

Eggleston George Cary

Camp Venture: A Story of the Virginia Mountains



George Eggleston

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of the Virginia Mountains**

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CHAPTER I *On the Mountain Side*

"I'm tired, and the other pack mules are tired, and from the way you move I imagine that the rest of you donkeys are tired!" called out Jack Ridsdale, as the last of the mules and their drivers scrambled up the bank and gained a secure foothold on the little plateau.

"I move that we camp here for the night. All in favor say 'aye.' The motion's carried unanimously."

With that the tall boy threw off the pack that burdened his shoulders, set his gun up against a friendly tree and proceeded in other ways to relieve himself of the restraints under which he had toiled up the steep mountain side since early morning, with only now and then a minute's pause for breath.

"This is a good place to camp in," he presently added. "There's grazing for the mules, there's timber around for fire wood and I hear water trickling down from the cliff yonder. So 'Alabama,' which is Cherokee eloquence meaning 'here we rest.'"

The party consisted of five sturdy boys and a man, the Doctor, not nearly so stalwart in appearance, who seemed about twenty-eight or thirty years old. Each member of the party carried a heavy pack upon his back and each had a gun slung over his shoulder and an axe hanging by his girdle. There were four packmules heavily laden and manifestly weary with the long climb up the mountain.

As the boys were scarcely less weary than the mules they eagerly welcomed Jack Ridsdale's decision to go no farther that day, but rest where they were for the night.

"Now then," Jack resumed as soon as he got his breath again – a thing requiring some effort in the rarefied atmosphere of the high mountain peak – "we're all starved. The first thing to do is to get a fire started and get the kettle on for supper. If some of you fellows will unload the mules and get out the necessary things I'll chop some wood and we'll have a fire going in next to no time."

With that he swung his axe over his shoulder and stalked off into the nearby edge of the wood land. There with deft blows – for he was an expert with the axe – he quickly converted some fallen limbs and dead trees into a rude sort of fire wood which the other boys shouldered and carried to the glade where the Doctor had started a little fire that needed only feeding to become a great one.

During their laborious climb up the steep mountain side the party had found the early November day rather too warm for comfort; but now that the sun had sunk behind the mountain, and evening was drawing near, there was a sharp feeling of coming frost in the atmosphere, and as it would be necessary to sleep out of doors that night with no shelter but the stars, Jack continued his chopping until a great pile of dry wood lay near the fire ready for use during the night.

In the meantime the other boys busied themselves in getting supper ready. Harry Ridsdale – Jack's younger brother – prepared a great pot of coffee, while Ed Parmly fried panful after panful of salt pork, and Jim Chenowith endeavored to boil some potatoes. "Little Tom" Ridsdale, another brother of Jack's, employed himself in bringing the wood as fast as his brother chopped it, and piling it near the fire. While these things were doing the Doctor had carefully unpacked some of his scientific instruments and hung them up on trees at points, convenient for observation.

Presently Ed Parmly called out: "Now fellows, supper's ready – at least the pork and the coffee are waiting for Jim Chenowith to dish up his potatoes. Come Jim, what's the matter? Are you trying to boil those potatoes into mush?"

"No," answered Jim, jabbing the tubers with a stick which he had sharpened for that purpose, "but somehow the potatoes don't seem to want to get done. Mother always boils them in from ten to twenty minutes, according to their size, and these are about the ten minute size, yet I've boiled them for full half an hour and they're only now beginning to get soft."

"Your mother's potato kettle," said the Doctor, "isn't boiled at an elevation of two thousand feet above the sea level and that," consulting his aneroid barometer, "is about our present altitude."

"How do you find out that?"

"What has height to do with boiling potatoes?"

These questions were fired at the Doctor instantly.

"One at a time please," said the Doctor, "and as I see Jim is at last dishing up his potatoes we'll postpone the answer to both questions, if you don't mind, till we have satisfied our appetites."

The hungry fellows were ready enough to give exclusive attention to the business in hand, and as they sat there on logs and other improvised seats with tin plates before them and tin cups at hand they were a picturesque and attractive group, such as an artist would have rejoiced to portray.

As is usual with boys in the mountain regions of Southern Virginia, they were very tall – the older ones nearing, and Jack exceeding, six feet in height, while even "Little Tom" stood five feet seven in his socks with a year or two of growth still ahead of him. They were all robust fellows, too, lean, muscular, thin visaged, clear eyed and bronzed of face. They wore high boots, into which the legs of their trousers were thrust, and, over their trousers, thick woollen hunting shirts, the whole crowned with soft felt hats. It was precisely the dress which Washington urged upon Congress as the best service uniform that could be devised for the use of the American army.

"Now then Doctor," said Jim Chenowith, pushing away his tin plate and swallowing the last of the coffee from his big tin cup, "tell us why the potatoes wouldn't cook."

"Simply because the water wasn't hot enough to cook them as quickly as usual."

"Not hot enough? Why it was boiling like a volcano every moment of the time," said Jim in protest.

"Yes, but the boiling of water doesn't always mean the same thing. You see at or near the sea level water boils at a temperature of 212 degrees, Fahrenheit. But when you climb up mountains you come into a rarer and lighter atmosphere and water boils at considerably lower temperatures."

"But I kept my potato kettle boiling very hard – " interrupted Jim; "I never stopped firing up under it."

"That made no difference whatever in the amount of heat in it," answered the Doctor. "When water boils at all it is just as hot as fire can make it, unless it is shut completely off from contact with the air, as is the case in steamboilers. You can't make it any hotter no matter how much you may 'fire up' under the kettle."

"Why, how's that?" asked "Little Tom," becoming interested. "The more fire you make in a stove the hotter the stove gets, and the hotter the room gets, too. Why isn't it the same way with a kettle of water?"

"I'll explain that," said the Doctor, "and I think I can make you understand it. When water boils it gives off the vapor which we commonly call steam. That is to say, some of the water is converted by heat into vapor. It requires a great deal of heat to make the change from liquid to vapor and so the process of giving off steam cools the water. That is why you put a lid on a pot that you wish to boil quickly. You do it to check the cooling process by confining the vapor and preventing a too rapid conversion of water into steam."

"Is that the reason that you can hold your hand in the steam from a kettle when you can't hold it in the water that the steam comes from," asked Jim.

"Yes. The steam is really hotter than the water, but it needs all its own heat to keep it in the form of vapor, and so it doesn't give off enough heat to burn your hand after it gets a little way from the pot and begins to expand freely. Now as I was saying the harder you boil water the more steam it gives

off and the heating and cooling processes are so exactly balanced that boiling water stands always at a uniform temperature no matter whether it is boiling hard as we say, or only just barely boiling. But in a dense atmosphere it requires more heat to boil water than it does in a rarefied atmosphere like that up here on the mountain. At Leadville and other places lying from 10,000 to 14,000 feet above sea level in the Rocky mountains you can't boil potatoes at all and it takes full ten minutes to boil an egg into that condition which we call 'soft.' It all depends upon the temperature of boiling water, and that is considerably lower here than down in the valleys where we live."

"But Doctor," said Harry, "you promised to tell us how you find out how high we are above the sea level."

The Doctor got up, went to a tree and took down a scientific instrument.

"This," he said, "is an aneroid barometer. It measures the atmospheric pressure, and as that pressure steadily and pretty uniformly decreases as we go higher up, the instrument tells us at once how high we are."

"But will it measure so accurately that you can trust it?" asked one of the now eagerly interested boys.

"Let me show you," said the Doctor. "Make a torch, for it is growing dark, and come with me down the hill a little way. First look where the needle stands now."

They all carefully observed the register and then proceeded with their mentor down the hill a little way. He there exhibited his instrument again and it registered fifty feet lower than it had done on the plateau above. Returning to the camp fire they found that the needle had resumed its former pointing.

"Then you can tell by that instrument exactly how high you are at any time?" queried Jack.

"No, not exactly. You see the atmospheric pressure varies somewhat with the weather even if you observe it always on the same level. One has to allow for that, but allowing for it we can tell by the instrument what our elevation is with something closely approaching accuracy."

Just then came an interruption. A tall rough bearded, unkempt mountaineer, rifle in hand, stalked out of the woods and approached the camp fire. After inspecting the company and their belongings in silence for a time, he spoke a single word of question – "Huntin'?"

"No," answered Jack, who had risen in all his length of limb.

"Trappin'?"

"No."

"Jest campin' out?"

"No," answered Jack, still adhering to that monosyllable.

"Mout I ax then, what ye're a doin' of up here in the high mountings? You see us fellers what lives up here ain't over fond of strangers that comes potterin' round without explainin' of their selves."

"Well" said Jack, "I don't see why I shouldn't tell you what brings us here. My mother owns a tract of timber land a little further around the mountain, and it is pretty much all she does own in the world. She's a widow, and she's had a pretty hard time to bring up three boys of us" – turning and indicating his two brothers – "and now we see a way of helping her. They're going to build a railroad down in the valley on the other side of this mountain, and they want railroad ties. So we have organized a party and come up here to chop down trees, make ties and send them down the mountain by a chute."

"Um," answered the mountaineer. "What's them there things for?" pointing to the Doctor's scientific instruments hanging about on the trees.

"They are scientific instruments, if you know what that means," answered Jack, who was beginning to grow irritable under the intruder's impertinent questioning.

"What are you goin' to do with 'em? Will they help you to chop wood?"

"No, of course not. But the Doctor here," indicating him, "is much interested in science and he has brought his instruments along so as to make our stay on the mountains as profitable as possible in the way of study."

"My friend," broke in the Doctor, addressing the mountaineer, "If you will come to our camp when we get settled I'll show you how I use these things and what they tell me. One of them tells me how high up we are and when it's going to storm or clear away; another shows how fast the wind is blowing, another how cold it is and so on."

"Which one on 'em tells the strength of whiskey and how much tax they ought to be paid on it?"

This question was asked with a peculiar tone of sneering incredulity and suspicion.

"Not one of them has any relation whatever to whiskey or taxes or anything of the sort," answered the Doctor.

By this time Jack's patience was exhausted and by common consent Jack was the leader of the party. He turned to the tree behind him, seized his shot gun, presented it at the mountaineer's breast before that worthy could bring his rifle to his shoulder, and in an angry, but still cold voice, said:

"I'll trouble you to lay down that rifle."

The man obeyed.

"Now I'll trouble you, if you please to lay down your powder horn and your bullet pouch and your cap box and everything else that pertains to that rifle." All this while Jack was holding the muzzle of his full-cocked, double barrelled shot gun in front of the man's breast, while all the other boys had seized their guns and stood ready for action. The Doctor had not a shot gun, but a repeating, magazine rifle of the latest make, long in its range, exceedingly accurate in its fire and equipped with fourteen cartridges in its magazine that could be fired as fast as their owner pleased. And the moment that the mountaineer, before he laid down his rifle, made a motion as if to bring it to his shoulder, the Doctor had stepped to Jack's side with his destructive weapon in position for instant use. After the man had laid down his arms, the Doctor stepped back, lowered his weapon and said to Jack: – "Manage the affair in your own way. Only be prudent, and above all don't lose your temper."

Jack then said to the mountaineer:

"You've asked us a number of questions. Now I want to ask you some. What do you mean by intruding upon our camp? Who are you? What right have you to ask us about ourselves and our mission in these mountains? Answer man, and answer quick or I'll put two charges of buck shot through you in less than half a minute."

"Now, don't be too hard on a feller, pard," answered the man. "I didn't mean no harm in partic'lar. But you see us fellers that lives up here in the high mountings has a hard enough time to git a livin' and we don't like to be interfered with by no revenue officers and no spies and no speculators from down below. You see if we're caught, some of the money goes to the informer, an' so we takes good keer to have no informers about, an' if they insist on stayin' we usually buries 'em. Now you've got the drap on me an' my only chance is to go way if you'll let me go. So far as I'm concerned you're welcome to go round the mounting an' chop all the railroad ties an' cordwood you choose. But there's fellers in the mountings that you ain't got no drap on, as you've got it on me, an' fellers what ain't so tender hearted as me. An' so, while I'll leave my gun an' promise never to meddle with you again if you won't shoot, at the same time my earnest, friendly, fatherly advice to you boys is to take yourselves down out'n this mounting jes' as quick as you kin. It ain't no place for people of your sort."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," answered Jack. "We've come up here on a perfectly honest and legitimate mission, and we're going to carry it out. We are not interfering with anybody and I give you warning that if anybody interferes with us it will be the worse for him. We are armed, every man of us and we are prepared to use our arms. Tom," – turning to his brother, – "take that man's rifle and discharge it into the cliff back there."

Tom obeyed the command instantly. Then Jack said to their unwelcome visitor, "Now you can take your rifle and go away. But don't intrude upon us again. If you do, you'll get the contents of our guns without any explanations or any arguments. Take your gun and go!"

The intruder took his gun and accoutrements and without a word walked away up the mountain through the timber land.

"What does it all mean, Jack?" asked all the boys at once.

"Moonshiners," broke in Tom, sententiously.

Moonshiners are men who operate little unlicensed distilleries in the fastnesses of the mountains and surreptitiously sell their whiskey without paying the government tax upon it.

"But why should moonshiners object to our camping in the wood lands up here and cutting railroad ties?" asked Jim Chenowith. "I don't see the connection."

"Well, they do," answered Tom. "They are engaged in a criminal business and they don't want to be watched. If they are caught their stills and their whiskey are confiscated, they are fined heavily, and worse still they are imprisoned for very long terms. They are always on the lookout for agents of the revenue in disguise, and so they don't want any strangers in this 'land of the sky' on any pretence. They are desperate men to whom murder is a pastime and assassination an amusement."

"Then why did you anger the man as you did, Jack, and subject him to humiliation?" asked Ed Parmly. "Won't it make him and his people our enemies?"

"No," answered Jack. "They are that already. You remember that even after hearing my explanation of our purpose in coming up here, he ordered us to leave the mountain at once. Not being a pack of cowards of course we're not going to do anything of the kind. So it was just as well to let him know at once that we're going to stay, that we are fully armed, and that in the event of necessity we shall be what he would call 'quick on trigger.' I meant him to understand that clearly, and he understands it. You see men that are freest in killing other men have no more fondness than people generally for being killed themselves. Desperadoes are not heroes. They are merely bullies who take advantage of an unarmed enemy when they can and sneak away as that man did whenever an enemy 'gits the drap' on them as the fellow phrased it."

"But won't they attack us in our camp?" asked Jim Chenowith.

"Probably," answered Jack with perfect calmness. "They want us out of the mountains and they'll probably try to drive us out. But I for one am not going to be driven out, and I don't think the rest of you fellows are Molly Cottontails to be chased down the steeps."

"No!" called out little Tom. "We've got guns and we know how to use them. We're up here by right and here we'll stay. Won't we boys?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" answered the others in chorus.

"All right then," said Jack, "and I thank you all. But now that we know our danger we must look out for ourselves. We must never sleep without a sentinel on guard, and every fellow of us must always sleep with his gun by his side. That's what soldiers call 'sleeping on arms!'"

"All right!" called out Tom, who was always ready. "Arrange the guard detail for to-night Jack. I'll take the worst turn, which I believe begins about three o'clock – the 'dog watch' they call it on steamboats."

"Well," said Jack, meditatively. "It's now nearly ten o'clock. We'll all be up by six in the morning. That's eight hours and there are five of us; so it means one hour and thirty-six minutes apiece, of guard duty."

"Hold on," broke in the Doctor. "You've forgotten me."

"Well you see, Doctor, your health isn't good, and we don't want you to lose your sleep. We'll do all this guard duty without bothering you."

"Not if I know it," answered the Doctor. "I didn't join this party as a dead head, you may be sure of that. I'm going to share and share alike with you my comrades. I am not yet very strong after my long illness, but I'm strong enough to stay awake for my fair share of the time, and you may be

sure I am strong enough to pull a trigger and empty fourteen bullets from my magazine rifle into any body that may venture to assail us. Now boys, I want you to understand my position and attitude clearly. Either I am a full member of this company in good standing, or else I do not belong to it at all. In the latter case I'll withdraw and go back down the mountain. I'm older than you boys, but not enough older to make any serious difference. I'm still a good deal of a boy, and either you must let me do a boy's part or I'll quit. If I stay with you I must be one of you. I must do my share of the cooking and all the rest of the work, and especially my fair share of all guard duty and all fighting, if fighting becomes necessary at any time. Come now! Is it a bargain? Or am I to quit your company to-morrow morning, as a man too old and unfit to share with you the work we have come up the mountain to do?"

"I move," said little Tom, who had more wit than any other member of the company, "that Doctor LaTrobe be hereby declared to be precisely sixteen years old, and fully entitled to consider himself a boy among boys!"

The motion was carried with a shout, and then Jack, who was always practical, said:

"Well then there are six of us. That means one hour and twenty minutes apiece of guard duty to-night."

So it was arranged, and as soon as the order in which the several members of the party should be waked for duty was arranged, the boys piled an abundance of wood on the fire, wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay down to sleep. But first little Tom manufactured a pot of fresh coffee, and set it near the fire where it would keep hot.

"The sentinel must be wide awake," he said, "and I don't know anything like good strong coffee to keep one's eyes open."

CHAPTER II

A Picket Shot

The three Ridsdale boys and their comrades lived in a thriving, bustling little town in one of the great valleys which divide the Virginia Mountains into ranges each having its own name. Their ages ranged from Jack's nineteen years down to Jim Chenowith's sixteen. Little Tom was so called not so much because he was rather shorter than his overgrown brothers, as because his father had been also Thomas Ridsdale and for the sake of distinguishing between them the family and the neighbors had from his infancy called the boy "Little Tom." He was next to Jack in age being now nearly eighteen years old, and as a voracious reader and a singularly keen observer he was perhaps better informed than any other boy in the party. He was not really little by any means, being five feet seven inches high and of unusually stalwart frame. From his tenth year till now he had spent his vacations mainly in hunting in these mountains. His knowledge of wood craft and of all that pertains to the chase was therefore superior even to Jack's.

The father of the Ridsdale boys had been the foremost young lawyer in the town, but he had died at a comparatively early age, leaving his widow a very scanty estate with which to bring up the three boys who were her treasures. The boys had helped from the earliest years in which they were capable of helping. They had chopped and sawed and split wood, worked in the hay fields, dropped and covered corn, pulled fodder and done what ever else there was to do that might bring a little wage to eke out the good mother's scant income. In brief they had behaved like the brave, manly, mother-loving fellows that they were, and they had grown into a sturdy strength that promised stalwart manhood to all of them.

Among the widow's meagre possessions was a vast tract of almost worthless timber land up there on the mountain. It was almost worthless simply because there was no market for the timber that grew upon it. But now had come the railroad enterprise, whose contractors wanted ties and bridge timbers and unlimited cordwood for use in their engine furnaces. So Jack and his brothers had decided to omit this winter's attendance upon the High school, and to devote the season to the profitable work of wood chopping on the mountain. There was an exceedingly steep descent on that side of the mountain, on which their timber lands lay, so that by building a short chute to give a headway they could send their railroad ties and the other products of their chopping by a steep slide to the valley below by force of gravity and without any hauling whatever. Two of their schoolmates – Jim Chenowith and Ed Parmly had asked to join in the expedition. An arrangement had been made with the railroad people to pay a stipulated price for every railroad tie shot down the hill, a much higher price for every piece of timber big enough for use in bridge building and a fair price for all the cordwood sent down the chute. This latter was to be made of the limbs of trees cut down for ties or bridge timbers – limbs not large enough for other uses, and which must otherwise go to waste. The two boys who did not belong to the Ridsdale family – Ed Parmly and Jim Chenowith – were to pay to Mrs. Ridsdale a small price agreed upon for each tie or timber, or cord of wood that they should cut on her land, the rest of the price going to themselves.

During the last week before their departure Dr. LaTrobe had asked the privilege of joining the expedition. He was a man of means whose home was in Baltimore, but who had come to the town in which the boys lived in search of health and strength. He was a tireless student of science, and in the course of his duty in one of the charity hospitals of Baltimore he had contracted a fever. His recovery from it was so slow and unsatisfactory that he had abandoned his work and wandered away into South Western Virginia for purposes of recuperation and had been for some months boarding with Mrs. Ridsdale. In pursuit of health and strength therefore he asked to join the Ridsdale boys in their mountain expedition.

"I have quite all the money I want," he explained, "and so the ties and timbers and cordwood that I may cut will be counted as your own. All I want is the life in the open air, the exercise, the freedom, the health-giving experience of a camping trip."

Thus it was that the party had come together. They knew perfectly that once in the mountains after winter should set in in earnest their communication with the country below must be very uncertain. They therefore, took with them on their own backs and on the backs of their pack mules those necessaries which would most certainly render them independent of other sources of supply. The Doctor had largely directed the selection of food stuffs, bringing to bear upon it an expert knowledge which the boys, of course, did not possess.

"The basis will be beans," he said.

"But why beans?" asked Jack.

"For several reasons. First, because beans will keep all winter. Second, because beans are very nearly perfect food for robust people. They have fat in them, and that makes heat, and they have starch and gluten in them too, so that they are in fact both meat and bread. Pound for pound, dried beans are about the most perfect food possible. To make them palatable we must take some dry salted pork along. We can carry that better than pickled pork in kegs and we shall not have to carry a lot of useless brine if we take the dry salted meat."

The Doctor added some dried beef, a few hams, some bacon and a supply of sugar.

"Sugar," he explained, "is almost pure nutriment. It is food so concentrated that it ought never to be taken in large quantities in its pure state."

"That's why they were so stingy with me in the matter of candy when I was a little chap," soliloquized Tom.

The total supply of meat taken along was small, but it was quite well understood that the party must rely upon its guns mainly for that part of its food supply.

For bread there was a small quantity of "hard tack" and a large supply of corn meal.

The salt was securely encased in a water-tight and even moisture-proof oil-cloth bag. One big cheese was taken by special request of Ed's mother, who had made it a year before, and the Doctor approved its inclusion in the list.

"It weighs fifty pounds," he said to Jack who from the first had charge of the expedition, "but it is pure food and we couldn't put in fifty pounds of any thing else that would go so far to ward off starvation in case we get into difficulties. Next to a supply of coffee, nothing could be more useful."

There were only four pack mules to carry these things, but every member of the party carried a heavy pack on his shoulders, besides his gun and axe, so that altogether the expedition was reasonably well provisioned, in view of the fact that it was going into the mountains where game of every kind abounded.

No provender was carried for the pack mules. There was grass enough for them to live upon during the journey of two days and at the end of that time they were to be turned loose to find their own way down the mountain, cropping grass and herbs as they went.

There was a grind stone for the sharpening of the axes, and one of the boys carried a long cross-cut saw. The ammunition supply was large, and besides cartridges loaded with turkey shot it included several scores that carried full sized buck shot. The ammunition, added to the rest, very seriously over-loaded the mules. On a long journey those animals, large and brawny as they were, could not have endured the burdens laid upon them. But the trip up the mountain was to occupy a good deal less than two days and so the owner of the mules readily consented to the overloading.

That is how it came about that the five boys and Doctor LaTrobe were camping up there in a little mountain glade, on the night on which our story opens. They had less than a mile to go on the next day in order to reach their permanent camping place, but the journey was mainly a very steep up-hill one, and, their halt on the mountain side was in every way wise.

Healthily weary as they were it did not take the boys long to fall asleep after they had wrapped themselves in their blankets and lain down with feet toward the great blazing fire.

It was understood that the one on sentry duty should replenish the fire from time to time, but at Jack's wise suggestion the sentry was himself to remain well away from the blazing logs, and in the shadow of the woodlands beyond.

"Otherwise," explained Jack, "an enemy approaching in the dark might easily pick off our sentry, sitting or standing in the firelight, and then slip away in the darkness without the possibility of our seeing him."

The hours wore away, however, with no disturbance in the camp. One after another sentry aroused his successor and himself lay down to sleep.

It was nearing daybreak, and little Tom was on duty. There was already a rime of white frost on the grass and leaves and the atmosphere was chill. Tom looked longingly at the great blazing fire as he walked his beat in the woodland shadows far beyond reach of its comforting radiance.

"Any how this snappy air keeps a fellow from sleeping on post," he said to himself, "and they punish that crime with death in the army. Whew! how my ears ache!

"What's that?" he ejaculated under his breath as he heard a stealthy noise. Listening he heard a sound as of some one creeping up through the woods. He cocked both barrels of his shot gun, each of which carried nine buck shot, and breathlessly waited, listening and looking. Presently he fired, and instantly every member of the party was on his feet, gun in hand, for they were all sleeping with their pieces beside them.

"What is it?"

"Where is it?"

"Who is it?" and so on with question after question they bombarded little Tom.

"It's breakfast," said little Tom, calmly walking to the foot of a tree and there picking up a fat opossum.

There was a laugh, for half asleep as the boys were they saw the humor of the situation and realized under what a nervous strain they had been sleeping.

"Now go to sleep again," said Tom, "and when I wake you next time breakfast will be ready."

He went away into the woods and there dressed the opossum. Then he so far disregarded orders as to go to the fire and rig up a device for cooking the dainty animal. He cut two forked sticks, sharpened their lower ends and drove them firmly into the earth. Across these he laid another stick and from it he hung the opossum by a bit of twine which he twisted till it set and kept the roast revolving. Then he returned to the shadows, but every now and then he came back to the fire to inspect his roast and to set the string twirling anew.

Finally, just as day was breaking, little Tom aroused the rest with a demand that some of them should make some bread, brew some coffee and "make themselves generally useful," as he phrased it.

The sun was not yet up when the last bones of the pig-like little animal were picked clean and the final drop of coffee was drunk.

CHAPTER III

The Doctor's Plans

The little company had only a mile, or a trifle more, to go before reaching their final destination. But it was literally "up hill work." Often it was worse even than that, involving the climbing of cliffs and difficult struggles to force the mules through rocky and tangled woodlands.

It was nearly ten o'clock therefore when they at last came to a halt in a body of thick-growing timber, and after a careful inspection of the situation, decided to pitch their permanent camp there.

There were many points to be considered in locating themselves. They must have water of course and there was a spring here under the cliff that rose at the back of the plateau. It needed some digging out to form a basin, but an hour's or two hours' work by two of the party would accomplish that. They must be near the cliff on the other side over which their ties and timbers were to be sent into the slide that was to carry them to the valley below, and this spot seemed the best of all for the purpose. Finally the timber, consisting chiefly of vigorous young oaks, hickories and chestnuts, but having many giant trees besides, was here especially dense in its growth, and ready to their hands and axes.

"There's a steep reach of mountain looming up just behind us," said the Doctor, "and when the snows come it may give us some trouble in the way of avalanches, floods and the like, but on the whole I think this is the best spot we could select."

So the pack mules were relieved of their loads, and turned loose. It was certain that the sagacious animals would slowly retrace the road over which they had come and return to their master in the valley below. At any rate the master of them was confident of that and his agreement with the boys had been that the mules should simply be turned loose when their task was done.

"Now let's all get together," said Jack Ridsdale when the mules disappeared over the edge of the last troublesome ascent. "Let's all get together and lay out our work."

"That's right," said the Doctor. "We must first of all provide for immediate needs, and next for a permanent camp. Now first, what are our immediate needs?"

"Water, fire, and a temporary shelter," promptly answered little Tom the readiest thinker as well as the most experienced woodsman in the whole company.

"Well we'll set two fellows at work digging out a large basin for that spring," said Jack. "That will give us an adequate water supply for all winter. You Tom, and Ed Parmly, are detailed to that work. Now as to shelter. Of course we've got to build a permanent winter quarters. But that will take several days – perhaps a week, and in the meantime we're likely to have snows or rains and we must have some sort of temporary abode. We must build that to-day. How shall it be done?"

"Easy enough," answered Harry Ridsdale. "We can set up some poles just under the cliff back there and make a shed open in front and covered with bushes so arranged as to shed the rain. Of course the place wouldn't be a good one for permanent quarters, but in November there are no avalanches or anything else of that sort, and so a temporary shed there will answer our purpose for the present."

"But how are we going to keep it warm?" asked Ed.

"By building a big fire in front of it," answered Harry.

"But suppose the wind should blow hard from the north and blow all the smoke into our shed?" said Ed.

"Well, let it," answered Harry. "The smoke will rise, especially in a high wind, and our bush roof will certainly be porous enough to let it through."

After a little further discussion it was decided to adopt Harry's plan, and by the time that Tom and Ed had completed the work of digging out a water reservoir, the rest of the party had constructed a temporary shelter under the cliff, quite sufficient for their immediate needs. By this time hunger

– that always recurring condition – had seized upon them and they prepared a rather late dinner of squirrels that had been shot by one and another of the party on the journey. They were tired, too, and the need of rest was imperative. So they decided to do no more work that day, but to devote its remaining hours to the task of planning their winter quarters.

First of all they selected a location for their winter house which the Doctor thought the avalanches and the floods from the mountains would not seriously inconvenience. The ground on which they were camping was a sort of plateau, with a cliff rising behind and with the steep mountain side falling away into the fathomless depths in front. The plateau embraced several acres of land, and it was fairly level; but the spot selected for winter quarters was a little knoll which rose above the general level very near the top of the steep front.

By the time that all this had been accomplished night fell, and there was supper to get. After supper Jack said:

"Now we've laid out our camp, but we haven't named it yet. With the enmity of the moonshiners already aroused, it's a venture – our staying here I mean – but we're going to make the venture. So I propose that we call this camp of ours 'Camp Danger,' or 'Camp Risk' or camp something else of the sort."

"Why not call it 'Camp Venture?'" asked Harry.

"Good! 'Camp Venture' it is," answered Ed Parmly and the Doctor in unison. "Let it be 'Camp Venture'" and, added the Doctor, "if we are up to our business we'll show our friends that 'Camp Venture' did not venture more than its members were able to carry out. I'll tell you what, boys, I'm going to keep a diary setting forth all our adventures, and when the thing is over and done for, I'm going to write a book about it."

"Then we'll all be heroes of romance," said Jack. "Who'll be the villain of the piece?"

"Not at all," answered the Doctor. "I shall use fictitious names for all of you and even for myself, so that nobody shall ever know who we are or who it was that lived and experienced and perhaps suffered in 'Camp Venture.' I'm not going to spoil you superb fellows by making public personages of you before your time. But I'm going to write a book about your doings and sayings, which will perhaps interest some other boys and help them to meet duty as it ought to be met."

This story is the book that the Doctor wrote.

CHAPTER IV

A New Declaration of Independence

"Well," said little Tom long before supper, "if you fellows are too lazy to do any more work after an easy day like this, I am going out into the sunset to look for a turkey. I'm not fond of salt meat, and besides we've got to spare our salt pork against a time of need. I'll be back by supper time."

With that he shouldered his gun, withdrew one of the buckshot cartridges, inserted one loaded for turkeys in its stead, and strolled away up the mountain side.

An hour passed and little Tom did not return. Another hour went by and still no little Tom came. By this time darkness had set in and supper was ready. The boys were growing uneasy, but they comforted themselves with the thought that "Little Tom knows how to take care of himself, anyhow."

So they sat down to their evening meal with a great fire crackling and glowing in front of their temporary shelter, and filling it with fierce light which completely blinded their eyes to everything in the gloom beyond. They had carelessly stacked their arms in a corner, a dozen feet beyond reach, and were chatting in a jolly way when suddenly there appeared before them the tall mountaineer of the night before.

This time he was wilier than on his previous appearance. This time he levelled his gun at the party and quickly stepped between them and their arms. Then, with his rifle at his shoulder and his finger near the hair trigger that was set to go off at the very lightest touch, he called out:

"You got the drap on me las' night, but now I've dun got the drap on you. Will you now git out'n this here mounting? I've dun give you notice that us fellers what lives up here don't want no visitors from down below. So throw up your hands and march right now, every one of you. I'll take keer o' your guns an' other things, an' I'm not a goin' to take this rifle from my shoulder till the last one of you is well started down the mounting. Come now! Git a move onto you!"

At that moment a noise as of some heavy body falling was heard in the outer darkness just beyond the limits of the firelight. The next instant little Tom leaped upon the mountaineer's back grasped his throat with both hands and dragged him to earth. His rifle went off in the *mélee*, but fortunately the bullet had no billet and flattened itself against the side of the cliff.

Of course the mountaineer was more than a match for little Tom and in a prolonged struggle would easily have got the better of him. But the other boys instantly came to their comrade's assistance and the intruder was quickly and completely overcome.

He had received some ugly hurts in the encounter, among them a broken arm, but the Doctor dressed the wounds and meantime the man became placative in his mood.

"I was about to shoot him," said little Tom, "but it isn't a pleasant thing to shoot a man even when you must, and so I thought of the other plan, and jumped on his back instead. I knew I couldn't hold him down by myself, but I knew you other fellows would come to my assistance, so I risked that mode of operations."

"If you had shot him," said the Doctor, "you'd have been justified both in law and in morals."

"Yes, I know that," said little Tom, "but I shouldn't have slept well afterwards and I'm fond of my sleep."

"Well now eat your supper," said the Doctor, "and perhaps our friend the enemy here will join you in enjoying it."

To the astonishment of all, the mountaineer eagerly replied:

"Well, I don't keer if I do. I ain't et nothin' sence a very early breakfast, an' it wa'n't much of anything that I et then. As for the little scrimmage, I don't bear no malice when I gits hurt in a fair fight – least of all against a young chap like that. You see I had got the drap on you fellers, an' when he come up sort o' unexpected like and unbeknownst to me, he jist naterally took the drap on me."

It was all fair an' right, an' I want to say I'm grateful to him for not usin' his gun. He could 'a shot me like a dog, an' he didn't."

All this while the lean and hungry mountaineer was eating voraciously and in spite of his wounds with an eager relish.

"How do you people live up here?" asked the Doctor. "You can't grow much in the way of crops. Do you generally have enough to eat?"

"Well hardly to say generally. Sometimes we has, and more oftener we hasn't. You see our business is onsartain. That's why we don't like strangers prowlin' around in the mountings. Now I've got somethin' friendly like, to say to you fellers. Fust off I want to tell you *I'm* not agoin' to bother you agin. I'm a believin' that you've come up here on a straight business. But there's others that ain't got so much faith as me. They'll make trouble for you if you stay. My advice to you is to git out'n the mountings jest as quick as you kin."

"But my friend," said the Doctor, "Why should we leave the mountains? We are on land owned by the mother of my young friends here. We have come only to see if we can't get some money for her out of lands that have never paid her anything – not even earning the taxes that she has paid on them. Why shouldn't we stay here and do this? This is a free country, and – "

"They's taxes in it," said the mountaineer, gritting his teeth, "an' they's jails for them that tries to carry on business without a payin' of the taxes. I don't call that no free country."

"It would be idle to argue that question," replied the Doctor. "But we, at least, have nothing to do with the taxes. We are here to make a little money in a perfectly legitimate way, by hard work. We are not interfering with any body and we don't intend to interfere with any body. But we're going to stay here all winter and carry on our business."

"Yes!" added Jack, "and if any body interferes with us it will be the worse for him."

"Well, you're makin' of a mistake," said the mountaineer, "an' I give you friendly warnin'. As I done told you before, I believe you. I think you're dead straight. But there's them what ain't so charitable, as the preachers say. There's them that'll believe you're lyin', and 'll stick to that there belief till the cows come home, an' they'll make a mighty heap o' trouble fer you fellers ef you tries to stay here. They're men that won't be watched I tell you, and forty witnesses, all on their Bible oaths couldn't persuade 'em but what you're here to watch 'em. It's friendly advice I give you when I tells you to git out'n these mountings."

"All right," broke in little Tom, "but while you're scattering friendly advice around suppose you advise your friends to let us alone. Tell them that little Tom Ridsdale proposes to shoot next time, and to shoot his buckshot barrel at that." Tom rose to his feet and added:

"You and your people mean war. Very well. I for one, accept the issue. Hereafter it will be war, and in war every man shoots to do all the damage he can. I have a perfect right to be here on my mother's land, and here I am going to stay. If every other fellow in the party should start down the mountain this night, I would stay here alone to fight it out all winter. And every other fellow in our party feels just as I do. Go to your criminal friends and tell them that! But warn them that if they interfere with us we'll not wrestle with them, we'll shoot and we'll take no chance of missing. We'll shoot to produce effects. We'll never interfere with you or your friends, but you and your friends mustn't interfere with us. If you do, you'll get war and all you want of it. We've tried to do the right thing by you; and now I give you fair warning."

"Well, all I've got to say," said the mountaineer, as he took his departure, "is jest this: You fellers has dealt fair with me, an' I'll deal fair with you. That boy that threw me down an' broke my arm mout just as easy have shot me through the body; an' then the tender way that the Doctor done up my arm! Why even a woman couldn't 'a' been tenderer like. Now I ain't got no quarrel with you fellers, an' that's why I'm advisin' you to git down out'n the mountings as soon as you kin. There's others, I tell you, an' they ain't soft hearted like me. They'll give you a heap o' trouble if you stay here."

"Let them try it," answered little Tom. "Let them try it. Then we'll see who's who, and what's what. Now tell your friends what I've said to you. There! good night! I hope your arm will get well. If it doesn't, come over here and let the Doctor look at it."

With that defiant farewell in his ears the mountaineer took his leave.

"Was it prudent, Tom?" asked Ed Parmly, "to send that sort of defiant message to the moonshiners?"

"Yes, quite prudent. We want them to know that we are here on our own business and not on theirs, at all. We want them to know that we propose to stay here whether they want us to do so or not. And finally, we want them to understand that any interference with us on their part, will mean war. I've simply issued a Declaration of Independence, and – "

"And to it," called out Jim Chenowith, quoting, "we pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor."

"Now," said Jack, "from this hour forward we'll keep a sentinel always on duty, so that we may not be caught napping. During the daytime, of course, when we're chopping ties and timbers, we'll need no sentinels. We'll keep our guns within easy reach, and so every one of us will be a sentinel, but when night comes on we mustn't let anybody 'get the drap' on us as that fellow did to-night. By the way, Tom, did you get any game?"

"Why, yes. I forgot all about that. I dropped it out there to tackle that mountaineer. I had carried and dragged it for weary miles, and I wonder at my forgetfulness."

Without questioning him further two of the boys went off into that circle of darkness which seemed impenetrably black when looked at from the fireside, but which was light enough when they got within its environment. There they found a deer, weighing perhaps a hundred and fifty pounds, which little Tom had shot high up on the mountain and had laboriously dragged, in part, and carried on his shoulders in other part, all the way to camp.

Tom was much too weary to attend to it, but there were eager hands to help, and while Tom slept, they dressed the venison, and when Tom waked in the morning, he found that he had been completely excused from sentry duty throughout the night. His toilsome hunt, his painful carrying of the deer, his nervous strain over the necessity of encountering the mountaineer, and pretty seriously injuring him, and above all, his rise in wrath and his deliverance of a new Declaration of Independence as a defiance to the mountaineers, had been decreed by unanimous vote of the party to be the full equivalent of sentry service, and so Tom had been permitted to sleep through all the hours till breakfast was served.

CHAPTER V

The Building of a Cabin

Jack routed out the entire party before daylight next morning and bade them "get breakfast quick and eat it in a hurry. We've got to begin our house to-day," he added.

They were eager enough, for, apart from the frolic of house building, they knew how badly they should need a more secure shelter than their temporary abode could furnish, should rain or snow come, as was likely now at any time.

Breakfast over, Jack took his axe and marked a number of trees for cutting. Most of them were trees nearly a foot in thickness – none under eight inches – and all were situated in the thickest growth of timber.

"Why not choose trees farther out in the open?" asked Ed Parmly, "where they would be easier to get at and get out."

"Because, if you will use your eyes, Ed, you'll see that out in the open, the trees taper rapidly from stump to top. I want trees that will yield at least one, and if possible, two logs apiece, with very little taper to them. Otherwise, our house will be lop-sided."

"But I say, Jack, what causes the difference? Why do trees in the thick woods grow so much taller and straighter and of more uniform size than trees out in the open?"

"Because every tree is continually hunting for sunlight and air," answered Jack. "Out in the open, each tree finds these easily and goes to work at once to put out its branches, about ten feet from the ground, and to make itself generally comfortable. But where the trees are crowded close together each has to struggle with all the rest for its share of sunlight and air. They do not waste their energies in putting out branches that they can do without, but just keep on growing straight up in search of the air and sunlight. So you see if you want long sticks you must go into the thick woods for them. Out there in that half open glade there isn't a single tree with a twenty-foot reach before you come to its branches, while the trees I have marked here in the thick woods will give us, most of them two logs apiece twenty-one feet long and with not more than three or four inches difference between their diameters at the butt and their diameters at the extreme upper end. It's a good deal so with men, by the way. Those that must struggle for a chance usually achieve the best results in the end."

By this time the axes were all busy felling the marked trees, and within an hour or so they all lay upon the ground, trimmed of their branches, and cut into the required lengths of twenty-one feet each.

Having felled his share of them, Jack went a little further into the woodlands, and began blocking out great chips from one after another big chestnut tree. Having blocked out these chips, Jack sat down and began to split them, observing the result in each case with care. Presently he satisfied himself and set to work to cut down the giant chestnut whose chip had yielded the best results.

"What's all that for, Jack?" asked the Doctor. "Why did you split up those chips in that way, like a little boy with a new hatchet?"

"I was hunting for some timber that isn't 'brash,'" answered Jack, "to make our clapboards out of."

"What do you mean by 'brash?'"

"Why, some timber splits easily and straight along its grain, while other wood breaks away slantwise across the grain. That last kind is called 'brash,' and, of course, it is of no account for clapboards. See here!" and with that he took up two of the big sample chips and illustrated his meaning by splitting them and showing the Doctor how one of them split straight with the grain, while the other showed no such integrity.

"Oh, then, you're going to make clapboards out of this tree to roof our shanty with and to close up its gables."

"I'm going to make clapboards for our roof," answered Jack, "but not for our gables. They'll be made of logs, in true mountain fashion."

"But how is that possible?" eagerly asked the Doctor.

"I'll show you when we come to build. I can't very well explain it in advance. And another thing, Doctor, you remember that we have only ten pounds or so of nails, all told."

"That's true!" exclaimed the Doctor, almost in consternation. "We can't roof our house till somebody goes down the mountain and brings a supply."

"That's where you are mightily mistaken, Doctor. There isn't a log cabin in these mountains that has a nail in its roof."

"But how then are the clapboards held in place?"

"That again is a thing I can show you far better than I can explain it without demonstration. But we must first get our clapboards, and if you'll go back to the camp and bring a cross cut saw, I'll have this giant of the forest laid low by the time you get back, and then you and I will cut it into four-foot lengths for clapboards."

It should be explained that in the mountains of Virginia the word "clapboard" and the simpler word "board," mean something quite different from what they signify elsewhere. When the Virginia mountaineer speaks of a "board" or a "clapboard" he means a rough shingle, four feet long, simply split out of a piece of timber and not dressed in any way.

When the Doctor returned with the cross cut saw, Jack first marked off ten feet of his great tree at the butt and the two set to work to sever it.

"But you said we were to cut it into four-foot lengths," said the Doctor, as they began to pull the saw back and forth.

"So we are," answered Jack, "after we saw off this butt. You see, the butt of a tree is always rather brash, and so we won't use that for clapboards. Besides, I've another use for it."

"What?" asked the Doctor.

"I'm going to dig it out into a big trough and make a bath tub out of it. You see, that spring up there under the cliff has a fine flow of water. I'll sink this trough in the ground, at a proper angle, and train the water into it. It will run in at one end and out at the other, continually, so we'll always have a fresh bath ready for any comer."

"But will the boys relish a cold bath out of doors when the thermometer gets down into the small figures?"

"Well they'd better. Little Tom is a crank on cold bathing in the morning, and if any fellow in the party doesn't relish that sort of thing, Tom will souse him in any how till he teaches him to like it. He won't do you that way, Doctor, of course, but – "

"But why not? I need the tonic influence of cold morning baths more than anybody else in the party, and as soon as we get our bath tub in place I shall begin taking them. And more than that, I'll help little Tom in the work of dousing any boy in the party that neglects that hygienic regimen."

Having sawed off the butt of this big tree, Jack went back to the house site and directed the boys as to the work of building. The forty sticks of timber already cut, when piled into a crib would make the body of a cabin nearly twenty feet square, allowing for the overlapping of the timbers, and about ten feet high under the eaves. Jack showed the boys how to notch the logs at their ends so as to hold them securely in place and so also as to let them lie very close together throughout their length. For, of course, without notching, each log would lie the whole thickness of another log above the timber below it. Having thus started the four in the work of building, he returned to the woods where he and the Doctor continued the work of sawing the big tree trunk into four-foot lengths. About noon the Doctor volunteered to go and prepare a roast venison dinner, and Jack proceeded to split the tree-lengths into sizes convenient for the riving of the clapboards.

By the time that he had accomplished this, the Doctor whistled through his fingers to announce dinner, and every member of the party was eagerly ready for the savory meal, the very odor of which

made their nostrils glad while they were washing their hands and faces in preparation for it. There were not many dishes included in it – only some sweet potatoes roasted in the ashes, and some big pones of black ash cake, to go with the great haunch of roast venison.

Ash cake is a species of corn bread, consisting of corn meal mixed up with cold water and a little salt, and baked hard in a bed of hot ashes and hotter coals, and if any reader of this story has ever eaten ash cake, properly prepared, I need not tell him that there is no better kind of bread made anywhere – no, not even in Paris, a city that prides itself about equally upon its "pain" – bread, – and its paintings, of which it has the finest collections in all the world. Finally, there was the sauce – traditionally, the best in the world, – namely, hunger. Half a dozen young fellows high up on a mountain side, who had breakfasted before daylight and swung axes and lifted logs till midday, needed no highly-spiced flavoring to give savor to their meat. They ate like the healthy, hard working fellows that they were, and they had no fear of indigestions to follow their eating.

After dinner the work of building went on apace. The main crib of the house was finished by noon of the next day, and the roof and gables only remained to be completed after that. This was to be done as follows:

Logs to form the gables were cut, each a few feet shorter than the one below. Then poles six inches in diameter were cut to form a resting place for the clapboards, and were placed lengthwise the building, resting in notches in the steadily shortening gable timbers. The gable timbers were permitted, however, to extend two feet or so beyond the notches in which the lengthwise poles rested, and a second notch was cut in each end of each of them. When a row of clapboards was laid on the lengthwise poles, another lengthwise pole was placed on top to hold the clapboards in place, and this top pole rested in the outer notches of the gable logs, thus securely holding the roof in position, and as the clapboards overlapped each other as shingles do, the roof was rainproof.

Meantime Jack had been riving clapboards with a fro. Does the reader know what a fro is? The dictionaries do not tell you in any adequate way, though in Virginia and throughout the south and the great west that implement has played an important part in enabling men to house themselves with clapboards or shingles for their roofs. So I must do the work that the dictionaries neglect. A fro is an iron or steel blade about eight or ten inches long, about three inches wide, a quarter of an inch thick at top, tapering to a very dull edge at bottom. In one end of it is an eye to hold a handle.

The fro is used in splitting out clapboards and rough shingles. The operator places its dull edge on the end of a piece of timber of proper width, at the distance of a clapboard's thickness from the side of the timber. Then he hits the back of the fro blade with a mallet or club, driving it well in like a wedge. Then, by working the handle backwards and forwards, and pushing the fro further and further into the crack, as it opens, he splits off a shingle, or a clapboard, as the case may be. In the south, and in some parts of the west nearly all of the shingles and clapboards used are still split out in this way with the fro. Until recent years, when shingle making machines were introduced, all shingles were made in that way, so that next to the axe, and the pitsaw, which used to do the work now done by the saw mill, the fro played the most conspicuous part in the creation of human habitations in all that pioneer period when sturdy arms were conquering the American wilderness and stout hearts were creating the greatness in which we now rejoice. It is stupid of the dictionaries not to tell of it.

In splitting out his clapboards from three-cornered sections of his chestnut logs, Jack gradually reduced those sections to a width too small for the further making of clapboards. This left in each case a three-cornered stick two inches thick at its thickest part, and perhaps three inches wide to its edge. The Doctor wanted to utilize these sticks for firewood and proposed to carry a lot of them to the temporary shelter for that purpose.

"Not by any means," said Jack. "Those wedge-shaped pieces are to be used for chinking."

"What's chinking?" asked the Doctor.

"Why, you see," answered Jack, "the logs of which our house or hut is built, are not quite straight, though they are the straightest we could find in the woods. There are spaces between them

that are open, and when the zero weather comes we should be very uncomfortably cold in there if these spaces remained open. No fire that we could make in our chimney would keep us warm under such conditions. So we must stop up the cracks. We'll do that by fitting these pieces of chinking into the cracks between the logs, and then 'daubing' the smaller cracks with mud. That's an operation that will try your resolution, Doctor, and determine whether you are really only sixteen years old, as we voted that you were, or are a much older person, to be specially considered by us boys – for I don't know any more disagreeable job than daubing a log cabin."

"Good!" answered the Doctor. "I'll submit myself to the test very gladly. You'll show me how to 'daub' of course, and if I don't 'daub' with the best and youngest of you, then I'll give up and go down the mountain, acknowledging myself a failure. But I give you fair warning that I don't expect or intend either to give up or to go down the mountain."

"We should all be very sorry if you did, Doctor. We've adopted you now. We've decreed that for this winter, at any rate, you are only sixteen years of age, and upon my word, if you'll allow me to say so – "

"Now, stop right there," broke in the Doctor. "Don't say 'if you'll allow me to say so.' That undoes the whole arrangement. You fellows have accepted me as a boy among boys, and you've got to stick to that. There are to be no deferences to me. There is to be precisely the same comradeship between me and the rest of you that exists among yourselves, otherwise I shall consider myself an intruder."

"All right," responded Jack, seizing the Doctor's hand and pressing it warmly. "We all feel that you are altogether one of us, and I for one shall hereafter treat you as such. So when the daubing time comes I'll set you your task like the rest of them and I'll criticize every crevice you leave open. What with an open roof – for a clapboard roof is very open – through which the wind can blow at its own sweet will, and what with the necessity of keeping the door open most of the time for light, it's going to be very hard work to keep the place comfortably warm."

"But why keep the door open for light?" asked the Doctor. "Why not let in the light through windows?"

"We haven't any windows," answered Jack, "and we haven't any sash or glass to make them with."

"Of course not," said the Doctor, "but still, if you'll let me, I'll show you how to have windows that will keep out the wind and let in light at the same time. I've all the necessary materials in my shoulder pack."

"I can't guess how you're going to do it, Doctor, but at any rate I accept your statement, and if you'll tell me what sized openings you want in the walls for your windows, I'll go at once and saw them out."

"That's what troubles me," said the Doctor. "I don't see how we are going to make window openings without sawing through the logs, and I don't see how that is to be done without weakening the structure, and letting the unsupported ends of the logs fall out of place."

"Oh, that's easy enough," answered Jack. "You tell me what sized window openings you want in our walls, and I'll take care of the logs."

The Doctor thought a moment, and then said:

"Well, we ought to have two windows, each about two feet and a half one way by about three feet or a little more the other way."

"Does it make any difference," asked Jack, "whether the long way is up and down, or to the right and left?"

"None. You can make the openings long either way and short either way."

"Good!" answered Jack. "Then I'll make them long to right and left and short in their up and down dimensions, so that I shall have to saw out only two logs for each window."

Jack went immediately to work. He split out six or eight boards, each four times the thickness of any ordinary clapboard, and, taking a handful of the small supply of nails on hand, went to the cabin now well advanced in construction, and selected the places for the two window openings. Then he nailed the thick boards securely to the logs, one on each side of one of the proposed window openings. The boards were long enough to reach over four of the logs. Jack nailed them securely to all four of the logs, thus binding the timbers together, and making each a support to all of the others. Then he sawed out three-foot lengths of the two middle logs, leaving their ends securely supported by the boards which were firmly nailed to them, and also to the uncut logs above and below. Then, to make all secure, he fitted pieces of his thick boards to the ends of the sawed logs, and nailed them firmly into place as an additional protection against sagging.

"Now, then, Doctor," he called out, "come on with your windows. I'm curious to see what they are like."

"In a minute," answered the Doctor, who was busy with his materials on a log in front of the house. He had taken two strips of thin yard-wide muslin each a little over four feet long, and with the inside of a bacon rind he was busily greasing them.

The result of the greasing was to render the thin cotton fabric quite translucent, and indeed, almost transparent. With tacks, of which there was a small supply in the Doctor's own pack, he securely fastened one of these pieces of greased muslin on the outside of the window opening that Jack had made, and the other on the inside, leaving a space of several inches between.

"There," he said, when all was done, "that will let in light almost as well as glass could do, and it will keep out wind and cold even better than the logs you sawed away could have done, no matter how well chinked and daubed they might have been."

Then he and Jack proceeded to deal with the other window opening in the same way. By the time that they had done the boys were clamorously calling them to supper, and they were not reluctant to answer the summons. By this time the roof was on the house and a door of clapboards, split out of double thickness, was hung by hinges made of limber twigs, called withes, to pegs in the logs, and supplied with a wooden latch, catching into a wooden slot. The door opening was made precisely as the window holes were. The mountain form of log cabin involved the least possible use of metal in its construction, and except for the nails used in making the door and windows this one had involved the use of no metal at all. It was not all done, by any means, but at least its outer shell was done after two days of hard work, and the rest could be safely left till the morrow – all of it, except one thing, of which Jack was mindful during supper.

CHAPTER VI

After Supper

"Boys," said Jack while supper was in process of consumption, "I'm afraid we've all got to do a little work to-night by moonlight. Fortunately there is a moon, but these thin, fleecy clouds mean snow or I'm mistaken."

"What is the work to be done, Jack," asked Ed. "Why," said Jack, "we've got to have some dry broom straw for our beds, and we've got to gather it to-night. Otherwise it'll all be wet."

"Broom straw" in Virginia means a tall grass of the prairie grass kind, which grows thickly in every open space. In winter it is dry and nothing makes a sweeter smelling bed.

The boys were tired after their hard day's work, but their enthusiasm instantly outvoted their weariness, for their proceedings had not yet lost the character of a sort of frolic in their minds.

"Besides," said little Tom as the supper drew to an end, "I for one am not half as tired as I was when we sat down to eat."

"Naturally not," said the Doctor.

"But why is it?" asked Tom. "I don't see how I have got rested so soon."

"You've fired up," replied the Doctor. "Did you ever see an engine that worked badly for want of steam? Did you ever observe what the engineer does in that case?"

"Yes, of course; he sets the stoker to firing up under the boiler. But what has that to do with getting tired and getting rested again? I don't see the connection."

"Yet it is clear enough," the Doctor responded. "The human system is a machine. It must have energy or force or whatever you choose to call it, to enable it to do its work. Now an engine gets its energy from the coal or wood burned under its boiler. This human machine derives its energy solely from food put into the stomach. When you are tired it means simply that your supply of physical force has run low. When you eat you replenish the supply, just as firing up does it for the engine."

"But Doctor," said Jack with an accent of puzzled inquiry, "how about those people that are always tired – 'born tired' as they say? They eat, but they never get over being tired."

"Dyspeptics, every one of them," replied the Doctor. "It doesn't help an engine to shovel coal into its furnace if the coal doesn't burn. In the same way it doesn't strengthen a man to eat unless he digests and assimilates his food."

"Well now, if you people have sufficiently assimilated your food and your ideas," broke in little Tom, "let's get to work."

Some of the boys pulled the grass and piled it in rude shocks. The others carried it to the hut and bestowed it in one corner, ready for use. As they carried on the work the moon slowly went out, and just as they were finishing it, Jim Chenowith called out:

"There's the snow," and very gently the flakes began descending. "Jack you're a good weather prophet, and this time it's lucky for us that you are. Otherwise we should have had wet broom straw to sleep on all winter. By the way, how are we going to arrange our beds?"

"Why, we'll build a platform of small poles along the eastern wall of our house – the fireplace being on the western side. We'll divide this platform into compartments, each to serve as a bed. We'll lay clapboards on the poles to make a smooth surface, and on them we'll pile all the broom straw we've got. Then we'll wrap ourselves in our blankets and crawl in. Do you see?"

"Yes, but how about the fellows that must sleep under the Doctor's muslin window?" asked Harry. "Won't they sleep pretty cold, Doctor?"

"I don't think so," answered the Doctor. "The windows will keep out the cold quite as well as the logs themselves do."

"But how can they? How can two thin sheets of muslin keep cold out or heat in, which I believe is the better way of putting it?" asked Harry.

"They can't," answered the Doctor. "Bring those two sheets of muslin together and they would let heat out and cold in as freely almost as an open hole does. It isn't the muslin that keeps the cold out or the heat in – which ever way you choose to put it. It is the imprisoned air between the two pieces of muslin. There is hardly anywhere a worse conductor of heat than confined air. That is why in building fire proof structures in the great cities they use hollow bricks for partition walls. No amount of heat on one side can pass through the confined air in the bricks and set fire to anything on the other side of the wall. In the contracts for such buildings it is often stipulated that the owner shall be free to build as hot a bonfire as he pleases in any room he may select, and if it sets fire to anything in any other room the contractor shall pay a heavy penalty."

"But where did you get your idea of greased muslin windows, Doctor?" asked Jack. "I never heard of it before."

"I got it by reading history," answered the Doctor. "In old English times nobody but princes could afford to use glass. Its cost was too great. And then later, when glass became cheaper, a stupid government put a tax on windows, and so men went on using greased cloth instead of glass in order to get the light of heaven into their habitations without having their substance eaten up by a window tax."

"But why was it 'stupid' as you say for the government to raise revenue by so simple a means as that of taxing windows?" asked Jack.

"Because governments exist for the good of the people governed, and not the reverse of that. Otherwise no government would have any right to exist at all. A window tax discourages the use of windows. As a result the people live in darkness and foul air, which is not good for them. But governments in the old days assumed not that the government existed for the good of the people, but that the people existed for the good of the government. Never until our American Republic was established was that notion driven out of the minds of Kings, Princes and great ministers of state. It is one of our country's best services to human kind that it has taught this lesson until now in every part of the civilized world it is perfectly understood that the government is the servant of the people, not the people the servant of the government."

"Yes, I remember," said Jack, "that when the colonies were resisting British oppression, Thomas Jefferson put into an address to George III a pointed and not very polite reminder that the King was after all only a chosen chief magistrate of the people, appointed by them to do their service and promote their happiness. There wasn't much idea of 'the divine right of kings' in Jefferson's noddle."

"No," responded the Doctor, "nor in Franklin's, or Patrick Henry's or John Adams's or James Otis's. Jefferson simply formulated the thought of all of them when he contended that the British parliament had no more right to pass laws for the government and taxation of Virginia than the Virginia legislature had to pass laws for the government and taxation of Great Britain. But the beauty of the whole thing lies in the fact that these great truths, asserted by the Americans in justification of their rebellion, have been fastened upon the minds of men everywhere, and all civilized governments have been compelled to accept and submit to them. There are kings and emperors still, but they have completely changed their conception of their functions. They have been taught, mainly by American statesmen, that they are nothing more than the servants of the people, and that so far from owning the people, the people are their masters. But come boys, it's time to get to bed. So turn in at once. I'm on guard for the next hour and a half."

CHAPTER VII

A "Painter"

There was still much to do on the house and the boys set themselves at work on it very early the next morning. First of all there was a chimney to be built. Jack directed two of the boys to saw out a space nine feet wide for the fireplace, first securing the logs in position by nailing pieces of timber to them, just as he had done with the Doctor's windows. He decided that the fireplace when finished should be five feet wide.

"You see," he said, "we've a hard house to keep warm and we must have a lot of fire. Now the width of a fire means as much as its other dimensions, and so I'm going to have a wide fire. We'll burn full length cordwood in our fireplace, and we'll make room for plenty of it in front of a big back log. In earlier times an open wood fire place was the only heating apparatus people had, and they managed very well with it. Nowadays people insist that an open fire will not heat a room. I'm disposed to think that that's because they make their fireplaces too small. We'll make ours big, like those of our grandfathers."

Then Jack turned to the Doctor and asked:

"Is it freezing?"

"No," answered the Doctor. "The thermometer stands at forty-six, and before noon this little skim of snow will be gone I think. But why do you ask?"

"Because we want to chink and daub our house as soon as possible, and of course we can't do it in freezing weather."

"Why not?" asked the Doctor. "We can warm our hands from time to time and make out to stand it."

"Yes," answered Jack, "but that isn't the point. If we daub in freezing weather the mud will all drop out. You see it freezes and then when a thaw comes the whole thing goes to pieces. So I'm glad it isn't freezing to-day. Now come you fellows, and let me show you how to chink and daub."

He dug away the soil at several spots, exposing the clay that lay beneath. Then pouring great pailfuls of water into the holes thus made, he set the boys at work mixing the clay into a soft plastic mud. By the time that this was well started the two who were to saw out a fireplace opening had finished that task, and Jack set all at work fitting chinkings into the cracks between the logs, and so daubing them with the soft mud as to close up all cracks, big and little, against the ingress of the winter's air.

"Now, Doctor," he said, when the boys began showing something like skill in this work, "if you'll come with me, we'll start a chimney."

They went into the woods and set to work splitting some chestnut logs into thick slabs, six or seven feet long. With these they made a sort of crib work outside the house at the point where the fireplace was to be. This, as Jack explained, was to hold the fire place.

Inside of this crib, or box – about two feet inside – Jack drove some sharpened sticks into the ground and behind them he placed some clapboards set on edge. Then he called for mud and with it filled in the space between the clapboards and the crib walls behind. Then he set another tier of clapboards and added more mud, and so on till he had the whole inside of the slab crib lined with two feet of mud held in place by clapboards set on edge and braced with stakes.

"Now, then," said Jack, "when we build a fire the clapboards will slowly burn away, but very slowly because no air can get behind them, and in the meantime the mud will bake into one great solid brick. Now for the top of the chimney."

Then he went outside and built upon this fireplace a smoke stack, consisting of cribwork of sticks split out for the purpose, embedding each stick in a thick daubing of mud as he went.

By the time he finished it was night – for so eager had the boys been with their work that they had not stopped on this third day for dinner, but had contented themselves with cold bites left over from breakfast. In the meantime also the other boys had finished chinking and daubing the house.

"Now we're ready to move in," said Jim Chenoweth as they sat down round the fire to eat their supper.

"Indeed we're not," answered little Tom. "We haven't built our bed yet or a table to eat on, or any chairs to sit on, and besides that the fireplace must have at least twenty-four hours in which to dry before we can build a fire in it. You're always in a hurry Jim. If we get comfortably moved into our winter quarters by this time day after to-morrow we'll do very well indeed."

"Yes," interposed Jack, "but we'll move in to-morrow night nevertheless. By that time we'll have the bed constructed and a table and some sort of chairs made, and we shall be much more comfortable in the house than out here under the cliff where it is very uncomfortably wet and muddy since the snow began to melt. Of course we can't have a fire in the house for two or three days yet, but we can have one outside, in front of the door."

"So the programme for to-morrow is to make beds, chairs and a table?" asked the Doctor.

"That's the programme for the other boys, Doctor. You and I will in the meantime set up the chute through which we are to send the results of our chopping into the valley below. Fortunately there is a straight slide down the mountain, free from trees and landing at the right place. It was used some years ago to send big stones down. All we've got to do is to build a short chute at this end of it. Gravity will do the rest."

"But, I say Jack," broke in little Tom, "If we begin to chute sticks down there and anybody should be in the way –"

"But there'll be nobody in the way," answered Jack. "You don't imagine that I left so serious a matter as that to chance, do you? I've arranged the whole thing. Our slide ends in a spreading sort of flat down there in the valley that embraces an acre or so of level ground. Our timbers will go down there with the speed of cannon balls, but when they get there they'll slow up as the descent grows gentler, and stop on the level ground. Now I've arranged with the railroad people that we're not to send anything down the chute till to-morrow afternoon at the earliest, and that after that we are to send nothing down till three o'clock each day. That's to give them a chance to collect the stuff, haul it away and measure it."

"By the way," asked the Doctor, "how are we going to keep tab on their counts and measurements? Must we simply trust the contractor's men for all that?"

"Not by any means," answered Jack, who carried a very good business head on his shoulders. "Not by any means. We'll keep our own count up here. On every hundredth tie that we send down I am to mark 100, 200, 300 and so forth, according to the count, using a piece of red keel for the purpose. On every big bridge timber that we send down I am to mark the length and smallest diameter, keeping an account of it all up here. As for cordwood, every time we have sent down ten cords I am to send down a slab indicating the amount. All these markings of mine will be verified below, of course, and when we go down in the spring the contractor or, rather, his agent with whom I made our bargain – for I didn't meet the contractor himself – will settle with us. He knows us only as a single source of supply, and will credit everything we send down to the whole party of us. So as between ourselves we must keep our own accounts so as to make a proper and equitable division of the proceeds of our work when the springtime comes. To that function I appoint Ed Parmly. He is to keep our books. He has had experience in that sort of work in his father's store, and we'll look to him to keep a record of every fellow's contribution to the supply of timber sent down."

"But Jack," broke in little Tom, "how are we to estimate the amount of cordwood we send down the chute?"

"We won't estimate it at all. We'll cord it up and measure it before we send it down, just as we'll count our ties and measure up our bridge timbers. What's that?"

All the boys had started to their feet at the sound of something that seemed to be a human being in excruciating agony.

After a long pause there was a repetition of the strange, pitiful cry.

"May I use your rifle, Doctor?" asked little Tom. "That's a fellow that I don't care to tackle with a shot gun, and I've located him pretty well."

"What is it, anyhow?" asked Ed Parmly and Jim Chenowith, in a breath.

"It's a panther," answered Tom as he took the gun from the Doctor's hands, slipped off his boots and crept stealthily and noiselessly into the woods.

"Stay here, all of you," he commanded, "and don't make the least noise."

Tom was a chronic huntsman. From his tenth year onward, as has been already told, he had spent a large part of his vacation alone in the woods in pursuit of game. Sometimes he had been absent from home for a week at a time, having taken no supplies with him, but depending exclusively upon his gun for the means of subsistence. Then he had come home heavily burdened with wild turkeys, squirrels, opossums, raccoons and game of every other species that the mountains afforded. In every matter pertaining to the chase his present comrades were willingly ready to pay deference to little Tom's superior skill, knowledge and sagacity. So they all obeyed him when he bade them remain where they were, and keep perfectly still.

There was a long time of waiting. Then came another of the demoniacal screams, but still no response from little Tom. Several minutes later came three rapidly succeeding reports from the repeating rifle, and after half a minute more little Tom called out —

"Come here all of you, and bring your guns."

The boys all hurried to the place from which the voice came, the Doctor carrying a brand from the camp fire to give light.

It was well that he had thought of that, for light was just then badly needed. Little Tom was lying at the root of a tree, covered with blood and manifestly fainting. Only a few feet away lay the panther, shot three times through the body but still sufficiently alive to be striking out madly with his fearfully clawed fore feet in a desperate endeavor to destroy his enemy.

By the light of the Doctor's torch three charges of buckshot were quickly driven into the beast's vitals, and at last he lay still.

Then, all attention was given to Little Tom. Throwing his torch upon the ground the Doctor called out:

"Build a fire right there, boys, as quickly as you can. I must have light by which to examine the boy's wounds."

Willing hands produced the desired light within a very few moments, and stripping off part of Tom's clothing, the Doctor discovered that the beast had dealt him two vicious blows with his horridly armed claws, one tearing his left arm severely and the other lacerating his chest. After a hurried examination, the Doctor said:

"He can stand removing to the camp if you'll carry him gently, boys, and I can treat him better there than here." Then he gave a few hurried directions as to the best way of carrying the wounded boy, and the others very lovingly obeyed his instructions in removing their comrade to the main camp fire.

"Now," said the Doctor, "remove all his clothing as quickly and as gently as you can."

This was done and the Doctor carefully examined the wounds.

"It's all right, boys," he said, presently. "Tom is very painfully hurt, but the 'painter' didn't know enough of anatomy to deliver his blows in vital parts. Tom will get well, but he's fainting now. Lower his head and throw a gourdful of cold water into his face and another over his chest."

It was no sooner said than done, and no sooner was it done than Tom revived. After blinking his eyes for a moment, he asked:

"Did you fellows finish the painter?"

"Indeed we did," answered Jack; "but it's you old fellow, that we're concerned about now."

"That's all right," said Tom, "but that fellow's hide is worth a good many dollars, and better than that, we're rid of him. If I hadn't shot him he would have dropped from a tree upon some one or other of us, and in that case he wouldn't have left anything for the Doctor to do."

Meanwhile the Doctor was carefully cleansing the boy's wounds and drenching them in water in which disinfectant tablets from his pocket case had been dissolved. Here and there it was necessary to draw the edges of deep gashes together by a stitch or two with a surgical needle. "But the main thing," the Doctor expounded, "is to cleanse and disinfect the wounds. Nature itself," he added, "will repair any wound that does not involve a vital part, if it is cleansed and kept clean. The danger always is that the wound will become infected, that inflammation and blood poisoning will set in and kill the patient. Fortunately, we surgeons know now how to prevent that, and I'll answer for it that nothing of the kind shall happen to little Tom."

"But what is it that causes the inflammation and blood poisoning?" asked Harry.

"Microbes," answered the Doctor; "little things that you can't see without a microscope – and some that you can't see with one. The greatest advance that was ever made in medical and surgical science was the discovery of the fact that nearly all diseases and all hurtful and dangerous inflammation is due to the presence of microbes in a wound. The moment the Doctors found that out they set to work to kill the microbes. They studied them under the most powerful microscopes. They tried all sorts of experiments with them till they learned how to kill them. Thus they discovered two greatly good things – antiseptic surgery first and after that aseptic surgery. Antiseptic surgery aims to kill all the evil germs that are already in a wound. Aseptic surgery aims to keep all evil germs out of the wounds that the surgeon must make."

"Would you mind giving us some illustrations, Doctor?" asked Jack.

"Certainly not, if you are interested," said the Doctor.

"I have practiced both antiseptic and aseptic surgery on little Tom to-night, so his case will serve to illustrate both. I have washed all his wounds with a solution of bi-chloride of mercury, commonly called corrosive sublimate, for the purpose of killing all the germs that may have got into them from that beast's claws or in any other way. That was antiseptic surgery. Then, wherever I found it necessary to take a stitch or two, I have used ligatures drawn directly out of a disinfecting solution, and perhaps you observed that I thoroughly disinfected my needles and other implements by passing them through a blaze before using them. So, also, as to my hands. Before touching Tom's wounds I thoroughly scoured my hands in a solution of corrosive sublimate, so that they might not carry any possible infection to the scratches. All that is aseptic surgery. In the hospitals, where all conditions can be controlled they do this aseptic business completely. First of all, they have an operating table made of glass, which absorbs nothing and could be easily and perfectly cleansed after each operation by mere washing with water. But not content with that they scour the table with a disinfecting solution immediately before every operation. Then the surgeon, his assistant, and all the attendants are clad in garments that have been rendered 'sterile' as they call it, by roasting. So of all the towels and sheets and everything else employed about the patient's person. Everything is sterilized. The bandages and the thread or the catgut to be used are drawn from thoroughly disinfected supplies. The surgeon's instruments of every kind are laid in a panfull of a disinfecting fluid, and there are so many of each that if any one of them is accidentally dropped its use is abandoned and another is used in its stead. But come! Little Tom, you are comfortable now. Why not tell us how it all happened?"

"Well, you see," answered little Tom, "when I heard that cry and located it, I knew what it meant. I knew it was a painter or a catamount, or a puma, or a panther, or a mountain lion – or whatever else you choose to call it, for it bears all those names and some others. And I knew what it was after. It wanted that last leg of venison of ours, but it wasn't over particular. If it couldn't get the venison it was quite ready to take any one of us boys instead."

"It's a smart beast, the panther. It sneaks on its prey and springs upon any animal, human or other, that it may fancy, for lunch. And yet it is a fool in some ways. It suffers itself to grow enthusiastic now and then, though that is very rare, and when that happens it gives that excruciating yell that we heard. I never heard that except once, before to-night.

"Well, when I heard it, I knew what it meant. I knew that unless somebody killed that panther, that panther would kill somebody in this company. At his second yell I located him pretty accurately, though, of course, you can't depend too confidently upon that, as the beast often runs a dozen yards in a few seconds. So I took your gun, Doctor, and went out to find the gentleman. For a time, I couldn't get a sight of him, but after awhile he yelled again, and I 'spotted' him. I crept up in the very dim light till I got a good view of him, crouching on a limb, and evidently planning to spring upon me and accept me in lieu of the venison. Then I fired three bullets through him with that splendid repeating rifle of yours, Doctor, and then I had an illustration of the old adage about 'the ruling passion' being 'strong in death.' For, instead of dropping to the ground, as I had expected him to do, the beast sprang twenty or thirty feet forward and attacked me with his hideously long and sharp claws. He tore me to ribbons at his first onset, but then the three bullets I had given him from your gun seemed suddenly to dishearten him. So I managed to creep out of his way and call to you fellows to come to my rescue. The rest of the story you fellows know better than I do. For the next thing I recollect was when you doused me with the water so that I should become conscious of the prick of the Doctor's needles, as he sewed me up. By the way, Doctor, am I seriously hurt?"

"Seriously, yes," answered the Doctor. "But not dangerously, I think. You're going to have a good long rest in one of our beds over there in the new house, but surgery is now so exact a science that I think I can promise you an entirely certain recovery within a few days, or a few weeks at furthest, if you'll be a good boy and obey my instructions."

"I say, boys," called out Tom, "how fortunate we've been in bringing a Doctor along, even if we did have to resolve half his age away! Doctor, I never met any other boy of only sixteen years old who knew half as much as you do! Now, I'm tired. I'm going to sleep. Call me when it comes my turn for guard duty."

And with that the boy sank to sleep. But there was no call upon him that night or for many nights yet to come, for sentinel service.

CHAPTER VIII

The Condition of the Moonshiners

The next day the boys moved from their temporary shelter into their permanent winter quarters, building a fire in front of the door and making themselves as comfortable as they could under the circumstances.

Meantime the Doctor and Jack had got the chute ready. It was a strong, rough structure of stout poles, forming a sort of trough, beginning on a level with the ground at the turn of the hill and extending with a heavy incline for twenty yards or so over the steep brow of the mountain. It was supported by strong hickory and oak posts and braces throughout its length. Any piece of timber placed in its upper end and gently impelled forward would quickly traverse it to its farther end and there make a tremendous leap and a long slide down the steep, into the depths below.

Little Tom, greatly to his disgust, was peremptorily ordered into bed by command of the Doctor, but two of the boys had volunteered to strip off that valuable panther skin for him, salt it and stretch it out on the logs of the cabin to dry.

It was on Saturday that the boys removed to their new quarters, and the next day, being Sunday, was to be spent in resting. But Little Tom, as he lay there in his broom straw bed about midday on Saturday became troubled in his mind about the provisioning of the garrison.

"We've eaten up the last of the venison to-day," he said, "and there isn't an ounce of fresh meat in the camp. If I didn't hurt so badly, and if the Doctor wasn't such a tyrant, with his arbitrary orders for me to lie still, I'd go out this afternoon and get something better than salt meat for all of us to eat to-morrow. Why don't some of you other fellows go? If you can't get a deer, you can at any rate kill a turkey or a pheasant or two, or some partridges or squirrels, or, as a last resort, some rabbits. Oh, how my head aches! Go, some of you, and get what you can."

With that the poor bed-ridden boy turned over in his bunk and sought sleep. But Ed Parmly and Jim Chenowith acted upon his wise suggestion. A few hours later they returned to Camp Venture bearing three hares and seven squirrels on their shoulders, and dragging a half-grown hog by withes.

"I don't know but what we've made a mistake," said Ed to Jack; "the hog may belong to the moonshiners, and if so, they'll present their bill in a fashion that we sha'n't want to have it presented."

"Never mind about that," called out Tom, from inside the house. "We're at war with those people, you know, and in war you capture all you can of the enemy's supplies. But why can't you let a fellow see your game?"

The boys dragged the shoat into the hut, and Tom, expert huntsman that he was, had only to glance at it in order to pronounce it one of the wild hogs of the mountains, and anybody's property.

"Don't you see," he said, "that although it is only a half-grown shoat, it has tusks already. No domesticated hog ever developed in that way. And besides, the moonshiners haven't any hogs or anything else, for that matter. They are the poorest and most starved human beings I ever saw or heard of. I passed a week as a prisoner in one of their huts once, and I never dreamed of such poverty or such indolence. So long as they have corn pones or anything else to distend their stomachs with, they simply will not exert themselves to get anything better. They won't even go out and shoot a rabbit if they've got anything else to eat. You simply can't conceive of their poverty or of the indolence that produces it. If one of them owned a hog he'd kill it without taking the trouble to fatten it, and he'd eat it to the picking of the last bone before he would exert himself to procure another morsel of food."

"When was it, Tom, that you learned all this?" asked Harry.

"A year ago. You remember the time I went hunting and didn't get back for two weeks?"

"Yes, but tell us –"

"Well, that time I was captured by the moonshiners and held for a week as a spy. I didn't say anything about it at home except confidentially to Jack, for fear mother would worry when I went hunting again. But I tell you fellows you never dreamed of the sort of poverty that those men and their families live in. I don't know whether they are poor because they lead criminal lives, or whether they lead criminal lives because they are poor. But I do know that that fellow told the truth the other night when he said that they do not usually have enough to eat. You saw how starved he was. That's the chronic condition of all of them; and yet these mountains are full of game and any man of even half ordinary industry can feed himself well by killing it.

"The trouble is they are hopeless people. They have no ambition, no energy, no 'go' in them. They drink too much of their illicit whiskey for one thing, I suppose, but I don't think that's the bottom trouble. They seem to be people born without energy. They like to sit still in the sunshine, unless there is a revenue officer to hunt down and shoot. I suppose they are what somebody in the newspapers calls 'degenerates' – people that are run down even before they are born."

"But tell us, Tom," broke in Harry, "how did you get away from them?"

"Why, I watched my chance," answered Tom, "till one day I 'got the drap' on my jailer, to employ their own language. With a cocked gun at his breast, I made him promise not to follow me, and then I retreated 'in good order' as the soldiers say, down the mountain, with both barrels cocked. But really, fellows, you can have no idea of the abject poverty or the inconceivable indolence of these people. The little energy they have is expended in making illicit whiskey and sneaking it down the mountain without getting caught. Many of them have already served long terms in prison, but they regard that merely as a manifestation of the law's injustice, just as they do the hanging of one of their number now and then, when he is caught shooting an agent of the revenue. They don't understand. They are as ignorant as they are poor, and their poverty exceeds anything that it is possible for us to conceive."

By this time Tom's scant strength was exhausted, and after muttering: "That's anybody's wild hog," he turned himself over in bed and went to sleep.

CHAPTER IX

A Sunday Discussion

"I say, Tom," said the Doctor, on Sunday morning, after the breakfast things had been cleared away, and the first fire had been lighted in the new fireplace, "I want to ask you something about your experience on your hunting trips."

"Go on, Doctor. No boy of sixteen – and we've voted you to be of that age – can ask me anything that I'll hesitate to answer."

"Thank you," said the Doctor, with a laugh. "Now, think of me as exactly sixteen and tell me all about it. As I understand, you have frequently spent from a week to ten days in the mountains, living exclusively upon what you could kill."

"So far, Doctor, you are absolutely right," answered the boy, who, having laid aside his headache, was disposed to be facetious.

"Well, that must have been animal food exclusively," said the Doctor.

"Absolutely," answered Tom. "I had always a little of the mineral food salt to season it with, but as for bread or potatoes, or anything else of a vegetable character, why I simply couldn't get them."

"All right. Now, the theory is that a man must have starchy foods in order to keep in good health. You had no starchy food for from a week to two weeks at a time on each of these occasions, but lived exclusively on meat. Now, what effects of this diet did you observe?"

"None whatever, except that little Tom Ridsdale had a mighty keen relish for bread when he got home again."

The Doctor then asked detailed questions as to particular symptoms, to all of which the substance of Tom's replies was that in his case no symptoms whatever had manifested themselves. "I think, Doctor," he added, "as the result of my own experience that a healthy young human animal like me, when living night and day in the open air and taking a great deal of exercise, can eat pretty much anything he pleases that we commonly recognize as food, or rather anything of that kind that he can get – without much danger of injuring himself. No, I don't know so well about that. Once, I got hurt in the mountains, and lived for a week in a barn, eating nothing but corn. I was all right in a general way, but I suffered a good deal with cold. When I got out and killed a 'coon and roasted and ate it, the weather seemed suddenly to warm up."

"Precisely," answered the Doctor. "The fat of the coon furnished you with fuel, and you needed it. The more I study the subject, the more firmly convinced I become of two things – first, that man is essentially a carnivorous, or meat-eating animal, and second, that while starchy foods are desirable as a part of his diet, they are not absolutely necessary to him, except at comparatively long intervals. You know a baby simply cannot digest starchy foods at all. It would starve to death with a stomach full of them. Every baby lives exclusively upon the animal food milk."

"Yes," answered Jack, "but so does every colt and every calf. Yet, neither horses nor cows eat any animal food whatever after they cease to be colts and calves."

"That is true," said the Doctor, meditatively. "I hadn't thought of that." Then, after a minute's thought, he added – "but neither cows nor horses have any carnivorous teeth whatever, any teeth fit for the chewing of meat, while man has. Besides that, physicians have observed that behind almost every case of obstinate, low fevers and that sort of debilitated disease, there is a history of underfeeding, and particularly of an insufficient use of meat, whether as a matter of necessity, or merely as a matter of choice. Persons who eat no meat, or very little meat, may seem very robust so long as positive disease does not attack them, but when they contract maladies of a serious sort, they are very likely to show a lack of stamina, a deficiency of recuperative power."

"Then you don't believe at all, any more than we meat-eating Virginians do – in the doctrines of the vegetarians?" asked Jack, as he finished the hind legs of a broiled squirrel.

"It will be time enough," answered the Doctor, "to consider the doctrines of the vegetarians when they agree among themselves as to what those doctrines are."

"Why, how do you mean?" asked Tom.

"Well, some vegetarians held a congress, or a convention, or something of that sort in New York a little while ago. There were only fifty-seven of them present, I believe, and yet they managed to split their congress up into four groups, each antagonizing the views of all the others with something approaching violence of temper."

"What were their differences?" asked Tom.

"Well first of all there was a group who advocated the eating of vegetable matters only, except that they saw no harm in the use of milk, eggs, cheese and butter. Next there was a group who bitterly condemned milk, eggs, cheese and butter as animal foods, tending to inflame evil passions and utterly to be rejected, though they ate milk biscuit and butter crackers. This second group looked with favor upon all fruits and vegetables, but here a third group took issue with them, contending that only those vegetables should be eaten which grow above ground, and utterly rejecting the thought of eating potatoes, parsnips, beets, turnips, onions, carrots, radishes and other things that develop beneath the surface of the earth. Finally there was a fourth group that agreed with the third except that they made a plea in behalf of celery, on the ground that it is naturally a plant growing above ground and is artificially imbedded in earth only by way of making it tender and palatable."

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