold down here, believe me."

"Oh, it'll be warm enough," declared the owner of the cabin, "if that onary little beast turns this way after he crawls out of the window. And I'll advise you all to give him plenty of room."

"We will, thank you," the others sang out in a chorus. "Oh, you skunk, we like you--at a distance! Go ahead, Max, fix him!"

Having dropped the weeds Jim had selected down the flue, Max only waited until the black smoke began to pour out.

Then he quickly clapped a board Jim happened to own over the top.

"That ends my part of the work here," he called out, crawling over to the side of the cabin where he could have an unobstructed view.

Heads appeared around the corners of the structure, but no soul was venturesome enough to dare show himself in plain view.

And so they waited to see what the result of the bright plan would be. Already smoke was oozing out of the opening on the side, and it did not seem possible that anything but a salamander could stand the stifling fumes much longer.

## CHAPTER IX.

### BEFORE THE BLAZING LOGS.

"He's coming!" called out Max from above.

"Take care, everybody!" cried Trapper Jim.

In one way it was laughable to see the tremendous excitement caused by the small striped animal with the bushy tail. The skunk emerged from the window in something of haste. Reaching the ground it seemed to cast one look backward, as though either feeling provoked at being forced to vacate such nice quarters, or else wondering what all that rank odor of smoldering weeds meant.

Then the skunk sauntered jauntily off toward the woods, looking as saucy as you please. The dogs bayed from their place of confinement; the boys stepped out to wave their hands after their departing guest; but not one was bold enough to wish to lay a hand on him.

"Good-by and good luck!" called Trapper Jim.

"Next time don't stay so long," laughed Owen.

"He's little, but oh, my, how mighty!" remarked Steve.

"Look out, he's stopped!" shrieked Bandy-legs, and with that everybody made a headlong plunge back of the cabin again.

Indeed, Bandy-legs himself hid in a thicket and looked rather white on reappearing again after Max sang out that the coast was clear.

"They say one swallow don't make a spring," remarked Owen, when all danger was over, "but it strikes me one polecat does."

Of course, since the object of his labor had now been successfully accomplished, Max took the board away from the top of the chimney.

This allowed the smoke to escape in a normal way.

But when they stepped inside the cabin the boys were loud in their

expressions of disgust.

"That weed was sure a corker for smell as well as smoke, Uncle Jim!" declared Owen.

"Well, I guess you're right there," chuckled the trapper. "I admit it does run a pretty fair race with Mr. Skunk himself, and that's why they give it his name. But it did the business all right, eh, boys?"

"That's what," assented Steve, who had been holding his breath until he could get used to the tainted atmosphere.

"And we ought to be thankful it's no worse," declared Max, joining them.

"Yes," Trapper Jim went on to say, "I remember a case where in a logging camp some greenhorn was foolish enough to kill one of the animals, and the result was they had to build new quarters. Nobody could stand it in the old place. There's nothing more lasting."

"It ain't overly nice right now," asserted Steve. "I'm wondering which I like least, the perfume our visitor left or the one your old skunkweed made."

"Oh, we'll soon change all that, boys," declared Trapper Jim. "Build up the fire and we'll get busy. Just wait and see how it's done."

It was, after all, a very simple thing.

Trapper Jim's idea seemed to be built on the principle that "like is cured by like." He believed in overpowering one odor with another.

And when that cabin began to fill up with the appetizing scent of frying onions, flanked by that of some ground coffee, which Jim allowed to scorch close to the flames, even "hard-to-please Steve" admitted that everything seemed peaceful and lovely again.

"But after this," he remarked, "I hope when we all go away from home we'll be careful to close the blinds as well as the door."

"Yes," added Owen, "and hang out a sign 'This house is taken; no skunks need apply.' One dose was enough for me."

"But, s-s-say, wasn't it a c-c-cunning little b-b-beast," observed Toby, "and d-d-didn't he look real sassy when he m-m-marched off with his t-t-tail up over his s-s-shoulder?"

Steve looked at him severely.

"You'd better be mighty careful how you admire one of them striped critters at close quarters, Toby, if ever you meet one in the woods," he remarked.

"S-s-sure I will be careful," replied the other, with a wide grin.

"Because," Steve went on to say, "if you ever do get in collision with one, we'll have to bury every stitch you've got on, crop your hair close, and make you sleep and live in some old hollow tree. Ain't that so, Uncle Jim!"

"I guess that's about the size of it," came the reply.

"Oh, you d-d-don't need to w-w-worry about me," Toby hastened to say. "I know enough to k-k-keep out of the r-r-rain. I d-d-don't like his l-l-loud ways any b-b-better'n the rest of you."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," Steve continued, severely. "I'm a little suspicious about you, Toby, because you always did like cats. And I'm going to keep an eye out to-morrow for a handy hollow tree so's to be all ready."

"Oh, s-s-shucks! I h-h-hope you'll n-n-need it your own self," was what Toby sent back at him.

By the time supper was ready the boys were as hungry as a pack of wolves in January. And everything tasted so good, too.

Trapper Jim showed them how to cook some of the venison in a most appetizing way. It was "some tough," as even the proud Steve admitted; but, then, what boy with a gnawing appetite ever bothered about such a small thing?

The idea that they had actually shot the deer themselves would cover a multitude of sins in the eyes of the young Nimrods.

And while they were satisfied that the disagreeable odor left behind by their unwelcome guest had been dissipated, Trapper Jim knew better. They would detect faint traces of it about the place for days to come, and find no difficulty about believing the trapper's story about the abandonment of a lumber camp.

"Are all s-s-skunks s-s-striped like that one was?" asked Toby, during the progress of the meal.

"There he goes again," burst out Steve; "I tell you, fellows, we're going to have a peck of trouble with this here inquirin' mind of Toby's."

"G-g-go chase yourself!" blurted out the stuttering boy, indignantly. "I'm only tryin' to g-g-get information at c-c-close quarters."

"And you'll get it, all right," chuckled Steve. "You'll be satisfied, I reckon; but think of us, what we'll have to stand. Just you let that close quarters racket die out, Toby Jucklin."

"Some of the animals are jet black," remarked the trapper, "and they fetch a better price than the striped skins."

"Glory be!" ejaculated Bandy-legs.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Steve.

"You don't mean to tell me they use the skins for furs?" Bandy-legs continued.

"Sure they do," replied Steve; "ain't that so, Uncle Jim?"

"They make splendid furs," was what the trapper remarked. "The striped ones are dyed, of course. And they have a way of removing any faint odor that happens to remain."

"Faint odor!" echoed Steve, sniffing the atmosphere. "I wonder if there ever is such a thing in connection with these awful beasts."

"That shows you haven't read up about them, Steve," remarked Owen. "Why, there are a whole lot of skunk farms all over the Northern States."

"You're fooling me, Owen," declared Steve, reproachfully.

"How about it, Uncle Jim; am I kidding him?" demanded Owen, turning toward the old trapper, who was enjoying all this talk immensely.

"Heaps of skunk farms, yes, siree," he replied, promptly. "They soon get to know the man who feeds them and give him no trouble. He's a peaceable little critter, and only when he gets excited does he go to extremes."

"Well, I want to give 'em all a wide berth," Steve asserted. "And if I meet one in the woods I'm willing to let him have the whole path. I'd take off my hat and bow in the bargain, if I thought he wanted me to. Because I've got a whole lot of respect for the skunk family. They're just immense!"

So they talked and jollied each other as they went on eating one of the "bulliest suppers" they had ever sat down to, as more than one of the boys loudly declared.

The dogs had been brought in and were given their share from the remains of the venison that had been cooked, the balance of the hind quarter having been hung out in the frosty air.

All of the boys had taken a decided fancy to the dogs, and in return the intelligent animals seemed to reciprocate this friendly feeling. Accustomed to sharing the cabin with the trapper at night as his only companions during the long winter months, they did not take kindly to the new rule that made them sleep out in a kennel while the boys were present. And when allowed inside they hugged the fire in a way that told how much they appreciated its cheery warmth.

They were lying there later on in the night and Trapper Jim had just mentioned that it must be time for him to take the dogs out, when old Ajax lifted his head and growled. Immediately little yellow Don did the



same.

"What ails 'em?" asked Steve, as the dogs got up and stood there, the hair along their necks and backs rising up.

"Oh, I reckon they scent some animal prowling around outside," remarked the trapper, making for the door.

"Good gracious! I hope now it ain't that same old skunk come back because he's changed his mind!" exclaimed Bandy-legs, glancing hastily around, as if to see where he could hide.

The trapper, however, seemed to know that there was no danger along those lines. He took down the bar, and, throwing open the door, stepped out.

As he did so there was a sudden vicious snarl that thrilled the boys, and then the dogs bounded out with a chorus of wild barks.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE TRAIL OF THE CLOG.

The excitement was tremendous for the time being, with the barking of the two dogs and the cries of the boys.

All of them had heard that savage snarl as Trapper Jim stepped out.

"Was it a bobcat?" demanded Steve, who had been wise enough to snatch up his gun before following the trapper out of the door.

"Just what it was," replied the other.

"Three to one he was at our meat!" exclaimed Max.

"You can see it swinging yet," declared Owen.

"That's right, son," the trapper admitted; he was hanging to it when I broke out so sudden-like. When he snarled like that I ducked some, because it ain't the nicest thing a-going to have a bobcat on your shoulders. But I saw him make a spring and land among the branches of the tree. Then he was gone, and the dogs they run out, givin' tongue."

"The moon's just climbin' in sight," said Steve, eagerly; "d'ye think I'd stand a chance to get a crack at him if I hurried along to where the dogs are barking like mad?"

He acted as though seriously contemplating such a bold move. The trapper laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You'd best stay just where you be, son," he said, quietly, but in a way Steve understood. "Only a foolish or reckless hunter'd try to get at lose quarters with a bobcat of nights. They scratch like fun, and there's always danger of blood poisoning from such wounds."

So Steve was forced to restrain his ardor. But he relinquished his plan with rather bad grace.

"I'll get you yet, old feller," he was heard to mutter, as they heard the wildcat emit a mocking, tantalizing cry at some little distance away. "You see if I don't, now!"

And when Steve once set his mind upon accomplishing anything, he generally got there, for he was very persistent.

Trapper Jim, thinking that the dogs had had all the excitement necessary, and wishing to put a stop to their racket, blew a whistle he carried.

So well trained were the dogs that upon hearing the signal to return to their master they immediately stopped barking and a few minutes later Ajax showed up, quickly followed by Don.

"You chased him off, didn't you?" said the trapper, stooping down to pat his pets by turns.

The dogs each gave a single bark, as though to say "yes," and their wagging tails told how much they appreciated these few words of praise from their master.

"Will the cat come back again, do you think?" Owen asked.

"I reckon not," laughed Trapper Jim; "since he's found out we keep dogs around the camp. A bobcat hates dogs about as much as human beings do skunks. If you ever run across him again, Steve, it'll be somewhere else; p'r'aps up where you left the rest of your fine buck."

"Well, he didn't get our breakfast, anyway," remarked Bandy-legs, quite bold again, since all the danger seemed past.

"Will you leave it out there after this, Uncle Jim?" asked Max.

"On the whole," replied the other, "I guess not. It'll keep all right indoors. And if that hungry cat should come back, the dogs'll smell him and keep up a tarnal barkin' that'll knock our sleep galley-west."

So he proceeded to lower what was left of the venison, which was thereupon carried inside the house and hung up from the rafters, along with numerous other things--packages of dried herbs, stalks of tobacco which Jim had had sent up from Kentucky, where a friend grew the weed, and some dried venison that he called "pemmican" or jerked meat.

As they were all tired and in need of a good night's rest, the boys were just as well pleased with this assurance that their sleep should not be

broken.

"I guess that pesky skunk didn't have time to crawl in my bunk," announced Bandy-legs, in a satisfied tone, after sniffing the blankets carefully.

"Oh, you're always seeing ghosts where there ain't none!" declared Steve.

The night passed away without any serious disturbance. Once or twice there was an outbreak of barking on the part of the dogs, still haunted by memories of the bold bobcat that had dared come so close to the cabin. Trapper Jim had to go out once to quiet Ajax, whose deep-toned baying seemed to annoy him.

Morning arrived, and the boys, as usual, were up at the first peep of day. There was so much to be done they could not waste time in trying to sleep after the darkness had gone.

On this particular day quite a number of things awaited their attention. First of all they meant to seek the spot where the big bear trap had been set in the hopes that they would find Bruin caught.

This was only a beginning.

Next in order, Steve and Max had decided to start out, taking Toby along, and fetch in the balance of the venison, Toby had expressed a desire to see the arena where Steve and the five-pronged buck held their little circus. He also wished to try how fast he could hurry around that tree, so as to be prepared in case the time ever came when necessity would compel him to adopt the same tactics.

Finally, Trapper Jim, and possibly the other two boys, would have to make the rounds of the traps to take out any catch, and set them again.

On the whole it promised to be a rather energetic day.

Breakfast having been disposed of the boys all got ready to move on. This time the dogs were taken, because they might prove valuable in case a bear was caught. But Trapper Jim made sure to hold them in leash. He valued the dogs too much to think of taking any more chances of having them injured than he could help. There was no need of risking their lives with a trapped and furious bear when a single bullet would do the business.

"Close that window, boys," said the trapper when they were ready to go.

"You bet we will," declared Steve.

"No more unwelcome guests--whew!" ventured Bandy-legs, as he started to accomplish the duty mentioned by the trapper.

They made quite a large party as they sallied forth--five boys, the trapper, and the two dogs. Each of the boys had a gun of some sort, for

they had provided themselves with weapons against this trip to the North Woods and two weeks or so with Trapper Jim.

"I pity the poor bear," said Max, as he looked around at the assortment of weapons and the eager faces back of them.

"He'll sure die of fright when he sees this bunch all in their war paint," Steve observed. "Specially when he gets sight of Bandy-legs there with that silly old pump gun he bought and is afraid to use."

"Who's afraid?" sang out the injured party. "I ain't used it just because there ain't been no chance yet, see? If I'd been along with Max when that buck showed up, guess I'd 'a' give him as good as you did."

"Listen, would you, fellers!" exclaimed Steve, and then he laughed. "Say, wouldn't it have been a circus if that deer got to chasing Bandy-legs around a tree! Run? Well, he'd have to stir those stumps of his faster than he ever did before in all his life, or he'd be hangin' on the ends of them horns. I guess you're lucky not to have been there, my boy!"

"We're getting near the place where we set that trap, I reckon," remarked Bandy-legs, partly to change the course of the conversation, for it sometimes made him feel uncomfortable when Steve got to joking upon the subject of his short lower limbs.

"Correct, son," replied the trapper. "I'm glad to see you noticed the lay of things when we was here yesterday."

"It's right over yonder," continued Bandy-legs, anxious now to let Steve see that he was not as stupid as the other made out.

"What makes you so sure of that, Bandy-legs?" asked Max.

"Why, you see, I remember that tree with the big bunch of scarlet leaves. I was lookin' at that while Uncle Jim set the trap. Ain't another clump like that anywhere around, I reckon," was the smart reply Bandy-legs made.

The old trapper nodded his head.

"He's right," he said. "I took them same five leaves for my mark, too. The trap was set just beyond. But, of course, that ain't sayin' we'll find it there now."

"Not find the trap, do you say, Uncle Jim?" exclaimed Bandy-legs; "why, whatever could happen to it?"

"If so be the bear came along and put his foot in, so them powerful jaws they closed like a vise, I reckon he'd walk off with it," the trapper replied.

"That's so, you didn't fasten the chain to a stake or a tree," said Owen.

"But I remember that you had a big clump of wood fixed to the end of the chain; what was that for?" Bandy-legs asked.

"I k-k-know; that's the c-c-clog," Toby interrupted them to remark.

"Just what it was," Trapper Jim admitted.

"A clog, was it?" Bandy-legs continued; "but what's the use of it?"

"I'll explain," the other remarked; "when we set a bear trap we generally fasten the chain to a heavy piece of wood. When Bruin shuffles off he drags this after him. And in the course of time it weakens the old chap, for he's losing blood all the time."

"That's kind of cruel; but go on, Uncle Jim," Owen remarked.

"I guess you're about right, son," said the other, "and there's lots that's cruel about this trappin' business. But the women must have their furs, and ever since Adam's time I reckon the animals has had to supply covering for human beings. Eve thought it all over many a time, and I try to be as humane in my work as anybody could."

"But there's another use for the clog, isn't there?" asked Max.

"To be sure there is," Trapper Jim replied. "You see, it drags on the ground and leaves such a plain trail that any tenderfoot could follow it."

"Then you really have no use for the dogs," spoke up Owen. "I supposed they were going to lead us along the trail."

"Oh, they'll do that, all right," laughed the trapper; "but to tell the truth I fetched 'em along for exercise and to keep them from getting uneasy more'n anything else."

He stopped and appeared to be listening.

"Can you tell if he's there?" asked the wondering Bandy-legs.

"I can tell that he ain't there," replied the trapper. "It's all as still as anything. That means either our bear didn't come along his trail after we set the trap, or else he's come and carried it away with him."

"She's gone!" ejaculated Bandy-legs, as he craned his neck the better to see the spot where, as he remembered, the big trap had been set, artfully concealed, squarely in the track Bruin used in going to and fro from the marsh to his chosen den, where he expected to hibernate during the coming winter.

"You're correct, son," Trapper Jim declared. "The bear has been here and walked off with my prize trap. Here's where the clog tore up the ground, you see. I reckon now any one of you boys could follow them marks."

"With my lamps blindfolded," Steve ventured.

"Then come on with me. We ought to have bear steak for supper to-night," and holding on to the eager and straining Ajax, while Owen looked after Don, the trapper led the pursuit.

Everywhere could be seen the plain marks where the weighty clog had plowed into the ground when the trapped bear pulled it along after him.

As the trapper had said, the merest tyro could easily have followed such a broad, blood-marked trail.

Sooner or later they must expect to come upon the bear unless he had been able, through good luck, to reach his den ere now.

The excitement on the part of the two dogs grew more intense.

"We must be crawling upon him, I should think," Max remarked.

"Just what we're doing," the trapper replied, "and, unless I miss my guess, we'll find him caught fast in this thicket just ahead. Slow up, boys. There's no need of hurrying any more, for I think he's waiting up for us right here."

With their hearts beating like trip hammers the boys now approached the thicket into which the plain trail of the heavy clog seemed to plunge.

## CHAPTER XI

"STEADY, STEVE, STEADY!"

"Listen!" said Trapper Jim.

All of them became silent. Even the dogs, as if recognizing some vein of authority in that one word spoken by their master, ceased barking, though still straining hard in the leash, as though fairly wild to break away.

There was a crackling of the bushes, and this grew louder.

"Oh, I see him!" cried Bandy-legs.

"Get ready to shoot, everybody, if I give this word; but don't pull trigger unless you hear me yell you to," called out the trapper.

Then there was a savage roar that seemed to make the very air quiver. Out of the thicket scrambled a big black bear, looking furious indeed.

Thinking they were about to be attacked, and in a panic at the very idea, some of the boys leveled their guns. They might have pulled trigger, too,

in their excitement, only for the quick warning the old wood's ranger gave.

"Hold your fire, everybody. It's all off. No danger as long as that clog remains fast!" was what he shouted.

Max could readily grasp the situation. He saw that the angry beast could only come just so far, because something was holding one of his hind legs.

"The clog's got fast among the rocks in there, and he's held as tight as can be; that's what's the matter," Steve sang out.

Of course the only thing left to do now was for some one to put a bullet where it would be apt to do the most good.

Who would be appointed to carry out this part of the programme?

Steve hoped Trapper Jim would look favorably upon him when seeking a candidate. He had never shot a bear in all his life, and while there would be little glory attached to the passing of one that was held fast in a trap, still it would be something to think of later on.

But Trapper Jim was a wise man. He supposed that every one of the boys was fairly quivering with eagerness to be the one selected.

As he looked around at the five anxious faces the trapper scratched his head, as though unable to decide.

"It can't be did that way," he muttered. "They must draw lots for it, and the shortest straw wins out. Hear that, boys?"

"Yes, and it's all to the mustard," said Steve, keeping on the alert, and ready to pour in the contents of both barrels should the trapped bear give any evidence of freeing the clog.

"Then here goes."

With that the trapper fastened Ajax to a tree, and then, bending down, picked up a number of twigs. These he seemed to pinch off so that they were all of a size but one, which was shorter.

"Remember, boys," he said, as he mixed these in his hand, so that one could not be told from the others, "it ain't the longest pole that knocks the persimmons this time. The feller who gets the short straw has the chance. Take a pick, Steve."

Steve, of course, could not hold back. And while the dogs were jumping to the length of their leashes and barking madly, with the bear roaring an accompaniment as he tugged desperately at his chain, he drew a splinter of wood.

"Missed! Gee, what tough luck!" Steve exclaimed, in a chagrined voice, as

he stared at his prize.

"Try your luck, next!" said Trapper Jim.

Max made a choice. He met with the same result that had given Steve such an overwhelming sense of disappointment.

Then Owen stepped up eagerly.

"I've got it picked out," he remarked, "and it's all over but the shouting." Then he chose, and was jeered by Steve.

"That leaves it a toss-up between Toby Jucklin and Bandy-legs!" he exclaimed, envy plainly marked in his voice.

The two who had yet to draw looked a little frightened. Truth to tell, neither of them experienced anything in the shape of an overwhelming desire to "slay the jabberwock," as Owen put it.

"Draw, Toby, and be quick about it," Steve flung out; "don't you see the old chap's getting all out of patience. Pull out a straw, now, and be done with it. Whatever you draw settles it."

So Toby, with trembling fingers, did as he was told. And immediately he glanced down at the one he had taken, he grinned.

For it was one of the longer straws, similar to those taken by the others. Bandy-legs grew pale.

"Do I have to draw?" he asked, almost piteously.

"Sure you do!" cried Steve. "There's only one left, and you draw that. It's the fatal short one, too. You ring up the prize, Bandy-legs!"

"But--I didn't have any choice!" remonstrated the one selected by fate to be the executioner of the trapped bear.

"Huh, I like that!" laughed Steve. "Why, you had a chance every time one of us stepped up and made a pick. Go on, now, and get ready to do for him, unless you've got cold feet and want to hand it over to somebody else."

But somehow Steve's jeering remarks had stirred Bandy-legs' pride. He looked hard at the other. Then he shut his jaws tight together.

"Thanks! I guess I'll do the job myself!" he remarked.

"With that pop gun of yours?" asked the incredulous Steve.

"No, I'm going to ask Max to lend me his rifle," replied Bandy-legs.

"Much you know about a repeating rifle!" continued his tormentor.



"Well, I did fire it a few times at a target, didn't I, Max?" protested the chosen one.

"You sure did, and really hit the target once," Max hastened to answer, as he exchanged guns with Bandy-legs.

"Huh, that ain't sayin' much, when like as not the target was a \_barn\_!"

Ignoring this last thrust from Steve as something beneath his notice, Bandy-legs saw to it that the hammer of the repeating rifle was drawn back.

"Where'll I stand, Uncle Jim?" he demanded, trying to appear quite cool; but the experienced old trapper knew very well how he was secretly quivering all over.

"Here, drop down behind this rock and rest your rifle on it," he said.

"Now, wait till I say the word, and then press the trigger. Aim just back of the foreleg, because you're more apt to reach his heart there."

"What if I don't kill him?" asked Bandy-legs, with a big sigh.

"Clap another shell in and give it to him. Reckon you know how to work the trombone action, don't you?" the trapper went on to say.

"Sure I do," answered the Nimrod, lowering his cheek to the stock of the gun.

"Remember, now, and don't shut your eyes, Bandy-legs!" advised Steve.

"Let up on that, Steve," remarked Max, who was greatly interested in seeing the novice get a square deal.

Half a minute of waiting followed. The dogs continued to jump and bark, and the bear, made savage by his pain, tugged at his chain and growled.

"Shoot!" said Trapper Jim, suddenly.

Almost with the word came the clear report of the rifle, showing that at least Steve's jibes had had the effect of putting Bandy-legs on his mettle.

With a fearful roar the bear fell over and began struggling. The dogs seemed almost frantic now in their desire to break loose.

"Quick, work the pump action and get ready!" called out Trapper Jim.

Bandy-legs managed to do as he was told, though he was shaking so by this time that he almost let the gun drop.

"Hold on, no use wasting another shot. I reckon he's done for," was what he heard Trapper Jim say.

"And you've been and gone and killed a real live bear, Bandy-legs!" said Max.

The boy heaved a sigh as he gave back the rifle.

"But he was held fast in a trap, Max," he said, moodily; "guess that ain't so much to crow over."

"But ain't he a whopper!" exclaimed Steve, who was at the bear's side almost as soon as the animal had ceased to struggle.

"If we only had a c-c-camera here now we'd take him with his f-f-foot planted on the old b-b-bear and holdin' his g-g-gun!" exclaimed Toby.

Here was plenty of work for all hands.

The bear must first of all be skinned, because Jim said he had a splendid hide that would be worth a good deal to him when properly dried.

Then they wanted some of the meat, in fact all that was worth while, for Jim would dry that which they did not consume.

"Plenty of fat, too," he observed, as he worked. "I like that, because I'm short just now on bear's grease, and a supply would come in handy."

"What do you use it for, Uncle Jim?" asked Owen.

"Dozens of things. I rub it on boots, I keep my guns and ax from rustin' by smearin' it on. Why, long ago in the woods I've known where families made candles out of bear's fat by using a wick in the middle."

By degrees he managed to cut the bear up. The meat was wrapped in packages, so that it might all be transported to the cabin.

"What about the trap; will you set it again?" asked Steve.

"Not here," was the reply. "No other bear is likely to come along the trail this fellow made. One of you boys had best tote it back home. I may need it again this winter if the season stays open and the bears come out to look around, like they do mild winters."

It was well on toward noon when they arrived once more at the cabin, each one being pretty well loaded down.

They concluded to have a bite to eat before attempting anything further. But the cooking of the bear meat would have to be deferred until later in the day, as it would take too much time.

Feeling refreshed after their meal, the boys announced themselves ready to undertake any further business.

Max, Steve, and Toby were to take that four-mile tramp after the venison that had been left behind on their former trip.

"Seems like we're getting our share of happenings up here," remarked Steve, as he and his two chums tramped steadily on.

"Well, yes, it does look that way, Steve."

"Things come along right smart these days and nights," continued the other. "And already it's paid us for the long trip, 'cording to my calculations."

"It certainly has," admitted Max.

"With more'n a week more to come," added Steve. "And there's only one thing I feel bad about, too."

"I think I could give a guess what that is," said Max; "the bobcat."

"Hit it plumb center that time," laughed the other, as he shifted his gun to the other shoulder, for on the four-mile tramp it was beginning to feel rather heavy.

"Well, I wouldn't bother my head any over that fellow getting away scot-free," Max continued. "He didn't do any damage, and, as Uncle Jim says, you might have been sorry if you went out in the dark woods looking for trouble. When anybody does that he generally finds it, all right."

"But I hope I just happen on the old pirate again while we're up in this neck of the woods," observed the persistent Steve. "I'd just like to look along the barrels of my gun at the varmint, as Jim calls him."

"Yes, Steve, and he said he had an idea this was the same old cat that gave him a peck of trouble last winter, stealing some of the animals that were in his traps, but always avoiding getting caught himself."

"Why, Uncle Jim even tried to poison the thief, but nary a bite would the cat take of the doctored meat," Steve went on. "I hope this is the same tough old customer and that I sight him when I've got my gun along, that's all."

"We've got there, Steve. I can see the very tree where we hung up the balance of the little buck we knocked over."

Steve could not but note how Max persistently gave him an equal share in the credit of killing the deer. It warmed his heart toward such a generous chum. But, then, that was always the way with Max Hastings.

"Let's go a little slow, Steve," he continued; "we can't see the deer, because of the leaves that still hang on to the oak."

Silently then they advanced.

And just as they arrived at a spot where they could see the hanging carcass, again did they hear that ferocious snarl as on the preceding

night. Steve instantly threw his gun up to his shoulder, and at the same instant he heard Max at his elbow saying:

"Steady, Steve, steady! Look out, he's going to jump."

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE END OF A THIEF.

The wildcat had evidently found the hanging carcass not a great while before. At the time the three boys approached he had been regaling himself as he clung to the upper part of the dangling buck.

Being only half satisfied he seemed angry at being disturbed in his meal. The boys happened to be "down the wind" from him, and this would explain how it was they came upon him apparently unawares. But when a wildcat is in a frightfully bad humor he does not run off very easily, and this one, according to what Uncle Jim had said, was unusually bold. He had proved this by approaching the cabin of the trapper on the preceding night.

Crouching there on the swaying carcass of the deer, and with his chops all bloody from his recent meal which they had disturbed, the bobcat presented a truly terrifying appearance.

His short ears were laid back close to his head, his yellow eyes glowed as though they were balls of phosphorescence, and the hair on his back seemed to stand up on end.

Max had his gun in readiness, too.

He was not going to take any more chances than were necessary. Steve seemed to be all ready to fire, and he knew the other to be a pretty good shot. But, then, who could wholly depend upon such an excitable fellow?

Then the cat sprang!

Max heard Toby utter a shout of warning that was swallowed up in a tremendous roar close to his ears. Max sprang aside, and he thought he saw Steve doing the same sort of stunt. Toby was already safe behind the friendly trunk of a tree.

To the relief of Max the leaping cat seemed to crumple up in the air. It turned completely over, as though by the impact of something that had struck it. And when it reached the ground it lay even beyond the hanging venison.

"Wow!" came from Steve.

He was scrambling to his feet, having dropped his gun. There was a look

of mingled satisfaction, surprise, and pain upon his face.

"What's the matter?" asked Max, noticing how the other was rubbing his right shoulder where the butt of his shotgun had rested.

"Hurts like fun!" replied Steve, making a wry face.

"You mean it kicked, don't you, Steve?"

"Kick? Well, I'll be sore for a month of Sundays," replied the other, grunting as he touched a tender part. "Did you see me go over?"

"Sure I did, but I thought you were dodging the leap of the cat, the same as I did myself," returned Max.

"Dodging nothing!" said Steve. "I tell you that pesky gun clean kicked me off my pins. Never had it play me such a trick before."

Max stooped and picked up the shotgun. Then he laughed.

"It's all as simple as pie," he said.

"Do you mean I was that excited I pulled both triggers at once?" cried Steve.

"Well, both hammers are down, and," breaking the gun as he spoke, "you can see for yourself the shells are empty."

"Glory! No wonder I blew that old cat away, then!" cried Steve. "With all those two dozen buckshot chasing through him the poor critter must have been nearly torn to pieces. And there my fine door mat goes a-glimmering!"

Investigation proved that Steve's fears were realized. The terrific discharge at such close quarters had so riddled the skin of the wildcat that it was not worth attempting to save.

"What a shame!" said Steve, as he got up again after examining the dead beast. "He was a jim-dandy, too. If I'd only had a crack at him thirty yards away instead of ten feet, I'd have saved that lovely pelt."

"But it was a corking good shot, I tell you, Steve," declared Max, warmly.

"That's j-j-just what it was," added Toby, who had parted company with the friendly tree, now that the danger seemed a thing of the past.

"To hit a tiger cat sitting on a limb is considered a good enough showing," continued Max; "but to knock holes through him while he is in the air jumping deserves high credit. Think of that every time your shoulder hurts."

"Anyhow," remarked Steve, cheerfully, "I can bat right or left handed,

and I can shoot a gun the same old way; so this little accident won't knock me out of the running. But I'd be happier if I hadn't just ruined that skin."

"Well, better lug him home, anyway, if you feel able to," advised Max. "Uncle Jim will be glad if he recognizes the crafty old thief of last winter in this cat you knocked down."

"Guess I will," Steve remarked, "though he'll be a load to tote. We'll wait and see how you come on with the venison."

"Oh, don't bother about that," said Max. "Toby and myself will look out for all we want to take with us."

"But those antlers--I promised to decorate my room with those, Max!"

"That's all right," declared Max. "Come for them before we leave here. You know the place, and by that time the foxes will have cleaned them nicely for you."

And so things were arranged.

An hour later and the three lads headed for camp again. Each one toted his share of the burden. But long before the cabin was reached Steve began to feel sorry that he had determined to display the wildcat to the others in order to prove his story, and also let Trapper Jim see whether the victim of his double shot was the same despised and hated bobcat that had given him so very much trouble in the preceding year.

Nevertheless Steve was a most determined boy. And having started in to accomplish anything he could hardly be influenced to give it up just because his back ached and his lame shoulder protested.

Max insisted on changing loads with him when they were halfway home.

"I can carry it better than you with your sore shoulder, Steve," he said, when the other started to protest; "besides, I've made this bundle of venison so it can be tied on your back. You'll find it a relief. Don't say another word, for you've just got to do it. All very good to show how plucky and game you are, old fellow, but if you should get knocked out by too much exertion, why, don't you see, it'll break up the whole shooting match for the rest of us?"

Max put it that way for a purpose. He knew Steve's generous nature, and that the other could be prevailed upon to do a thing for the sake of his chums, when he would not budge so far as any personal benefit was concerned.

"Oh, well, if that's so, perhaps I'd better throw the old thing away," Steve declared.

"No," said Max, "that would be foolish, after you've carried it two miles now. Besides, I feel sure Uncle Jim'd like to see the cat. If he knows

his old tricky enemy has really and truly kicked the bucket, he'll rest easier this year. One thief like this can give a trapper heaps of trouble. He learns to look for his dinners in the traps."

"All right, then, Max; but it's awful good of you to change over," declared Steve. "Why, this load ain't a circumstance beside mine. I'm sorry for you, though, and if--"

"Let up on that sort of talk, please, Steve. If I find it too much I'll own up. Then Toby here can take his turn."

"S-s-sure thing," assented the party mentioned, smiling good-naturedly.

But, after all, Max carried the trophy of Steve's shots close to the camp. Then, thinking the other might like to be seen coming in with his own game, he made him change again, though Steve winced as he worked his lame shoulder.

The others had returned, and were all busily engaged with the trophies of the traps.

Trapper Jim, upon finding that Owen and Bandy-legs manifested a certain amount of interest in all he did, took great pleasure in showing them just how the skins must be removed from the animals and fastened securely to the stretching boards, so they would not shrivel up when drying.

He managed to impart considerable interesting information while working, and Owen, determined not to get all these facts twisted, was seen to be scribbling something down every little while.

When they saw what constituted Steve's load, and heard from Max and Toby the true story of how the savage animal was shot while making a leap toward the young Nimrod, admiring looks were cast on Steve.

"Gewhittaker, but ain't he a savage-looking old monster, though!" declared Bandy-legs, examining the dead cat; "a whole lot bigger'n that one we got in the Great Dismal Swamp, fellows, let me tell you right now. Look at the teeth and the needle-pointed claws, would you! I'm glad I didn't have to face this critter."

"And Bandy-legs," Steve could not help saying, "this sweet little cat didn't have its hind leg caught in a trap, either. It was free as air, and if my lucky shot hadn't gone just where it did, I guess I'd be in rags right now."

"Well," said the other, in no wise hurt by what Steve said, I never claimed to be a hunter like you, Steve and you know it. I guess shooting a trapped bear is about my limit. But I know you wouldn't run away from the biggest old pig-stealer that ever came down the pike."

"Thank you, Bandy-legs," said Steve, "and really and truly I don't believe I would, not if I had my trusty gun along."

The afternoon was wearing away, and all of them believed that they had been through quite enough excitement for one day. Besides, they had covered a good many miles since morning and felt rather like resting.

Trapper Jim was getting some of the bear meat in readiness for cooking. He knew it would be anything but tender, but long experience had taught him how to pound it with a little contrivance he had, thus opening the tissues and allowing the juices to escape. In this way a tough beefsteak can be made more palatable if one cares to go to the trouble. Sometimes he parboiled meat and then fried it.

As the sun went down Max stood outside the cabin, looking around at the picture. The air was fresh and invigorating and he drew in a big breath, as, turning to Owen who had just come out to join him, he remarked:

"Talk to me about the good times we've had before; I tell you nothing ever happened to this lucky bunch that was halfway equal to this!"

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A GLIMPSE OF THE SILVER FOX.

There was no audacious bobcat around to worry them that night. Steve had indeed, as Owen said, "laid the jabberwock low," when he discharged both barrels of his shotgun at once.

They were all under obligations to Steve. Every time that lame shoulder of his gave him a more severe twinge than usual he could, figuratively speaking, of course, shake hands with himself.

It is a great thing to be a public benefactor. There was Bandy-legs, for instance, who, much to his own inconvenience, had shown Trapper Jim and the rest just how easy it would be for some animal to drop down the wide-throated chimney during the absence of the cabin's owner and play havoc within.

The panic excited by the squatter skunk had been another lesson. And in consequence Trapper Jim, aided and abetted by Bandy-legs, who was a pretty clever hand at making things, had arranged a contrivance that worked much after the manner of a grating over the top of the chimney.

This, while allowing the smoke to escape freely, put up the bars against the admission of any would-be intruder, even a squirrel.

It would do temporarily. Trapper Jim said that later on when he borrowed that big buckboard again and transported his lively guests to the town and the distant railroad, he had it in his mind to secure a sheet of that heavy close-woven wire netting, such as was used in stable windows and for many other purposes. It allowed a free circulation of air, and yet



prevented the entrance of sneak thieves.

So on this night Bandy-legs could go to sleep in peace on the floor, he having given up the bunk to the next one on the list.

If he woke up in the night and raised his head to find the fire burning low, he need not imagine every grotesque shadow in the dimly lighted cabin to be a fierce animal that had crept in while they slept.

When day came again they laid out their programme as usual. Of course, Uncle Jim, having started his season's work, could not neglect his traps. Every day when the weather allowed he must trudge the rounds and see what Fortune had sent him.

Besides, a humane trapper wishes to end as quickly as possible the torture of any creature that has been caught by the leg in one of his steel contraptions.

"It's a cruel enough business at the best," Jim Ruggles told the boys as he sat and spoke of his past experiences, "and often I've been sorry I ever took it up. But there must be trappers as long as women will demand rich furs in the winter season. My only satisfaction is that I've been kinder toward the little animals of the woods than most brutal trappers would be."

"But, however did you come to take up such a queer profession in the beginning, Uncle Jim?" asked Owen that morning, as they got to talking about the many years the old man had spent in this way.

Owen had discovered, before now that that Jim Ruggles was really a man of education, having been a college graduate.

He smiled at the question, did the old trapper.

"Oh, there were a lot of things combined to send me to the woods," he said, musingly. "First of all was my intense love for all the Big Outdoors. Seemed like I could never get enough of it. The more I saw of the forest, the more I felt drawn to it. I guess I had the woods hunger from boyhood. Max, here, knows what it is."

"I think I do," remarked the one mentioned. "I feel the craving come over me at times and have hard work to resist."

"Well, take my advice, son, and fight it off," remarked Trapper Jim.

"Anyhow keep it in subjection. The world needs you. There's plenty of work for such as you in the busy marts of men. Don't allow yourself to ever dream of spending your whole life lost in the wilderness like I've done. What can I look back to but a life that's been wasted, so far as being useful to my fellowmen is concerned? A little run to the woods now and then to renew your vigor and draw in new strength--let that be all."

"But you said there were other reasons why you came here, Uncle Jim," persisted Owen.

At that the old man actually laughed.

"I suppose while I am at it," he said, "I might as well make a clean sweep and confess all. Well, I was a foolish young man at the time, you see, and took it to heart because a certain young lady I thought heaps of wouldn't accept me. But, then, my health was nothing to boast of in those days, and doctors had said it would be a good thing if I could spend a year up here."

"And you did?" continued Owen.

"Been here ever since," replied the trapper.

"And you don't look weakly now, Uncle Jim."

"I should say not," laughed the other, as he stretched his muscular arms above his head. "The open air, free from all disease germs, such as abound in cities; the long tramps; the freedom from worries; and, above all, the plain food and regular hours built me up wonderfully. Perhaps, after all, I did the right thing, because I'd have been dead long ago if I remained among the city dwellers."

"And, how about the heartless girl--did you ever see her again, Uncle Jim?" asked Owen, with a boy's freedom of speech.

Again the trapper laughed and then sighed.

"I never saw her again, son," he replied. "Years later I heard she married but I couldn't tell you whether his name was Smith or Brown. Then came the news that Susie had died, leaving one child. Sometimes I'm seized with a sort of yearning to look that boy up, and perhaps do something for him, just because I cared for his mother. But I never have, because before I get started it begins to look foolish to me."

The old man had a tear in his eye. And both Owen and Max felt drawn to him more than ever.

"Thank you ever so much, Uncle Jim, for telling us all this," Owen said, in a soft tone that caused the trapper to look fondly at him as he went on:

"Well, I've spoken to you boys about things that have been lying deep down in my old heart buried for many a year. But just forget it. And let's see what Luck has got in store for us to-day. I'm going to get out a couple of my special fox traps."

Something about the way he said this as well as the eager flash that shot athwart his rugged face caused Max to cry out:

"Fox traps! You've got some reason for saying that, Uncle Jim."

"Maybe I have, son," remarked the trapper, smiling more broadly at this

evidence of astuteness on the part of the boy.

"Is it the silver fox?" demanded Max.

"Well, I thought I had just a glimpse of the little darling yesterday when out with the boys," observed Trapper Jim.

"But you didn't mention it before now--I didn't hear any of them say a word about it," Max went on.

"That's right. I thought I'd keep it quiet. But what's the use when such sharp eyes keep tabs on every move I make. Besides, you two might like to watch how I set a trap to catch a fox. Because they're about as smart as any animal that walks on four legs."

Soon afterward the boys started out with the trapper. Steve, feeling his lame shoulder, concluded to rest up for a day, while Bandy-legs confessed that he much preferred doing a number of things about the cabin, perhaps catching a few pickerel in the little pond not far away, as Trapper Jim kept a supply of live minnows on hand to be used as bait when fishing with "tip-ups" through the ice later on.

So Max, Owen, and Toby saw how the two traps were set for the black fox, whose pelt is the one known as silver fox, and by long odds the most prized of all furs, sometimes one fine skin fetching thousands of dollars.

They found another mink caught, besides a number of muskrats. And in the last trap was a beautiful silky otter. Trapper Jim seemed highly pleased when he looked at his various prizes for the day.

"Seems like you boys must have brought me good luck," he declared.

"I hope we have," laughed Owen.

"I never hit such a nice mess before so early in the season," continued the trapper, "and it wouldn't surprise me a great deal now if I caught that splendid silver first shot out of the box."

"S-s-say, wouldn't that j-j-just be g-g-great," said Toby.

"Well, the traps are set and it's been pretty nigh a morning's work, because there's so much to do about trapping a smart fox. But, boys, let's hope that to-morrow or some other day it'll all be paid back, and I'll be able to show you what a beautiful skin the black fox sports."

"But you've taken them before, you said, Uncle Jim," Owen observed.

"Sure, two or three times, and pretty good ones at that," replied the trapper, with a chuckle. "But you know, it's always the same old story in this business."

"What's that?" asked Max.

"The skins you've captured in the past never compare with those you see on the backs of live animals. The best is always to come, eh, Max?"

"J-j-just like it is in f-f-fishing," declared Toby. "The big one in the w-w-water b-b-beats the one you've l-l-landed. I used to think the w-w-water just m-m-magnified 'em."

"No, it's the hope we have. Possession dulls the interest. You boys know that the apples next door always taste better than those you have in your own orchard."

The three whom Trapper Jim addressed just looked at each other and laughed. Nobody answered him. There was really no need of words. Jim knew boys from the ground up, and loved them, too. He had once been a boy himself.

On the way back home he told them many interesting things connected with the shrewdness of mink and otter, and how smart the trapper had to be to outwit them.

"That's one of the pleasures of the business," he went on to say; "this continual matching of a man's wits against the instinct and cunning of these same clever little varmints. Why, a single old mink has kept me guessing pretty much all winter and changing my methods a dozen times."

"But I reckon you got him in the end, Uncle Jim," said Max.

"What makes you believe that, son?"

"Oh, because you never give up once you've set your mind on a thing," replied the boy, admiringly.

"Well, I don't knuckle down very often, that's a fact," chuckled the trapper; "though there have been occasions. That girl episode was one, you remember, Max."

"But you got the sly old mink, didn't you?" persisted Owen.

"Yes, I got him when I had just about exhausted every scheme I could think up," answered the trapper; "and let me tell you, boys, that day when I carried him to the cabin I felt as big as the President of the United States."

Another night of comfort followed. Trapper Jim said it began to feel real lonely, now that the bold bobcat no longer came prowling around trying to steal things.

But the boys enjoyed having a good rest undisturbed by any sudden clamor.

This time only Max and Steve accompanied the trapper. Owen found that he had wrenched his ankle, and had better take a day off, and Toby had arranged to try the pickerel with Bandy-legs, who had caught a few on the

previous day.

Steve had heard about the traps set for the "silver," and he wanted to be along if there was anything doing.

When they arrived near the first trap it was untouched. But the second they found sprung and empty.

"Oh, he was caught and broke away. It's too bad!" cried Steve, pointing to traces of blood and some shining black hairs on the jaws of the Victor trap.

But Trapper Jim was saying angry words to himself.

"Caught the finest silver I ever set eyes on only to have him snatched by a sneak of a pelt thief!" and he pointed as he spoke to the imprint of a shoe in the soil.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

#### THE PURSUIT.

"Stolen!" burst out impulsive Steve, his face pale with rage.

Both boys felt keenly for their friend, Trapper Jim. He had looked forward so long to capturing his rare prize; he had taken such great pains to set his traps with that object in view; and now, after success had come, and the black beauty was caught, it must be terribly aggravating to discover that some one had happened on the spot, robbed the trap, and was far away with the precious pelt.

Trapper Jim did not often give way to his feelings. He quickly got a fresh grip on his emotions and could talk calmly again. But there was a gleam in those piercing eyes of his, undimmed by age, that made Owen glad he did not stand in the shoes of the pelt thief.

"When do you think he was here, Uncle Jim?" Max asked, as he examined the plain track of the thief's shoe.

"This morning, and not more than an hour ago," came the answer. "He was heading as straight as could be for our cabin, like he meant to drop in on me; but after this he turned back. The temptation was too much. Few men could let a chance pass by to pick up a silver fox when a common red wouldn't bother 'em the least bit."

"But, say, I hope you don't mean to let him get away with the skin altogether, Uncle Jim," flashed Steve, with an angry look still on his face.

"Well, that wouldn't be like me," returned the trapper, quietly; and Max realized that his was the determined, bulldog nature that never lets go, while with Steve it was a flash-in-the-pan, hasty action, without a careful laying out of plans.

"Then we'll pick up the trail and follow it?" asked the eager boy.

"As soon as we can have Ajax here, son."

"But why wait for the dog?" complained Steve. "It'll take all of an hour to get back here again."

"That and more," replied Trapper Jim.

"And that time will be wasted," Steve went on.

"Listen," remarked the trapper. "Long ago I learned that things like this are done best when you go about them soberly. Once I start on this trail of the pelt thief, and I mean to keep on it if it takes me a hundred miles! What does an hour count for in that case, Steve?"

"Mighty little, I guess," admitted the boy.

"There are other reasons for getting the dog," continued the trapper.

"This rascal will expect pursuit. And so every little while he'll do things to cover up his trail. P'r'aps he'll wade along a stream, and come out by way of rocks that would leave no mark. Then, again, he'd run along a log and jump from stone to stone. All these things would delay me. What took ten minutes of \_his\_ time would consume an hour of mine. It's much easier to set a problem than to solve one."

"Sure thing. I understand now why you want the dog," Steve confessed.

"Ajax has a good scent. His nose is very keen. Here's a rag the thief must have dropped. Once I let the dog smell of this, and he'll follow that trail hour after hour, so long as it don't get too cold."

"Shall I go and get Ajax! I would run all the way," Steve suggested.

"Well, with that lame shoulder of yours, son, you'd have a hard time of it holding a running dog in leash. So we'll have to get Max here to attend to that part of the business. Think you could return without any trouble, my boy?"

"Well," replied the other, with a laugh, "all I'll have to do will be to let Ajax have his head. He'll keep to our trail, all right."

"Just what I expected you to say," remarked the trapper. "And now be off with you. We'll be nosing around here. Leave your gun with me, as you'll need both hands to manage the dog."

"And what message will I carry to the other boys?" asked Max.

"Explain things in a few words, and tell Owen to take charge until we show up again. It may be to-night, and again it might not come about until to-morrow. But they've got a-plenty to eat, and that satisfies boys."

And so Max hastened off. Although not as impetuous by nature as Steve, he knew that every minute gained now would shorten the lead which the audacious pelt thief had upon them. And so Max sprinted more or less whenever he had the chance.

It was not over an hour when he once more made his appearance, with the excited Ajax towing him. And evidently Max had had no easy job of it, trying to hold the eager hound in, for he looked relieved and rubbed his muscles after Trapper Jim took the leash.

The boys were deeply interested in all that followed. They saw the trapper hold the soiled rag upon which the thief had perhaps wiped his hands for the hound to sniff at for a minute or two.

Then Trapper Jim led Ajax to the footprints and made him catch the same particular odor,

When the intelligent hound gave a bay and led the way along the trail of the thief, his nose close to the ground and his tail in perpetual motion, Trapper Jim looked pleased.

"He's got the scent, all right, lads," he observed, "and after this he'll never forget it. There are few hunting dogs that can be taught to follow a human being as well as they do animals; but Ajax is an exception."

"Now we're off!" exclaimed the restless Steve, exultantly.

"Yes, and the rascal will have to hump himself if he hopes to escape us. I haven't given up all hopes of reclaiming that silver fox pelt yet," and the trapper really seemed in a better humor than he had enjoyed since the first discovery of his great loss.

For quite some time they hurried on. Ajax was straining at his leash most of the while, and seemed capable of picking up the scent even when there was not the faintest trace of marks that Max could discover.

"It was a mighty good thing we thought of the dog," Steve admitted, and then, seeing the trapper looking humorously at him, he gave a short laugh, as he hastily added: "I mean it was a wise head that concluded to send for Ajax, and not start off half-shot, like some foolish fellows would have done."

"Yes," added Max, "in several places I've lost the trail. And three times now the fellow's run along a fallen tree, jumping off where he saw hard ground or stones. That would have given us trouble and delayed us, but Ajax followed the scent without looking for a trail.

"Here's a creek," interrupted the trapper, "and chances are the thief

will use it to try and hoodwink us."

They waded through, regardless of the icy cold, for the water was not up to their knees.

"Don't see any tracks on this side, Uncle Jim," sang out Steve.

"No, and I guessed we wouldn't," replied the other.

"But he crossed over, didn't he!" demanded the boy.

"Chances are he did," answered Trapper Jim, "but before stepping out he went either up or down the creek a ways. First of all we'll try up. If that fails us after we've gone some distance, we'll come back here and try the other way."

But it chanced that his first guess was the right one. They had gone along the bank of the creek less than eighty feet when Ajax uttered a sound and gave evidence of renewed excitement.

"The rascal found the water too cold and came out at the first chance," remarked Trapper Jim. "You see, there's a shelf of rock here. No sign left for our eyes, because the warm sun has dried up any wet marks he made. But Ajax has caught the same scent as there was on that rag."

"And we're off again. Hurrah!" cried Steve, delighted to know that the clever tactics of the pelt thief could not prevail against that keen sense of smell possessed by the hound.

After that the fugitive did not seem to think it worth while to make any more efforts to conceal his trail.

"That cold water was too much for him," suggested Steve.

"Or else he expects he's done enough, and that no one, not even Trapper Jim, could follow him," Max had said; "but I rather think he knew a dog would be put on his track. That water business is always the trick used to throw a hound off the scent."

"Quite right, son," remarked the trapper; "but I allow this fellow has got me guessing good and hard, and that's a fact."

"You mean because he's quit trying to hide his trail?" asked Steve.

"Well, partly that, but there's another thing," Trapper Jim went on to say.

"I think I'm on to it," observed Max.

"Well, I saw you look some surprised at the time, son," declared the trapper. "But Steve, here, saw nothing. Did you notice, Steve, which way we headed at the time we first picked up the trail at the sprung trap?"



"Why, yes, it was almost due south, wasn't it?" asked Steve.

"Right, son, and look at the sun now," the trapper remarked.

"Gee, that's queer!" muttered the surprised Steve.

"What is?" asked Max, smiling.

"The sun--why, it's swung around on the right. Say, don't tell me time's passed like that, and it's afternoon now. Why, we haven't felt hungry enough to tackle that bully lunch Max fetched along when he came back with the dog."

Both of the others laughed at this.

"That's one on you, Steve," said Max. "See, my watch says just ten-thirty. The sun didn't swing around at all, but the trail did."

"It's heading north now, is it?" demanded Steve.

"Straight as can be," replied Trapper Jim.

"But the cabin lies that way!" objected the puzzled boy.

"Just what it does," admitted Jim. "When the thief sat down to rest back there he must have been thinking it over. And he made up his mind to do something on the spot, for when he started again he cut out a new course direct."

"Whew, the nerve of him!" exclaimed Steve.

"What makes you say that, Steve?"

"Why, don't you see, he's got the fever bad. Thinks p'r'aps Uncle Jim here might have another silver fox pelt laid away, and while he's about it he reckons he'd better double up."

But Trapper Jim shook his head. He knew no pelt thief would ever display such boldness as Steve suggested. There must be another reason for the sudden change of plans on the part of the fugitive.

"Have we gained on him?" asked Max, presently.

"Considerable," replied the trapper.

"How d'ye know that?" demanded Steve,

"There are plenty of signs to tell me," came the answer. "Anyone used to following a trail would have seen them. And I reckon, now, Max hasn't been blind all this while."

"No," replied the one spoken of. "I saw water still oozing into a deep track when we passed that boggy ground, and right then and there I

concluded we must be less than half an hour behind the thief."

"Good!" ejaculated the trapper; "anything else. Max?"

"Why, yes," returned the boy, calmly. "There was a little twig that righted itself even as I looked at it. His foot had bent it down. Now, I shouldn't think it could have stayed that way more'n half an hour at best."

"I saw it, too," added the trapper; "and it pleases me more than I can say to find that you keep your eyes about you, son. It ought to be a lesson to Steve here. Queer, how one person can see so much and another nothing."

"Well," ventured Steve, "I have noticed one thing, anyhow."

"Glad to hear it, son. Tell us what it is, now."

"The dog," remarked Steve.

"Yes, what of Ajax?" questioned Jim.

"He acts different now."

"And from that you conclude what?" queried the trapper.

"Why, we're closing in on our game," Steve went on. "I've hunted enough to know how dogs show that."

"Fine! We'll give you credit for that point, Steve, because it's a fact," laughed the trapper, in a half-hushed way.

"Aw! I ain't quite such a silly as I look," remarked Steve.

"I should think not," said Max, and Steve hardly knew whether to take the observation as a compliment or the reverse.

"And, now, lads, we'd better stop talking," said Trapper Jim. "I reckon we're close enough on our man for him to hear us if we're noisy. And, perhaps, if he learned we'd nigh overtaken him, he might start off on the run."

So for some time they kept on in abject silence. Not a word was spoken, and save for the panting of the eager hound and the labored breathing of the trackers, all was still.

The country had become quite rough, and Max knew they must be passing over the hills he had seen from the cabin, lying to the south. They had had to climb them when on the way from the distant town, and Max even hoped some day to circulate among them with his rifle. But he had hardly expected that when he did, it would be while on the track of a human being.

"He slipped here--you can see the marks his shoes made in the shale," said Trapper Jim, pointing to the ground in front, which sloped downward rapidly.

"Oh, my land!" ejaculated Steve, "look where the marks lead, right to the brink of that precipice or the bank of a deep ravine. Honest, now, I believe the feller must 'a' gone over there."

"Just what he did," added Trapper Jim, solemnly; "and it'd make an ugly fall for a body, too."

They crept to the edge and looked down. The bottom of the ravine was many yards below, and there were cruel rocks, partly hidden by dense vegetation, now brown from the touch of Jack Frost's fingers.

"Listen, that sounded like a groan!" exclaimed the awe-struck Steve.

"I think I can see something among the weeds," remarked Max; and hardly had he spoken than a hand was raised to wave toward them and a voice full of pain called out:

"Help! Oh, help!"

Led by Trapper Jim the boys made their way down the steep rocky bank of the ravine. The first object they saw was the pelt of the silver fox, for the thief had removed it during his various stops so as to lighten his load. Then they came upon the doubled-up figure of a comparatively young man, at sight of whom Trapper Jim frowned and seemed strangely moved.

## CHAPTER XV.

### GLORIOUS NEWS.

"So you're the pelt thief, Ed Whitcomb, are you?" said Trapper Jim, gloomily, as he leaned on his rifle and looked down on the young fellow, at whom Ajax was sniffing as though he recognized an old friend.

Max caught the name. He recognized it, too. Trapper Jim had told them how he had brought a young fellow up from the railroad town two seasons before for company. His name had been Ed Whitcomb, too. They had seemed to get on for a time splendidly, but finally split on the subject of drinking, for Trapper Jim was very set against using liquor in any shape, and would not allow a drop of it in his cabin.

"Yes, I'm the thief, Uncle Jim," said the man, trying to suppress a groan. "The temptation when I happened on that silver was too much. I obeyed a sudden impulse and stole it. Reckon, just as you used to say, too much drink had warped my judgment, because there was a time when I'd sooner have cut my hand off than steal."

"But you got sorry for it, I reckon," said the trapper, a little more softly.

"Yes, something rose up in me and rebelled," replied Ed. "Perhaps it was the memory of the mother I had as a boy. Yes, it must have been only that. I reckoned she could see what I done and it'd make her feel bad."

"You turned back?" Trapper Jim continued.

"I turned back, sure I did," the wounded man went on, eagerly. "I was going to find you and tell you what a fool thing I'd done, tempted by the devil, and how sorry I was. Then I slipped and went over the rocks up there. But I deserve all I've got, Uncle Jim. I was a scoundrel; and after all your kindness two years back, too."

"But what were you coming up here for?" asked the trapper.

"Why, Mosher, the grocery man, said some letters had come in his care for you and these youngsters that were at your place. He told me you'd arranged to have a half-breed bring up any mail that arrived, but that the carrier was down on his back with malarial fever. So I said I didn't mind running up. Was so late starting I had to spend the night in the woods. And then this morning that temptation got me."

"But you repented--you meant to do the right thing, Ed. Oh, I'm glad you turned around and faced the other way before this thing happened."

"So am I," groaned Ed, "but I'm afraid my leg's broken, and I'm sore inside like I'd fractured some of my ribs. What's going to come of me I don't know. And perhaps I don't care much either, though you'll be glad to know, Uncle Jim, that me and strong drink have parted company forever. Ain't tasted a drop these three months; but it shows what it did for me when I could stoop low enough to steal, and from one of the best friends I ever had."

"That'll do for you, Ed," said the trapper, dropping on his knees beside the wounded man; "we're all weak and liable to give in to temptation. The fact that you repented is enough for me! We're going to carry you home with us."

"Home--to your cabin, after I was so mean as to steal--"

"Don't ever mention that to me again," ordered the trapper, sternly; "forget it just as though it had never been. Yes, your leg is broken, Ed, the left one, and quite a bad fracture, too. But I know how to fix you up, and in three weeks you'll be hopping around on a crutch."

Ed fairly devoured him with his eyes.

"They broke the model after they made you, Jim Ruggles," he muttered, as he put his hand to his side, indicating great pain there.

"Now let's see what's wrong about your ribs, lad," said the trapper, as he started to undo the other's coat, and then his heavy blue woolen shirt.

"I reckon you have got a rib cracked," he said, after a careful examination; "but nothing serious. Hurt for a while when you take a long breath, but it'll knit together again. And now--"

Trapper Jim stopped short in the middle of a sentence. He was staring hard at something he had seen all of a sudden.

"Where'd you get this, Ed Whitcomb?" he demanded, in a thick voice.

As he spoke he caught hold of a locket which hung about the neck of the other by a little gold chain. It had been burst open possibly by the fall, and as Trapper Jim started to draw the shirt of the wounded man together again he had disturbed this keepsake, which, turning about, disclosed the face of a pretty young woman.

"Why, she gave it to me," replied the other, weakly; "I've worn it that way ever since she died; and you're the first, right now, that's ever looked on it, Jim."

The trapper's eyes filled up.

"What was she to you, Ed Whitcomb?" he asked, gulping hard.

"My mother, of course," came the answer.

Trapper Jim simply turned the face on the locket so that Max could see it, and then he said in almost a whisper:

"Susie Benedict!"

Max understood. This, then, was the girl for love of whom Jim Ruggles had partly given up his ambition of ever being anything worth while when he fled to the wilderness.

How wonderful things do happen at times Max thought.

Why, only a few hours before Jim had been confessing to Owen and himself how sometimes he felt as though he would like to hunt up Susie's boy and do something for him, as he was possessed of ample means.

And here a strange freak of fate had brought them together in this remarkable way. Why, they had even spent a winter in company without Trapper Jim ever suspecting the truth.

But it was all right now.

And Max privately confided to Steve, who demanded to know who Susie Benedict was at the first opportunity, that Old Jim would spend no more winters up there alone with his two dogs.

"They'll make a team of it, and be as happy as two clams," he declared; while Steve was very much tickled at the way things had turned out.

So, under the directions of the trapper, who was setting the broken leg without delay, the two boys fashioned a rude but effective litter upon which the wounded young man could be comfortably carried.

The boys took turns with Trapper Jim in carrying the litter. Nothing seemed to weary the old trapper. He trudged on over hill and through the woods, as though his frame might be made of steel.

But every time a halt was made he would come around to see if his rough bandages still held, and the hand that touched Ed Whitcomb was as tender as that of a woman, while his voice was filled with solicitude when he asked how the other felt.

And Ed Whitcomb understood it all now. He marveled to think that this man, whom he had known so long, and who had really been the means of causing him to reform before it was too late, had once loved his mother!

Darkness came on.

They were still some distance from the cabin, and both boys looked tired, though unwilling to confess to the fact.

"We're going through with it, that's what!" said Steve, with a snap of his jaws, when the wounded man suggested that they ought to rest.

And they did.

Trapper Jim showed them how to make some torches that would give a pretty good light. And the one who did not assist with the stretcher went ahead to show the way.

And along about nine o'clock the barking of the dogs brought the three boys in the cabin to the door.

Great was their surprise when they learned what had happened. Ed Whitcomb was made comfortable in the lower bunk, and the boys at once agreed the trapper was to occupy the other. The floor and those soft furs would furnish them with good enough beds.

Of course the three who had been at home were wild to hear all about it. And Max thought it best to get them outdoors where he could relate the whole story, even to the fact of Jim Ruggles having once been head over ears in love with pretty Susie before she turned him down.

They thought it was the greatest thing that had ever come under their observation. And all agreed that since Ed Whitcomb had repented after taking the precious pelt, and was on the way back with it, he must be all right.

They meant to treat him as a man and a brother because it was evident that Uncle Jim was bound sooner or later to adopt the other as his son and heir.

And that pelt was a beauty, too; though none of the boys could realize that, according to what Trapper Jim said, it might be worth all of fifteen hundred dollars.

Another day came around.

Of course the trapper, having neglected his catch on account of the theft of the silver fox pelt, had to start off unusually early.

This time Owen accompanied him, his ankle having improved.

Toby, encouraged by the catch of fish which he and Bandy-legs had made on the preceding day, started out again, determined to make a record.

The other three remained in and around the cabin, bringing up firewood, looking after the skins that had been placed in the air, where the sun could not get at them, and doing such chores as would fall to the lot of Trapper Jim were he alone.

The letter which reached them had been from Mr. Hastings, telling them he had seen Steve's folks, as well as Mr. Griffin and Toby's guardian; and that since they had gone so far, and the school would not be ready until late in November, they might stay another week longer than they had contemplated, if they cared to do so.

And by a unanimous vote the five boys had immediately decided that they did care, so they enjoyed the prospect of more happy days ahead.

It was almost noon when Toby was seen running frantically toward the cabin and minus his cap. Every few steps he would cast a look of fear over his shoulder.

"What ails you?" shouted Steve, and Toby, though he could hardly speak, managed to blurt out:

"B-b-bear--eatin' up all m-m-my f-f-fish. M-m-meant to t-t-tackle me n-n-next!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

### SURPRISING BRUIN--\_Conclusion\_.

"WHOOH!" shouted Steve, as he made a headlong plunge in the direction of the cabin door, closely followed by the other two.

Of course all of them were after their guns, and it hardly seemed five seconds to Toby, panting without, ere his companions were tumbling pellmell through the cabin door again, each clutching his favorite weapon.

"Lead us to him, Toby!" commanded Steve, arrogantly.

"Yes, show us the big hulking beast that devoured your fish, Toby," said Bandy-legs, "we'll fix it up with him. I'm no slouch of a bear killer myself."

"Aw, rats!" scoffed Steve. "This ain't one of your docile trapped bear kind, Bandy-legs. This one can run like all get-out. If he ever starts after you, it's dollars to doughnuts you'd never get away on them short pins of yours."

"Can bears climb trees?" asked Bandy-legs, nervously.

"Well, I should say yes, black bears especially. They live half the time up in trees," replied Steve, who was pushing on just behind Toby himself.

Whereupon Bandy-legs discreetly allowed Max to pass him also. Since Nature had placed a serious handicap on him when dealing out those short legs, it seemed only right that he should be allowed a little extra distance. Then, in case the hungry fish-eating bear did see fit to charge them, all of the boys would be placed upon something like an equal footing.

Toby was furious by now.

He might have been simply frightened at the time he made his appearance before the cabin, but that feeling was rapidly giving way to anger. And bursting almost with indignation, he had to try and express himself to his comrades, despite the impediment in his speech, which was always worse when Toby grew excited.

"B-b-been all the b-b-blessed m-m-mornin' a-c-c-coaxin' them p-p-pickerel to t-t-take hold, and h-h-here that b-b-bloomin' old c-c-crocodile of a b-b-bear had to s-s-swallow h-h-half of 'em in one b-b-big b-b-bite!"

Max chuckled as he listened. He even found time to wonder whether Toby, if pressed, knew what sort of animal he meant by a "crocodile of a bear." But then a good deal of allowance must be made for a stuttering boy, and especially when he has a grievance as big as the one Toby shouldered.

"There's the pond ahead," cried Steve; "now show us your old bear."

"Come this way," said Toby. "I g-g-guess he's eat up all my s-s-string; and now he's hunting f-f-f or the can of b-b-bait."

He led them into a thick part of the wood.

"L-l-look!" whispered Toby, pointing.



"It is a bear, as sure as you live!" exclaimed Max.

"C-c-course it is," Toby went on; "w-w-what'd you think m-m-made me run? G-g-guess I know a s-s-stump when I see one."

Max held the impetuous Steve back.

"Wait," he said, "and let's all fire together. This bear isn't held by a trap, and if you only wound him there'd be a pretty kettle of fish."

"Ain't no f-f-fish left; he's d-d-devoured even my b-b-bait, the old glutton!" bellowed Toby, shaking his fist toward the bear.

Bruin evidently had enjoyed his unexpected meal immensely. Likely enough he had never before in all his life been offered a fish dinner gratis. Perhaps some of these other two-legged creatures that drew near, holding the funny sticks in their hands, might offer him another nice mess of pickerel fresh caught.

So the bear stood there on the edge of the pond watching them approach, as though not a particle afraid, only curious--and still fish hungry.

"See him licking his lips, would you!" cried Bandy-legs, still in the rear.

"L-I-liked 'em so m-m-much, he w-w-wants m-m-more, hang him!"

"We'll give him some cold lead instead," declared Steve, holding his double-barrel ready so he could shoot from the left shoulder; "see if he'll be able to digest it."

"He'll die just now, anyhow, if all of us nail him," remarked Max, laughing at the way the bear stood there watching them spread out like a fan.

"Aren't we close enough. Max?" asked Bandy-legs, who was nearly twice as far away as the two bolder spirits,

"Yes," piped up Steve, "let's get to work. You count three, Max; and remember, Bandy-legs, don't you dare shoot till you hear him say 'three' plain as dirt."

"But, Steve," said Max.

"What d'ye want?" grumbled the other, trembling with eagerness to begin operations.

"I hope you've only got one hammer raised," continued Max. "It'd be pretty tough if you fired both barrels again, and lamed your left shoulder, too."

"Cracky! I guess you're right, Max. Wait a few seconds till I set one

hammer down. I ain't going to take the chances. Shooting left-handed's bad enough, but what'd I do if I lamed that arm, too!"

"Try it w-w-with your l-l-legs!" observed Toby.

"All ready!" called out Max.

"Q-q-quick! He's m-m-moving off!" shouted Toby.

"All the better," said Max, coolly. "We can get a good aim at his side now; just back of the shoulder, remember, Bandy-legs!"

"C-c-count!" begged Toby, who hated to think of the bold fish robber getting off scot-free after his recent raid.

The bear was ambling off. Perhaps he had come to the wise conclusion that too much fish at one time was bad for a bear's digestion. And then, again, he did not altogether like the looks of all these queer two-legged creatures with those crooked black sticks which they kept poking out at him.

He would not run away, because, of course, he was not really afraid; but even a bear might be allowed to conduct a masterly retreat.

"One!" called out Max.

The three guns were leveled.

"Two!"

Then cheeks pressed the stocks and eyes glanced along the tubes, while itching fingers began to play with waiting triggers.

"Three!"

It was almost the roar of a cannon that followed. Three guns had spoken almost in the same breath.

"H-h-he's g-g-gone!" yelped Toby, who could see better than any of the others, because no little puff of white powder smoke obscured his vision.

A tremendous thrashing in the water told them that the wounded bear must have toppled over into the partly frozen pond.

"Look out for him!" cried Max.

He had ejected the used cartridge from his magazine rifle with one quick motion. Another sent a fresh one into the firing chamber.

Steve had drawn back the second hammer of his gun, and in this fashion then the two chums advanced straight toward the spot where they had last seen the bear.

Bandy-legs, more cautious, kept farther off, though he, too, aimed to reach the border of the little lake, in order to see what was going on.

"Got him!" whooped Steve, when he discovered that the bear was evidently fatally wounded, and fell back into the water every time he tried to climb the bank.

It was Max who thought to mercifully put an end to the stricken beast's sufferings by another well-directed shot from his rifle.

The bear was now dead. Even Toby put in his claim to a partnership in bringing about its demise. The right of first discovery rested with him, and he was ready to take up a defense of his claim at any time.

So, in order to avoid all bad feelings, and insure peace in the family hereafter, Max declared that the honor should be jointly shared by the whole four of them.

"Whenever we speak of 'our' bear, you'll know which one we mean," he remarked; "and, now, the next thing is to get the old chap up on dry land."

Securing some rope and a couple of blocks he had seen at the cabin, doubtless used when Trapper Jim wanted to haul logs, or with one man's power do a three-man job, Max fashioned a block and tackle.

With this they easily got the bear up the bank.

Then Max tried his hand at removing the skin, after which he cut up the bear, with Steve's assistance. And before Trapper Jim and Owen got back from setting a dozen more muskrat traps, as well as attending to those that had been neglected on the preceding day, everything needful had been done.

Great indeed was the surprise of Trapper Jim when he finally arrived, tired and likewise hungry, to smell cooking bear steaks, and discover not one bear skin stretched out properly to cure, but two.

The last one had been somewhat torn where the various leaden missiles had passed through. But the trapper assured the boys that if placed in the hands of a good fur dealer it could be easily sewed up, and would make them an elegant rug for their club room,

"Every time you walk on it you'll remember this delightful little vacation spent with Trapper Jim in the North Woods," he declared.

"And it will always have just a faint fishy smell to me, because the rascal ate up all Toby's morning catch before we got him," remarked Max.

"S-s-say, we had f-f-fish for s-s-supper last night, didn't we?" demanded Toby.

"That's right, we did," spoke up Steve, "and right sweet pickerel, too,

thanks to the one who stuck it out all afternoon watching his poles and keeping one eye on the woods for the mate of our bear to appear. Oh, they were nice, all right! And I just dote on pickerel, all but the boot-jack bones."

It can be safely assumed that they were a merry crowd that night.

The boys, realizing that their period for fun up in those glorious North Woods had been extended another week, were bubbling over with joy.

Trapper Jim had everything to make him contented, and even happy. Every time he touched that elegant fox skin he felt like shaking hands with himself because of the satisfaction it gave him--not so much the value of the pelt as the proud consciousness that he had finally been enabled to capture another of those rare and almost priceless prizes which every fur taker dreams about.

And then, again, doubtless Uncle Jim found great reason for thankfulness every time he glanced toward Ed Whitcomb. What had been a vague, half-formed dream in his mind bade fair to become a reality. He was Susie's boy, and circumstances had thrown them together in a way so strange that it was surely intended that they should part no more.

As for the wounded man, although he might often deep down in his heart deplore the weakness that had taken possession of him at sight of the captured silver fox, still, since it had brought Jim and him together, and revealed a new and entirely unsuspected bond between them, why should he regret it.

Besides, Trapper Jim declared he owed the fox skin to Ed, anyhow. He had discovered that the animal had gnawed its foot almost off, and long before Jim and the boys came along would have gone limping off on three legs only that Ed appeared just in time to knock it on the head.

With nearly two weeks ahead of them, it was only natural that Max and his four chums should anticipate other glorious times. And that they met with no disappointment in this respect the reader who has followed them thus far with interest will discover when he reads the next volume of the series:

"CAUGHT IN A FOREST FIRE."

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