

Allen Quincy

**The Outdoor Chums on the
Lake: or, Lively Adventures on
Wildcat Island**



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CHAPTER I – THE BURNING STEAMBOAT

“Hurry up, and give the signal, Frank!”

“Yes, let’s get the agony over with – either Bluff is a better all-round paddler than I am, or else he has to take water, that’s all!”

“Please hold your horses till I get a good focus on you, fellows!” called Will Milton, the official photographer of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club.

He stood on a little private dock, overlooking Lake Camalot, and manipulated his camera with the air of a professional.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to wait a bit now, boys,” replied Frank Langdon, the judge, who was also seated in a cedar canoe very like those of the contestants, only it was built for two, his mate being Will.

“What’s gone wrong now, Frank?” demanded Jerry Wallington, with his double-bladed paddle poised for the first dip.

“Why, look at the *Eastern Star*– she’s making her first Spring trip around the lake, and heads in a line to cut you off your course,” declared the referee.

“So much the worse for the poor old boat; we’ll just have to run her down,” calmly observed the youth called Bluff.

“I was only thinking of your being swamped in the rough water she leaves in her wake. Better relax your muscles for a few minutes, you impatient braves.”

“Talk to me about your hard luck, what d’ye think of that? Why, the plagued old boat’s just gone and stopped where she blocks us off in our little spin,” grumbled Jerry, in plain disgust.

“That settles it, then; we’ll surely have to sink her,” remarked Bluff.

“Hold on before you think of that. I’m afraid there’s something wrong aboard, for Captain Amos would never stop out there on the lake – at least I never knew him to do such a thing before,” said Frank, standing up in the canoe to see better.

“Say, fellows, isn’t that smoke coming out of the cabin?” demanded Will.

“Smoke – why, perhaps the old tinderbox is afire!” ejaculated Bluff.

“Let’s paddle out and see; perhaps we can be of some help!” cried Jerry.

“Come on, then!”

“Hey! you fellers hold on; where do I come in?” shouted Will.

“You stay on the dock and get a snapshot of the whole circus!” answered the unfeeling Jerry, as he spurted away, urging his dainty craft along with rapid strokes of his spruce blade.

“Marooned, I declare,” muttered Will; “but perhaps I can improve the opportunity and get a picture that will go down in the history of steamboating on Lake Camalot.”

The three lads fairly flew over the intervening water, which was almost smooth, as the breeze hardly created a ripple on the surface.

Frank, having a larger boat to manage, fell behind a trifle; but his arms were seasoned in all manner of work, and he kept tagging along close in the rear.

Apparently there was need for alarm, as the smoke had rapidly increased in volume, and was now pouring out of the little steamer.

At the same time they could plainly hear the shouts of excited men; while the shriller voices that arose told that there were women passengers aboard.

Dashing up to the side of the boat the boys scrambled aboard, hastily securing their canoes to any object that promised temporary anchorage.

Then they hurried to the cabin.

Here they found a scene of the utmost confusion. Men were trying to dash buckets of water upon the fire, which seemed to have gotten quite a foothold. It even looked as though the first trip of the little *Eastern Star* this season would prove to be her last.

Captain Amos was plainly badly rattled by this sudden emergency, though he was working like a trooper to extinguish the flames, and leading his two assistants, the engineer and deckhand, in gallant rushes almost into the fire, where the contents of the buckets they carried seemed to do little or no good.

Frank Langdon was possessed of a cool head in emergencies that called for tact. He made an astonishing discovery as soon as he arrived upon the scene of action. This consisted of the fact that in the tremendous excitement, with the passengers shrieking in his ears, the captain had entirely forgotten the fact that the boat was equipped with fire extinguishers.

“Here, fellows, get busy, strap this on my back, and then get another. We’ve got to put out this fire or some one will be burned to death, or drowned. Don’t let any woman jump overboard!” he exclaimed.

Jerry and Bluff seemed to catch some of the spirit that animated their leader. They succeeded in fastening the extinguisher to his back, even though their hands trembled while so doing.

No sooner had this been done before Frank was off, rushing directly toward the spot where the flames seemed to have taken hold most fiercely.

It was rather appalling, but somehow or other the sight of the brave boy, equipped for mastering the mounting flames, caused a little cheer to arise from the excited passengers.

As soon as the prepared liquid from the little apparatus began to spread over the fire, its ardor was immediately checked. By the time Jerry rushed alongside, similarly equipped, Frank was getting the better of the conflagration.

“Don’t stop with the water, Captain Amos!” shouted Frank, knowing that if their extinguishers gave out before the fire was fully under control it might spring up again into new life.

“Away, boys! Hand up the buckets!” cried the captain.

Several of the male passengers, having by now partly recovered from their panic, started in to assist. Between the whole lot the water came faster, and in less than ten minutes the fire was practically out.

There had been some damage done, but nothing to seriously injure the steamboat; and a carpenter could make repairs while the vessel was covering a few daily runs in this balmy April weather.

Captain Amos now found a chance to rush up to Frank, and shake his hand vigorously.

He was a bluff chap, not much older than Frank, a very good steamboatman, only that he seemed apt to lose his head in a crisis, which after all, must be a grave fault.

“Bully for you, Frank! Your coming saved the boat, I believe. I’ll never forget it, I tell you. Was just about to lay hold of those fire extinguishers when your crowd forestalled me. It was a rough deal all around. With those women shrieking, and holding on to me, begging me to save them, a fellow might be excused for being a little slow to do the right thing. And you, too, Jerry and Bluff – shake hands!”

“What set the boat afire?” asked the curious Bluff, immediately.

The captain shook his head.

“I don’t believe it was an accident. We have always been mighty careful about leaving any waste around where it could start into a flame. Besides, if you notice, boys, you can see that it started close to the cabin, and not near the boiler.”

Captain Amos involuntarily lowered his voice and glanced suspiciously around while speaking. His manner thrilled the boys as they had seldom been before.

“Not an accident! Tell me about that, will you? Do you mean that you believe some one set the boat afire?” exclaimed Jerry.

“Don’t speak so loud, please. That is what I think. Unless it was intentional, I can’t imagine how the thing started,” answered the young captain, who was still much excited after his recent experience.

“But it seems monstrous. Who would be guilty of such a terrible thing?” asked Frank, possibly dimly suspecting that the other might be seeking to cover up some lack of proper caution on his part, though that was not like Amos Short.

“Say, did your crew mutiny?” gasped Bluff, whose eyes were wide open with wonder over this new development of the affair, and who had lately been doing considerable reading of sea tales.

“Well, hardly. I only have the engineer, an old faithful fellow; the pilot, who stuck to his post through it all, and would have run us ashore if the worst came; and one deck hand, a darky,” he replied warmly.

“Then it was a passenger, you think?” demanded Frank, determined to get at the bottom of this new mystery.

“Well, none of my pay passengers. Listen and I’ll tell you. This being the first trip this year we were not so particular about taking pay. At Newtonport a couple of tramps got aboard. When I went to collect their fares they said they had no money, but wanted to get across the lake to Centerville. Rather than have a disturbance on board I allowed them to remain, cautioning them to stay below near the engine.”

“Perhaps you are right, Captain; but what could be their object in firing your boat?” asked Frank.

One of the passengers hurriedly approached at this moment. He was plainly much excited, and as the fire was completely out it could not have been from that cause.

“Captain, before you get into Centerville I demand that you have every person on board this boat searched!” he exclaimed vigorously.

“Searched, Mr. Pemberton – what do you mean?” exclaimed the captain, in dismay.

“Because, sir, my luggage has been opened while we were all excited about the fire, and my property scattered about. I have been robbed of something that was worth considerable money to me, sir. And I intend to hold you and your steamboat company liable for damages!” he cried indignantly.

The captain looked at Frank – here then was an explanation of the sudden fire!

CHAPTER II – TWO CLEVER ROGUES

“This is a serious charge, Mr. Pemberton!” said the captain, in a low voice.

“But I mean it, every word, sir. I tell you I have lost certain articles that represent a large amount of money to me. And I shall proceed against your company unless they are recovered,” declared the passenger, angrily.

Frank believed he recognized in this party a traveling agent who visited the jewelers in the lake towns several times a year. This being the case it was easy to understand that the packet which he complained was stolen, might have contained precious stones, or something along that line.

“Stop and make sure before you say that, Mr. Pemberton,” remarked the captain, turning pale at the threat; for under the circumstances such an action against the company might lose him his comfortable berth.

For once his good-heartedness seemed to have placed him in a predicament. According to the plain rules of the company it should have been his business, upon being refused the proper fare by the two ugly tramps, to have called upon his crew to assist him in putting them ashore, or getting rid of them somehow, even if he had to throw them overboard.

“I know just what I am saying, sir; the packet is gone, and I am ready to swear that I left it in my bag,” replied the other, firmly.

“But consider, sir, that in all this excitement a man might lose his head. Just as likely as not you may have done something with the packet yourself. It would seem to be the first thing a man might think of.”

Captain Amos was arguing with a view to shifting the blame; but he had a positive customer to deal with in Mr. Pemberton. The other shook his head and frowned.

“I insist upon every one being searched before they leave the boat,” he said. “No honest person will object to such a course, I feel sure; and it is the only safe way. And you yourself should be the one to do the job, Captain, in the interest of your company – of course with the assent of the passengers and crew.”

The commander of the boat somehow at this juncture looked at Frank, just as if he sought advice from this source.

“It is the right thing to do, Captain,” that party hastened to say, “and as for my two chums and myself we would like you to begin right now with us.”

“There is no necessity in your case, my boy; for you have been under my eye all the time you were aboard, and we owe you much,” the gentleman hastened to exclaim.

“Nevertheless, if any are to be searched all should be without a single exception, to make it fair. But it strikes me, Mr. Pemberton, that the captain already has a pretty good idea as to who took your valuables, if they have been stolen, and not lost overboard in the confusion,” remarked Frank, calmly.

The traveling jeweler whirled upon the officer.

“How is this, Captain?” he demanded, anxiously.

“We were just wondering how the fire started,” the other explained, “and I declared it could not have come from any carelessness of my crew, and that there was no chance of an accident. In a word, sir, I vowed the fire must be of incendiary origin. Frank, here, and his friends were asking what reason any one would have for setting this boat on fire, when you rushed up stating your loss.”

“I begin to grasp your meaning. It implies that in order to cover up their robbery the thieves started this fire, thinking that if the boat burned no one might be the wiser. That looks very plausible. Did I understand this boy to say you had an idea concerning the identity of the criminal?” Mr. Pemberton asked eagerly.

“Yes, I believe I have,” said Captain Amos, sturdily.

“Then I demand that you place him under arrest immediately, before he can escape with my property. Is there more than one concerned, do you think? Ah! I have an idea I know whom you mean – the two tramps who came aboard at Newtonport?”

“Exactly. They are the ones I suspect. It would be easy to start such a blaze undetected, for no one would be dreaming of such rascality,” replied the officer.

“And taking advantage of the sudden confusion,” went on the passenger, “when men and women were shouting, and rushing frantically about, they must have searched my luggage purposely, knowing that I was carrying a valuable packet in my bag.”

“That would appear to cover the case, sir. In the light of this explanation do you still insist upon every one being searched?” demanded Captain Amos.

Mr. Pemberton also looked toward Frank, although, perhaps, unconsciously. The latter smiled and hastened to remark:

“I really believe that what the captain says may be the true explanation of both the fire and the robbery, Mr. Pemberton. And in that case the arrest of the tramps will bring your valuables to light.”

“Provided they have not gone overboard by accident,” the captain could not resist saying, with pointed emphasis.

The passenger shook his head doggedly, and said:

“There is not the slightest chance of that, sir. I vow I was not once near the spot where my luggage was piled up from the first cry of fire until just now, when I went to see that my things were safe. Surely I would know it if I had gone there.”

“Besides, Captain, unless I’m mistaken this gentleman was the only one among the passengers who seemed to have his senses; I am sure I saw him helping to pass the buckets of water along,” remarked Frank.

“Right you are, son,” said the gentleman, with a faint smile; “for that is a fact. I forgot that I even had any luggage aboard, and the cries of those poor frightened women got on my nerves so that I was bound to do all I could to assist in saving the boat. Now, Captain Amos, I am disposed to go as easy with you as possible, but something must be done before you order the boat into Centerville!”

“I’m willing to do anything that seems right, only tell me what you wish,” replied the officer, promptly.

“If those ugly-looking customers are guilty, they must be apprehended before they have a chance to secrete the goods,” vouchsafed Mr. Pemberton.

“I agree with you. The only question is, ought we try and do it here, or wait until we reach the wharf, where we will find the constable waiting, as he always is when the *Eastern Star* arrives?”

“It might be safer to wait,” admitted the passenger, “but in that event the rogues will be given a chance to hide the packet, perhaps, about the boat, trusting to getting it another time. Then, as we would have no evidence that they were guilty, we could not hold them.”

“What do you say, Frank?” asked the captain, turning to the leader of the chums, and by that action admitting that he entertained great respect for the opinion of the boy who had done so much to save the steamboat.

“I think the gentleman is right,” came the quick response.

“That we ought to search the tramps now,” queried the captain, anxiously; for he felt certain that this move would bring on a fight, which might add still further to the excitement of the already terrified women aboard.

“Undoubtedly. Just as he says, they might think it good policy to conceal their plunder somewhere about the boat, hoping to get it later on, after the excitement had died out. And if you want any help in doing that same thing, Captain, count on myself and two chums.”

The answer came so readily from the lips of the canoeist that Captain Amos was almost overcome. He thrust out his hand impulsively, exclaiming:

“Say, that’s awful kind of you, Frank. We may need your assistance, for, to tell the truth, those hoboos looked mighty tough, and I reckon they’ll put up some sort of a fight before giving in. I only hope they don’t happen to have any sort of guns about them. Wait till I call up Simmons the engineer, Coddling the pilot, and Adolphus the coon deckhand. If Mr. Pemberton gives us a hand we will have eight to cow the rascals.”

“We will need the whole bunch if they are half as tough as you say, Captain,” declared Jerry, anxious to be heard.

The captain beckoned, and a negro boy came running up.

“Go and tell the pilot and engineer to come here at once, and you accompany them,” he said.

“Yas, sah!” replied the willing worker, shooting away with a look of curiosity toward the others, as if wondering what new trouble had arisen.

“That boy was working all the time, I believe,” said Mr. Pemberton, thoughtfully.

“Who, Adolphus?” asked the captain; “every minute at my side; and I’d trust him with every penny I owned. But here he comes, and both men are with him. Now we can get ready to look for those ragged tramps, and corner them.”

“H’m! when did you see them last?” asked Frank, starting suddenly, as if he had made an unpleasant discovery.

“Certainly not since the cry of fire first broke out. But what makes you ask such a question, Frank?” demanded the captain, showing new alarm.

“Well, I have an idea that it may be some little time before you get a chance to round those scamps up, and proceed with your search. They are the busy boys all right, and while we’ve been talking matters over here the hobo couple have been *doing* things. Look there, Captain, half way to the other shore, and tell me what you see!” and Frank pointed as he spoke.

Immediately a chorus of exclamations arose.

“As sure as you live, there they go like hot cakes!” cried Bluff.

“Talk to me about nerve, if they haven’t ‘cribbed’ Frank and Will’s double canoe!” came from Jerry’s lips, as he stared at the retreating object.

“And just notice, fellows, that both of them paddle as if they knew all about canoes. Those hoboos have done some camping in their day, as sure as you live!” observed Frank, always on the lookout for these telling points.

“Say, do we stand here and let them get clean away without lifting a hand?” exclaimed Bluff, piteously.

“Hardly. Into your canoes, boys, and after the thieves at full speed!” cried Frank.

CHAPTER III – THE TELL-TALE PICTURE

Once again all was excitement aboard the steamboat.

Jerry and Bluff dropped into their frail craft with the practiced balance of experienced canoeists. Frank did not mean to be left behind in the wild race, managed to occupy a place in the craft of Jerry. He seized upon the single paddle, intending to work his passage, and make up for the additional burden.

As they started off they could hear the captain giving orders to the crew.

“He means to turn the boat around, and start after the thieves himself!” cried Jerry, as he dipped his double-blade swiftly on one side and then the other.

Both little mosquito craft were by this time fairly flying through the water. As those who wielded the paddles faced forward they were able to see what progress they made all the time toward overhauling the escaping hoboos.

“Not much hope,” declared Frank, finally.

“They’re two-thirds of the way in to shore. We are gaining, but not enough by half to overhaul them,” announced Bluff, making valiant progress.

“Tell me about this, but I hope Will sees his opportunity to snap off a good view. This has your race beat to a frazzle, Bluff!” shouted Jerry.

“There comes the steamboat! The captain is heading to cut them off,” said Frank.

“But he’s too far away. Besides, it’s too shallow in there, and if he knows his business he’ll never try to go much closer. A fire is bad enough, not to speak of a stranded boat,” observed Bluff.

The two men in the double canoe were working like steam-engines to make progress. They handled the paddles fairly well in unison, and as Frank had said, showed a familiarity with the blades that spoke of former experiences.

As the three boys paddled on they saw the leading canoe shoot up on the shelving beach. Then the tramps scrambled ashore.

“Hold on there, you!” bellowed Bluff, in his excitement; “we want to talk with you!”

For answer the two men only made derisive motions. Then they vanished in the thick timber.

“They’re gone, all right, boys. I reckon it will take some hunting to find such slippery rascals again,” remarked Frank, with a laugh; for it was not his packet that had been stolen, and he had no reason to be deeply concerned.

“What will we do now?” demanded Bluff, looking as disappointed as though he had just lost a race.

“Recover our canoe, and put across the lake to where Will stands on that dock.”

“But see here, Frank, do you mean to let those fellows get away?” asked Jerry.

Jerry was always the impulsive one of the four chums. His characteristic temperament often got him into hot water. Only the preceding Fall when the boys had taken a trip into the woods, owing to a storm unroofing the Academy at Centerville, as narrated in the preceding volume of this series, entitled “The Outdoor Chums; or, First Tour of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club,” he had found himself precipitated into numerous difficulties because of this failing. Frank was frequently compelled to restrain this impulsiveness on the part of his chum. On this camping trip they had met with many strange adventures, including an invasion of the camp by a wildcat, a bear and also some enemies who wished to do them harm by setting fire to their tents; Jerry had lost himself in the forest and encountered numerous exciting adventures, and there had followed a series of mishaps that had all winter long given the chums a subject for entertainment and discussion.

Frank was pleased to find that the tramps had not been vindictive enough to try and do any harm to the frail craft in which they had made their escape from the steamboat.

For this he was disposed to feel a little kindly toward them. It also made him more convinced than ever that they must have a tender spot in their evil hearts for a canoe, and could not bear to smash up such a delicate little craft.

The steamboat was lying off-shore, and our boys headed in such a direction that they could talk back in answer to any questions asked by the captain.

“Did they get clean away?” called the commander of the boat, using his hands in lieu of a megaphone.

“I reckon they did, Captain. They skipped into the timber, and that was the last thing we saw of them,” replied Frank, pausing for a minute in his labor.

“That’s bad. We were in hopes you could capture them,” said the other, looking plainly worried over what future troubles were in store for his company.

“Boys, I thank you for the trouble you took, and hope to see you again,” shouted Mr. Pemberton. “I’m going to get off at Centerville, and engage the sheriff to hunt high and low for those rascals. If you hear of anything, please look me up. It is mighty important that I recover possession of that missing packet.”

“All right, we’ll be glad to do so, sir. We expect to spend the Easter holidays in the woods somewhere along the lake, and it’s just possible we may run across those two hoboes again,” answered Frank, dipping his paddle in deeply again, and sending his boat after those of his companions that were flying on ahead.

They allowed him to catch up, for Jerry wanted to ask a question or two.

“Say, do you really suppose we could meet with those scamps again?” he said, eagerness showing in his eyes; for Jerry loved excitement, though fond of calling himself a square sportsman, always giving the game every possible chance.

“About one chance in ten; still, it’s there. If they hang around here for any reason, and we’re in the woods, you can see we might run across the couple,” replied the other, quietly.

“Talk to me about your volunteer fire companies, I reckon we’ve got a cinch on the prize for rapid work,” cried Jerry. “Only for you, Frank, that blessed old *Eastern Star* was sure bound to go up in smoke. The company ought to vote you a medal.”

“And there’s poor Will standing on the deck waiting for us to come in and tell him what all this fuss is about,” remarked Bluff, as they drew near the shore.

“Hello! you runaways, what in the wide world was all that row out there?” demanded the stranded canoeist, as the others glided in close to the little wharf upon which he was sitting with his legs dangling over, and the precious camera gripped tight in his hands.

“All sorts of things happening. The boat was on fire, and Frank here settled that by grabbing up an extinguisher and turning the hose on the flames, while the crew was handling the buckets. The whole thing would have gone up if we hadn’t arrived just in time. Then there was a robbery aboard,” said Bluff, eagerly.

“What! a robbery? Do you really mean it?” gasped Will.

“Certainly. A jewelry salesman had a valuable packet stolen from his stateroom. It is believed that the fire was started just to cover the robbery. While we were talking over matters, trying to get the facts straight, and decided on arresting a couple of hoboes aboard who were suspected of doing the job, they ran away with the double canoe, and escaped into the woods across yonder,” went on Frank.

“Two hoboes! Why, I saw them standing at the side of the steamboat looking down at the canoes. They’ll appear in the picture I took just then, for the smoke was rolling up, and the view was magnificent,” declared Will.

Frank started and looked hastily out upon the lake.

“I’m afraid it would be too far to recognize the features of any one, even if you caught a first-class view,” he remarked.

“Still there’s a little chance. A magnifier or reading-glass might bring it out strong enough. Anyhow, I’m going right home and make the try, fellows. My roll is finished, and I might as well develop it now as later.”

“Bring it around to-night when we meet at my house to talk over our camping trip for the Easter holidays,” said Frank.

“Where do you think we’ll go, boys?” asked Bluff, anxiously.

“For myself I’m in favor of Wildcat Island at the southern end of the lake. Somehow, nobody ever goes there, and we could have a great time, I imagine,” remarked Frank.

“Yes, especially with the wild man that they say has his den somewhere on that same old island,” remarked Bluff, shrugging his shoulders, as if the idea did not strike him favorably.

“Talk about your circus, a wild man appeals to me every time!” said Jerry. “I’m in favor of going there, particularly because it offers a chance for excitement. Suppose we captured this *thing* and found that it was a big monkey or orang-outang that had escaped from some menagerie long ago, wouldn’t that be something to shout over? Me for Wildcat Island. How about you, Will?”

“To tell the truth I’ve always wanted to get some good views of that lonely place, and I’ll vote in favor of going there,” returned the young photographer.

Bluff turned anxiously toward Frank.

“Are you backing these desperate schemers up in this madness, Frank?” he asked.

“Well, I’d like to explore that place very much. No one has ever done it, so far as I can learn. Some say the island is haunted; others that there are rattlers in plenty there, besides furious wildcats; and then there’s this story told about a wild man who has been seen several times on the shore of the island. Why, yes, I’m in favor of going there to-morrow, when we start out.”

Bluff threw up both hands.

“I give in. Three against one settles the matter for keeps. Wildcat Island it is then for the Easter camp. But I refuse to accept any of the responsibility for whatever may happen,” declared Bluff, firmly.

“Speak to me about a quitter, will you? Listen to him knuckling down before we even make a start. He claims to have bigger lungs than me, does he? I’ll have to admit that he can make a lot more noise when it comes to squealing.”

Bluff Masters turned upon the other indignantly, as he exclaimed:

“Wait and see who turns white first when that wild man bobs up. My lungs are in better shape than yours, and I can prove it any old day. There goes Will off, and I’m for following him. Bring a print of each picture around to-night, old chap.”

“Sure. And let’s hope they turn out decent,” answered the other, waving a hand as he moved away in the direction of town, leaving it to Frank to paddle the big canoe to the landing where they kept the cedar craft when not in the boathouse of the club.

Frank was a busy fellow during the remainder of the day. He had the job of laying in the stores that were to see them through a whole week in camp; and when four boys get out in the open for that length of time it is simply astonishing what an amount of food they can dispose of.

But Frank had spent many a night under canvas and bark covers in Maine, and, in fact, there was little about camping he did not know. At the same time he always made it a point to ask questions whenever he ran across any one who had also been through the mill; for in this way even veterans may learn new wrinkles by exchanging ideas.

About eight o’clock, Jerry and Will came in together, as they lived close to one another. Bluff was not a minute behind them, anxious for a view of the pictures that had been taken that day.

“Say, how did they turn out?” he demanded, as soon as he entered the room where Will was opening an envelope, and Frank handling a large reading-glass.

“Just bully, that’s what. Never got better results. The water was in a beautiful ripple, you see, and that always adds to a picture. Here, take a look, fellows,” with which remark Will scattered a lot of prints on the table.

He had certainly become quite a clever hand at both developing his films and printing his pictures, for the results were as clear as a bell.

“They do look fine,” commented Frank, as he commenced to shuffle them over; “and the smoke is pouring out of that old steamboat at a great rate. I’m looking for the one you spoke about, where those hoboos are standing in the sunlight on the edge of the burning boat. Here it is. Jerry, you would be apt to know better than I could if either of these fellows has a familiar face. Take a look.”

“If he don’t, perhaps I may. I’ve lived around here three days longer than he ever did,” grumbled Bluff.

Jerry bent down closer and continued to stare through the reading-glass.

“Talk to me about your luck, boys, this beats the band!” he exclaimed.

“Do you recognize one of them, then?” asked Frank, eagerly.

“Sure I do, and I’m surprised Captain Amos didn’t. The dumpy one is Waddy Walsh, the bad egg, who was sent to the reform school three years ago. He must have escaped somehow, and joined the army of tramps on the road,” declared Jerry, positively.

CHAPTER IV – THE PADDLE TO WILDCAT ISLAND

“Waddy Walsh!” exclaimed Bluff, showing sudden interest. “Let me look, Jerry!”

“Will you give an honest opinion, regardless of any bias, one way or the other?” demanded the other, whose father was a leading lawyer in Centerville.

“Of course I will. What do you take me for, anyway?” replied Bluff, aggrieved.

“Then look, and tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” and Jerry handed him the reading-glass.

“Well, what’s the verdict?” asked Frank, after Bluff had studied the picture for a full minute.

“I won’t be as positive as our friend here, but I’m inclined to think that it may be Waddy, all right; anyhow, he’s about his size, and there’s something in his way of standing that reminds me of the fellow,” announced Bluff.

“Talk to me about your hedging, what d’ye think of that? Of course it’s Waddy, as big as life, grown somewhat, and with torn clothes and dirty face; but I’d know his attitude among a dozen. Consider that point settled, Frank.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter much to us at all. If the sheriff, Mr. Dodd, manages to catch up with the runaways, Mr. Waddy will have a chance to go back to where he came from – the reform school. Now, let’s drop those two, and talk over our proposed visit to Wildcat Island,” remarked Frank.

“Have you got all the supplies?” asked Will.

“Here’s the list. Look it over, and if anybody wants to suggest other things all they have to do is to put them down. We’re willing to lug stuff there to the limit of our canoes,” answered Frank.

When they had made all arrangements the meeting was adjourned to the time when they expected to start from the boathouse just after noon on the following day.

“How about the weather – do we go, regardless?” asked Will, again.

“True canoeists laugh at the weather. Come rain, come storm, they buck up against whatever the day brings forth. At one, then, every fellow be on hand. I’ll have the supplies there before that. I’ve got a surprise in store for you boys, too,” remarked Frank.

“Tell me about that, will you; he’s going to let us lie awake all night trying to guess the great conundrum. Say, it hasn’t anything to do with the girls coming over some day to take dinner with us, has it?” asked Jerry.

“Oh! say, that would be immense, only too good to be true,” cried Bluff, who, be it known, was rather inclined to be sweet on Frank’s only sister, Nellie.

“They’ve promised to come, all right; but this has nothing to do with that. You just wait and see, that’s all I’ll say. Now come into the front room, fellows. Nellie has had several friends over, and we’re going to make a delightful evening of it.”

Frank would not listen to any protest, but ushered his three chums into the parlor where they found four lively girls enjoying themselves with music, and waiting for the meeting of the club to come to an end.

For the next hour they romped as only a lot of young people may, for whom the morrow has no terrors. Will’s twin sister, Violet, was, of course, there, as were Mame Crosby and Susie Prescott, the former of whom was never so happy as when teasing Jerry, and getting him to “spout” after the fashion of his learned father when pleading for a prisoner before the bar.

It was about half-past ten that they separated, after enjoying some simple refreshments in the way of cake and lemonade.

The boys saw the girls home, Will taking his sister; while Bluff, secretly informing Nellie Langdon that he only did it out of pure courtesy, saw that Susie was properly escorted through the quiet streets of Centerville, and reached her father’s house in safety.

When Frank reached the boathouse, just at half-past twelve on the following day, he found all of his companions there ahead of him.

“You slow coach, think we’ve got the whole afternoon to get started?” demanded Bluff, who was bustling around as usual, yet accomplishing very little.

“Well, if you examine closer you’ll find that I’ve been here most of the morning, and packed the things in several bundles. These go in the big canoe; those yonder you must stow away, Bluff, while Jerry will take care of the rest,” replied Frank, paying little attention to the way in which he was addressed, because he knew it was mere talk, and no slur intended.

“Sure you didn’t miss anything?” asked Jerry, smiling grimly; for he pretended to scorn this wholesale carrying of stuff into the woods, and always declared he could exist happily with a blanket, a coffee-pot, a frying-pan, some salt and pepper, coffee and ship biscuit, depending on rod and gun to supply all else.

Nevertheless, when the “duffle” was lugged into the woods he considered it a sacred duty to do his utmost to lessen the supplies, possibly for fear they would have to “tote” them out again, as Bluff used to sarcastically remark.

“Not that I know of. If you are afraid, why we might go over the list again, and see what else we can use,” said Frank, with a wink toward Will.

“I beg of you don’t. My poor canoe would sink of fright or freight. Besides, I want you to notice that it’s kind of rough out on the lake, and as it stands we’re taking big chances of being swamped. Come on, fellows, load your cargo!” called Jerry.

“What’s this funny bundle in our boat?” demanded Will, suddenly.

“Ask no questions and I’ll give you no yarns. Just possess your souls in patience, and you’ll see after a while,” came Frank’s answer, as he went on loading systematically, taking heed of the fact that they would need to buck up against some rather heavy seas from the south while on the way, and that everything must be protected from the wet by covers.

“I bet it’s a new patent stove he’s got along,” suggested Will.

“Oh! that’s in my boat already. It burns kerosene, and makes a blue gas. Frank says it’s the boss in rainy weather, with those aluminum camp kettles for cooking. I reckon it must be a box of cake and pies the girls have supplied,” ventured Bluff.

“You’re away off, for they’re going to bring those things when they come. Besides, this isn’t in the shape of a box at all,” laughed Frank.

“That’s a fact, and it looks more like a spare blanket or two,” came from Jerry.

“Well, give it up, boys. I don’t believe you’d guess in a month of Sundays. Now, are you all ready?” queried the leader of the club, as he took up his paddle and prepared to look after the port side while Will worked the starboard.

Frank, being the more experienced of the twain, had the stern seat, as that is usually considered the post of greater responsibility in clearing rocks while running rapids, and generally guiding the craft.

“Say when!” called Jerry.

“The *Red Rover* is ready to meet the storm!” announced Bluff, whose little craft had a narrow band of red around its gunwale.

“Go!”

The four paddles dipped deeply into the water, and simultaneously the little canoes started into the teeth of the wind. There were a few shouts from the shore, and considerable waving of snowy kerchiefs from a group of girls standing before Frank’s house, which latter brought a series of salutes from the paddlers until the commodore of the flotilla sternly warned them that unless they paid more attention to what they were doing an upset would mark the beginning of their Spring outing.

After that they kept their eyes straight ahead. And, indeed, there was really need for all attention, since the waves were running quite high for such small vessels to meet. Still, a canoe, if properly

handled, can live in a sea that will sink a much larger boat; since the tiny cedar craft mounts to the crests of the waves with the buoyancy of a cork.

They paddled strenuously for an hour toward the south, and by that time were beginning to feel their muscles growing somewhat sore. The season was young, and they had not as yet become wholly accustomed to hard manual labor, though all of them used the school gymnasium through the winter months in the endeavor to keep in condition.

“Talk about your combers, these are the real thing,” grunted Jerry, as he shot up on the crest of a wave, from which exalted position he had a fleeting view of the island dead ahead; and was then swept down into what seemed to be a valley.

The fact that each boat was so heavily laden added to the danger of their swamping if once they turned sideways to the seas, or broached to; but the boys were conscious of this ever-impending peril, and fought tooth and nail to prevent it.

Wildcat Island was quite a large piece of ground, standing in the lake at some little distance from either shore, but much nearer the western one, that upon which the town of Newtonport was situated, with its distant range of hills, called the Sunset Mountains by the natives.

This island lay not far from the foot of the lake, while another, going by the name of Snake Island, was situated close to the lumber camp at the head of the body of water, which was some ten miles long by between one and two wide.

With a strong south wind blowing, a heavy sea could be kicked up, though naturally this would be found much worse the farther up the lake one went.

“Ten minutes more will see us there, boys!” shouted Frank.

He feared that one of the other paddlers might be getting pretty near his last effort, and wished to encourage the balance of his chums to renewed efforts.

“We’re all right; don’t worry about us,” called back Bluff, who happened to be a little bit ahead.

He had hardly spoken than he came close to the verge of disaster. To make his voice carry the better, Bluff had half turned his head, and in doing this lost his advantage just a trifle. So it came that the next sea struck the *Red Rover* on the forward port side, instead of head on. This caused the frail canoe to sheer out of her course, amid frantic efforts of her wearied skipper to regain a straightaway heading; and only for the fact that a second sea did not follow closely on the heels of the first, he might have met with an upset.

Presently they ran into the lee of the island, where the water was smoother.

This revived the flagging energies of Bluff and Jerry, always rivaling each other in whatever they attempted; so they set up a little race for the shore.

“Who won, Frank?” demanded Bluff between gasps, as all of them landed.

“Well,” remarked the other, with a sly wink at Will, which at the time the latter did not fully understand, though its import was made plain later, “I’d declare it a dead heat! You two fellows are so evenly matched it’s hard to decide which is the better.”

“All but our lung capacity; there I’ve got him beaten every time,” insisted Bluff.

“You have, eh? Wait until the opportunity comes, and you’ll just see how easy I put you on the mat. Ashore it is, my hearties! We’re castaway sailors for a week!” exclaimed Jerry, suiting the action to the word, and dragging his canoe up on the little shelving beach, beyond which lay the bristling thickets, hiding all the mysteries of Wildcat Island.

“Monarch of all we survey. Here we hide from the world, and forget dull care,” sang Will, prancing about to ease up his strained muscles.

“Here, lend a helping hand, you shirk!” called Frank, who was dragging the big canoe ashore alone.

Suddenly there was a shriek from Will that made the others spring up. Frank’s hand involuntarily reached out for the double-barreled shotgun that lay in its waterproof case on top of the stuff in his canoe.

“Look! look! the wild man!” shouted Jerry.

They all saw a hideous face framed among the branches and twigs of the thicket close by. One second only was it in view, hardly long enough for them to make out that it was human rather than that of an immense ape. Then the ugly face vanished from their sight, leaving the four canoeists gaping at each other as though unable to positively decide whether they had really seen the mysterious wild man of the island, or something which their imaginations had conjured up instead.

CHAPTER V – A STRANGE HAPPENING

“Did you see him, boys?” exclaimed Will, who was shivering as if he had just run across a ghost.

“Why, to be sure,” replied Frank, laughing a little forcedly; for the sight of that hideous face had given him a shock.

“Then it was so, after all. I began to believe I was just imagining things. Oh! what a magnificent opportunity I missed. How can I ever forgive myself?” groaned Will, showing signs of disgust.

“Opportunity for what – capturing the terrible wild man?” cried Bluff, aghast at what seemed the audacity of his ordinarily peaceable chum.

“Certainly not. But if I had only been ready I could have taken his picture to show the folks at home. My stars! what a great feat that would have been,” sighed the disappointed photographer, shaking his head.

“Tell me about that, will you? There was my uncle laughing at me when I mentioned about this same wild man of the island. He declared it was only some innocent animal, or else an old woman’s tale. But every one of us saw him, and we’ve not been ashore five minutes, either,” declared Jerry.

“I foresee some stirring times for us here, what with the snakes, if they are to be found, the ferocious wildcats they tell about, and now this mysterious wild man,” remarked Frank, soberly, as he began to take the bundles out of his canoe and place them high and dry up on the shore.

“Are we going to stay?” asked Bluff.

“Why, to be sure we are. Talk to me about your brave men, I like to hear a fellow speak about being scared away by the first sight of some poor, harmless chap. Perhaps it’s another of Mr. Smithson’s crazy people, escaped from the asylum over at Merrick, and hiding out here.”

On their camping-out trip of the preceding autumn they had met with a remarkable personage who persisted in declaring that he was the famous Prince Bismarck, and who eventually turned out to be an escaped inmate of the asylum at Merrick, some miles away.

A keeper named Smithson had engaged them to help him capture the demented one, and this was what Jerry was referring to when he spoke.

“I wouldn’t wonder but what that may be true,” remarked Frank, seriously; “but no matter, we are not the kind to run at a shadow. We laid out this trip to spend our Easter holidays on Wildcat Island, and it’s got to be something pretty threatening that will frighten us off.”

“Hear! hear!” exclaimed Jerry.

“That’s the stuff!” declared Bluff, thinking that he could not afford to let his rival take all the credit for valor.

“But I’ll never get another opportunity to take his picture,” complained Will.

“How do you know? Man alive, there may be no end of stirring times coming, with that same old hermit figuring in the circus. Perhaps the scent of our coffee and bacon will bring him back into touch with civilization; why, he may even walk into our camp, and try to make friends, when he gets a whiff of onions frying,” and Frank slapped his chum on the back as he spoke along this line.

“Oh! well, if you think that way I’ll keep up my hopes. And you just remember that if I seem to be hugging this little snapshot contrivance closer than usual, why, I’m only keeping in readiness for instantaneous work. A fellow has to be pretty quick on the trigger to get a picture of a wild man, you know.”

They soon had the boats unloaded.

“Pull them out, fellows. I’ve brought along the chains and padlocks belonging to each boat. Having a canoe stolen isn’t such fun, even on a ten-mile lake like Camalot,” ventured Frank, as he produced the articles in question, and proceeded to fasten the canoes together, at the same time making sure they were chained to the sturdy root of a nearby tree.

“He thinks of everything,” admitted Will, in admiration.

“Don’t you believe it for one second. I forget many things; but as they said a wild man inhabited this bit of island, I wanted to make sure he did not run off with any of our boats, and perhaps our supplies.”

“All the same, it took your long head to think of such a thing, old chap. Now, I defy any one to hook our boats. Besides, we don’t mean to ever leave the camp unguarded; and I guess you expect to put up the tents close by here?” said Jerry.

“It looks good to me,” replied Frank, casting another glance at the little open spot close to the beach, which seemed an ideal place for a canoeist’s camp, having a splendid view of the lake, stretching almost ten miles away to the north.

The four were soon as busy as beavers.

They already knew how to erect the tents, which had a fly that could be lowered in front in severe weather, and a ground cloth of waterproof material, quite an addition to the comfort of the interior.

Jerry worked just as hard as the rest, although every now and then pretending to laugh at all this fuss, when a humble shack of branches ought to serve any fellow who called himself a true sportsman.

By the time the fireplace had been built of stones, over which several stout steel bars rested, upon which the cooking utensils would set, the Spring afternoon was drawing to a close.

“What will we have for our first supper?” Bluff asked; for he did not mean to let Jerry carry off all the honors in the cooking line this trip.

Secretly Bluff had been getting the hired girl at his home to teach him some of the kitchen lore, and he had a few surprises up his sleeve which he intended to spring upon his unsuspecting chums when the occasion came around that he was left alone in charge of the camp.

“Nobody thought to bring a steak this time,” ventured Frank; “so if you’re all agreeable, I say that we begin our cooking with a little canoeist’s menu something along this order: Tea, succotash, a can of corned beef, fresh bread and butter, and finish with a jar of preserves and cake from home. How does that strike you?”

“It suits me. And as the sun is sinking low, the sooner we get to work the better,” declared Bluff, readily enough; for he was fairly ravenous, and kept wetting his lips like a hungry dog that scents a rich, juicy bone.

“Talk about your feasts, what could equal that programme? Me for the corned beef every time. Why, it’s my best hold, and I just worship it – hot, cold or medium. How do you stand, Will? Any further suggestions?”

“Well, I brought some imported Switzer cheese along, and you know, fellows, I’m particularly fond of it; so if it’s just the same to you, I’ll add that to the list,” replied the one addressed.

“Oh, my! that’s what I get for speaking too hastily. Now I shall certainly be punished. I suppose as long as that cheese lasts my appetite will vanish at every meal. I only hope that gay old wild man takes a fancy to it, and elopes with the whole blessed bunch. Why didn’t you fetch limburger and kill us outright, instead of our dying by inches? But it will help draw the wildcats around, that’s one comfort,” groaned Jerry.

Preparations for supper went on apace.

They had set the tents at the base of a little bluff; for Wildcat Island was a singular formation, being quite hilly in parts. Indeed, some people were fond of comparing it to the volcanic islands that suddenly rise up out of the sea in regions like the Alaska coast; and as frequently vanish in a night. It was moreover heavily wooded, and the rank vegetation made it anything but an easy task to do any exploring.

Frank had calculated that this steep bluff overhanging the camp would be of considerable benefit to the expedition should a severe storm set in from the west.

As the boys busied themselves with various tasks they chatted and joked after their custom.

The stew of succotash and corned beef, which Frank had called the Canoeist's Delight, was now ready. He set it aside on a stone to cool a trifle while the table was being prepared.

"How's the coffee getting on, Jerry?" asked the chief cook of the evening; for they usually changed around, and gave each fellow a chance to show what he knew along the line of preparing appetizing dishes, or of exposing his ignorance, which method of procedure naturally created some rivalry.

"Just about ready. I've allowed it to boil furiously three times, and settled it with a dash of cold water on each and every occasion. Talk to me about the nectar of the gods, this suits me all right."

"Oh! please hurry up. I'm almost trembling with eagerness, after sitting here and sniffing those delicious odors for so long a time," pleaded Will, who happened to have nothing to do with the supper on this occasion, his time coming on the morrow.

But they gave him no heed, those unfeeling wretches.

The one who camps out must expect to prove himself a hero daily by conquering his appetite and holding it in check with a firm hand until the head chef declares that all is ready for the feast to begin.

Frank had just finished placing the aluminum plates and cups, and was about to reach out for the kettle of steaming stew, when to his astonishment he found the stone, where he had laid it, empty.

Thinking that one of the others might be playing some trick, he opened his mouth to remonstrate, when a cry from Will caused him to turn his eyes upward.

There he saw the little kettle swinging in mid-air, and being drawn hastily upwards by some unseen mysterious agency!

CHAPTER VI – FRANK MAKES A GUESS

No one seemed able to say a single word.

Standing or crouching there, with staring eyes those four lads watched the marvelous ascent of their supper. It was as though an unseen hand had reached down and plucked the kettle from the rock to carry it heavenward.

Now it had reached the level of the top of the bluff, and as they continued to gape, an arm was thrust hastily out from the rank vegetation that grew there; they saw eager fingers clutch the kettle, and then it was drawn from their sight.

“Tell me about that!” gasped Jerry, as soon as he could catch his breath.

Bluff made a dive for Frank’s gun. His own repeating shotgun was at home, out of commission, for which Jerry, who hated the modern arm as the devil is said to hate holy water, never ceased to give thanks.

But Frank caught his arm.

“No, I wouldn’t do that, Bluff. We can afford to lose our stew, for we’ve got plenty more behind it. We can even let the little kettle go, if necessary; but we should hate to have any man’s life on our hands, no matter if he is a crazy being.”

“Did you see him, Frank?” exclaimed Will, in great excitement.

“No more than the rest of you. An arm came into view, and the kettle was drawn in. Somebody is going to enjoy a fine supper to-night. Perhaps the poor fellow has not tasted decent food for ages. Much good may it do him,” said Frank.

“What are you going to do about it, then?” demanded the warlike Bluff.

“Well, the best thing is to open another can of succotash and one of the corned beef, since we seem to have set our minds on that stew,” smiled Frank.

He immediately started operations.

“But are we going to sit here like a lot of babies while that scamp runs off with our supper?” demanded Bluff, indignantly.

“And he’s stolen one of your charming little aluminum kettles, too, Frank,” put in Will, in added horror.

“Well, there are plenty more where that came from, and an indulgent dad will, I am sure, supply me with all I want; but I should hate to have to tell him that I had filled a poor demented being with bird-shot just because the tantalizing odor of my favorite canoeist stew had tempted him beyond endurance.”

“How do you think the beggar ever did it?” asked Jerry at this juncture, as he craned his neck to look straight upward.

“I think I can see how. I noticed a cord of some sort. Evidently he had a hook attached. This he passed over that branch of a tree sticking out from the top of the bluff, so that the kettle might be kept away from the face of the cliff as it rose, and in that way prevented from spilling its coveted contents,” replied the one addressed.

“Talk to me about your aeroplanes, that was an ascension to beat the band! Wow! I had a chill run up and down my spinal column, for I give you my word, fellows, at first I really thought of ghosts, and that some invisible agency had reached down and gobbled our supper.”

“And I thought I was dreaming – that I’d fallen asleep by the fire, and you had eaten up all the stew, while Bluff was throwing up the empty kettle to practice shooting at, like he did our wash-basin that other time,” admitted Will.

“And that chap was angling for the bale of our kettle while we sat here and never once suspected what was going on. Say, we’re a husky lot of tenderfeet. Why, some night a thief will come and steal the blankets off us, and no one be the wiser until morning,” declared Bluff, in disgust.

After a while the second kettle of stew was pronounced ready. It was laughable to see how those four crowded around to protect it against an invading force; and what suspicious looks they cast upward at the brow of the innocent little bluff.

But there was no further manifestation of the Presence near them. Jerry kept an eye on the coffee-pot, and was ready with a keen-edged knife to immediately proceed against any dangling cord and hook that might come in sight.

They enjoyed the supper in spite of the uncanny feeling that this unprovoked and early attack had produced.

“Who was it predicted that the odors of our cooking would stir up the old hermit, and awaken his appetite for the things of the civilized world? Frank, it was you. And sure enough that’s what came to pass. He’s got tired of feeding on roots and birds’ eggs and fish,” remarked Will, feeling better after he had quieted the gnawings of his appetite.

“Provided that it was the so-called wild man,” said Frank, quietly.

At which remark there was a chorus of cries.

“It certainly must have been a human being and not an animal. Even an educated ape or chimpanzee could never have had that cord and hook and managed it as this chap did. What do you mean by doubting it, Frank?” demanded Bluff.

“Yes, tell us what you’ve been thinking?” asked Will.

“Say, that gives me an idea. I wager I can guess what he’s got in mind,” ventured Jerry, looking exceedingly wise.

“Well, go on then,” from Frank.

“The two runaway tramps!”

“Jerry, that head of yours will get you into trouble some day. You are too good a guesser,” laughed Frank.

“Then that was it? You think the tramps have come over here to Wildcat Island to hide while the sheriff is hunting the woods high and low for them? I declare, if that’s so it means warm times in store for us,” exclaimed Will.

“Talk to me about your war scares, what could equal that? Why, we’ll capture the blooming hoboos, and let Mr. Dodd know there are others besides himself who can do things.”

“What makes you think that?” pursued Bluff, who always wanted to know the why and wherefore of everything, he being the Doubting Thomas of the quartet.

“I may be mistaken, remember; for I’m just speculating, you see. In the first place, I doubt if our wild man would be provided with such a convenient cord and hook. Then again I saw that arm, and it was covered with a sleeve that looked wonderfully like that of the taller tramp’s coat, a dun-colored affair.”

“Bravo! Frank’s logic carries the day. I’m going to take it for granted that we are entertaining angels unawares on this blessed old island,” cried Will.

“Angels?” snorted Jerry. “Talk to me about that, will you? They must have had their wings singed, then, or else they’d have flown down and scooped our grub instead of using a measly old string. Angels! Wow! Will’s turning poet as well as artist.”

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