

**MORGAN
SCOTT**

OAKDALE

BOYS IN CAMP

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CHAPTER I. THE CAMPING PARTY

The afternoon of a lazy midsummer day was waning as an old white horse drew a heavily loaded, creaking, complaining farm wagon along a crude, seldom used road which wound through the depths of a silent stretch of timberland. A sleepy looking, tow-headed boy with round apple cheeks sat on the wagon-seat and held the reins. Behind the wagon five more boys straggled along on foot, stumbling over the rocks and “cradle knolls.” The party, with the exception of the drowsy driver, who had been engaged to transport the camping outfit from Pemstock, the nearest railroad station, was bound for Phantom Lake, the objective point of the expedition.

As originally planned, the company had been made up of four Oakdale lads, Phil Springer, Sile Crane, Ben Stone and Rodney Grant; but, listening to their talk of the sport they would have on such an outing, Sleuth Piper had become inspired by a longing to join them, and almost at the last moment he had succeeded in securing permission of his parents. The five mile jaunt from Pemstock to Phantom Lake followed a journey of twenty odd miles by rail; but, despite the dust, heat and bad roads, the enthusiasm of the boys showed no symptoms of waning.

Carrying a double barreled shotgun and wearing an old leather-banded cowboy hat and a belt supporting a sheathed hunting knife, Piper followed close behind the writhing wagon, peering with an exaggerated air of caution and keenness into the timber and bushes on either hand. The rustling of a running chipmunk, the distant chatter of a red squirrel, or the cawing of a crow, lazily wheeling overhead, was sufficient to cause Piper to halt with quickly uplifted hand and the pose of one who sensed an impending danger.

“Oh, what’s the matter with yeou naow?” drawled Sile Crane in exasperation, as he finally stumbled against Sleuth’s heels. “Yeou couldn’t shoot anything if yeou saw it, and, anyhaow, the old gun ain’t loaded.”

“Hush!” sibilated Sleuth. “We’re in the enemy’s country, and peril menaces us on every hand. Who knows that the chatter of yonder squirrel or the sudden cry of the soaring crow does not betoken the near presence of some prowling varmint? There may be bloodthirsty redskins lying in ambush for us, and, unless we preserve extreme caution, perchance our scalps tonight will dangle in the wigwams of the Wampanoags.”

“Oh, go on with yeour dinged fol-de-rol,” snorted Crane. “Yeou’ve read so many of them cheap Injun stories that yeou’re half nutty. Between them yarns and the detective stuff yeou sop up, yeou’ll go clean off yeour base if yeou don’t look aout. Come, pudge along.” He ended by giving Sleuth a vigorous shove that nearly sent the smaller lad sprawling.

“Careful, Sile,” begged Ben Stone. “Have you forgotten that it was Sleuthy’s clever work which practically saved me from the stigma of a crime? If you have, I haven’t, and I’m not liable to forget it.”

Piper gave his champion, a stocky, square built, somewhat unprepossessing lad, a grateful look.

“I guess I opened their eyes some that time, didn’t I, Ben?” he grinned proudly. “I made the fellers that had been poking fun at me sit up and take notice. I had them all spellbound in court when I told my story and gave my deductions.”

“Yes,” chuckled Phil Springer, who was wearing a canvas suit that crinkled and rustled at every step. “It was so still in the court room that you might have heard a gum-drop.”

“A pun that’s right worthy of Chipper Cooper himself,” observed Rodney Grant, who, although a genuine Texan and the son of a cattleman, was the most simply and practically dressed member of the party. “We must be getting near the lake. It’s sure a wonder to me that the Dutchman hasn’t rolled off the wagon-seat before this and broken his neck. Look at him! There he goes! Oh, Dutchy, look out!”

The sleepy driver seemed to awaken and recover barely in time to prevent himself from bounding like a ball beneath the forward wheels of the wagon.

“Vat’s der matter?” he gurgled, yanking at the reins and turning to glare, red-faced, over his shoulder. “Vy iss it you at me yell like dot undt nearly make me off fall? Who vas you calling Tutchman already now? I would haff you understood dot I peen a Cherman.”

His indignation brought a shout of laughter from the boys.

“Pardon me for breaking in on your peaceful slumbers,” entreated the Texan. “We were reckoning the lake must be right near by this time.”

The German lad rubbed his eyes, yawned, and looked around.

“Yah,” he said, “der lake hass almost reached us. It vill soon be here, I peliefe. Not much more must we on go.”

“We’ll never reach the lul-lul-lake in the world if you gug-gug-get twisted in gug-guiding as much as you do in tut-talking,” said Springer.

“Vot iss?” cried the young German in derision. “Anyvay, I do not up chop my vurds, der vay you did. Ven dose vurds did out come your mouth from, it iss mincemeats they vas already.”

This turned the laugh on Springer, who sought in vain to make a sufficiently sarcastic retort, and became so excited through the effort that he stammered more than usual.

“Oh, start up your old nag again, Dutch,” urged Crane. “Yeou and Springer both murder language in a criminal fashion.”

“Maype dot peen so,” admitted the lad on the wagon; “but it iss py our mouths we talk, undt not our noses through.” With which solid shot he chirruped to the old horse, and the wagon creaked onward once more.

“It sure seems to me,” laughed Grant, “that Mr. Carl Duckelstein isn’t near as sleepy as he looks. As we’ve engaged him to bring us butter, eggs and milk daily, he may provide some amusement for us.”

In a few moments, the road taking a bend through the trees, they set the woods ringing with shouts of satisfaction, for before them they caught a glimpse of the placid blue waters of Phantom Lake. Soon the broad sweep of the sheltered island-dotted lake, with a range of mountainous hills rising directly from the shore at the further side, opened out before them, the prospect being one to make their youthful hearts beat swiftly.

Eight miles in length and fully half as far across at its widest point, the forest-surrounded, mountain-sentineled strip of water was one of the most picturesque sheets to be found in old New England, remaining as yet unspoiled by too many swarming campers and resorters, although a newly opened hotel near the base of the highest and most precipitous cliff of the range of hills was attracting increasing numbers of the latter class. From Pleasant Point, which the Oakdale boys had now reached, the hotel far across the lake could be glimpsed amid the green foliage at the base of the purple cliff.

Springer capered like a colt, shouting again in joyous abandon as he ran out on the point to get a good view of his surroundings.

“It’s gug-great, fellows,” he cried – “simply great! This is a corking place to camp. Why, here’s deep water on one side right off the rocks, and a cove with a sandy beach on the other sus-side. Gee whiz! it’s fine.”

The enthusiasm of the others, excepting, of course, the seemingly stolid German lad, was scarcely less unrestrained.

“It certain is all right,” was the decision of Rod Grant. “I’ll admit it beats anything to be found in Rogers County, Texas.”

“Here’s a rippin’ place to go in swimmin’ right off the rocks,” announced Crane, inspecting one side of the point. “Looks like a feller can dive off into ten foot of water. By glory! we sartain ought to have fun here.”

“Come over here,” called Stone from the other side. “Come on over, fellows. Here’s a place where we can land with our canoe when we get it over from Pemstock.”

With one foot crossed over the other, Sleuth Piper leaned on the muzzle of the shotgun, in imitation of the pictured pose of some scout or trapper he had seen on the cover of such a lurid yarn as pleased his fancy, calmly surveying the prospect from the most sightly spot of the point.

“We should not forget,” he said, “that we’re in the heart of the Dark and Bloody Ground, afar from the nearest settlement. What seems so peaceful and serene to the naked eye may hide a thousand deadly dangers. Though the pizen redskin may not be near, through these trackless wilds prowl innumerable ferocious beasts that –”

“Wake up,” cried Crane. “Turn over; yeou’re on yeour back.”

“Let’s get busy,” suggested Stone. “There’ll be plenty of time to look around tomorrow, and we’ve got to hustle to pitch that tent and get supper before dark.”

“Sure,” agreed Grant. “Everybody get busy. Come on.”

CHAPTER II. MAKING CAMP

Carl, the German boy, was dozing again upon the wagon-seat. When they awoke him he grumbled a little, but they did not ask him to assist in unloading, knowing that he would simply be in the way. It required only a few minutes to remove the boxes, bales and bundles, which were piled together promiscuously.

“Is there a spring near by, Carl?” asked Grant.

“Vot does a spring vant uf you?” returned the German lad in surprise.

“We must have water to drink.”

“Vater? Goot cracious! Didt you oxford to up drink der whole lake right away soon?”

“Not exactly, but we weren’t right sure it was suitable for drinking purposes. It’s all right, is it?”

“Vale, it vas vet, undt uf you drink it I don’t peliefe it vill disagreement by you. Howefer, uf it didt not like you, there vas a spring in der voods pack somevhere. I could not say how near it vas away.”

“Well,” laughed Rod, “although that’s plenty indefinite, I reckon we can find it. You’ll come early in the morning with the butter, eggs and milk, will you?”

“Yah, der putter, eggs undt milks vill pring me early,” assured Carl.

“And then you are to hike to Pemstock and tote our canoe in to us.”

“‘Hike’ and ‘tote’ didt not understood me,” replied Carl; “but I vill go undt dot canoe get tomorrow as soon as possibility.”

“That’s what I mean,” said Grant.

As the German boy gathered up the reins to back the wagon round, Piper stepped forward and checked him with an uplifted hand.

“Stay,” said Sleuth. “Pause a moment. Would you inform us if there are any dangerous wild beasts in this virgin forest? Are there likely to be animals prowling about against whose attack we should keep a nocturnal vigil?”

“Vot vas dot, a dog?” asked Carl wonderingly. “Didt you mean vas you to keep a dog to out vatch for vild animals? I didt not observation dot you had a dog aroundt anyvhere. Maype, howefer, you have vun your pocket in.”

Sleuth shook his head sadly. “It’s evident,” he returned, “that you are not wise to the delicate shadings of the English language. By a nocturnal vigil I mean a night watch.”

“Oh, yah,” nodded Carl. “Now I understood it. You haf a night vatch your pocket in, in order dot der time can see you ven it iss dark. I peliefe maype it vas a goot kindt uf a vatch to have.”

“You haven’t answered my interrogation concerning the before-mentioned dangerous wild animals,” persisted Piper, unheeding the half suppressed merriment of his companions. “Are there any around these parts?”

“Last vinter,” was the answer, “my oldt man he didt see der footprints uf a gouger, undt dot gouger didt off carry vun uf our sheeps.”

“A gouger?” cried Sleuth. “What is that?”

“It vas a gouger; a vild peast mit four feets undt claws undt two eyes undt teeth undt a goot appetite for meat undt plood.”

“A-a-ah!” breathed Sleuth, with a long, shuddering intake of his breath. “I knew there must be such ferocious creatures in this wild and desolate wilderness, but what a gouger can be has got me guessing.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Grant, “he means a cougar.”

“Dot peen vot I said already,” persisted the German boy. “Vale, I must along go uf I vill home get pefore dark. Goot py, undt don’t let dot gouger catch you.”

Turning with some difficulty, he drove away into the stilly woods, the bumping and creaking of the old wagon drifting back to the ears of the campers a long time after it had disappeared from view. Ere those sounds fully died out Piper brought forth his jack-knife, hastily cut open one of the burlap-covered bundles, and extracted a hatchet, with which he attacked one of the smaller wooden boxes.

“Here, what are yeou tryin’ ter do?” cried Crane. “Don’t go ter stavin’ up that box; we may need it. What be yeou after?”

“The ammunition – the cartridges for the gun,” palpitated Piper. “As a means of defense against a ravenous cougar, the weapon is practically null and void unless loaded.”

Stone seized the hatchet and wrested it from the hand of the agitated youth. “When we’re ready to open that box,” he said, “we’ll do so without smashing it into kindling, for we’re going to need it again when we pack up. Have some sense, Sleuth. There are no cougars in these parts.”

“Nun-never heard of one,” said Springer. “There might be woodchucks or hedgehogs, or even, sometimes, a wildcat; but I’ll bub-bub-bet nobody ever saw a cougar around here.”

“Nevertheless,” declared Sleuth grimly, “I intend to stand on guard tonight with this loaded weapon. Many a foolish, reckless man has lost his life by carelessness in the wild regions of an unknown land.”

“As fur as I’m consarned,” said Crane, “yeou can stand on guard if yeou want to; but when it comes time to turn in, you’ll see me hittin’ the blanket.”

“The first thing to be done,” said Grant, who seemed to be the natural leader of the party, “is to pitch our tent and prepare for supper. Let’s choose a camping spot. I reckon it won’t be hard to find a good one here.”

“What’s the mum-matter with this place right where we are?” asked Springer. “It’s all cleared up excepting a few rocks, and it’s pretty near level.”

“I judge we can find a better place,” was the opinion of the Texan. “This is too far back on the point; we should get out where we can feel more of the breeze, which will help to drive away flies and winged insects. Furthermore, this is in a slight hollow that would get mighty wet if it rained hard. We must look out for drainage in case of rain. I think I can see a good place.”

The spot he chose needed to be cleared of some low bushes and a few small loose rocks that were not difficult to remove. By using that location, as Rod explained, not only would they get the benefit of whatever breeze might be stirring and have dry ground beneath them if it rained, but the tent could be so pitched that the early morning sun would shine full upon the front of it, and some near-by trees would provide cool shelter throughout the warm middle hours of the day. Furthermore, two low, flat-topped rocks, at a distance of some fifteen feet from where the tent would stand, formed a sort of triangle, which, partly closed in with some more stones that might be found near by, could readily be made, with the aid of the sheet-iron top they had brought, into a combined cook-stove and fireplace. Four or five feet from the rocks grew three stout saplings, likewise in a triangle and close enough together so that, by nailing cross-pieces to them and spanning those cross-pieces with boards from one of the boxes, a handy cook’s table might be constructed in a few minutes.

The boys listened to Rodney with increasing respect for his judgment and sound horse sense.

“Gall dinged if yeou don’t seem to know jest haow to do these things, Texas,” drawled Crane. “I guess we’ll foller yeour lead.”

“All right,” nodded Grant briskly. “Do you know how to rustle firewood?”

“I was brung up on a farm, and I cal’late I know as much abaout the different kinds of wood as anybody here.”

“Then get the axe out of that bundle Piper cut open and go foraging for wood. Stone, can you cook any at all?”

“Not much,” confessed Ben; “but I suppose I can fry bacon, and that’s about all the cooking there’ll be to do tonight.”

“That’s right. We’ve bread and some canned stuff. You can get out the stove top and cooking utensils and build the fireplace, with the help of Piper, who will bring such extra stones as you may need. Springer, I reckon you and I had better clear away here, unpack the tent and get it ready for pitching. When we need the others we can call them to give us a helping hand.”

In this manner he set them all at work, and, to their credit, every fellow took hold with a will. While Springer and Grant were ripping up the small bushes by the roots, removing the loose stones and smoothing out the ground for the tent floor, Piper, red-faced and grunting, brought rocks for Stone to build the fireplace, and, that being done, aided him in constructing the cook’s table. The ring of Crane’s axe resounded through the near-by woods, and presently he appeared with a huge armful of dry sugar maple cut from a fallen tree.

“If this ain’t as good firewood as anybody can find araound here,” he said, dropping it on the ground near the fireplace, “I’ll eat every stick of it.”

“Where’s the axe?” questioned Grant.

“I left her stickin’ in the log.”

“Get it. Cut a chopping block if you can find anything suitable, and bring it along with the axe, which we’ll need when we come to drive the stakes for pitching the tent. I don’t reckon it’s a good plan to leave an axe out in the woods away from camp.”

Two minutes later the strokes of the axe were again ringing through the woods, and in less than quarter of an hour Crane reappeared with the implement in his hand, rolling along the ground before him a chopping block, which he had cut from the small sugar maple.

By this time the fireplace was constructed and a fire already started in it. Furthermore, the cook’s table was almost ready for use. The tent had been unpacked, shaken out and spread on the ground with the ridgepole lying in position beneath it. At each end of the tent lay the uprights, ready to be raised into position. The axe and the smaller hatchet were placed handy for use at either end of the tent, after which the tent fly was spread in its proper place, with the loops of the long guys over the front and rear pole pins. Stout stakes had been driven at both ends of the tent, and to these the guy ropes were made fast. The loops at the four corners of the tent were likewise made fast to stakes, the pins of the uprights were slipped through the ridgepole ends, and Grant announced that everything was ready for the raising.

It is probable that the fellow who has never pitched a tent in the woods will not understand the thrill of that moment which was experienced by the young campers as, directed by Grant, they placed themselves in position to hoist away. As only four were required for this part of the work, Piper stood back and awaited orders. The others, two at each end, grasped the front and rear uprights and lifted the ridgepole, bearing the tent and fly. As soon as convenient, two of the boys slipped inside and seized the poles to assist, after which the uprights were hoisted into a vertical position. Those within remained holding them thus until the four corners were carried out and made fast to the ground pins. After this, the tent being thus temporarily secured, all went about the work of setting the guy pins and making the ropes fast to them.

The wall pins were next driven into place and the walls roped down to them. Then the fly was lifted to a proper height and guyed off, Piper keeping busy assisting to make everything staunch and taut.

“There she is, fellows,” said Grant proudly, stepping away and running his fingers through his damp hair, “and it sure is my opinion that for a bunch of novices we’ve made a right good job of it. She stands as square and true as anybody could ask, and I opine she’ll provide shelter as long as we want it, in any kind of weather.”

“You bub-bet,” exulted Springer. “Don’t it look fine? It’s a dandy, fellows.”

“The teepee is erected,” said Piper.

“What be we goin’ to call our camp?” asked Crane.

“Let’s call it Camp Oakdale,” suggested Stone.

“That’s it; that’s the name,” cried the others.

“A cheer, then, for Camp Oakdale,” proposed Grant.

They responded right lustily.

CHAPTER III. EVENING AT PLEASANT POINT

From the cooking kit the sheet-iron stove top, having two holes with covers, was brought forth and placed over the fire, each end resting on the edges of the flat-topped rocks. In this manner the cook stove was made ready for use, and while Stone fried bacon, made coffee, opened a tin of meat and carried forward all the preparations for supper, the others unpacked and stowed away the rest of the outfit.

The ground-cloth was smoothly spread over the levelled tent floor and made fast, after which, having decided on the positions of the beds, everything to be kept beneath the tent was brought inside and placed as conveniently as possible in the most limited space close to one of the tent walls. Of course there was some discussion over the stowing of these articles, but in the end it was Grant who decided how it should be done. And it was the Texan who selected two tall, straight young trees, each about six inches in diameter, standing some distance from the tent, and instructed Crane to cut them down and trim them smoothly, that they might be used as "bed rails." Before these rails could be fully prepared, however, Stone called them to supper.

"Ay-yi!" responded Crane, instantly dropping the axe. "Yeou bet that saounds good ter me. I've ketched a few whiffs of that sizzling bacon, and it's made me so ravenous I could eat an old bootleg. Seems to me I never was so nigh famished in all my life."

The others were no less hungry, and they lost little time in seating themselves, cross-legged, upon the ground about a box cover which Stone had brought into use as a temporary table top.

"We can put up a regular dining table tomorrow," said Ben; "but this will have to do tonight." He was pouring the coffee as he spoke. "No milk, but plenty of sugar. Here's the fried bacon, the canned meat, and toast – burned a little, perhaps – and cheese. Not much of a meal, but it will have to do for the first one in camp. Tomorrow we'll have fresh eggs and butter and milk and –"

"Fish," put in Piper; "all kinds of 'em, right out of the water. Wait till I get my fishing gear together and start out after the finny denizens of this landlocked deep."

"I'll bet you're a great fuf-fuf-fisherman, Sleuth," grinned Springer, winking slyly at Grant. "You know all about it, don't you?"

"As a general all-round Nimrod," replied Piper, forking a piece of bacon and depositing it on a slice of the blackened toast, "I'm simply a wonder. The fish don't have a ghost of a chance when I get after them."

"Hush!" cautioned Grant. "Speak low. There may be some fish near this point, and, if they should hear you and carry the news of your presence to their relatives and friends, it might produce a tremendous panic among the 'finny denizens of this landlocked deep;' and we don't want to scare them all away."

"I don't know much abaout fishin'," mumbled Crane, his mouth full of food, "so I guess I'll git yeou to give me some lessons, Sleuth."

"Piper," said Stone, seating himself after pouring the coffee, "must indeed be a past master in woodcraft, hunting and fishing. He's the only fellow who has brought a sleeping bag. I say, Sleuth, where did you get that thing?"

"Borrowed it of Jim Bailey, who outfitted to go to the Klondike ten years ago and never went," answered Piper. "Oh, you fellows can have your beds, but I propose to do this thing up in style; and, while you're tossing restlessly on boughs and blankets, I'll be snugly ensconced in my cozy sleeping bag. They are great things when you're camping out; Bailey said so."

Chattering and bantering in this manner, the boys thoroughly enjoyed the meal, their faces lighted by the soft, warm rays of the sun, that was on the verge of sinking behind the wooded range at

the far side of the lake. Already the white hotel could barely be discerned, and the purplish shadows were creeping out from the base of the hills. The lake lay like a mirror, with no breath of air rippling its glassy surface. The peace of evening in the solitudes was closing in.

“Let’s hustle up a bit, fellows,” urged Grant. “We must cut some boughs for our beds before it gets too dark. If we can only get some genuine balsam boughs, it will be right fine.”

“There’s some balsam trees back beyond where I cut the firewood,” announced Crane; “but now that I’ve et I feel so lazy I don’t care much abaout cuttin’ boughs. What’s the use to trouble aourselves tonight; we’ve got blankets to roll up in.”

“The blankets are all right,” returned Rodney; “but anyone who tries to sleep in them with no boughs beneath him is sure going to find it uncomfortable before morning. The ground itself gets mighty hard, as I know from experience, and a chap who has been working and perspiring will feel plenty cold before morning comes, no matter how warm and easy he is when he first rolls in. I propose to have some boughs under me.”

“With my sleeping bag,” said Sleuth, “I need nothing of the sort.”

“Then,” said Rod, “you can gather up the dishes and wash them while the rest of us are cutting boughs. Everyone must do something.”

Dish washing being especially abhorrent to him, Piper groaned and grumbled, although he did not refuse to perform the task to which he had been assigned. The others, provided with the axe, hatchet and strong knives, set forth, Grant leading the way, in search of the necessary boughs. Not far from the tent, in a little open spot, Sile paused a moment to kick off the top of an ants’ nest and watch the frantic creatures which were exposed to view in that manner.

“To-morrer,” he said, “if we’ve got it to spare, I’ll turn some kerosene over this ’ere colony, and that’ll fix ’em. We don’t want any of them things crawling into the tent to nip us at night. I tell yeou they can bite some.”

“They must be almost as dangerous as Carl’s ‘gouger,’” laughed Rodney; “but we can’t fool with them now.”

Crane had really located some trees of balsam fir, and, with the shadows deepening, they made haste to cut several huge armfuls, which they carried back and piled in front of the tent. This accomplished, the bed rails were cut off at the proper length and smoothly trimmed of branches and knots, after which they were placed lengthwise in the tent, one being rolled up close against the wall, while the other, each end protruding from beneath the canvas so that it could be pinned fast to the ground, was laid parallel about four feet away. The space between those logs was then filled with the boughs, all carefully spread out, the softest tips being reserved for the top. It was necessary to light the lantern that they might see to spread the blankets, but finally the beds were arranged to their entire satisfaction.

Sleuth, having finished his task with the dishes, removed the stove top and replenished the fire, reclined in the light of the blaze and with a superior air watched his laboring comrades, secure in the belief that his sleeping bag would provide luxury and comfort denied the others.

Grant had brought along a guitar, an instrument presented to him by a cowboy on his father’s ranch, and this he now produced and put in tune, seated on the chopping block near the fire. The rest found comfortable positions near at hand, and, having strummed a while, Rod struck into “The Spanish Cavalier.” He had a clear, melodious voice, and he carried the air, the others joining, with the exception of Piper, who could not sing a note to save his life.

“The Spanish cavalier stood in his retreat,
And on his guitar played a tune, dear;
The music so sweet he oft would repeat —
The blessings of my country and you, dear.
Oh, say, darling, say, when I’m far away,

Sometimes you may think of me, dear;
The bright sunny day will soon fade away,
Remember what I say and be true, dear.”

The hushed and breathless trees seemed to be listening. The melody of the song floated far over the shrouded bosom of the lake, beyond which the light of the hotel gleamed at the foot of the cliff, on the highest crest of which a great white cross had been planted. The waving firelight flooded over the boys, seated or half reclining upon the ground, with the tent standing out snowy white against the black background of the forest. There was no moon, and overhead a few vapory stars peered through the haze which had spread across the sky. At times the fire, rising, flung a gilded gleam out upon the placid water off Pleasant Point.

The glamor and poetry of the time and place was distinctly felt by all those boys. It was a splendid thing to be alive and to be there, a little band of congenial friends and comrades granted the ever-to-be-remembered delights of this midsummer outing in the best days of enthusiastic, unsatiated, golden youth. In years to come, when the hard, cutting edges of life’s experiences and cares had rasped away their fervor and left them, perhaps, incapable of deep enjoyment of simple things, they would sometimes recall this outing with the mingled thrills of regret and pleasure which memory so often yields.

They sang other old-fashioned songs: “Swanee River,” “Aunt Dinah’s Quilting Party,” “Bring Back My Bonny to Me;” and then, alone, strumming the accompaniment on the guitar, Grant rendered that doleful pastoral of the plains, “The Cowboy’s Lament.”

The mood for singing passed, and they were silent, even the Texan, having put aside his instrument, leaned his elbows on his knees and propped his chin with his hands to stare moodily into the sinking fire. As the unreplenished flames died down, the shadows crept nearer and the tent seemed to beckon to the embrace of its shelter.

Finally Piper shook himself, sat up, stretched his arms above his head and yawned.

“Me to the sleeping bag,” he said. “I’m going to turn in.”

CHAPTER IV.

A BAD NIGHT FOR PIPER

“Why, Sleuthy,” drawled Crane, in pretended surprise, “I thought yeou was goin’ to stand guard all night to keep off bloodthirsty redskins and ‘gougers,’ or other wild animals. Is it possible yeou’re goin’ to let us snooze unprotected – is it possible?”

“Huh!” grunted Piper. “I guess there’s no danger, and I’m mighty tired. There won’t anything touch us.”

“Then,” laughed Grant, rousing from his reverie and picking up the guitar, “you no longer fear that tomorrow may see our scalps dangling in the wigwams of the Wampanoags?”

“The progress of civilization,” returned Sleuth, “the irresistible advance of the ruthless palefaces, has driven the red men steadily toward the setting sun, and I have a conviction that not many Wampanoags remain in this region.”

“But,” said Springer, rising to his feet, “it might be a good thing for somebody to kuk-kuk-keep guard. The rest of us would sleep better. Why don’t you do it, Pipe?”

“Why don’t *you*?” snapped Sleuth. “You needn’t think you’re going to throw everything on to me.”

“P’r’aps he’s afraid of the spook that’s said to prow around this lake,” suggested Crane mischievously. “Yeou know folks claim the old lake is haunted by the ghost of a hermit that used to live on Spirit Island, and lots of people have heard the ha’nt wailin’ in the night.”

“Bosh!” sneered Sleuth. “Nobody believes such stuff these days. There ain’t any ghosts.” Despite this assertion, his eyes were seen to roll a bit nervously toward the near-by shadows.

“P’r’aps not,” admitted Sile; “but sometimes some folks see and hear mighty peculiar things that they can’t explain.”

“Well, I’m not going to stay up all night watching for spooks,” retorted Piper; “and, as far as wild animals are concerned, I’ll slip a couple of shells into the gun and keep it right near me, and if anything comes prowling round I’ll fill it full of lead. I’m a light sleeper, anyhow, and it’ll be easy for me to wake up.”

Stone had relighted the lantern and hung it in the tent, that they might see to undress and retire. Grant threw a few more sticks on the coals and followed Ben into the camp, Piper at his heels.

While Sleuth was loading the gun and getting out the sleeping bag Crane, struck by a sudden mischievous idea, whispered eagerly to Springer, who clapped a hand over his mouth to suppress a giggle.

“Git him away from the tent, Phil – git him away somehaow,” urged Crane; “and keep him till you hear me whistlin’.”

A few moments later Phil shouted from the water’s edge far out at the extremity of the point:

“Ho, Sleuth! Come on out here! Sleuth! I say, Sleuth, hurry up!”

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Piper called back from the tent door. “Where are you?”

“Out here on the pup-point; out close to the water. There’s something jumping in the water, and I think it must be fish. You know all about fish, so cuc-come out and tell me if I’m right.”

Piper hesitated and grumbled, but the others urged him to go.

“We want to know if there’s fish araound here,” said Crane, “for if there is mebbe we can ketch a mess for breakfast. Go on aout, Sleuth, and see.”

His vanity thus appealed to, Piper issued forth, crossed the patch of light made by the reawakened fire and disappeared beyond, calling to Springer. Barely had Sleuth disappeared when Crane hastily found a lard pail in which various articles had been brought along, dumped the contents, warned the wondering Grant and Stone to keep still, and passed round to the rear of the tent, as the

sound of his footsteps betokened. It was not long ere he was back, bringing the pail with the cover securely in place.

“Git holt of the mouth of that sleepin’ bag, you fellers,” he hissed. “Hurry up, before Sleuthy returns.”

“What are you up to, anyhow?” questioned Stone cautiously.

“Never yeou mind. Don’t waste time askin’ questions naow. There’s going to be something doing after Piper crawls into this old bag.”

They held the mouth open for him, and, removing the cover from the pail, he dumped its contents inside the sack, chuckling all the while.

“What the dickens – ” began Stone.

“A good big dip right aout of the middle of that ants’ nest,” snickered Sile. “Them little black bugs can nip like sin, and they’ll have Sleuthy squirmin’ some in no time. Shake ’em daown to the bottom – that’s right. Naow spread it aout jest as he left it. Don’t give it away to him, but jest wait for the circus to commence after he pokes himself away into that thing.”

He began undressing, whistling at the same time, and soon Piper and Springer were heard returning from the point, engaged in an argument as to whether or not they had seen fish “breaking” in the water.

“Never mind,” said Grant, as they entered; “I reckon we’ll find out in the morning whether or not there are fish around here. Hustle up, everybody, and turn in. I’m all ready, and don’t fancy having you gents fussing and growling and keeping me awake.”

Ere Piper had undressed to his underclothes, which were of the athletic variety and in which he proposed to sleep, all save Crane had wrapped themselves in blankets and rolled on to the bed of balsam boughs, the fragrance of which pervaded the entire tent.

“Git in, Sleuth, so I can put aout the light,” urged Sile. “Got yeour old gun all ready, ain’t ye? Be sure to keep off cougars, and don’t let anything git into the tent to bite ye in the night.”

Piper somewhat laboriously and bungingly stowed himself into the bag feet first, Crane snickering in spite of himself as he watched the performance, while more than one of the blanket-wrapped bodies on the boughs quivered suspiciously.

“What are you laughing at?” demanded Sleuth resentfully, as he pulled the top of the bag up around his shoulders. “Perhaps you think this isn’t comfortable, but I want you to understand it is. I’ll get more real good solid satisfaction out of this bag tonight than you will on your old bough bed.”

“I was jest thinkin’,” returned Crane, “that it might be kind of hot inside that thing this time of year. When I git too hot in the night it sets me to scratchin’ something awful – makes me itch, like things was bitin’ me.”

“You’d better have your bed examined,” sneered Sleuth pointedly. “I’m never troubled that way.”

“Haow do you hitch this thing up raound yeour neck?” asked Sile, examining the top of the bag. “I should think yeou’d want it fastened, so yeour shoulders wouldn’t stick aout. I see haow it’s done, but it must be consarned awkward to fasten it from the inside. I’ll do it for ye.”

In spite of Sleuth’s protest that he did not want the top fastened too tightly, the joker slyly drew it close and made it secure. This done, he lost little time in folding his blanket round him, extinguishing the light and rolling on to the boughs, where, like the others, he eagerly awaited developments.

Save for the mournful peeping of a tree-toad in a near-by thicket and the occasional crackling of the fire, the light of which flickered on the tent and shone through the narrow opening in front, a profound silence settled for a time over the camp. It was not long, however, before the waiting boys heard Piper moving a bit restlessly in the bag, and in a short time the sound of these movements became more distinct, seeming to indicate that Sleuth was squirming about uneasily. Springer turned a snicker into a poor imitation of a snore, and Crane poked him sharply in the ribs. Almost immediately Piper was heard scratching himself vigorously.

“Drat it!” he whispered to himself; and Springer’s body shook convulsively.

Following this, the boy in the bag began jumping and twisting about, and several smothered slaps were heard.

“Hey, what’s the matter with yeou, Sleuthy?” mumbled Crane in a pretended tone of sleepiness. “Why don’t yeou keep still? Haow do yeou s’pose anybody is goin’ to sleep with yeou kickin’ up all that rumpus? Ain’t yeour old sleepin’ bag comfortable?”

“Sure, it is,” answered Piper; “only there was a hubble under me like a stone. Gee whiz! I didn’t know it was so hot tonight.”

“Dud-dud-dry up!” growled Springer. “If you keep talking you’ll gug-get me wide awake, and I’ll never go to sleep. Lie still, Sleuth.”

“I’m comfortable now,” assured Piper. “It’s all right.”

But barely had he uttered these words when he gave a tremendous jerk and resumed his scratching more vigorously than ever.

“Guess you were right, Sile,” he finally admitted; “these sleeping bags are hot things. Don’t know what makes me itch so. Oh, gee! feels like something was nipping me.”

“Will you never keep still, Sleuth?” exclaimed Grant.

“I’m sorry,” said Piper, struggling to sit up; “but something is stinging me like a lot of nettles. Oh, great smoke! it’s fierce. Say, Sile, won’t you unfasten this old bag? I can’t seem to get out of the thing.”

“No, I won’t unfasten it,” returned Crane in pretended exasperation; “but if yeou don’t lay daown and keep still I’ll hit yeou with a boot or something.”

“I can’t lie down,” protested Sleuth, rapidly becoming frantic. “I tell you something is chewing me up to beat the band. I can feel things crawling on me.”

“It must be all imagination,” put in Stone, who, although he enjoyed the joke, really pitied the victim. “Still, imagination is very painful sometimes. Why don’t you let him out of the bag, Sile?”

“Let him aout of the bag!” snapped Crane, rising on his elbow. “Well, I guess not! Didn’t he tell us haow comfortable them things was? He wouldn’t lift a hand to cut boughs for a bed.”

Piper groaned. “But I washed the dishes,” he almost wailed. “Say, unhook me, Sile, and let me out, or I’ll have a fit. I tell you there’s things crawling all over me, and they’re just chewing me up alive.”

“You don’t suppose they’re ‘gougers,’ do you?” snickered Springer.

“Oh, laugh – confound you, laugh!” snarled Sleuth furiously. “You think it’s a joke, don’t you?”

“Sort of sus-seems that way to me,” admitted Phil.

“Oh, say!” wailed the miserable fellow in the sleeping bag. “If I don’t get out of this thing I’ll go crazy. I tell you I’m being eaten up alive by something.”

“Did you ever read a certain essay on the ‘Power of Imagination,’ Piper?” asked Stone. “If you ever have, you should realize that a person may make himself very miserable by conceiving all sorts of foolish things.”

“No, I’ve never read your old essay,” howled Sleuth, thrashing around in the bag. “But I tell you this is no imagination; this is the real thing. Light the lantern, somebody, for the love of Mike! I’m burning up. I’m all afire.”

“But there ain’t no fire in the bag – there can’t be,” asserted Crane relentlessly. “Just the same, somebody ought to git a bucket of water and souse him. P’r’aps that would keep him still.”

Springer could hold himself in check no longer, and he burst into shrieks of laughter, during which Piper, kicking and floundering, rolled over and over until he was outside the tent.

At this point Stone sprang up and hastened out to bend over the writhing victim, and the others, eager to see all there was to be seen, also rose and peered forth.

It was with no small difficulty that Ben prevailed on Sleuth to keep quiet long enough for the mouth of the bag to be unfastened. When this was done, the boy inside scrambled forth, fiercely

kicking the thing from him, and by the light of the fire he discovered a number of black ants running wildly about upon his person.

“There they are!” he cried. “There’s what bit me! I told you something was doing it. Oh, murder! let me get out of my underclothes.”

Frantically he stripped off every rag and stood stark naked in the firelight, still brushing and slapping and scratching.

“Well, I swan to man!” said Crane, who had also come out of the tent. “If them ain’t ants, I’m a woodchuck. Haow do you s’pose they got into the bag?”

“Must have been there a long tut-time,” said Springer. “Seems to me I’ve heard that one of the troubles with sleeping bags was that they made fuf-fine nests for ants and all sorts of insects. You’ll never gug-get me to sleep in one.”

“You never will me – again,” vowed Piper. “Being eaten alive by ants is worse than being burned to the stake by redskins.”

He was savagely shaking his underclothes as he spoke, having turned the garments inside out.

Stone carried the sleeping bag some distance from the camp and flung it over the low limb of a tree, and the boys urged Piper to make sure there were no ants remaining upon his person or his underclothes before he re-entered the tent.

“There are two extra blankets,” said Grant. “You can have them, Sleuth, and make yourself comfortable as possible. We’ll light the lantern and look around to make sure there are no ants left in here.”

Apparently none had escaped from the bag, and after a time Sleuth was permitted to return and settle down with the blankets beside the bed of boughs occupied by his companions. The lantern was again extinguished, and finally, one by one, the boys dropped off to sleep, although the occasional chuckling of Springer was heard even after some of the others were breathing regularly and heavily.

Gradually Piper’s wounds ceased to smart, and, with no suspicion of the fact that he had been the victim of a rather painful joke, he sought to compose himself for slumber. Nevertheless, the experience through which he had passed made it no easy matter for him to get to sleep, and he lay there, turning now and then as the minutes slipped away into hours and the hours lengthened. At times the odor of the balsam boughs mingled with the faint smell of smoke which a fitful breath of rising wind brought into the tent from the smoldering coals of the fire. The tree-toad continued its mournful peeping, and away in the woods a bird awoke and chirped. Once something fell from a tree, making a swishing sound as it cut through the leaves and struck the ground with a soft thud.

Although he no longer suffered much from the attack of the ants, Piper found his every sense painfully alert. Through the opening at the front of the tent he could see the faint, dull glow of the coals, which grew dimmer until it finally faded completely. At irregular intervals the night seemed to breathe with puffs of air which set the leaves rustling as if they were whispering to one another. Off in the woods something stirred, and there was the barely perceptible cracking of a twig, as if it had been broken beneath a soft and stealthy foot.

Imagination was vigorously at work with Piper, and he fancied all sorts of creatures to be prowling about in the vicinity. He was vexed because close at hand his four comrades slept peacefully, while he remained thus exasperatingly wide awake.

Suddenly, far away from the bosom of the lake, came a long, low moaning cry that thrilled the wakeful lad from his toes to the roots of his hair, for there was something weirdly doleful and terrible in that sound. Instantly he thought of the ghost of the dead hermit, which was said to haunt Spirit Island, and his teeth began to chatter a little. Never had he imagined that a night in the woods could be so fraught with awesome and terrible sounds. He was tempted to awaken the others, but knew they would be angered and scoff at him if he did so. Of a sudden he thought of the gun, and, thrusting out his hand, touched the cold barrel of the weapon, which he had placed near by. Grasping it, he seemed to feel his courage returning.

“If anything comes around here it’ll get hurt,” he whispered to himself. “There won’t be any fooling about it, either. I’ll shoot.”

As if applauding this courageous attitude on his part, he heard a sudden clapping sound, which seemed to come rushing toward the tent and cease abruptly.

“Now what was that?” he speculated, sitting up and holding the gun across his knees. “It was something. I’d just like to know.”

Getting out of the blankets, he rose to a crouching position and stepped toward the front of the tent, the gun gripped fast in his fingers. The darkness outside was not nearly as deep as he had thought it would be, and he could plainly perceive the outlines of tree trunks near at hand. Holding his breath, he crouched at the tent opening, gazing one way and another.

A fresh strong breath of air swept over the point, moving the tree tops and picking up a swirl of ashes from the fireplace, so that the last remaining coals were uncovered and fanned into a glow. And then, within ten feet of the fire, close to the trunk of a tree, he saw what appeared to be a black human-like body, above which rose a ghastly white face with two huge burning eyes. Those eyes of fire, seeming to glare upon him, sent cold chills darting along his spine. Immovable as a statue, he crouched, the gun in his hand forgotten for the moment.

Once more from the vague and distant bosom of the lake came that dreadful, doleful cry; and, as if in answer, a hoarse voice, half human yet demon-like, seemed to burst from the creature with the glowing eyes.

Gasping, Piper pushed the catch of the hammerless with his thumb, flung the butt of the gun to his shoulder, levelled the weapon at that black figure with the ghastly face and fiery eyes, and pulled both triggers.

CHAPTER V. WITH ROD AND REEL

A great flash of fire burst from the double muzzle of the gun, and a crashing report woke the echoes of the woods and went reverberating across the bosom of the lake. Although staggered a bit by the recoil of the weapon, Sleuth seemed to see the white head of the figure at which he had fired fly off into space and go sailing away, visible for a moment against the sky ere it disappeared.

Needless to say, the sound of the shot brought the sleeping campers off their bed of boughs uttering exclamations of astonishment, alarm and interrogation.

“Wha-wha-what’s the mum-matter?” spluttered Springer.

“Great thutter!” gasped Crane. “Sleuth’s shot at somethin’.”

“What was it, Piper?” asked Stone.

“Yes, what did you fire at?” demanded Grant, reaching the agitated boy and grasping his shoulder.

“Oh, it was the most horrible thing you ever saw,” palpitated Piper. “It was right out there under a tree, a big black creature with a face as white as a sheet and fiery eyes as large as saucers. It had a frightful voice that made my blood run cold as ice.”

“Oh, come, Sleuth, what are you talking about?” remonstrated Rodney. “You’ve been dreaming.”

“Not on your life!” retorted the still trembling lad. “Haven’t even closed my eyes. I couldn’t. I heard all sorts of creatures prowling around in the woods, and something wailing like a lost soul out there on the lake in the direction of Spirit Island. You fellows snoozed like a lot of dead ones,” he continued resentfully. “You’d let Old Nick himself get you before you’d wake up. I never saw such a bunch of mummys.”

Crane’s fingers were not quite steady as he struck a match and lighted the lantern.

“Think yeou hit the critter, Sleuthy?” he asked.

“Hit it! You bet I did! Why, I just blew its old white head right off its shoulders. I saw that head go sailing through the air, too. You’ll find out I hit it when you look around.”

“I reckon,” said Grant, “we’d better investigate. Come on with the lantern, Sile. Where did you say the thing was, Piper?”

“Right out there,” answered Sleuth – “right out under that tree near the fireplace. Hadn’t I better load the gun again before we go out?”

“Here, gug-give me that,” snapped Springer, snatching the piece from Piper’s hands. “You’ll be shooting the top of somebody’s head off yet. Now let’s see what he fuf-fired at.”

Directed by Sleuth, who timorously held back and permitted the others to precede him, they went forth to investigate, Crane leading with the lantern.

“Here ’tis,” said Sile, holding up the light with one hand and pointing with the other. “I’ll bet a dollar that’s what Sleuthy fired at; and, so help me Bob, it’s his sleepin’ bag hangin’ over that limb!”

Springer, his agitated nerves suddenly relaxing, uttered a shout of laughter, in which the others joined, with the exception of Piper himself, who immediately began protesting that he had not fired at the dangling sleeping bag.

“That’s not the thing,” he rasped furiously. “I tell you what I shot at had a white head with big fiery eyes. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“Let’s see if he hit the bag,” suggested Grant. “That will tell.”

It did tell, for the light of the lantern showed them a ragged hole torn through the very center of the sleeping bag by the two charges of shot, and once more Sleuth’s companions gave vent to unbridled merriment.

“Oh, this is the fuf-funniest thing yet,” howled Springer, clinging to his sides. “Old Sleuthy shot his own sus-sleeping bag. And it had a white face with fiery eyes as big as saucers, and he blew the head of the thing right off and saw it go sus-sailing through the air! Oh, dear! oh, dear! I’ll lose my breath!”

In sullen gloom Piper stood staring at the riddled sleeping bag. “I don’t care what you say,” he snarled; “it did have a white face with blazing eyes. Laugh, you mutts – laugh your heads off!”

“I won’t get over this for a week!” choked Crane.

Even Stone was convulsed, and Rodney Grant was compelled to lean against the tree for support.

“It had a terrible voice – don’t forget the voice,” said Ben.

“And he heard something wailing like a lost soul out toward Spirit Island,” put in Rod.

“Yes, I did; yes, I did!” rasped Piper repeatedly. “There – there it is now! Hear it yourselves! Now what do you think? Now what have you got to say?”

Out of the distance came a repetition of the cry which had contributed so much to the wakeful boy’s alarm.

“Oh, dear! oh, dear!” came again from Springer, as he rubbed his sides with both hands. “It’s a loon – nothing but a loon. They always holler lul-like that.”

“A loon!” muttered Sleuth, crestfallen. “It is? Well, anyhow, I know what I saw, and I’ll stick to it about the white face and the fiery eyes.”

Crane had placed the lantern on the ground almost beneath the dangling sleeping bag, and now Grant stooped and picked up something revealed by the light.

“Here’s a white feather,” he said. “A stray shot from Sleuth’s gun may have knocked it out of some sort of a bird. That’s it, I reckon; he saw a white owl that had lighted on the very branch this bag hangs from. That accounts for the big fiery eyes and the terrible voice.”

Piper was struck dumb; he tried to say something, but the words choked in his throat and he abandoned the effort. Mercilessly his companions joshed him, and he realized that his exploits on this first night in camp were destined to provide a topic for raillery for some time to come. With his head down, he turned and plunged into the tent. They found him wrapped in the blankets and stretched on the ground, and to their continued badinage he would utter no word of retort.

With the first gray streaks of morning showing in the eastern sky, Springer attempted to arouse Piper and get him up.

“Come on, Sleuth,” he said. “You want to fish, and this is the time to get at it.”

“Go on,” was the smothered retort. “I’m going to get some sleep. Fish all you want to; I don’t care.”

Grant was up in a moment. “I’m with you, Phil,” he said. “Let’s take a plunge and a rub-down to wake us up, then we can try the fishing, and leave the others to start the fire and have things ready for breakfast when we get back.”

Flinging off everything, they raced out to the rocky side of the point, and Sleuth heard them go plunging into the water, one after the other. With a shivering sigh, for the damp coldness of the earth had crept up through the ground-cloth and blankets and seemed to pierce his bones, Piper got upon his hands and knees, crawled to the bed of boughs just deserted, pulled the blankets of the others around him and again courted slumber. Hazily he heard the early risers return, rub down with coarse towels and get into their clothes. They were putting their rods and reels together when he drifted off for the first time into sound and peaceful sleep.

Rod and Phil made their way slowly along the lake shore toward the south, casting the flies as they went, at which feat Springer, having had more experience, was by far the most skilful.

“It’s the back-snap that does it, Rod,” he explained. “Don’t swing your whole arm so hard; use your wrist more. If you can get a good sharp back-snap and time the forward movement of your hand

properly, you'll catch on pup-pretty soon. You don't want to cast out as hard as you bring the line back, for if you do you'll snap the fly like a crack of a whip, and you may even snap it off. Watch me now."

Rodney watched and saw his companion send the fly soaring far out on the water with a double movement of the wrist, sharp and then gentle, and scarcely any movement whatever of the shoulder.

"It sure looks right simple," confessed the Texan. "I can do it fairly well with a short bit of line, but I get plenty balled up when I try to let it out and make a longer cast."

Phil reeled in and gave a demonstration of the proper manner to whip a line out by repeated casts, drawing off more and more from the reel with the left hand and holding the slack until the proper moment to let it run. Indeed, as Grant had said, it seemed an extremely simple thing to do, and Rodney, being an apt pupil, soon began to get the knack of it, and was not discouraged, although he repeatedly made a failure right on the heels of a very praiseworthy effort.

"You're getting it all right," encouraged Springer. "You're doing sus-splendidly."

"There I go into a bush," said Rod, as his fly caught in some shrubbery at a distance behind him.

"Never mind that. You'll need pup-plenty of room at first, and you'll keep forgetting every little while to make your back cast good and sharp and your forward cast easy. The two movements must be tut-timed just right, too."

"It must be right good sport when there are fish to catch, but we don't seem to get any bites."

"There are fuf-fish enough in the lake," declared Phil. "Wait till we find them. It's only the real true fisherman who has plenty of pup-patience and perseverance; the ordinary fellow gets tired and quits after a short time. He seems to think he ought to find fuf-fish anywhere and everywhere. Perhaps the flies we have on are not right, and we'll try some others as we mum-move along."

In the east the pearly gray light was taking on the tint of pink coral, and gradually this deepened, until it displayed the tone of a red-cheeked apple dangling from an orchard branch in autumn. Presently the white cross marking the cliff called "Lovers' Leap" at the further side of the lake gleamed out golden bright, like the spire of a church. The morning air was clear and sweet with the faint odors of the woods, and it seemed to effect the boys like wine, filling their bodies with vibrating energy and tingling enthusiasm.

Although Springer paused to change his flies as they moved along, trying in turn a "Morning Glory," "Parmacheenee Belle," "Silver Doctor" and "Brown Hackle," it was not until he cast into the shadow of some overhanging bushes at the mouth of a brook that he had a strike. There, almost as soon as the hackle sailed out and dropped lightly upon the smooth surface of the water, there was a swirl, a snap at the line, a sharp bending of the delicate bamboo rod; and the clear, buzzing whirr of the multiple reel told that the fish was hooked and running with the fly.

CHAPTER VI. A MORNING'S SPORT

Instantly both boys were athrob with excitement, although Springer, handling the rod and "playing" the fish, was somewhat less agitated than Grant, who immediately dropped his own tackle and seized the landing net, ready to render such assistance as he might.

"He sure must be a dandy, Phil," palpitated the Texan, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glowing. "Great Scott! see the rod bend. He hasn't jumped yet. Don't they jump?"

"If it's a sus-sus-salmon," stuttered Phil, swiftly winding in as the fish ceased its spurt and yielded a little, "it will jump; and maybe it will if it's a bub-bass. It may not break water at all if it's a tut-trout."

Heedless of wet feet, Phil waded out until the water had reached to the knees of his canvas trousers, and there he stood, displaying no small amount of skill at the delightful task of baffling and tiring the fighting fish. Whenever the finny victim grew weary and permitted the line to slacken the angler reeled in, keeping it fairly taut, all the while prepared to let the reel run when it was necessary. In this manner, following the fish's repeated breaks for liberty, the boy gradually brought it closer, admonishing his companion, who had likewise waded out and was waiting near at hand, to be ready to dip with the net when told to do so.

It was indeed exciting work, which kept them keyed to the highest tension. Both knew what it was to experience the fierce thrills of a savage football clash and the triumphant elation of brilliant and successful work upon the baseball field, but in the sport of this midsummer morning hour there was something different, yet quite as intensely enjoyable and blood-stirring. The reason, perhaps, lay in the fact that both possessed the natural instincts of the sportsman who finds the highest pleasure in a fair and honorable battle where victory and defeat hang in the balance until the last moment. For until the net should lift the fish from its native element they could not know how securely or how lightly it was hooked, and it was possible that, through a sudden swirling struggle of the creature itself or an inopportune tautening of the line just when it turned desperately to run away, it might tear itself free and escape.

Three times Grant made ready to dip, and once he sunk the net deep in the water; and three times the weakening fish darted off, setting the reel whirring. On the last occasion both lads obtained a good view of the finny fellow, magnified by the water, and therefore looking large indeed.

"He certain is a corker, Phil," breathed Grant. "Bring him up again. I'll get him next time."

"Sink the net as I reel him toward you," instructed Springer, "and be ready to make a quick scoop under him. Here he comes now."

Moving a bit heavily and slowly in protest against the treatment it was receiving, the fish was reeled in toward Grant, who obeyed directions faithfully, accomplishing the final *coup* by a swift forward and upward movement of the sunken net.

"Ah-ha!" exulted Springer. "That's the sus-stuff! You did it fine, Rod."

They waded ashore, and Phil, thrusting a thumb and finger into the fish's gills, lifted the shining, spotted trout, flapping helplessly, from amid the meshes.

"Look!" he cried proudly. "Just had him caught by the corner of the lip. A pull an ounce too hard would have lost him."

"Say," said the Texan approvingly, "I opine you handled that baby right skilful. Jingo! but he's a beaut. Must weight better than two pounds."

"Two and a-half, I should say," nodded Phil, regarding his catch with a self-satisfied air. "He'll go well for bub-breakfast."

Rodney smacked his lips. “I should guess yes. Two or three more like that will make a mess for a hungry bunch.”

The creature was placed in the basket they had brought for that purpose, and Grant, eager to emulate his friend’s example, soon recovered his abandoned rod and resumed casting. Springer likewise lost little time in once more applying himself to the task of whipping the pool at the mouth of the brook.

By this time the sun was up, and in the near-by dewy thickets they could occasionally hear the flutter of a wing or the rustle of a running squirrel. The morning was breathless, and the surface of the lake reflected the sunlight like a polished mirror; but under the bushes along the shore were shadows in which trout might lie, and the artificial flies at the ends of the silken lines went dropping into those shadows and skimming across them, propelled by gentle movements of the rods that gave the luring baits the lifelike appearance of swimming insects.

At intervals Grant caught his hook in the bushes or tangled his line, but he could see that he was really making some progress in the art of casting, and he held his patience, despite these annoying interruptions.

And it was Rodney who got the second strike. He saw the swirl of the darting fish and gave the rod a sharp jerk, after the manner of Springer, instantly shot through by a thrill as he felt the line tighten, saw the bamboo bend and heard his reel humming.

“You’ve got him!” cried Phil. “Now pup-play him – play him carefully. Don’t let him have the slack when he stops. Be ready to reel in.”

In the excitement of the shifting of the rod from one hand to the other and getting ready to work the reel Grant gave the fish some slack, but was relieved, when he wound in, to find the creature had not broken away.

“Not too hard,” admonished Springer. “Don’t hold him tut-too hard when he tries to run.”

“I must have hooked him in good shape, or he’d sure freed himself right away,” said the Texan. “Look at my rod bend. He must be a whopper.”

The tugs and thrills of the vibrating rod seemed to permeate his entire body, causing his heart to leap and skip and his breath to come quickly through his nostrils. It was characteristic of the boy from Texas that in moments of stress he always kept his teeth set and his lips pressed together.

But Rod did not possess the angling skill of Springer, and presently, with a sudden tremendous swirl and splash, the fish caught him unprepared and jerked the rod downward till the tip almost touched the water. A moment later the strain upon the line relaxed, the end of the rod sprung back, and Phil uttered an exclamation of dismay.

“You’ve lul-lost him!”

“I opine that’s right,” confessed Grant, reeling in slowly, a comical expression of dejection upon his face. “The way he pulled he must have been a monster. It’s too bad, and I’m certain a rotten fisherman.”

“It’s always the bub-biggest ones that get away, you know,” laughed Phil cheerfully. “Chirk up, Rod; nobody gets them all. There ought to be more in here.”

But, although they continued to whip the mouth of the brook for some time, not another rise could they get.

“One isn’t enough for breakfast,” said Grant. “We ought to have more.”

“Let’s work up the brook,” suggested Phil. “You take one side, and I’ll follow the other. Just watch me and cuc-creep along quietly, the way I do. Don’t let your shadow fall on the water, and try to drop your fly into the pools without showing yourself to the fish that may lie there.”

He forded the brook a short distance above its mouth, and they began following it upward along a sort of ravine that cut through the woods.

In a few moments, dropping the flies into a quiet pool below the projecting end of a water-soaked log, both got a strike at the same time, and each one hooked his fish. Then there was sport and

excitement enough, it being no simple matter to keep their lines from becoming tangled in that small pool. Neither of the fish, however, was nearly as large as the one already caught, and, after dipping his own in a genuinely skilful way, Phil used the net to secure Grant's. Both were trout, weighing, probably, three-fourths of a pound each.

"There!" breathed Rod in deep satisfaction; "I'm an angler now, for I really caught something worth while with a fly-rod. Roping a steer is a heap more dangerous and strenuous, but the person who makes game of this sort of sport sure doesn't know what he's talking about."

Continuing to follow the brook, they found sport enough to satisfy any genuine Nimrod, and ere long the basket contained a catch numbering at least a full dozen.

"I suppose it's time we were getting back to camp," said Springer at last. "The others must be up by this time, and hungry. They'll wonder what has become of us."

"I hate to quit," admitted Rodney. "I could fish all day, I reckon."

"You're an angler all right," laughed Phil. "You've gugged the fuf-fever. But you mustn't try to catch all the fish at once, you know. This brook won't run away, and we'll try it again."

"Let's look; let's see how many we have," urged Grant. "Open the basket, Phil."

Springer had recrossed the brook, and he paused to comply with his companion's request. The basket opened, they gazed with admiring eyes at the spotted beauties within, some of which were still breathing and moving. They were thus engaged when a startling interruption caused them to spring up swiftly and turn their heads.

"Here, you fellers!" rasped a harsh voice. "What are you doing, fishing in this brook? It's private property."

CHAPTER VII. THE ENCOUNTER AT THE BROOK

The head of the speaker, crowned by an old straw hat, rose above a clump of alders on the opposite bank of the stream. His coatless shoulders, over one of which ran a single suspender, likewise could be seen. He wore no collar, and his shirt was open at the throat, exposing a hairy bit of chest. A “peeled” fishing pole, projecting upward beside him, betrayed the purpose of his visit to the brook at that early hour.

Somewhat less than twenty years of age, he was not a prepossessing looking fellow as he glared angrily at the surprised fishermen, who returned his gaze in silence, seemingly stricken dumb for the moment by his startling and unwelcome appearance.

“Say, you fellers,” again called the stranger in that challenging, threatening tone of anger, “what business you got fishing in this here brook? You’ll git into trouble, trespassin’ on private property.”

“Jug-jug-jingoes!” breathed Springer. “He gave me a start.”

“Is this brook private property?” asked Grant coolly.

“Is it?” snapped the fellow on the opposite side. “Of course ’tis. Everything’s private property ’round here. S’pose this land ain’t owned by nobody? You ought to know better’n that. Who be you, anyhow?”

“We’re camping near by on the lake,” explained Rod, maintaining his unruffled manner, “and we were not told that the streams running into this lake were closed by law.”

“They don’t haf to be closed by law, and I guess you know it, too,” was the retort. “Any man has got a right to keep trespassers off his property.”

“Do you own this brook?”

“My old man owns it, and that’s the same thing. We don’t ’low nobody but ourselves to fish it.”

“Have you posted signs, warning trespassers to keep off?” questioned Rodney. “We didn’t see any.”

“Nun-nary one,” put in Phil.

“If you had,” flung back the angry fellow, “I don’t s’pose you’d paid no ’tention to them, or else you’d ripped ’em down.”

“But you haven’t put up any such signs?” persisted Grant.

“That don’t make no difference at all,” declared the stranger, coming out from behind the alders and revealing a lean, muscular figure, with slightly stooped shoulders. “You hadn’t no right to fish here till you found out.”

“We were told we could fish anywhere on the lake or around it.”

“Who told ye that?”

“Herman Duckelstein.”

“That thick-headed old Dutchman? He don’t know nothin’. I’ve had to near punch the head off his pie-faced boy to keep him in his place.”

With calm, keen eyes the Texan took the measure of the arrogant stranger, betraying no symptom of alarm, a fact which seemed to increase the fellow’s irritation.

“So you near punched the head off Carl Duckelstein, did you?” said Grant, with a touch of scorn. “And I opine you’re two or three years older than he, while it’s right plain you’re much taller and stronger. You ought to be mighty proud of that performance. What’s your name?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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