

Douglas Alan Captain

Camp Fires of the Wolf Patrol



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Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	9
CHAPTER III.	12
CHAPTER IV.	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

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CHAPTER I.

IN CAMP ON THE SWEETWATER

A troop of khaki-clad boys had been marching, rather wearily perhaps, along a road that, judging from all indications, was not very much used by the natives.

The afternoon was waning, so that a summer's night would soon begin to close in around them. Dense woods lay in all directions, the foliage of which had afforded very pleasant shelter from the fierce rays of the August sun. "Halt!" came the loud order.

"Hurrah! we're going into our first camp, fellows!"

"Is that so, Mr. Garrabrant?"

"Pull off your lids, boys, and give a salute!"

"What a dandy old place for a camp. How d'ye suppose he came to pick this out, Elmer?"

"That's as easy to tell as falling off a log, Toby. We have to use water to cook with; and just notice this fine stream running past us," returned the boy addressed, who seemed to be the second in command of the detachment of scouts. "Besides," he added, "you forget that we aimed to reach the Sweetwater River by evening, so that we could start up the current in our boats to-morrow morning. And this, I reckon, is the stream that we're looking for."

"Hurrah again, fellows! The day's hike is done. Now for a bully rest!"

"Stand at attention, all! Call the roll, secretary, to see if there are any stragglers!" the scout master commanded, as the small troop ranged up before him.

This young man was Mr. Roderic Garrabrant, who had only too gladly assumed the rôle he occupied, being greatly interested in the boy problem; and possessing a few fads and fancies he wished to work out by actual experience. His knowledge of woodcraft was not so very extensive; but the moral effect of his presence was expected to exert considerable benefit in connection with the dozen or more members of the Hickory Ridge troop of Boy Scouts.

The small town of Hickory Ridge lay about seven miles due south of the place where they had struck the winding Sweetwater; and the party had tramped this distance since noon. While it might not seem very far to those who are accustomed to long walks, there were a number among the scouts who had undoubtedly exceeded their record on this same afternoon.

An exceedingly tall and ungainly lad, with long legs that seemed to just delight getting in the way at times, threatening to twist him in a knot, drew out a little pocket volume, and in a sing-song tone started to call off numerous names.

Each boy answered promptly when he heard his own name mentioned; and as they will very likely figure largely in our story, it might be just as well to take note of the manner in which Arthur Stansbury called them off:

"Members of the Wolf Patrol: Elmer Chenowith, Mark Cummings, Ted Burgoyne, Toby Ellsworth Jones, Arthur Stansbury, and Chatz Maxfield.

"Members of the Beaver Patrol: Matty Eggleston, Oscar Huggins, Tyrus Collins, Jasper Merriweather, Tom Cropsey, Lawrence Billings.

"Unattached, but to form Numbers One and Two of the new Eagle Patrol: Jack Armitage and Nathan Scott."

"We seem to be just two shy," observed Mr. Garrabrant, with a twinkle in his eye, as he turned toward Elmer Chenowith, who had recently received his certificate as assistant scout master from

the National Council, and was really qualified to take the place of the leader whenever the latter chanced to be absent.

Elmer raised his hand promptly in salute, as he made reply:

"Yes, sir; Nat Scott and Jasper Merriweather. They pegged out a mile or so back; and after examining their feet, and finding that they were really sore from walking, I gave them permission to ride on the commissary wagon, sir."

Now, of course Mr. Garrabrant knew all this perfectly well. He had actually watched the pair of tenderfeet only too gladly clamber aboard the wagon that bore the tents, food, extra clothing, and cooking outfit for the camp. But thus far did military tactics rule the Boy Scouts, that he was supposed to know nothing about such incidents until they had been reported to him in the proper manner, as provided for in the system.

"Suppose then you notify them, Mr. Bugler," said the scout master, turning to Mark Cummings, who, besides being the especial chum of Elmer, was really a fine musician, and naturally had been unanimously chosen as bugler for the new troop of scouts recently organized in Hickory Ridge.

When the clear, penetrating notes of the bugle sounded through the neighboring woods, there came a faint but enthusiastic cheer from some point along the back trail. In addition, the waiting scouts could catch the plain creaking of a wagon, accompanied by encouraging words, spoken undeniably by a "gentleman of color."

"Git up dar, youse ol' sleepy-haid, Andy Jackson! Wot youse t'ink we's gwine tuh do up hyah in dis neck ob de woods, hey? Git a mobe on yuh, Jawdge Washington! Jes' quit dat peekin' outen de tail end ob yuh eye at me! We ain't playin' dat ere game ob politics now; dis am real, honest, sure-nuff work. Altogedder now, bofe ob youse; or de waggin dun stick in de mud of dis crick!"

Then followed a few whacks, as the energetic driver applied the goad, some startled snorts, in turn succeeded by another relay of faint cheers from the two footsore scouts aboard the wagon.

And presently the lumbering vehicle, with its sweating steeds, halted alongside the site selected by the scout master as the spot for the first camp of the scouts' outing. An opening was readily found where Ginger, the ebony driver, might urge his reluctant team to leave the hard road, and enter among the trees.

Immediately a scene of great bustle, and more or less confusion ensued; for it must be remembered that while the Hickory Ridge scouts may have drilled in the work of starting a camp, that was only theory, and the present was their first actual practice on record.

The contents of the wagon were overhauled, and several tents started to go up on spots particularly selected by the leaders of the patrols, who had this duty in their sole charge.

Here Elmer had a great advantage over all his fellows, since he had spent much of his life up in the Canadian Northwest, where his father had held a position as manager to extensive lands that were being farmed on a colossal scale, until a year or so previous, when, being left a snug little fortune, Mr. Chenowith had decided to return to his native state, to settle down for the balance of his days.

Of course the boy had picked up a considerable amount of useful knowledge during his stay in that country of vast distances, which was likely to prove of use to him in his experiences as a scout.

They had elected him as president of the troop, and he had readily been given the position of scout leader in the Wolf Patrol because of this wide range of knowledge pertaining to the secrets of outdoor life. It had also been mainly instrumental in securing for him the coveted certificate from Headquarters, recognizing him as a capable assistant to Mr. Garrabrant.

Elmer could toss a rope, follow a trail, throw a "diamond hitch" in loading a pack horse, travel on snowshoes, recognize most wild animals just from their tracks, make a camp properly, and do so many other like tricks that made him the envy of his mates, and especially Matty Eggleston, who was the leader of the Beaver Patrol, and had much to learn concerning his duties.

It was a cheerful scene, as the tents were raised, and fires began to crackle, one for each patrol, according to custom. Even the two limping scouts forgot their recent lameness, and began to sniff the air hungrily when Ginger started to get supper for the crowd.

Ginger had qualified as an expert first-class cook, but the truth might as well be stated right in the beginning that the boys quickly tired of the greasy messes the son of Ethiopia flung together, and soon followed the example of the Wolf Patrol, doing their own cooking, an arrangement that pleased the good-natured but indolent Ginger perfectly. He was always on hand, however, when the time for eating came around, being possessed of an enormous appetite that alarmed Mr. Garrabrant more than a little.

Night had closed in long before supper was ready, for things somehow worked at sixes and sevens on the occasion of the getting of the first meal, since many essential articles had to be hunted for, entailing a loss of time. But all this would be remedied as soon as they were in their permanent camp, for both Mr. Garrabrant and Elmer were keen on system and order.

The boys were almost famished after that seven-mile hike, and could hardly wait for the signal to "fall to." But there was an abundance for all, and none of them was much inclined to be what Arthur Stansbury called "finicky" that night.

Mr. Garrabrant, however, while eating, looked suspiciously toward Ginger, and shook his head in the direction of Elmer, as if to say that if this mess were a fair specimen of the cook's best efforts along the culinary line, the sooner they started in to depend on themselves the better for their digestion.

After the meal had been finished the boys left Ginger to clean up while they lay around, enjoying the sparkling blaze, something that most of them were not very familiar with. For the time being all formality was thrown aside, and they laughed and chatted, just as normal boys are prone to do when out upon a holiday jaunt.

Mr. Garrabrant showed the two laggards how they had been unwise not immediately to dislodge sundry small pebbles that had found a way to get in their shoes, with the consequence that presently stone bruises had formed that became painful. He made them easy with some lotion he carried for just such a purpose.

In this and dozens of other ways the efficient scout master expected to teach the boys of the troop how to take care of themselves when away from home. But the lads who had to be told *the same thing twice* might expect to forfeit some privilege since they were expected to think for themselves, after being shown.

There was also a second colored man along, who expected to take the team back on the morrow, since the scouts would have no further need of it, once they embarked in the boats that were to meet them here. In these they expected to ascend the Sweetwater to a small lake called Jupiter; and from thence by way of Paradise Creek find a passage to Lake Solitude beyond, where they meant to camp and learn the numerous "stunts" a good scout should know.

Some of the lads had fair voices, and school songs were sung around the fire, Mark doing the accompanying with soft notes on his bugle. He had mastered this instrument, and his mates never wearied of hearing him play.

Ted Burgoyne was afflicted with a slight lisp that gave him no end of trouble; though he always insisted that he spoke as correctly as any of his companions. Ted had a strong leaning toward the profession of a surgeon, and indeed was forever loudly wishing for a subject upon whom to operate. The boys had considerable fun over this weakness, but all the same they must have felt more or less confidence in his ability to do the right thing; for whenever any slight accident occurred it might be noticed that every one in camp called upon "Dr. Ted" to take hold; and he nearly always proved himself equal to the occasion.

Charlie Maxfield, or Chatz as he was universally called, was somewhat of a queer chap. He believed in ghosts, and was always reading stories of hobgoblins and haunted houses. Of course, with

such a propensity, Chatz could be depended on to try and frighten his chums from time to time. He was forever "seeing things" in the dark.

The rest of the boys had plenty of fun with Chatz, which he took in good part; but although, as a rule, his alarms proved to be false ones nothing seemed to disturb his deep-rooted convictions. They even said he carried a rabbit's foot, for good luck, the animal having been killed by Chatz himself in a graveyard, and in the full of the moon.

Needless to say Chatz Maxfield was a Southern-born lad, as his accent alone proved. He was a fine fellow, taken as a whole, outside of this silly belief in ghosts, which he possibly imbibed from the small darkies with whom he played on his father's Georgia plantation, years back.

"I don't see any boats around here, fellows!" remarked Ty Collins, when there came a little lull in the conversation, after Mr. Garrabrant had been explaining some puzzling matter that one of the boys had put up to him.

"Why, that's a fact!" exclaimed "Lil Artha," as the long-legged secretary, Arthur Stansbury was called by his mates – he was a devoted amateur photographer, and even then had been busying himself with some part of his equipment as he sat by the fire.

Arthur was keenly desirous of learning all the various kinks that a first class scout must know. He was somewhat of a joker in his way, and at times a little addicted to the use of current slang; but a warm-hearted, impulsive lad all the same.

"They are to be on hand in the morning, boys," remarked Mr. Garrabrant. "And of course we shall not think of leaving here until they come. Make your minds easy on that score, Nat and Jasper. Your heels will have a chance to get well, never fear."

"Where's Chatz?" asked one of the other boys, suddenly.

"He asked permission to walk back a bit over our trail," observed Elmer. "Said he missed a buckle from his coat, which he was carrying over his arm when he tripped. I let him take a lantern with him to see if he could find it."

"Lil Artha" began to laugh, and several of the other boys joined in.

"Oh! my! what if he happens to run across one of those ghosts he's always talking about?" suggested Toby Ellsworth Jones, whose grandfather had been a veteran, and a soldier under the colonel who died at Alexandria, Va., in the Civil War; whence the name of Ellsworth – Toby was just wild on the subject of aeronautics; and while thus far everything he attempted had proven as flat a failure as the famous flying machine of Darius Green, still he lived in hopes of accomplishing something that would make the name of Jones renowned.

Several of the boys struggled to their feet at this, finding themselves stiff in the legs after their long walk.

"Look! there's a light coming just flying along the road right now!" cried Larry Billings.

"And that must be Chatz on the full run, though he wouldn't yell out for anything!" exclaimed Mark.

"Something must be chasing him, fellows!" declared Toby, in great excitement.

"Perhaps it's a wildcat!" suggested Jasper Merriweather, who was a bit timid.

"Here he comes, and he can speak for himself. What ails you, Charlie; what happened to start you running?" asked the scout master, as the boy came hurrying up, breathing hard, and showing signs of positive alarm.

"Reckon I saw something, suh, that was mighty mysterious!" replied Chatz; at which the entire group of scouts looked at each other, and held their breath in awe.

CHAPTER II. THE SUDDEN PERIL

"I see you found your buckle, Chatz," remarked Elmer, noticing what the other was holding in the hand that was not occupied in grasping the lighted lantern.

"Oh! yes, I picked that up where I tripped, and nearly fell flat," replied the other, quickly. "Just as I got up off my knees I happened to look alongside the road, where the trees grow so thick, and I give you my word, fellows, I saw a moving white figure that had the most terrible yellow eyes ever! I know you all laugh at me whenever I say I believe in ghosts; but if that wasn't one I miss my guess, yes suh."

"I'll dare you to go back with me till we find out," said Elmer, quickly.

Chatz hesitated; but for all his silly notions in this one line the boy was far from being a coward.

"All right, if you say so, I'm willing," he declared. "I'd just like to know what that was, anyhow, if not a specter. Come on, Elmer."

"Take me along, won't you?" asked Lil Artha, gaining his feet, as he thrust his kodak away.

"Me, too!" called out several others; while a few hung back, not caring to take chances of a meeting with a real ghost.

"You can go along, Arthur, likewise Ted and Toby. The rest had better stay here with me to guard the camp, in case there happens to be a raid of ghosts," remarked the scout master, in a tone that put an end to all protestations.

So the little party trotted off, followed by wishful glances from the balance of those who would have liked to be with them.

Down the road they went, Chatz keeping in close contact with Elmer, and maintaining a discreet silence. Presently they arrived at the spot where he had found the missing buckle.

"Here's where I stooped down to hunt, boys," he remarked, in a low voice; "and when I looked over yonder, I saw IT standing just back of that fringe of brush, waving its long arms at me, and staring to beat the band. Do you see anything there, fellows?"

"Not a thing, Chatz," replied Artha, cheerfully. "To the foolish house for you!"

"What's that?" said Toby, holding up his hand, suddenly.

"Did you see anything move?" demanded the Southern lad, eagerly, as though he wanted to prove that his alarm had been well founded.

"I thought I did," replied Toby, quivering with eagerness.

"Listen, fellows," observed Elmer, with a chuckle.

From somewhere back in the woods there came a weird sound, mournful enough to strike a chill to the heart of anyone not familiar with its nature.

"Oh! whatever can that be?" cried Toby. "Sounded just like some poor feller calling for help."

"Elmer, you know; tell uth, pleath!" entreated Ted, with his usual lisp, which even the alarm that was seizing hold of him now could not dissipate.

"Well, I declare, I'm surprised to think that none of you fellows ever heard an owl hoot before!" laughed the scout leader of the Wolf Patrol.

"An owl – that only a poor little dickey of an owl!" cried Toby.

"Yes, it sounds just like the white owl we used to have up in Canada," continued Elmer, seriously. "And ten to one now, it was what Chatz here saw in that brush alongside the road. Of course it had staring yellow eyes; and in the dim light he must have fancied he saw an arm waving at him. That was only a shadow, Chatz. So come along, let's get back to the fire."

"Well, anyway, it looked mighty spooky," declared the Southern boy, stubbornly.

And he persisted in this attitude, even when some of his companions, who might not have been one half so brave as Chatz, if ever put to the test, began to "josh" him because of his recent alarm.

Mr. Garrabrant, accompanied by Elmer, went the rounds to ascertain just how the boys had erected their tents. He found little cause for complaint, since the young assistant scout master had drilled the members of the troop in this science, and they had it down quite pat, at least so far as theory went.

While the Boy-Scout movement of to-day has little to do with military tactics, still discipline is taught; and numerous things that soldiers employ in their daily life are practiced. One of these is setting a guard at night, and teaching the boys the necessity of keeping watchful when in the woods.

Each patrol had to set a guard or sentry, and lay out a plan whereby the various members would take turns in standing duty during some period of the night.

The two unattached scouts were temporarily added to the six composing the Wolf Patrol, so that they might come under the charge of Elmer, and profit from his instruction.

By ten o'clock the camp had relapsed into a condition of silence. "Taps" had been sounded on the bugle, which meant that every light must be extinguished except the two fires; and each scout not on duty seek his blanket.

Of course there was more or less whispering from time to time; and apparently it was a hard thing for some of the boys to settle down to sleep. But both Mr. Garrabrant and Elmer knew boy nature full well, and for this one night were disposed to overlook little infractions of the rules. But later on they would expect to hold the entire troop rigidly to discipline, when the time for skylarking had gone by.

Elmer had left word with the boy from the Wolf Patrol who first went on duty to awaken him if anything out of the way occurred. And in turn he was to transmit the order to the fellow who succeeded him.

When a hand gripped his arm as he lay under his blanket Elmer was immediately awakened; nor did he evince the slightest alarm.

"What is it?" he asked, softly, not wishing to arouse the others in the tent, who were sound asleep, if their heavy breathing stood for anything.

"Something moving on the river, and I thought you ought to know," replied the one who had crept excitedly under the canvas.

"All right, Toby, I'm coming after you. Back out!" replied Elmer, as he wriggled from under his comfortable blanket, and pulled on his trousers; for the air of an August night often feels decidedly chilly, especially after one has been snuggled beneath covers.

He found the fires had died down, though the boys made sure that they did not wholly go out, since they had no great love for the darkness.

"Listen! There it goes again," remarked Toby, once more clutching the sleeve of the scout leader in a nervous hand.

Elmer chuckled.

"Well, this is a funny thing," he said, as though amused. "First Chatz takes a poor old owl with its yellow eyes for a ghost, and now you imagine the dip of oars to be something as mysterious and thrilling. Why, don't you make out two sets plashing at different times. Those are the boats we expect. Perhaps the men from Rockaway down the river were delayed; or else they preferred to do their rowing after the sun set. But that's all it means, Toby."

"Aw! well, I thought it my duty to let you know," observed the other.

"And you did quite right, Toby. But I'd better try and get Mr. Garrabrant out here without awakening the lot, if it can be done," and saying this Elmer started toward the second tent, where the scout master had some four boys under his especial charge.

It proved to be just as Elmer had guessed. The two men who rowed the boats had preferred to do their work after the heat of day had gone by. They would not even pass the balance of the night in camp, being anxious to get back to Rockaway, the town some five miles down the river.

So this little excitement died away, and once more silence brooded over the camp on the Sweetwater. The night passed without any further alarm; and with the coming of morning the clear notes of the bugle sounding the reveille aroused the last sleepers, and caused them to crawl forth, rubbing their eyes and yawning.

Mark's grandfather had been a famous artist, and the boy bade fair to some day follow in his illustrious footsteps. He was forever drawing exceedingly apt pictures, with pencil, a bit of chalk, a scrap of charcoal or anything that came handy; and as a rule these were humorous caricatures of his chums in many amusing attitudes. So he now busied himself catching the sleepy scouts in various striking postures, to the great delight of those who gathered around.

Between Mark's readiness with the crayon and the eagerness of Lil Artha to use his camera, it seemed likely that little worth remembering would escape being handed down to illustrate the events of this, their first outing.

"Me for a bully good swim!" exclaimed the long-legged boy, as he started for the nearby river.

Others were quick to follow his example, for few healthy boys there are to whom the opportunity for splashing in the water on a summer morn does not appeal.

"Keep on your guard, fellows!" called Mr. Garrabrant, who was busily employed doing something near one of the tents. "The current is swift, and unless I miss my guess the river is quite deep here. Elmer, you go along and watch out that no one comes to harm," and he turned once again to his task, confident that his assistant was capable of executing his wishes properly.

Ten minutes passed away, and Mr. Garrabrant, having managed successfully to complete the little job he had set himself to execute, was thinking it time the boys who were bathing should be recalled, when he heard sudden cries that pierced him like an arrow.

"Hey! look at Jasper, would you, how funny he acts!"

"Elmer! Elmer! come here! Jasper's got a cramp! He's gone down!"

Hurriedly did the alarmed scout master leap to his feet and start wildly in the direction of these loud outcries. No doubt in that second of time he saw the faces of the Merriweather boy's parents, filled with the agony that comes to those who have lost a son by drowning; and the mental picture sent Mr. Garrabrant flying over the ground.

CHAPTER III. GINGER PLAYS WITH FIRE

At the time the loud cries had come, Elmer was just leaving the water himself, having had enough of a morning bath. He saw several of the boys running toward a point down stream, where Ty Collins and Nat Scott were when they shouted, and without wasting a second Elmer had sped that way.

So fast did he run that he easily outstripped the rest, and reached the spot where Ty and Nat stood on the bank, beckoning wildly to him, while they stared out upon the eddying water.

One look Elmer gave. It enabled him to glimpse something white emerging from the foamy water, and a pair of arms beat wildly in the air. Then he sprang in, and hand over hand made for the spot.

Luckily he had arrived just below, so that the chances of his reaching the drowning lad were better than would have otherwise been the case if he had the swift current against him.

Perhaps in all his life Elmer Chenowith never struck out with such intense eagerness, for he had seen that something serious must have happened to Jasper, since he was under the surface of the water most of the time and undoubtedly gulping in great quantities of it.

Keeping his eyes fastened on the struggling figure as best he could, Elmer made his way furiously through the surging Sweetwater. Just at this place, on account of a decided drop in the bed of the river, there was a swift current and considerable foam around the rocks that partly blocked the rapids.

"He's got him!" shrilled Tom Cropsey.

"But look out, Elmer; don't let him get a grip on you! Size up the way Jasper is fighting to get hold of him! Oh! he nearly did it, then! What ought we to do, fellows? If he grabs Elmer they'll just both drown!"

It was Red Huggins who thus gave vent to his feelings. He generally became so excited in an emergency that he could not collect his wits enough to be of any great use. And it was fortunate that all of those present were not built upon the same model as impulsive Red.

Mr. Garrabrant had snatched up a rope as he ran. Perhaps, with rare wisdom the long-headed scout master had even placed it there, looking to a possible sudden need for such a thing.

He had no occasion to ask where the thrilling event was taking place. Every boy was staring in that one quarter, and before he even saw the two figures in the swirl of the yeasty river Mr. Garrabrant realized the condition of affairs.

He found that Elmer had managed to seize the drowning boy from behind, always the very best method of doing in such a case. Had he been unable to accomplish this, and the frenzied Jasper seized upon him, doubtless Elmer would have broken away, even though he might have had to strike the other quite sharply in the face and partly stun him to do so. Better that, than that both should go down together.

So Elmer was endeavoring to push the other in toward shore. Sometimes the water would go over them both with a rush, for they happened to be in one of the roughest parts of the river.

Mr. Garrabrant sized up the situation at a single glance. Then he ran down the shore a dozen paces, and started to wade into the river.

"Here, take hold of this end of the rope, boys!" he cried, as he came upon several of the scouts who were standing knee deep in the water, seemingly half paralyzed by the terrible nature of the scene before them.

Mark Cummings had just arrived on the scene. He had been dressing in the tent at the time the alarm sounded. Regardless of the fact that he had on his clothes, he sprang into the water alongside the scout master.

Together they buffeted the waves, and made for the approaching pair. Elmer saw them coming and redoubled his efforts to keep the drowning boy afloat, and at the same time avoid being clasped in his desperate embrace.

Then friendly hands were laid upon them, and with three to take charge, Jasper was borne to the land. He had collapsed before the shore was reached, and the balance of the boys gathered around, staring in great fear at his pallid face.

Mr. Garrabrant knew the theory of restoring a person who has come very near being drowned; but it chanced that Elmer had more than once had active participation in that sort of work. So he lost no time in stretching poor Jasper, face down, on the ground, placing his knees on his back, and having his arms worked regularly by some of the boys, while he pressed downward, again and again with considerable force, so as to induce artificial breathing.

As Jasper was not far gone he quickly responded to this rough but effective treatment. He belched out a small Niagara of water, groaned, trembled, and finally tried to beg them to have a little mercy on him, saying that he was now all right, upon which the boys of course ceased their efforts intended to bring him to.

Breakfast was slow in coming along that morning. Ginger had been tremendously unnerved by the exciting spectacle of the rescue of the drowning lad, and he continuously made all sorts of foolish blunders while trying to cook, so that in the end Mr. Garrabrant chased him away and set Elmer and Ty Collins at the job, both of whom he knew were very good cooks.

Afterwards the tents had to come down, and the entire outfit be stored away in the two boats which were intended to carry them the balance of the way.

Ginger sent the horse and wagon back in charge of the other colored man, and announced himself prepared to accompany the troop into the heart of the wilderness. He was so good-natured, and they could make use of him to do much of the drudgery of the camp; so Mr. Garrabrant decided to let Ginger go along, even though he was not to be trusted to get their meals any longer.

The boats were stoutly built, and of a good size. Both were capable of being rowed by two pairs of oars: and, indeed, this was rendered quite necessary by the swiftness of the Sweetwater in parts.

Once they reached the first little lake and the worst part of the struggle would be over; after that the going must prove much easier.

At first the scouts considered the rowing a picnic. That lasted less than ten minutes. Then, as the strain of the current started to tell upon them, grunts began to be heard, and these were followed by heavy sighs and glum faces.

Blisters began to appear on palms that were quite unused to labor of this severe kind. True, Mr. Garrabrant in one boat, and Elmer in the other, tried to show the greenhorns how they could save themselves much of this pain by proper handling of the oars; but like everything else, experience after all was bound to be the best guide.

A number of the lads, however, were more or less familiar with rowing, even though there was no body of water close to the town on the railroad known as Hickory Ridge. Of course Elmer himself took an oar, and kept up his part of the drudgery from start to finish; and his chum Mark also did his share with credit.

There were places where the river widened, and the current was less savage. Here those who tugged at the oars managed to rest up a bit for the next hard pull.

So the morning passed with frequent rests, for Mr. Garrabrant knew better than utterly to weary his command in the beginning. They were, after all, out for sport; and it would have been an unwise move on his part to have sickened the tenderfoot scouts before they had had a fair chance to get hardened to it.

Just before noon the boy in the bow of the leading boat gave a yell.

"What is it?" asked the scout master.

"I just had a squint at a body of water, sir; and I think it must have been a lake," replied Jack Armitage, who was in the boat with the Wolf Patrol, Ginger working one of the oars in the other craft.

"That must be the first lake, Jupiter they call it," Mr. Garrabrant went on.

"Hurrah! that means a rest, and lunch, fellows!" cried Lil Artha, who had been resting after his turn at rowing.

"Don't crow too soon," barked Toby, mysteriously. "The worst is yet to come. Remember that these two lakes are joined by Paradise Creek. I've heard that stream is worse than the river here to pull against."

"That's where you're mistaken, Toby," remarked Elmer. "I talked with a lumberman, and also a sportsman who comes up here every fall to shoot wild ducks on the lake they call Solitude. Both of them assured me that once we got to this point our troubles would be over. So cheer up, my hearties, the pulling will be a picnic after this."

Then they passed out from the head of the romantic Sweetwater. The lake was a pretty little sheet of water, with shores that, as a rule, were wooded; though in several places it looked as though farms ran down to the water's edge.

The boys soon clamored to get ashore and stretch their weary legs; nor was Mr. Garrabrant in the least averse to such a change himself. It is always inducive to cramp to sit in a boat several hours.

Lunch was eaten under a patch of friendly trees that grew on the bank. Then the troop was allowed half an hour to lounge around, ere once more embarking for the afternoon row.

Just where they had landed it was very wild. Rocks jutted up out of the sides of the hills, and the trees grew in every crevice where earth had gathered.

Toby was lying on his back, looking longingly up at the bald top of a neighboring elevation that might almost be called a mountain.

"Say," he said to Red, who happened to be sprawled out near him, "did you ever in all your days see such a splendid place as that for a starter? Just think what a jolly good thing it would be to stand there on the edge of that cliff and just give one big spring off, flapping your wings as you jumped. Wow! I can see myself sailing through space, and coming down as gently as a thistle ball. But how could a fellow ever get up there in the first place? – that's what's bothering me."

"Look here, Toby, you don't really mean to say that if you had those silly old wings along with you, anything'd ever tempt you to take such chances as to jump off that high place? Why, it'd be your finish sure, if you ever did. You'd come down with an awful jar. And ten to one we'd have to gather your poor remains up with a shovel. I'm glad Mr. Garrabrant refused to let you fetch along all that stuff you had laid out to bring."

"He near broke my heart when he said that, Red," sighed Toby. "But we're going to be up here some time, you know, and perhaps I might get a chance to rig up some sort of flying machine. I'll never be happy till I'm sailing through the clouds, and that's a fact."

"Your heart, could stand it better than your blessed neck," retorted Red. "And that's what would have happened to you, sure, if he'd let you try to play your game of being aviator to the troop."

"Sit still, fellows!" sang out the photographer just then; "I've got you in just a dandy picture, the entire bunch! There, done with a click, and thank you."

Mr. Garrabrant sat up and looked at his watch.

"About time we were moving, boys," he remarked, at which there were numerous uplifted eyebrows, and not a few groans, as the unfortunate tenderfeet looked at the red spots in the palms of their hands, unused to hard work.

Of course, as there was little to pack, it would be a matter of only a few minutes ere they could be on the move again, and speeding up Jupiter Lake toward the link that connected with the other sheet of water.

"All here?" asked Mr. Garrabrant, as a precautionary measure; since some of the scouts had shown a weakness for wandering whenever half a chance arose.

Elmer had just been in the act of counting heads.

"We seem to be one shy, sir," he remarked.

"It's Ginger," declared one of the scouts. "I noticed him walking off some little time ago, sir. He told me somebody said there was gold up in these mountains, and the poor old silly was lookin' for signs of it, I guess."

"Give him a call on the bugle, Mark!" said Elmer, looking annoyed; for it would be too bad if, after all their plans, Ginger should take it into his head to delay them now by getting lost.

So the bugler let out a blast that could easily be heard a mile away. Then they one and all listened to discover if any answer came floating back.

"I heahs yuh, suh," came the voice of Ginger from the neighboring woods. "I'se jes' be'n havin' heaps o' fun wid dis leetle snake hyah. Glory be, but he am de maddest critter yuh eber see, a shaking ob his tail; an' de locust asingin' in de tree."

"Keep away from him, Ginger!" shouted Elmer, jumping up; "keep away from him, I tell you! My stars! that must be a rattlesnake he's been playing with!"

CHAPTER IV.

A NEVER-TO-BE-FORGOTTEN SUPPER

And a rattlesnake it proved to be, sure enough!

When Elmer, followed helter-skelter by every one of the others, drew near the spot where Ginger stood, with a short stick in his hand, and now looking very much frightened after hearing what a narrow escape he had had, they discovered the angry poisonous reptile coiled, and buzzing away at a great rate.

Locusts had been singing near by during the drowsy noon hour, and that accounted not only for the common mistake of the black man, but why none of the others had paid any attention to the sound. Several remembered having heard it, when their memory was jogged later.

Elmer quickly found a longer pole with which he assailed the coiled terror of the rocky hills, and with a lucky stroke he finally broke its back. All the boys crowded around to look at the ugly thing, shuddering as they noted its vicious fangs.

"Better look out, fellowth," warned Dr. Ted. "I've heard they often hunt in coupleth, tho' there may be another of the vermin near by!"

But a hasty search failed to reveal a mate to the dead reptile. Mr. Garrabrant seized upon the occasion to read a lecture to the scouts, telling them to live up to their motto, "Be prepared," and always keep an eye out when in the woods.

"That's one danger we must never forget up here," he said; "and I've got a little phial I want every scout to carry along with him constantly. To-night I'm going to explain just how to act in case any one of you finds himself struck by a snake, which, however, I sincerely hope will never happen, because they're nasty things at best, and there's always a chance that the remedy may not work in time to save the patient."

Ginger begged for the rattle, to serve as a reminder of his narrow escape, and so Elmer cut it off for him.

"If I had time I'd like to skin the beast," the latter remarked, "for he's beautifully marked, and would make a nice tie, or a pocketbook. But in order to make a good job I'd require an hour or more, and we don't want to carry the thing along with us until night."

"Why do you say 'he' when you mention the rattler, Elmer?" asked Mr. Garrabrant, who was not above seeking new information from one who had been fortunate enough to experience the actual realities of wild life.

"Well, you see that the skin has black diamond-shaped marks on it. If it had been a female these would have been more along a brownish order. At any rate, that's what I've been told out where I met with these things frequently," Elmer stated.

"And I've no doubt but what you're quite right, Elmer," remarked the scout master. "I've noticed the same thing in connection with quite a number of birds, the female being coated a modest brown, whereas the male was a lustrous black. But we must be moving. I'm glad, Ginger, that it isn't necessary to practice on you for snakebite."

"Yas," muttered the black man, "an' de wustest t'ing 'bout de hull bizness am de fack dat dey ain't eben a single drap ob snake pizen in de hull bilin crowd. So 'deed, I is right glad myself now dat de leetle critter didn't git tuh me."

"And there goeth the only chance I've had this many a day to get a little anatomical practice," Ted was grumbling; though of course the boys understood that although his manner of talk might seem so blood-thirsty, the amateur surgeon was only joking.

But Ginger, after that, often watched Ted suspiciously and refused to be left alone in camp with him.

Ten minutes of stout rowing brought them to the mouth of Paradise Creek, where the waters from the other lake emptied into Jupiter. Joyfully they started to navigate these unknown regions. Elmer's boat was in the lead, though for that matter not a single one in the party had ever before been as far up the chains of waterways as this.

When even the scout master realized that those who handled the oars were becoming exhausted, he called a halt and changed around, bringing fresh recruits forward. He himself did yeoman service pulling, and Ginger also made his muscles add considerable value to the progress of the second boat.

"Dis am suah de t'ing tuh make de appatite," Ginger kept saying, as he tugged away, with the perspiration rolling down his black good-natured face. "Specks I done want dubble rations dis berry night, Cap'n. De laborer am worthy ob his hire, de good book say. An' dis am sartin suah hard wuk."

As the afternoon slowly passed they realized that they must be getting closer and closer to the second sheet of water. Nobody was sorry. And when the sun hung over the elevated horizon anxious looks began to be cast ahead.

Finally, almost without warning, the leading boat ran out of the creek, passing around an abrupt bend, and a shout of delight announced that the lake had been reached at last.

It was indeed well named. Solitude seemed to hang over the whole picture, and if it could impress them in this way while the sun was still shining, what gloom must follow after the shades of night had fallen.

"Look around on this shore for a good site for a permanent camp, Elmer," remarked the scout master, pointing to the left. "I choose that because we will get some shelter from the wind, in case of a sudden storm. Across the broad lake it would be apt to hit us doubly hard. Am I correct, Elmer?" Mr. Garrabrant went on.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, quickly, "I should have done just as you did, and I think I can see a good spot for our camp; anyhow it looks that way from here. Give way again, fellows, and I'll head the boat for our haven."

Ten minutes later, and the two boats had been run ashore. Then an eager troop of aching lads tumbled out, to stretch themselves, and express delight over having finally reached their goal. Quite a number of them had really never before been away from home over night, so that it required more or less assumption of gayety on their part to conceal their real feelings. But by degrees these would grow accustomed to the separation, and in the end it was bound to make them more manly fellows.

Once again were the tents pitched. This time more care was taken, for they anticipated a long stay, and ere breaking camp for the return trip it was not unlikely that they would be visited by one or more storms. So the stakes were driven well in, and each tent had a little gully dug around the upper side, so as to turn water to the right and left in case of a flood in the shape of a down-pour.

Other of the scouts started making fire-places from the numerous stones. They had had practice along these lines before now, closer at home, and the watchful eyes of the scout leaders took note of everything that was being done. When they saw that matters were not going just as cleverly as they could, a few words, perhaps a helping hand, straightened out the difficulty.

By the time the sun passed beyond an outlying spur of the mountain things began to take on a pretty decent look. Several of the boys who were fond of fishing had been set to work digging bait, and going in the boats to likely spots pointed out by the experienced Elmer. Their excited cries presently announced that there was some prospect of the bill-of-fare that night having the magic name of "trout" among the tasty food exhibit.

"And my word for it we'll need all we can get," laughed Mr. Garrabrant aside to his assistant, as he nodded his head to where Ginger was working lustily, and smacking his lips as he kept one eye on the busy fisherman, "because Ginger tells me he's awful fond of trout! It's going to keep me hustling to supply all the appetites in this Camp Content of ours; for they're developing most alarmingly."

But really Mr. Garrabrant was joking. He had foreseen just such a condition as this, knowing boys as well as he did, and made sure to add good measure to the quantity of food first planned for.

The fishermen presently brought in what catch they had made. Every one was both surprised and delighted to see the splendid size of the trout that had taken the bait.

"Why, this sure is a great snap!" exclaimed Lil Artha, who had been looking all around for various views which he anticipated capturing on succeeding days. "We can have the toothsome trout whenever the spirit moves, and the fishermen get busy."

"And they pull like a house afire, too," declared Matty Eggleston, who had been one of the anglers. "I've caught black bass lots of times, but this is my first trout experience. Yum, yum, say, don't they just smell fine, though? Look at Ginger walking up and down over by the shore of the lake! He's that near starved he just can't stay around any longer and sniff that delicious odor! Boys, ain't it near time to call us to the fray? Oh, I'm that hollow I'm afraid I'll break in two!"

"Supper's ready, Mr. Garrabrant!" announced Ty Collins, who had been given a free hand as chief cook on this evening, while Elmer paid attention to various other things.

"Call the boys in then, and we'll see if it tastes as good as it smells. Sound the assembly, Mark," called the scout master, himself not at all averse to the pleasant duty of satisfying the inner man's clamorings.

So the bugler sent out the sweet call, and even Ginger seemed to know what it meant, for he came hurrying along to serve the dinner, a broad grin stamped on his ebony face, and his mouth stretched almost from ear to ear.

"This is what I call solid comfort," observed Mark, as he tasted the crisp trout, and decided that it was finer than any fish he had ever eaten in all his life.

A chorus of approving grunts and nods followed his assertion, for as a rule the scouts were too busily occupied just then to say much. Ginger had not been compelled to wait until they were through, under the existing conditions that would have been next door to a crime, because the poor old chap was really frantic for something to stop the awful craving he had. So, after helping the entire bunch he was allowed to dip in and sit in a retired spot, where the tremendous champing noise he made while "feeding" might not annoy the rest.

Afterward, when everyone admitted that "enough was as good as a feast," they lay around taking things easy. Ginger gathered up the cooking utensils, and the numerous pannikins and tin cups used by the troop. It was to be his duty to wash these things after each meal, and thus the boys were enabled to avoid one very troublesome part of camp life. And hence they were glad to have Ginger along.

As before, arrangements were made looking to a constant detail to serve as sentries. There was no danger anticipated, of course, but since the scouts wished to learn everything that was connected with life in the open, they must carry out the game in all its parts. And guarding the camp against a possible foe was one of these things.

Two were to be on duty at the same time, the entire night being suitably divided up into watches, as on board a ship. From ten o'clock up to five meant seven hour shifts, with two boys on duty at a time.

Elmer and Mr. Garrabrant were exempt from this drudgery if they so pleased, but the chances were, both of them would obtain less sleep, that night at least, than any of the others. Even Ginger was given his "spell," though it was doubted whether he could keep awake an hour, for he was a very sleepy individual after he had finished his task with the tin pans.

"To-morrow we start in with some of our tests," remarked the scout master, as the time drew near for the bugler to sound taps. "That's one thing I want to drill you boys in, while we're up here. We'll pit the two details against each other, and see which can set up a tent in the shortest order, and in the best manner. Then we'll start on the first-aid-to-the-injured racket, and take a step further than we've ever gone before. After that I'm going to get our assistant scout master to show us a lot of mighty interesting things about following a trail, and what the different tracks of such animals as may be found up here look like. And another day some of us will hike to the top of that mountain, while another detachment tries to climb the second rise, after which they can wigwag to each other,

in Signal Corps language, and hold a long talk, to be verified later on in camp from the records kept. That is the program, boys. Now, go to your blankets and sleep over it."

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