

JOHN GOLDFRAP

THE BOY SCOUTS AT
THE CANADIAN BORDER

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The Boy Scouts at the Canadian Border

CHAPTER I A GLIMPSE OVER INTO CANADA

“Suppose we hold up here, and rest a bit, fellows!”

“We’ll have to accommodate you, Tubby. It really pains me to hear you puffing and blowing so hard.”

“Now, that’s just six words for me and half a dozen for yourself, Andy Bowles. Haven’t I seen you look longingly at every log we passed, as if you wished Rob would give the order to sit down and recuperate? Honest to goodness, I do own up that I’m a trifle winded. This pack seems to keep on getting heavier and heavier.”

“You only imagine it does, Tubby, that’s all. If a fellow is shaped like a wash-tub, what else could you expect of him when it comes to toting a load of duffle and grub over a Maine carry?”

“And when another angular chap I know is said to resemble a broom-handle, so far as symmetry and plumpness goes, you’ve got to expect that his greatest feats are accomplished when grub is served. That’s a time, Andy Bowles, bugler of the Hampton Troop of Boy Scouts, when you make competition throw up its hands in despair and retire from the field; your capacity in that line is without a peer.”

“That’s right, Tubby, take a swig of water from your battered old canteen after such a spread-eagle speech. I’m sure your throat must be parched, and as dry as a bone.”

“Here, fellows, suppose you let up badgering each other; and after we drop down on this log in the little open glade, what’s to hinder us from figuring out our next move in the search for Tubby’s Uncle George?”

The energetic speaker was Rob Blake. Those fortunate boys who have read any or all of the preceding volumes in this Series, do not need to be introduced to so prominent a character of the stories; but, of course, there will be many who are making the acquaintance of these wearers of khaki for the first time, and in justice to them it is only fair that we offer a few explanations while the trio stretch themselves upon that friendly pine log.

They all belonged to the famous Eagle Patrol of the Hampton Troop of Boy Scouts, Hampton being a Long Island town on the south shore. In times gone by many were the interesting happenings that came the way of some of the fellows belonging to that patrol. To even enumerate them here would take too long a time, and hence he who is desirous of knowing more about Rob Blake and his chums is referred to earlier volumes, where thrilling and uplifting scenes are depicted in a most entertaining fashion.

Some of these boys had visited the Panama Canal; had even gone abroad and been in a position to witness stirring action in the great war theater of Europe; spent delightful days wandering about the grounds of the wonderful Panama-Pacific Exposition out in California; chased over the torrid deserts of Mexico, when the revolutionist, Pancho Villa, was pursuing his earlier meteor-like career on bloody battlefields; and later still they had been connected with the amazing wave of preparedness that swept over our country from shore to shore.¹

What brought the three lads far up toward the international border at this season of the fall can be easily explained. As the reader has already learned by reason of the words which Rob Blake

¹ See “Boy Scouts Under Sealed Orders” and “Boy Scouts for Preparedness.”

uttered when suggesting that they rest from their labors, it had something to do with a relative of fat Tubby Hopkins.

“Uncle George” was a well-to-do gentleman, and a great sportsman. Every autumn he would slip away from business cares and spend a month with a couple of faithful woods guides hunting in the solitudes. Sometimes he went into the “bush” far up in the Canadian wilds after bull moose; or it might be seeking caribou in Labrador. This season it was not so pleasant to be within the boundaries of Canada, owing to the distracted conditions prevailing there, with young fellows enlisting for service abroad, and hundreds of men of German parentage and sympathies held in concentration camps; so Uncle George had wisely chosen to confine his hunting to the most inaccessible region in Maine.

Now it chanced that there had been some sort of epidemic in many Long Island communities that summer, and at certain points it held out so long in the fall that the school authorities became alarmed. At Hampton, sessions had been taken up only to be hurriedly discontinued, nor was school to be resumed for a period of at least two weeks.

That gave many of the boys a chance to lay plans for delightful outings. As a rule, the fall was a closed season to them, Saturday being their only off-day; and usually they had to put in most of that weekly holiday practicing for their football games to be played later.

Just at the time this occurred, Tubby Hopkins came to Rob and announced that an opportunity had arisen whereby he and two companions could take a flying trip up into Maine at no cost to themselves, as his father was ready to put up every dollar of the expense.

It seemed that a very important document should be signed by Uncle George within two weeks, or he and Mr. Hopkins stood to lose a large amount of money. Since the devoted sportsman did not plan to be seen in the realm of civilization under a whole month, and could not be reached by wire or letter, it became absolutely necessary that some messenger find his camp, and bring back the document signed.

Tubby asked Rob to engineer the expedition, for he had the utmost faith in the ability of the acting scout master of the troop. As several other fellows had already made arrangements for the new vacation, it happened that Andy Bowles was invited to make the third of the party.

Now, while Tubby and Andy often “scrapped” so far as a verbal exchange of pleasantries was concerned, they really were exceedingly fond of each other; and so the little party promised to get along very nicely together.

They had made the journey by railroad, leaving the cars at a certain small station, and, taking their packs on their backs, starting out on the strength of the rather uncertain schedule of his expected movements, which Uncle George had left behind at his city house when heading toward the Maine wilderness.

If they did not find him at a certain logging camp, at least they were likely to pick up a clue there as to where he had gone, and thus could follow after him. Rob had intended finding a competent guide, but it chanced that there was an unusually heavy demand for experienced woodsmen that season, and they met with several disappointments, until finally the others had urged Rob to make the plunge himself unattended.

They knew that he could be depended on to lead them safely, for Rob had considerable experience in woodcraft, and, besides this, carried a reliable chart of the region they were traversing.

Accordingly they had set forth valiantly, and at the time we meet them had been tramping for two days. According to Rob’s figuring, they must be getting close to the logging camp where, possibly, they would find Uncle George; at the same time he also knew that they were near the International Boundary.

“If you take a look over that way, due north, fellows,” Rob was telling the other boys, as they sat there on the log, and pointing as he spoke, “you can see for several miles. Notice that big clump of hemlocks on the rise yonder, along the near horizon? Well, unless I miss my guess, that’s Canada!”

“But I don’t see the line, Rob,” observed Tubby vaguely.

At this remark Andy Bowles burst forth in a laugh.

“Why, listen to the innocent, will you, Rob! Honest, now, I believe Tubby thinks the International Boundary is a real line drawn across the Divide from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to mark the division of Uncle Sam’s property from the Dominion of Canada and the Great Northwest Territory!”

“Oh, shucks! Of course I was only joking,” stammered the confused Tubby. “So that’s Canada, is it, Rob? Almost any old place across the line we’d likely find that conditions resembled Belgium and Northern France somewhat, with young men drilling at every crossroads, artillery companies rushing to stations to be sent across the sea, cavalry horses being herded, cattle slaughtered for meat to keep the army supplied, wheat trains heading toward some Atlantic port to be shipped abroad to feed those millions of fighters. Whee! It’s hard to believe that peaceful country over there can be *Canada!*”

“Oh, that’s only the border, Tubby, you see,” explained Rob, always ready to accommodate. “Farther back I’ve no doubt all those things are daily taking place, for you know Canada has already sent over three hundred thousand soldiers across the sea to fight for the Cause of Civilization. You and I have been at the front, Tubby, and we know the spirit that animates most of those men among the Allies; also how they expect to stick to their job, now they’ve begun, until it’s finished.”

“You mean, do you, Rob,” interrupted the listening Andy, who had not had the same good fortune as the others to see some of the fighting across in Belgium and Northern France, “that even while the Dominion is being shaken from east to west, right here along the border it’s just as it always was?”

“Well, hardly that,” continued the other hastily. “You know there have been all sorts of stories in the papers about plots hatched and engineered in the States by those whose sympathies are with Germany, and who feel furious because of the never-ending trains loaded with munitions, soldiers, food, aeroplane parts, motor trucks, and such things that an army in the field would require – these all heading across Canada, and aiming for the ports where steamers are waiting to carry cargoes to Great Britain. It would make these German sympathizers joyous if only *something* might happen to cut off this endless chain of supplies for the Allies.”

“Yes,” added Tubby eagerly. “I’ve read where the folks down in Washington are dreadfully alarmed lest one of these terrible schemes may succeed. You recall how the President enjoined everybody in the States to be strictly neutral, and not to lift a hand toward doing anything that might be reckoned an unfriendly or unneighborly act by the aroused people of Canada? So now the Government on both sides is keeping an extra guard along the border, in order to nip any such black scheme in the bud.”

“I’ve been told that’s the case,” Rob assured them. The talk went on along the same lines until finally the scout master, jumping up, announced:

“Well, we’ve rested long enough, I guess! We’d better put our best foot forward if we hope to get anywhere near that logging camp close to the border. So pick up your packs, fellows, and we’ll be off!”

“Oh, listen to that, would you!” cried Tubby excitedly. “It sounded just like the far-away whistle of a railroad locomotive.”

“A good guess, Tubby,” chuckled Andy, “because that’s just what it was. I half expected you’d ask Rob if it could be the scream of one of those Canadian lynx we’ve heard tell about are to be found up here.”

They were conversing while walking, and once again the whistle sounded. Even Tubby could tell now that it came from the northwest. There was also a faint rumbling sound that indicated the passage of a heavy train over a trestle, miles away.

“Yes, the Great Canadian Railway runs close to the boundary along here somewhere,” Rob said, “and I suppose we’ll often hear distant whistles, for the traffic at present must be unusually heavy. That’s likely a long train filled with grain, and all sorts of valuable supplies that are being sent from

the rich Saskatchewan and Alberta country, as an offering from the Canadian Northwest granary. It means another nail in the coffin of the Germans, when it reaches the land across the sea. All day long, and night, too, at intervals, those trains are running, carrying millions and millions of dollars' worth of supplies."

"Huh!" chuckled Tubby, "if a German only chanced to live around here, he'd have to stuff cotton in his ears to shut out the sound; because each rumble of trains would mean to him more trouble for his friends across the sea."

They pushed on for some time. Rob evidently had his plan of campaign well figured out, for he now turned sharply to the left and headed almost due west. Apparently he fancied he was as near the International Boundary as there might be any need of going; and that the lone logging camp must lie farther along the new course.

The startling idea had occurred to Tubby that, all unbeknown to themselves, they might inadvertently stray across the line, and be arrested as invaders, by some of those alert Canadian guards mentioned by Rob. The thought disturbed him considerably, and he was about to speak of it, despite the jeers with which he felt sure Andy would greet the idea, when something else suddenly came to pass that completely put it out of his head.

There was a crashing sound heard close by, a swishing of the undergrowth, and then a bounding object flashed into view, which took on the shape of a two-year-old buck, leaping frantically over logs and bushes, as though possessed. Upon his neck and shoulders the boys glimpsed a strange, mysterious gray hunch!

CHAPTER II

RUMBLINGS OF COMING TROUBLE

“Oh! Did you see that hump on his back, Rob? What could it have been?” gasped Tubby, gripping the sleeve of the other’s khaki coat in his excitement.

“Why, Tubby, don’t you know that was the pirate of the northern woods?” cried the equally aroused Andy, who had also been stupefied while the little drama was being enacted, and only recovered the use of his hands, and realized that he was carrying a gun, when the leaping buck had completely vanished from view.

“Do you mean a filibuster?” asked the stout boy incredulously.

“Well, yes; you might call a panther by that name,” laughed Rob.

“A panther!” echoed Tubby, thrilled more than ever. “Was that what the bunch across the poor deer’s shoulders was, Rob? Oh, to think we didn’t get a chance to use a gun and save the noble buck!”

“It all happened too fast for me,” admitted Andy dejectedly. “Besides, I don’t believe any of us could have hit that crouching beast and not harmed the deer.”

“No, that’s right, Andy,” said Rob convincingly. “After all, we only chanced to see one of the woods tragedies that are taking place right along. Panthers must have meat to live on, and deer are their legitimate prey. That’s why there’s never a close season on the gray buccaneers, nor on wildcats and wolves.”

Tubby did not express any timidity in words, but it might have been noticed how he somehow managed to keep a bit closer to his chums after that. If there were such savage “varmints” at large in the country along the International Boundary, Tubby did not think it wise to take any unnecessary chances; not that he would have admitted being *afraid*, of course; but then, as he always said, he offered a shining mark, because a discriminating beast was sure to pick out a plump morsel when foraging for a dinner, and consequently lucky Andy would get off scot-free.

They continued to walk on in a clump, and chatting as they advanced, though Rob kept his eyes and senses constantly on the alert for signs that would tell him what he wished to know.

“I’ve heard a lot about the Maine woods, and how all sorts of people manage to get a fair living from them, winter or summer,” Tubby was saying later on. “Rob, you know something of such things, because you’ve been up here before. How about it?”

“It’s just as you say,” Rob replied. “Thousands on thousands of men find ways to wring a living from Nature’s storehouse up here in the great pine forests. I’ve met some of them personally, and asked questions. I’ve been told all about the others, and what interesting stunts they do.”

“Tell us a little about them, please, Rob?” urged Tubby.

“Well,” began the scout leader, always willing to oblige his chums when it was within his power to accommodate, “first of all there are the thousands of guides, both natives and Indians, who in summer take parties along the waterways of Maine in canoes, fishing for trout, bass, or salmon in the countless streams and lakes; and in the fall serve the hunters in their camps, when they are after deer and moose. They go to make up quite a little army in themselves, and their wages amount to many hundreds of thousands of dollars per annum. Next in order and importance, I expect, is the gum-hunter.”

“Well, I declare, what is a gum-hunter, anyway, Rob?” demanded the listening Tubby. “I’ve heard of a gumshoe man; but do hunters go shod that way in the Maine woods?”

That allowed Andy, better posted, to have another little explosion,

“Oh, dear innocent, trusting soul, you’ll be the death of me yet!” he gasped, between his fits of laughter. “For pity’s sake, Rob, tell him quickly what a gum-hunter is, or he’ll surely burst with curiosity.”

“You must know, Tubby,” said Rob, himself smiling broadly, “that spruce gum is used in immense quantities, not only in the manufacture of chewing gum but for several other purposes.

“It is found here in the pine woods of Maine by expert searchers, who at a certain season of the year go forth and gather their harvest. They probably make good wages at their work, too, or there would not be so many of them keeping at it year after year. Some other time I’ll go further into details, and tell you how they find the deposits of gum. Some of them even gash trees, and come back in due season to garner the crystal profits that have exuded from the wounds. But the gum-hunter is only one of many chaps who earn a living in these Maine forests. There is the hoop-hole man you’re apt to run across in any section where it happens there’s a second-growth crop of ash saplings.”

“What does he do, Rob?” asked Tubby.

“He gathers the saplings, and occupies his evenings in camp by splitting and assorting and fastening them in bundles. These are later taken away in bulk. They are intended as hoops for barrels, nail-kegs, and such objects. The hoop man does a cracking big business in season, let me tell you.

“Then there’s the man who gets out the poles themselves to be used for various purposes; the fellow who hunts for certain crooked woods calculated to make good boats’ knees; the sassafras hunter; the ginseng and other root man, who knows where to pick up a little fortune in discovering patches of wild weeds that possess a marketable value when the roots are dug and properly cured; the herb gatherer; and last but far from least the bee man, who goes about looking for hives of wild bees in hollow tree-tops, so he can gather hundreds of pounds of honey.”

Tubby looked helplessly around him.

“Well, well,” he was heard to say, “you never would believe fortunes could be dug out of such forlorn-looking woods as these. It’s simply wonderful what some men can pick up, when others are as blind as bats in the daytime. I’m going to keep my eyes open. We might run across a diamond field.”

“Well, you may mean that as a joke,” said Rob, “but rare gems have been found around here, which brings up another calling that some men have followed. That is searching all the streams for mussels, because some pretty valuable fresh-water pearls have been discovered, they say, in Maine bivalves.”

“It beats all creation how many sources of revenue a smart man can unearth, if only he keeps his wits about him,” remarked Andy, who, apparently, was hearing this last bit of information for the first time. “If this terrible war continues much longer there’s likely to be another lot of professionals working industriously up here in the woods of Maine. They’ll be the friends of the Central Empires, who want to give Old England and her Colonies a backhanded blow by cutting off the supply of munitions and supplies that keeps on flowing toward the coast day after day.”

“Oh, why can’t the nations of the Old World keep the peace like it’s been kept for a hundred years between Uncle Sam and his big northern neighbor?” sighed the tender-hearted Tubby sincerely. “Here’s a boundary of over three thousand miles, and not a single fort to mark the dividing line; whereas over across the water, look at the enormous fortresses France and Belgium and Germany have maintained, though none of the Belgians’ stood the awful pounding of those enormous guns brought up by the Kaiser’s troops.”

“There’s a good reason for that, Tubby,” explained Rob. “Americans and Canadians speak the same tongue, and as a whole have the same aspirations. They understand each other, you see. It’s different over in Europe, where different nations hate like poison. We don’t seem to meet with the same measure of success down along our Mexican border, because those greasers never can understand our motives, for we think along entirely opposite lines.”

“When are we going to have a great World Peace, and war be abolished?” begged Tubby, almost piteously.

“Search me!” said Andy. “Because I don’t believe such a thing ever will be, as long as human nature is like it is; though of course I’d be glad to see it brought about. If the nations of the world could only form some sort of practical union, like that of the States now, and so were bound to keep

the peace, it might be done. Happy the man who has a hand in such a vast undertaking. If the chance came to me to handle the steering wheel of such a glorious job, why, I'd feel as lofty as – as that hawk soaring right now away up there in the blue heavens!”

Tubby mechanically followed the extended finger of the speaker, and then uttered a sudden startled cry.

“Hawk!” he ejaculated derisively. “That shows *your* ignorance, Andy. Hawk, do you say? Why, bless your simple and confiding nature, don't you know that object away up near the fleecy white clouds, and heading due north at this minute, is nothing more or less than an *aeroplane*? Rob, am I right?”

Rob was himself staring upward, and he hastened to reply:

“That's just what it is, Tubby. After seeing so many of those mosquitoes of the upper air currents soaring above the hostile armies across the big pond, you are able to tell one the minute you glimpse it. Yes, that's an aeroplane, as certain as that we are standing here gaping up at it. I want you to notice that it's heading directly so as to cross the International Boundary line.”

“What does that mean, Rob?” questioned Andy curiously, meanwhile continuing to crane his neck.

“Well, I'm only making a guess,” Rob ventured. “The chances are that pilot up yonder may be connected with some vile plot to destroy railroad property in the Dominion of Canada, and is now bent on spying out the land so as to make a chart of the country.”

CHAPTER III

BY AEROPLANE ACROSS THE BORDER

When the leader of the Eagle Patrol made this astounding assertion both of his friends betrayed additional interest. Indeed, it was a question whether Andy or Tubby, by the rapt expression on their faces, showed the greater excitement.

Tubby had one great advantage over his comrade. He had been abroad with Rob and Merritt Crawford, and had watched aeroplane pilots, both of the Allies and the Germans, shooting like meteors across the skies, bent on their work of learning what was going on back of the enemy's lines so as to give points to those who handled the monster guns far in the rear, allowing them to drop their shells exactly where most wanted.

"Well, to think of the nerve of that fellow!" exclaimed the indignant Andy. "He snaps his fingers at the proclamation of the President about all true Americans standing for strict neutrality. Why, he's meaning to give those Canucks the best chance ever to protest and claim damages from our Government. Isn't that a fact, Rob?"

"Just what it is, Andy," replied the scout master, watching the course of the small object so far up in the air that it resembled a giant bird.

"If they blow up a bridge, and wreck a train loaded with millions of dollars' worth of stuff, and it's proved that the scoundrels passed over from *our* side of the border, Uncle Sam will have to pay the whole bill?" questioned Tubby, now becoming aroused in turn.

"No doubt of it, if the proof is forthcoming," Rob assured him serenely, since he knew enough of treaties and international law for that.

"Then anything that's done against Canada from our side is really a blow aimed at our own country?" questioned Andy, beginning to show signs of anger. "Why, if it stands that way, then those conspirators are just as bad as if they were trying to knock a big hole in the U. S. Treasury, from which untold oodles of money could drop out. They're breaking the neutrality laws smack. I'd like to let 'em know just what I think of such sneaks. There ought to be some way to detect and punish such backhanded knockers."

"Oh, there are plenty of ways!" asserted Rob. "The law is stern enough, if you only can catch them in the act. There's the rub. They take all sorts of precautions to hide their identity. Who could recognize that chap up a mile or so from the earth? How does any one know that he's meaning to drop lower presently, so as to take a lot of pictures of the railroad where it passes over a bridge or trestle?"

"Is *that* the way it's done?" ejaculated the deeply interested Andy, who was more or less ignorant of how air pilots make themselves so useful in war times.

"Watch him!" snapped Rob, and all eyes were again focussed on the far distant object moving across the heavens, and passing some fleecy fragment of a floating white cloud.

"As sure as anything he's dropping on a regular toboggan slant!" cried Andy, thrilled by the sight.

"Huh!" remarked the wise Tubby, with the pride of superior knowledge, "that's what they call volplaning. Sometimes an aviator will shoot down for a mile like a streak of lightning, and just when you think he must be smashed against the ground he'll suddenly stop, just like a descending eagle does, and sail away as nice as you please on a lower level."

"Which is exactly what that spy is doing right now!" exclaimed Andy. "I guess he is down far enough for him to see all he wants to, and also snap off some pictures. But, Rob, if there are Canadian troops guarding the bridge across there why wouldn't they give him a volley to let him know he hadn't any business on that side of the International Line?"

“I expect that’s what they will do any minute now,” Rob assured him. “We may not hear the sound of the guns over here; miles lie between; but we ought to be able to tell by the actions of the aviator. If the lead commences to sing about his ears, he’s likely to mount again; he’ll be afraid of having his gasoline tank pierced by one of them, or be struck himself.”

“When we were on the other side, Rob,” interjected Tubby, “you know we always said petrol instead of gasoline; but they both mean the same thing. There, look, will you; he’s started up again, as sure as anything, making spirals, as they generally do when ascending in a big hurry.”

As Tubby declared, the man in the aeroplane had suddenly changed his location and was now ascending as fast as he could. Something had undoubtedly caused him to do this. Rob said he wished he had thought to fetch a pair of binoculars along with him, for then they might see spurts of smoke on the ground, and possibly even discover the bridge itself.

“But then who would ever dream we’d want glasses for such a purpose?” Tubby observed. “Goodness knows we’re lugging enough load as it is. He is turning around now, Rob, and heading this way again. Do you think he accomplished his purpose, and is now bent on getting out of range of those bullets?”

“Very likely,” the other replied, “though his danger was more imaginary than real. To strike a moving aeroplane at that height with an ordinary military rifle would be next door to an accident. Haven’t we seen air pilots take all sorts of daring chances, with shrapnel bursting all around them?”

The three scouts watched until the mysterious machine had vanished toward the south. They could hear the sound of the motor as it passed high overhead, though at a considerably lower level than when going the other way.

Once more then they started off, though Tubby had great difficulty in “getting a move on him,” as he called it; for that load on his back seemed to make him feel like Sinbad the Sailor when the Old Man of the Sea refused to dismount from his shoulders, after being assisted along the way, demanding that he be carried still farther.

The afternoon was now beginning to wane very fast. Already the westering sun had sunk far down in the heavens, and was heading for the horizon. While their conversation had been mostly upon the entrancing topic of that strict neutrality which had been enjoined on all citizens of the United States while the World War was in progress across the sea, at the same time Tubby’s thoughts would frequently stray to his own present troubles.

“It doesn’t look much like we would run across that old logging camp to-day, where Uncle George was going to make his first stay, does it, Rob?” he was heard to ask for possibly the sixth time.

And as he had patiently done on every other occasion the scout leader answered him pleasantly.

“I’m sorry to say there’s little chance of that happening, Tubby, much as all of us would like it. According to my rough chart, we must be getting in the neighborhood of that camp, though, and, if lucky, we might even run across your uncle to-morrow. Certainly, if we hear any shooting near by we’ll give a shout, and try to find out who’s who. That’s the best I can say, Tubby.”

“Thank you, Rob, very much,” said the fat boy sweetly. “I know well enough that if it depended on you we’d arrive in camp inside of half an hour. Then, having accomplished my mission up here, we could all give ourselves up to a delightful ten days of knocking around, and doing some hunting with his guides. That means we’ll soon have to call a halt ourselves and camp?”

Rob had to laugh at the vein of pleading he could detect in Tubby’s voice when he made that apparently innocent remark.

“I’m looking around for a good site, Tubby,” he announced, and at that the moon face of the stout member of the patrol fairly beamed with pleasure.

It was not more than ten minutes afterward when Rob stopped short.

“Here’s where we spend the night, fellows,” he told them.

“A bully good place,” assented Andy, casting a look of appreciation around at the trees, with several openings that allowed them to see the sky, and gave a promise of all the fresh air they would want.

“Yes, and I hear a brook gurgling along near by!” declared Tubby; – “the main reason why you picked out this place, Rob. The water left in my canteen is getting pretty stale, so I’ll be mighty glad to get a decent cool drink of sweet water.”

He hastily slipped out of the broad bands of his pack, and scurried over in the direction whence that pleasing drip of water was heard. The others saw him stop and then lie flat on his paunch, for with Tubby it was not so easy to get his mouth down to a low level, owing to his peculiar formation; usually his heels had to be higher than his head, just as you would tilt a barrel up to make the rim come in contact with the ground, all owing to that curve of the staves.

As they carried no tent, for that was utterly out of the question, it would be necessary for the trio of scouts to make some apology for a shelter calculated to keep the dew or the frost from chilling their bodies, as they slept in the open.

But, indeed, this was only a delight to these lads, accustomed as all of them were to roughing it. Many a time in the past had they constructed a brush shanty that, in an emergency, might even shed rain to some extent, and would surely afford them shelter from the chilly night air.

All of them got busy immediately, fetching branches and every manner of material that would be needed in the task. While Rob himself took over the job of building the shack, he had Andy cutting wood for a fire, and Tubby dragging further supplies of fuel toward the spot, so that altogether it made quite an animated picture, with everybody working like beavers.

Before the evening was fully upon them, things began to take on quite a homelike appearance. The shanty was completed, being rudely built, with a decided slant toward the back, and an open front. Some sportsmen’s tents are made on the same pattern, the idea being to have the fire so placed as to cause the sloping roof to reflect the heat that comes in through the open front.

Then came the always delightful job of cooking supper. No boy was ever known to object to lending a hand when this task is broached. Tubby, being something of a chef by this time, due to a grim determination to excel in one branch, even if he could never equal Rob in woodcraft knowledge, or other fellows in their several fads, had taken it upon himself to carry out the arrangements.

His depression had fled. The other boys were so full of optimism that it seemed to fill the air, even as that tempting smell of coffee, with fried onions, potatoes and bacon as accessories did. A more despondent chap than Tubby must have yielded to the general feeling of satisfaction.

Witness them, therefore, a little later on, spread out close to the fire, each with his legs crossed under him tailor-fashion, and bent on stowing away the heaping pannikin of hot food that had been served out as his share of the supper; while the big tin cups were brimming full of fragrant coffee that, as Andy said, “went straight to the spot every time.”

The first edge of their ferocious appetites appeased, the boys did not hurry, but took their time in eating. It was that delightful hour of the early evening in the pine woods when all Nature seems to be hushed, and the heart of the camper rejoices in his surroundings, which he joyously compares with the unhappy lot of those mortals who are compelled to remain amidst the skyscrapers of the city, chained to their desks, while the camper owns the whole world.

CHAPTER IV

AN INVASION OF THE CAMP

“Rob,” remarked Andy, later on, “why would those plotters choose Maine as the field for their dastardly attempts to strike at the Canadian Government? I should think they would have a bigger chance for succeeding in their undertaking, say away up in the Northwest, where the border isn’t watched as closely as along here.”

“That’s easy to answer,” replied the scout master. “In the first place you must remember that as all these supplies gathered through the Great Northwest granary approach the coast, where they are to be shipped abroad, they concentrate. It’s like the spokes of a wheel, and this eastern stretch of country can be likened to the hub. Get that, Andy?”

“I certainly do, Rob. This applies, I suppose, to some extent with regard to the soldiers, and the munitions, and all that; they are gathered here and there, and as the many rivulets draw closer to the coast the stream grows larger all the while. Sure, that stands to reason, and I was silly not to think of it myself.”

“Another thing that counts heavily,” added Rob sagely, “is the fact that out in the Northwest that you mention the transcontinental railroad doesn’t come anywhere as near the border as it does close to the Maine line. So, you see, an expedition crossing over here would have only a short distance to go before they reached the tracks they meant to destroy.”

“Yes,” said Tubby, who had been listening eagerly, “and perhaps there’s a bridge here that, if blown up, would about paralyze the stream of material that’s flowing steadily down toward the coast day after day. I reckon it’s to stop that tide of munitions and supplies, as much as the soldiers themselves, that these fellows are scheming to do.”

“There’s another far-off whistle of a train,” said Andy, perking his head up in a listening attitude. “They certainly come along quite frequently, and that goes to tell what a big business is being done by the railroad these days. I understand thousands of horses are being shipped from the ranches up on those big prairies of the Canadian Northwest, for they last only a short time in war, and the supply is beginning to fall short. Already I’ve read how the rival armies are making great powerful tractor engines take the place of animals in dragging heavy guns to the front.”

“Supposing that air pilot did succeed in getting all the information needed,” Tubby went on to say, “as well as some pretty smart pictures of the ground around the bridge, how soon would those plotters start to work, do you reckon, Rob? Surely not this very night?”

“Well, hardly, Tubby,” came the reassuring answer, “though we can’t say what need of haste there might be. If the aviator did snap off some pictures, the film would have to be developed, and prints made, which takes time. No, at the earliest I should say to-morrow night would be picked out for the attempt.”

“Oh, well, the guards are on duty, and are looking out for anything of that kind,” said Andy carelessly. “The visit from that aeroplane will put them on their mettle.”

“Unless,” Rob ventured thoughtfully, “they considered that the pilot was merely some venturesome American who had taken chances in crossing the boundary air, and found himself over Canada. It might be their shots were only sent to warn him he had better clear out, and to mind his own business.”

“Whee! In that case they might be caught napping,” said Tubby, with a vein of anxiety in his voice. “Rob, would it be any business of ours to warn the Canadians guarding the trestle or bridge, if we had the chance?”

“It would be our patriotic *duty*, if we really knew that mischief was brooding,” the scout master told him sternly. “Stop and think for a minute, and you’ll see it in that way too. First of all, as true

scouts, we would have to consider that these men, no matter how much they loved the land of their birth across the sea, are either citizens of the United States, or even if Germans, are enjoying the hospitality of Uncle Sam. To creep across the line so as to strike at their foe would be to abuse that hospitality. Yes, it would be the duty of any honest, patriotic American citizen to give warning, if he absolutely knew that such a scheme was afoot.”

“Do you mean to carry the news to some town in Maine, from where it could be wired to Washington, so that soldiers might be sent up here to frustrate the evil designs of these schemers?” asked Tubby, who at times delighted in framing his questions in exceedingly weighty language.

Rob Blake reflectively rubbed his chin as he considered this query.

“I’m afraid that would consume far too much time, Tubby,” he finally replied. “Before those troops could be rushed here from the nearest army post the mischief, such as it was, would have been carried through. No; if I learned positively that those German sympathizers meant to invade Canada, something the same way as the Fenians did a long time ago, I’d consider it my bounden duty to cross the line myself and try and warn the guards at the bridge.”

“That’s the ticket, Rob!” cried the delighted Andy, who himself believed in “hitting the nail on the head.” Tubby, a bit slower to grasp possibilities, bent closer, the better to hear what was said.

Much more was spoken of along these lines, but the reader has already learned what the boys, as young American patriots, were bent on doing should the occasion arise, and hence it is not necessary to repeat all that passed between them.

Of course they also talked of other things, returning to this fascinating theme from time to time. Often Tubby stared in the direction of the North Star, in company with the Great Bear or Dipper constellation; and at these times his round, rosy face registered an expression of awe. Tubby might have been gifted with a sense of second sight, and dimly may have seen possible complications they were fated soon to meet.

As the evening grew, all of them felt an inclination to turn in. They had covered many miles, and not over level ground, since the morning, and with those heavy packs on their backs it had proved to be quite a tiresome journey.

Tubby, in particular, was yawning terrifically, nor did he take the trouble to put his hand over his extended jaws. Often Andy would pretend to shudder, and warn him to be more careful, or both of his chums would fall into the huge opening.

Tubby would make no reply; he was too sleepy to enter into any argument. He may have had an object in his repeated yawning, knowing how contagious it is, and that presently he was bound to start both the others along similar lines.

Presently Rob was seen to copy his example. Andy followed suit.

“Guess we might as well turn in,” said the latter, with a grin, as he caught the eye of Tubby on him. “Tubby here will surely fall to pieces unless he gets some sleep.”

“Huh!” grunted Tubby scornfully. “Now that you’ve begun, too, Andy, and Rob gives like signs, we’ll be making it unanimous. What about the fire, though? Do we let that cheery blaze die out during the night?”

“No need of that,” said Rob immediately. “It promises to be pretty chilly, and our blankets aren’t any too thick at that; so I plan to get up once in a while and throw an armful of wood on the fire. If I don’t oversleep I think I can keep the thing going up to morning. Andy, if you chance to wake up any time, and find that the fire has got down to red ashes, you might crawl out and take a turn. Plenty of fuel handy, you know.”

“I’ll try and remember, Rob,” promised the other, “though I must say I do sleep as sound as a top. If you depended on me to attend to the fire the chances are it would expire long before dawn. But I may wake up once or twice, and I’ll do my duty, Rob, only too gladly. Pile in, Tubby. Your blanket is over there on the left of the entrance, and we’d have a nice time of it letting *you* crawl over us.”

Rob did not follow immediately, for he was busying himself at the fire. They were careful to take their belongings into the brush shanty with them, except certain things that could just as well hang high from a limb of the tree. There was no sign of rain or snow, so that they did not worry on that score.

Finally Rob came crawling inside the shelter. He fancied that one or both of his chums might already have dropped asleep, and did not mean to do anything to disturb them. Yes, he could hear Tubby's heavy breathing, which announced that the stout boy had drifted across the border of slumberland and was perhaps already dreaming of Hampton folks, or some past scenes in his ambitious career as a scout.

"He's off, Rob," Andy remarked in a low voice. "Gee! but Tubby can go to sleep the easiest of any one I ever knew. Honest, now, I believe he could take a nap while walking along, if only some fellows kept him from tumbling over. All he has to do is to shut his eyes, take half a dozen long breaths, and then he's clear gone."

"Well, don't talk any more now, Andy. We'll both try to imitate his sensible example," cautioned the other, as he started to creep under his blanket, having removed his shoes and coat beforehand, although he wisely kept them handy in case a sudden necessity should arise.

So the time passed. Rob did wake up some hours afterward, and creeping out replenished the fire. As he did so he took note of the fact that once again there faintly came to his ears the long-drawn whistle of an engine; and he fancied that it meant to notify those who guarded the bridge of the approach of a fresh train loaded with valuable army stores, or troops bound for the war trenches over in Northern France.

Again Rob snuggled down under his blanket, feeling grateful for the comforts that a generous fortune had supplied him with. He was not long in going to sleep.

Happily no one was nervous in that camp. He, too, soon lost consciousness, and possibly slept for several hours, for when next he awoke the fire had once more died down to red embers.

This time, however, the awakening was along entirely different lines. It was caused by the whole end of their brush shanty falling down with a crash, as though some heavy object had been hurled against it. At the same time the startled trio of scouts, sitting hastily up amidst the wreckage of their late shelter, saw some huge lumbering object scatter the glowing embers of the smouldering fire in every direction as it dashed madly through the camp.

Tubby was stricken dumb with amazement. Possibly he had been indulging in some extravagant dream in which the giant Jabberwock that sported through "Alice in Wonderland" was creating great excitement. He stared at the vanishing bulky animal as though he could hardly believe his eyes. Andy apparently had not lost control of his vocal organs, to judge by the shout he let out.

CHAPTER V

COMFORTING TUBBY

“Hey! What does this mean, knocking our house to flinders that way? Hold up, you, and tell us what you’re aiming at. A nice old farm bull you are, to be treating strangers so rough! Say, look at the dead leaves catching on fire, will you, boys!”

“Get busy, everybody!” called out Rob, already commencing to pull his shoes on as fast as he could, so that he might creep out from the wreckage of the brush shanty and prevent a forest fire from starting.

Andy followed suit. Tubby, not having been wise enough to keep his footwear close to his hand, had some difficulty in finding his shoes. Consequently when he did finally emerge, looking like a small edition of an elephant down on its knees, he found that the others had succeeded in gathering the scattered firebrands together again, and that some fresh pine was already flaming up, so dispelling the darkness.

Indeed, the growing warmth of the resurrected fire did not feel disagreeable in the least, for the night air was exceedingly chilly.

“Great Jupiter! Was that really a Jabberwock?” demanded Tubby, when he joined the other pair by the fire, holding out his chubby hands to the warmth as if the sensation felt very good.

“It was a bull moose,” replied Rob, without a moment’s hesitation.

“But what ailed the critter,” demanded Andy, “to make such a savage attack on our brush shanty, and dash through the half-dead fire like he did? That’s what I’d like to know. Rob, does a bull moose do such things always?”

“I’m sure I can’t say,” replied the other. “They are stupid creatures, I’ve always heard, and apt to do all sorts of queer stunts. It may be one of the animals could be taken with a mad streak, just as I’ve read a rhinoceros will do, charging down on a hunter’s camp, and smashing straight through the white tent as if he felt he had a special grievance against it. All I know is, that was an old bull moose, for I saw his big clumsy horns.”

Tubby shook his head, not yet convinced, and mumbled:

“I never saw a Jabberwock. I’m not sure there is any such strange beast in the world, but that didn’t resemble what I thought a moose was like.”

“You’ll have to prove it to him, Rob,” ventured Andy, “for when Tubby doubts he is like a wagon stuck in the mud: it takes a mighty heave to pry him loose.”

Thereupon Rob leaned forward and taking up a blazing brand that would serve admirably as a torch, he walked around until he found what he was looking for.

“Come here, both of you, and take a look at this track,” he told them.

“Huh! Looks like the spoor of a farmyard cow, only bigger. The cleft in the hoof is there, all right; so if a moose really did make that track, as you say, Rob, then they must belong to the same family of the cloven hoofs.”

“Here’s another bit of evidence, you see,” continued Rob, bent on rubbing it in while about the matter. “In passing under this tree the animal must have scraped his back pretty hard. Here’s a wad of dun-colored hair clinging to this branch. That proves it to be a moose, Tubby.”

“What if the old rascal should take a sudden notion to make another savage attack on our camp?” suggested Andy. “Hadn’t we better get ready to give him a warm reception, Rob? The law is up on moose and deer now, I believe. I’d like to drop that old sinner in his tracks. I’m going to get my gun.”

“No harm in being ready, Andy, though there’s small chance of his returning,” Rob replied. He, too, crept over to where his rifle lay, and secured the weapon. “His fury expended itself in that mad rush, I reckon. He would never dare attack us while the fire is jumping up.”

Nevertheless, the trio sat there for some time on guard. Andy, with the plea for neutrality still before his mind, and recent events down along the Mexican border, as read in the daily papers, occurring to him, called it “watchful waiting.”

“But what are we going to do for a shelter?” bleated Tubby finally, as if once more finding the temptation to sleep overpowering him.

“Oh, we’ll have to do without, and make the fire take the place of a brush covering,” remarked Andy superciliously, as became an old and hardened hunter. “Why, many times I’ve wrapped myself in a blanket, and with my feet to the blaze slept like a rock! I wonder what time it is now?”

While Andy was feeling around for his nickel watch, Rob shot a quick look overhead, to note the position of certain of the planets, which would give him the points he wanted to know.

“Close to three, I should say,” he hazarded, and presently Andy, on consulting his dollar timepiece, uttered an exclamation of wonder.

“Why, Rob, you’re a regular wizard!” he broke out with. “It’s that hour exactly. If you had eyes that could see into my pocket like the wonderful Roentgen rays, you couldn’t have hit it closer. I guess you know every star up there, and just where they ought to be at certain times.”

“It’s easy enough to get the time whenever you can see certain stars,” explained the scout leader modestly, “though you wouldn’t hit it so exactly very often as I did then. But as there are some three and a half hours before dawn comes we might as well soak in a little more of that good sleep.”

He showed Tubby how to arrange his blanket, and even tucked him in carefully, with his head away from the fire.

“You’re a mighty good fellow, Rob,” muttered Tubby sleepily, and they heard no more from him until hours had expired and morning was at hand.

There was no further alarm. The singular old bull moose must have wandered into other pastures after that mad break. They neither saw nor heard him again. It was just as well for the same Mr. Moose that he decided not to repeat his escapade, since he might not have gotten off so cleverly the next time, with those scouts on the alert, and their weapons handy for immediate service.

With the coming of morning the three boys awoke, and quickly prepared breakfast. Rob did not mean to go very far on that day. He believed that according to his chart and the verbal information he had received, they were in the immediate vicinity of the deserted logging camp near the border. He intended to circle around a bit, looking for signs that would lead them to it. All the while they could also keep on the alert for any rifle-shot that would indicate the presence of hunters in the neighborhood.

“There’s that railway whistle again,” remarked Andy, pausing while in the act of turning a flapjack, in the making of which he professed to be singularly adroit, so that he seldom lost a chance to mix up a mess for breakfast when the others would allow him.

“Guess the trains must have been passing all through the night, even if I didn’t hear any,” confessed Tubby frankly.

“Do you know, fellows,” asked Andy, since confession seemed to rule the hour, “the first thought that flashed through my head when we were so suddenly aroused in the night by all that row, was that the bridge had been dynamited by the German sympathizers, and the guards shot up sky-high with it. Of course, I quickly realized my mistake as soon as I glimpsed that pesky old moose lighting out, with the red embers of our fire scattered among all the dead leaves, and a dozen little blazes starting up like fun.”

“I wonder has any forest fire ever started in that same way?” ventured Tubby.

“If you mean through a crazy bull moose ramming through a bed of hot ashes,” Andy told him, “I don’t believe it ever did. For all we know no moose ever carried out such a queer prank before last night; even if such a thing happened, why the hunters would put the fire out, just as we did.”

“I guess Uncle George would have been tickled to see a big moose at close quarters like that,” said Tubby. “He’s shot one a year for a long while past. He stops at that, because he says they’re getting thinned out up here in Maine, and even over in Canada, too.”

Breakfast over, the boys loitered around for a while. None of them seemed particularly anxious to be on the move, Andy feeling indifferent, Rob because he knew they were not going far that day, and Tubby through an aversion to once more shouldering that heavy pack. In truth, the only gleam of light that came to Tubby he found in the fact that each day they were bound to diminish their supply of food, and thus the burden would grow constantly lighter.

Finally Rob said they had better be making a start.

“Understand, boys,” he told them, with a smile, “we needn’t try for a record to-day. The fact is, I have reason to believe that old deserted logging camp must be somewhere around this very spot. So, instead of striking away toward the west, we’ll put in our time searching for signs to lead us to it. At any minute we may run across something like a trail, or a grown-up tote-road, along which we can make our way until we strike the log buildings where Uncle George said he meant to make his first stop.”

“Oh! thank you for saying that, Rob,” Tubby burst out with, as his face radiated his happy state of mind. “For myself I wouldn’t mind if we just stuck it out here for a whole week, and let Uncle George find us. But then that wouldn’t be doing the right by my father, so we’ll have to keep on hunting.”

“I don’t mean to get much further away from the boundary,” continued Rob, “for what we saw yesterday bothers me. There’s certainly some desperate scheme brooding; that’s as plain as anything to me.”

“Just to think,” said Tubby, looking around him with a trace of timidity on his ruddy face and in his round eyes, “we may be close to a nest of terrible schemers who mean to do something frightfully wicked, and get poor old Uncle Sam in a hole with the Canadian authorities. Rob, supposing this job is pulled off, and those Canadians feel mighty bitter over the breach of neutrality, do you think they’d march right down to Washington and demand satisfaction? I heard you say they had raised a force of three hundred thousand and more drilled men, and that beats our regular army.”

“I guess there’s small chance of such a thing happening, Tubby,” laughed Andy. “You can let your poor timid soul rest easy. In the first place nearly all the three hundred thousand men have already been sent across the ocean to fight the Germans in the French war trenches, or else they are drilling in England. Then again our cousins across the border are far too sensible.”

“Don’t worry about that a minute,” he was told. “What we must keep in mind is that our patriotism may be called on to prevent these men from breaking our friendly relations with our neighbor, that have stood the test of time so well. If only we could find your Uncle George, Tubby, we’d put it up to him what ought to be done.”

“But even if we don’t run across him,” ventured Tubby bravely, “I guess we’re capable as scouts of taking such a job in hand of our own accord; yes, and carrying it through to a successful culmination.”

“Hear! hear!” said Andy, who liked to listen to Tubby when the latter showed signs of going into one of his periodical spasms of “spread-eagleism” as the thin scout was wont to call these flights of oratory.

So the morning passed away, and while they had not covered a great extent of territory by noon, at least the boys had kept up a persistent search for signs that would tell of the presence near by of the abandoned logging camp.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOGGING CAMP

It was along toward the middle of the day when Rob announced welcome news. He called a halt, and as the other pair stood at attention the scout master turned on Tubby with a look that thrilled the stout chum exceedingly.

“What is it, Rob?” he gasped, the perspiration streaming down his fat cheeks in little rivulets, for the day had grown a bit warm after that chilly night. “I know, you’ve run across signs at last?”

“Speak up, Rob, and give us a hint, please,” urged the hardly less impatient Andy.

“I wanted to see if you fellows were using your eyes, first,” explained Rob; “but Tubby seemed to be searching his inward soul for something he had lost; and, well, I imagine Andy here was figuring on what he wanted for his next meal, because neither one of you at this minute has thought it worth while to take a good look down at your feet. Right now you’re standing on the sign!”

They began to cast their eyes earthward. Andy almost immediately burst out with:

“Whee! an old long-disused tote-road, as the lumbermen call the track where the logs are dragged to the rivers, to be later on put behind a boom, and wait for the regular spring rise! Am I correct, Rob?”

“Straight as a die, Andy; this is a tote-road,” replied Rob.

“But what good is that going to do us, I’d like to know?” ventured Tubby, groping as usual for an explanation. “We don’t want to go to any river, that I know of. What we’re itching to find is the logging camp.”

“This track is going to bring us to it, sooner or later,” asserted Rob, with conviction in his tones. “I can give a pretty good guess which way the logs were taken along here, from the signs that are left on the trees and the bushes. Anybody with half a mind could tell that much. Very well, we must follow the track back, and keep watch for another road showing where the horses were daily taken to their sheds at the camp. I imagine it’s going to be a simple enough solution to the puzzle, boys.”

Andy was delighted. Tubby, having been convinced that the leader knew what he was talking about, managed to enthuse. Truth to tell, Tubby was yearning for the delightful minute to arrive when he might toss down that heavy pack of his for good and all, since they expected to go out of the pine woods much lighter than they came in.

They determined to sit down and eat a bite of lunch. After that they would again take up their task, the rainbow of promise glowing in the sky ahead of them.

“Have we gone a great distance away from the border, do you think, Rob?” Andy was asking, while they devoured such food as could be prepared quickly over a small fire.

“Well, that’s something I can’t exactly say yes or no to,” came the answer. “I don’t know where the dividing line comes. According to my reckoning we ought to be about as close as we were last night. In fact, I should say we are now exactly opposite the long bridge over on the Canadian side of the border.”

“But how could that be, Rob, when we’ve been doing considerable walking since breaking camp this morning?” demanded Tubby incredulously, but more as a means for increasing his stock of information than because he entertained the least doubt concerning the statement made.

“Our tramping hasn’t covered over half a mile in a direct line, because we went over a zigzag course,” replied the leader. “If you remember, whenever we heard a whistle for the bridge, it came from the west, showing that the structure lay farther that way.”

“Sure, you’re on the job when you say that, Rob!” exclaimed Andy, who had been an interested listener. “Only twenty minutes ago we all heard a rumbling sound, and decided it was made by a long

freight train passing over the trestle leading to the bridge. It came from a point exactly opposite to us. You wouldn't want any better proof than that, Tubby."

So they chatted, and ate, and passed half an hour. Then Rob said it would be well if they once more went forth. That tote-road was an alluring object to Rob; he wanted to prove his theory a true one.

Once more they began to "meander," as Tubby called it, through the woods, which had begun to thin out considerably, since most of the better trees had been cut down years back, and in places the ground was almost impassable with the wreckage of dead branches. Fortunately no fire had ever run through this region to complete the devastation begun by the axes of the lumbermen.

It could not have been more than half an hour later when Rob announced that he had discovered where the horses were in the habit of leaving the tote-road and following a well-defined trail through the brush and scant trees.

"Keep a lookout for the camp, fellows!" he told them, whereat Tubby began to elevate his head and sniff the air with vehemence.

"I thought I caught a whiff of pine-smoke," he said, "but I must have been mistaken. Still, as the air is in our faces, it wouldn't be strange if we did get our first indication of the presence of the lumber camp through our well developed sense of smell, rather than by reason of our eyesight."

"Wrong again, Tubby," chuckled Andy. "Eyes have it this time; there's your camp ahead of us. Look over the top of that clump of brush, you'll see the flat roof of a long log shanty, which must be the bunk-house of the lumber jacks in the days when they spent a winter here chopping."

Even Tubby agreed with Andy after he had shaded his eyes with his hand and taken a square look. The thought that they were finally at the end of their search for Uncle George was very pleasing, and Tubby laughed as though a tremendous load had already been taken from his shoulders.

"Why, it wasn't such a great task after all," he remarked, as though he had never once dreamed of being despondent.

"Wait," cautioned Rob. "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched, Tubby. It's poor policy to be too sanguine."

"But Rob, didn't you just say that was the camp?" pleaded the other.

"No doubt about it, Tubby. But possibly the person we're wanting to interview may not be in the place," reminded the scout master.

"What makes you say that, Rob?"

"Oh! I've got a sort of suspicion that way," responded Rob. "In the first place we haven't heard a single gunshot since arriving in the vicinity of this place yesterday, and that alone looks queer. Then we can see the roof of the bunk-house, with the mud and slat chimney in plain sight; it's after the noon hour, too, and the chances are there'd be more or less cooking going on if the place were occupied, but so far as I can make out not the faintest trace of smoke is flowing from that homely chimney."

Tubby, staring hard again, saw the truth of these assertions. He heaved a heavy sigh and shook his head dismally.

"Tough luck, I should call it, if Uncle George has never been here at all, and ours is going to be a regular wild-geese chase. Whichever way can we turn, Rob?"

"There you go jumping at conclusions, hand over fist, Tubby," said Andy quickly. "Rob doesn't mean that at all. Why, stop and think how your uncle was so very particular to mention that communications of importance sent to this camp would get to him in due time. He's handling some big business, and couldn't afford to drop out of the world entirely, even for two weeks. If he's left here be sure we'll find something to tell us where to look for him."

"Come along and let's see," urged Tubby, "they say the proof of the pudding lies in the eating. Inside of five minutes or so we ought to know the worst, or the best. I'll try and stand the shock, fellows."

Once more they advanced. They could not always keep in a direct line on account of the obstacles that beset their course, so that Tubby's estimate of the time required to reach the deserted logging camp proved erroneous; but by the end of ten minutes the little party drew up before the door of the long cabin which they understood had once sheltered a score of those rough wielders of the ax known as lumber jacks.

Some of the other rude buildings constituting the "camp" were in various stages of decay and in tumble-down ruin, but the bunk-house seemed to have been more substantially built, for it looked as though intact.

Before they arrived all of the boys had made a discovery that increased their haste to reach the door. There was some sort of paper fastened to it, and Rob had a pretty good idea as to what it would turn out to be.

"Uncle George has gone away from here, and left directions where to look for him," announced Andy promptly, showing that he, too, had made a guess concerning the nature of that notice on the door.

"Shucks!" Tubby was heard to grunt, at the same time giving his burden an impatient flirt, as though almost in a humor to rebel against another long siege of packing it over miles and miles of dreary pineland.

But a surprise, and a pleasing one at that, awaited them all as they found themselves able to decipher the writing on the paper.

It proved to be a business sheet, with Uncle George's printed address up in the left-hand corner. He himself had written the message in a bold hand, which any one capable of reading at all might easily make out; and this was what the trio of scouts read:

NOTICE

"We have gone over to the Tucker Pond to try again for the big moose that for two past seasons has managed to fool me. This year I hope to bag him. He is a rare giant in size. Make yourselves at home. The latch string is always out. We expect to be back in a few days at the most. The door is only barred on the outside. Enter, and wait, and make merry.

(Signed)

"George Luther Hopkins."

When Tubby read that delightful news he fell to laughing until he shook like a bowlful of jelly. It evidently made him very happy, and he did not hesitate to show it to his two faithful comrades. Indeed, all of them had smiles on their faces, for it would be much more satisfactory to loaf around this spot, possibly taking toll of the partridges, and perhaps even a wandering deer, than to continue their search for an elusive party, whose movements might partake of the nature of a will-o'-the-wisp.

"I'm going to make a sign reading '*Alabama*,' and stick it above the door, the first thing," announced Tubby, with a grateful heart. "It means 'here we rest.' If ever three fellows deserved a spell of recuperation we certainly are those fellows."

"How generous of Uncle George," said Andy, "to say the latch string is always out! Then, too, he calls attention to the fact that the door is only held shut by a bar on the outside, instead of within. All we have to do, fellows, is to drop our packs here. I'll remove that bar, and swing the door wide open, after which we'll step in and take possession."

He proceeded to follow out this nice little program, – at least he got as far as dropping his pack and removing the bar; but hardly had he started to open the door than Andy gave a sudden whoop,

and slammed it shut again with astonishing celerity. Tubby and Rob stared at him as though they thought he had seen a genuine ghost.

CHAPTER VII

AN UNWELCOME INTRUDER

“Oh! what did you see inside the cabin, Andy?” gasped Tubby, beginning to look alarmed, and shrinking back a little, because he did not happen to be carrying one of the two guns in the party.

“Wow! Talk to me about your Jabberwock!” ejaculated Andy, making his face assume an awed expression that added to Tubby’s state of dismay. “He’s in there!”

“But how could a big bull moose get inside a cabin, when the door’s shut, and fastened with a bar?” questioned the amazed and incredulous fat scout.

“It isn’t any moose,” scoffed Andy, and, turning to Rob, he went on: “I tell you, the biggest bobcat I ever set eyes on is in there, and has been having a high old time scratching around among the provisions left by Uncle George and his party. Oh, his yellow eyes looked like balls of phosphorus in the half gloom. I thought he was going to jump for me, so I slammed the door shut, and set the bar again.”

“A wildcat, do you say?” observed Rob, looking decidedly interested. “Well, one thing sure, Uncle George never meant that generous invitation for this destructive creature. As he couldn’t very well read the notice, or lift that heavy bar, it stands to reason the cat found some other way of entering the bunk-house.”

“How about the chimney, Rob?” asked Andy, as quick as a flash.

“Now I wouldn’t be much surprised if that turned out to be his route,” mused the scout leader. “They have a wonderful sense of smell, you know, and this fellow soon learned that there were things good to eat inside the cabin. Finding the place deserted, so far as his two-footed enemies were concerned, he must have prowled all around, and finally mounted to the roof. Then the opening in the chimney drew his attention, and getting bolder as time passed, he finally dropped down.”

Tubby, who had been listening with rapt attention, now broke out again.

“He must be a mighty bold cat to do that, I should say, fellows. Goodness knows how much damage he’s done to Uncle George’s precious stores. Oh! doesn’t it seem like a shame to have a miserable pussycat spoiling the stuff you’ve gone and nearly broken your back to pack away up here? But will we have to pitch a camp in one of those other smaller buildings, and let the bobcat hold the fort in the comfortable bunkhouse, with its jolly cooking fireplace?”

Thereupon Andy snorted in disdain.

“I’d like to see myself doing that cowardly thing, Tubby!” he exclaimed. “Possession may be nine points of the law, but in this case there’s something bigger than the law, and that’s self-preservation. That beast is going to pay for his meddling, if I know what’s what. Rob, how’d we better go at the job?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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