

BOBBY BLAKE

ON A
PLANTATION



FRANK A. WARNER

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Fred and Lee saw a huge alligator almost on top of them.

BOBBY BLAKE ON A PLANTATION
OR
LOST IN THE GREAT SWAMP

BY
FRANK A. WARNER

Author of "Bobby Blake at Rockledge School," "Bobby Blake on a Cruise," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER ROGERS

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BOBBY BLAKE ON A PLANTATION

CHAPTER I

THE SINKING BOAT

“I tell you what, fellows, that was some game yesterday,” said Fred Martin, as he sat with his comrades on the steps of Rockledge Hall, the day after that memorable Thanksgiving Day when Rockledge had beaten its great rival, Belden, in the annual football game.

“It was a close shave though,” remarked his chum, Bobby Blake, who had been the chief factor in the victory. “There were only two minutes left of playing time when, we got the touchdown. It came just in the nick of time.”

“I thought you were a goner when that fellow Hoskins dove at you,” put in Jimmy Ailshine, better known as “Shiner.” “That fellow sure is a terror when it comes to tackling. He grabs you as if you were a long-lost brother.”

“He came mighty near stopping me,” admitted Bobby. “I just felt his fingers touch me as I dodged. But a miss is as good as a mile, in football as in everything else.”

“It was a tough game for Belden to lose,” commented Perry Wise, a big, fat boy, who went by the ironical nickname of “Pee Wee.” “But both teams couldn’t win, and we were just a little bit too good for them,” he added complacently.

“Listen to that ‘we’,” jibed “Sparrow” Bangs. “Lot you had to do with it, you old elephant.”

“Wasn’t I sitting there rooting to beat the band?” demanded Pee Wee in an aggrieved tone. “And let me tell you I’m some little rooter.”

“Well, we’ve won the banner of blue and gold anyway,” declared Howell Purdy. “Maybe it won’t look good floating from the top of that flagstaff.”

“I wonder when we’re going to get it,” pondered “Skeets” Brody. “Have you seen it yet, Bobby?”

“Not yet,” replied Bobby. “But Frank Durrock told me all about it. It’s mighty nifty. It’s made in blue and gold, with a football in the center. Then at each of the four corners there’ll be the emblem of one of the schools that played for it, and it will have embroidered on it: ‘Champions of the Monatook Lake Football League.’”

“I’d like to have the letters big enough so that the Belden fellows could read it from across the lake,” chuckled Sparrow.

“Come off, Sparrow,” said Bobby with a laugh. “You’re like the Indians who

scalp the dead. It ought to be enough for you that we beat them, without wanting to rub it in. Besides, we didn't beat them by such a margin that we can afford to brag much about it. They sure let us know that we'd been in a fight."

"Talking of fighting," chimed in Billy Bassett, "did any of you fellows hear of the hold up that took place in town this morning?"

"Hold up!" came in a chorus from the lips of all the boys, as they crowded around him.

"Yes," replied Billy, "up at Mr. Henderson's house, about nine o'clock."

"In broad daylight!" ejaculated Fred. "Gee, but those robbers are getting bold. Are you sure about it, Billy?"

"Dead sure," replied Billy. "In fact, I just happened to be passing by, and I saw the whole thing."

"You saw it!" cried Sparrow, fairly bubbling over with excitement. "It's a wonder you didn't say something before. How many were there in it?"

"There were two against one," answered Billy.

"Weren't you awfully scared?" asked Skeets.

"Not a bit," declared Billy. "Why should I be scared at seeing two clothes pins holding up a shirt?"

There was a moment of awful silence.

Then with a howl the crowd rose and threw themselves on Billy, and mauled and pounded him until he begged for mercy.

"To think that I fell for it!" snorted Fred disgustedly. "I sure am easy."

"I'm just as bad," mourned Sparrow. "I swallowed the whole thing, hook, line and sinker. I'm not fit to go around alone. They ought to put me in an asylum for the feeble-minded."

"Serves you both right," laughed Bobby. "You ought to know Billy by this time. Whenever he starts to talk you can be sure that he's trying to put something over on us."

"I'd hate to have your suspicious disposition," grinned Billy, highly delighted with the success he had scored.

"Say, fellows, isn't it getting near time for lunch?" spoke up Pee Wee from his recumbent position on one of the steps.

"Can't that tank ever get filled up?" asked Skeets. "Look at the way he polished off that grand old Thanksgiving dinner, and he's starving yet."

"That was yesterday," explained Pee Wee. "How long do you think one dinner's going to last? Don't you suppose I've got to keep up my strength?"

"What for?" scoffed Skeets. "You're too lazy to use it anyway."

“Don’t forget that he’s got a lot of weight to carry around,” admonished Fred.

“What seems to be the matter down there,” put in Sparrow, pointing to a tree on the campus about a hundred feet from where the boys were lounging.

The others followed the direction of Sparrow’s finger and saw two boys engaged in what seemed to be an angry dispute. Even as they looked, the larger of the two snatched off the cap of his companion and threw it on the ground.

“Bill Snath is at it again!” exclaimed Fred, jumping to his feet. “He’s ragging that new pupil that came in a few days ago, Cartier I think his name is.”

“Might know that Snath couldn’t stay decent for long,” remarked Skeets. “He toned down a little after Sandy Jackson skipped out, but now he’s up to his old tricks. Cartier’s a good deal smaller than he is.”

“That’s the reason Snath’s picking on him,” said Bobby. “Trust that bully not to tackle anyone of his own size. Come along, fellows, and let’s see what the trouble’s about.”

They hurried in the direction of the two disputants, even Pee Wee showing more speed than usual, although even at that he brought up in the rear.

In the meantime, Snath had added insult to injury by planting his feet firmly on Cartier’s cap and looking on with a malicious grin on his face, while his victim tugged at it in vain attempts to regain it.

As the running boys neared the two, Snath caught sight of them, and a look of disappointment, not unmixed with fear, came into his small, pale eyes. For a moment he appeared as though about to slink away, but he thought better of it and stood his ground.

“What’s going on?” asked Bobby, as his eyes went from one to the other.

“Don’t know that that’s any of your business,” growled Snath, a pasty-faced, loose-jawed youth, with mean eyes set too close together.

“We’ll make it our business, you big bully,” Fred was beginning, when Bobby placed a restraining hand on his chum’s arm.

“Just a minute, Fred,” he said. “Let’s hear what Cartier has to say about it,” he went on, turning to the other boy. “How about it, Lee?”

“I was passing by him when he told me to take off my cap to him,” replied Lee Cartier, a slender, dark-eyed boy with a clean-cut, intelligent face. “I told him I wouldn’t and then he grabbed it and threw it on the ground. He’s standing on it now,” and he pointed to the crumpled cap under the bully’s feet.

“Suppose you let Lee have his cap, Snath,” said Bobby.

“Suppose I don’t,” snarled the bully doggedly.

“Then we’ll make you,” Fred burst out hotly, his face almost as red as the

fiery hair combined with a fiery temper that had gained for him the nickname of “Ginger.”

But again Bobby intervened.

“Easy, Fred,” he counseled. “Now look here, Snath,” he continued, fixing his eyes steadily on the bully, who tried to meet his gaze, though his shifty eyes wavered, “we’ve had enough of this sort of thing in this school, and we’re not going to stand for any more of it. Sandy Jackson tried it and couldn’t get away with it, and you’re not going to, either. Take your foot off that cap.”

“I won’t!” snapped Snath furiously, though there was a perceptible wobbly movement of his knees. “Who do you think you are anyway, Bobby Blake? You just quit butting in and let me tend to my own affairs. You needn’t think you’re running this school.”

“Take your foot off that cap,” repeated Bobby, not raising his voice a particle, but moving a step forward so that he was within easy reach.

The rest of the boys crowded about the two, all agog with expectation of a “scrap.” There was not one of them but cordially detested the bully, and many of them had been the victims of his petty torments. They were eager to see him get the thrashing he richly deserved, and that they felt Bobby was fully able to give him.

But Snath was one of those who believed that discretion was the better part of valor. He hated to give in, with all the boys looking at him, but he hated still worse the idea of coming to blows with Bobby, although he was much the larger of the two. His eyes fell on Bobby’s fists which were slowly clenching, and then with a growl he stepped back off the cap. He could not resist, however, the temptation to give the head covering a vicious kick.

“Take your old cap,” he snarled. “As for you, Bobby Blake, I’ll get even with you for this when you haven’t got your crowd with you.”

“Make him pick it up, Bobby!” shouted Fred, who was disappointed at not seeing the bully get his just deserts.

But Lee had already picked up the cap and put it on his head, while he flashed a look of gratitude at his champion.

Snath shambled away with a last malignant look at Bobby that was full of threats of vengeance in the future.

“It’s too bad you didn’t have an excuse for trimming him, Bobby,” sighed Sparrow, as the bully’s form vanished round a corner of the building. “He’s had a licking coming to him for a long time, and you’re the one who could have done him up to the queen’s taste.”

“I don’t want to fight,” replied Bobby. “I never want to if I can help it. You

know the trouble that came from that mixup with Sandy Jackson. But there's been too much of this bullying going on in the school and it's just as well to let fellows like Snath know where they get off."

"He's got it in for you," declared Skeets. "Did you see that look he gave you when he went away? I'll bet he's figuring out right now some dirty trick to play on you."

"Let him figure," laughed Bobby. "I should worry a lot and build a house on it. But what do you say, fellows, to kicking the football around a little? I'm a little sore from yesterday, and it will help get some of the kinks out of my bones. Besides it will help us get up an appetite for lunch."

All assented readily, except Pee Wee.

"I've got all the appetite I want already," he said. "If I had any more I'd be starving to death. But you dubs go ahead and play, and I'll lie down here and rest."

"That's the best thing you do," chaffed Fred.

"Rest is Pee Wee's middle name," jibed Sparrow.

But the good-natured fat boy only smiled in a superior sort of way and made himself comfortable, while his comrades got the ball and put it in action. There were not enough of them to form two elevens and play a regular game, but they got up a couple of skeleton teams and were soon in the thick of some lively scrimmages.

The new boy, Lee Cartier, had been chosen by Bobby as one of his side, and although he was not familiar with the fine points of the game, he played with zest and spirit and showed that he had it in him to become a good player. What he lacked in weight and strength he made up in quickness, and he followed the ball in a way that called forth praise from Bobby.

"That was good work, Lee," the latter said, after Lee had fallen like a flash on the ball that one of the opposing players had fumbled.

Lee's face flushed with pleasure at the commendation.

"I'm afraid I'm a good deal of a dub at the game," he answered. "If I could ever learn to play the way you did yesterday it would be something to talk about. I wish you would teach me the way the game ought to be played. Will you?"

"I've got lots to learn about it myself," replied Bobby, "but what little I know you're welcome to. There'll probably be lots of days when we can practice before real cold weather comes."

Just then a cry of alarm arose from Fred, as he happened to glance toward the lake.

“Look at that boat!” he shouted. “It looks as if it were sinking!”

All eyes were turned on a boat containing four boys, about a quarter of a mile from the shore. Two of the occupants were pulling desperately at the oars, but making scarcely any progress. The other inmates of the boat were waving their hands wildly and shouting at the tops of their voices, although what they were saying could not be distinguished at that distance.

Bobby gave one look and threw down the football.

“Come along, fellows!” he shouted, as he made for the boathouse at the top of his speed.

“They’re sinking and we’ve got to save them!”

CHAPTER II

JUST IN TIME

There was a wild shout as the other boys followed, and they were close on Bobby's heels when he reached the boathouse.

There were several boats in the house, most of them laid up in canvas coverings, as the weather was becoming so cold that the lake offered no special attraction. One boat, however, and luckily the one nearest the doors, was available, and to this Bobby rushed.

"Lend a hand, some of you fellows!" he called. "Some one get two pairs of oars from the rack. Hurry now! We can't waste a second."

In a moment the oars were handed down and put in the boat and Bobby had thrown open the sliding doors.

Willing hands helped him to push the boat down the slanting way that led to the float.

"Four of us can go in this," cried Bobby. "You, Fred, and you, Sparrow, and —"

"Let me go," begged Lee, whose eyes were burning with excitement. "I've had a good deal of practice in rowing and I can handle an oar as well as any one."

"All right," agreed Bobby. "Into the water now with the boat."

The rowboat was shoved into the water and held to the float by Skeets and Shiner, while Bobby and his three mates tumbled in, grasped the oars and pulled off.

By this time it was plainly to be seen that the endangered boat was much lower in the water than it was when it had first been seen. The gunwales were almost flush with the level of the lake, and the two who had been rowing had abandoned the oars, as it was impossible to drag the heavily laden water-logged boat through the water. The occupants had thrown off their coats, and two of them were tugging away at their shoes, preparatory to the swim for life that seemed inevitable.

The boys who were left on the shore waved their hands frantically, shouting to the boys in the sinking boat not to jump, and pointing to the other boat that was coming to their assistance.

In the meantime, Bobby and his companions were bending to the oars lustily

and putting all their strength into every stroke.

“Keep at it, fellows!” panted Bobby, while the perspiration rolled down his face. “Don’t stop to look behind. I’ll take a look once in a while just so as to keep the boat steering right. Pull with all your might!”

His comrades needed no urging, and the boat leaped through the water with a speed that rapidly cut down the space that still intervened between it and the sinking craft.

For sinking it was now beyond a doubt. The occupants had for the moment abandoned the design of springing overboard, and were baling frantically, using their caps and sweaters and hands in the effort to keep the doomed boat afloat until their rescuers could reach them.

“If they can only keep afloat two minutes more!” gasped Bobby, as a glance behind showed him the awful danger. “Don’t spare yourself, fellows. It may mean life or death. Just two minutes more and we’ll get them.”

But the two minutes grace could not be granted. They had got within perhaps a hundred feet, when there was a desperate cry from the inmates of the sinking boat, which was echoed from the watching crowd on the shore. The next instant the boat went down by the bow, and its four occupants were struggling in the lake.

“Pull, fellows, pull!” Bobby fairly screamed, bending almost double with his own exertions.

And while the other rescuers were following his example, it may be well for the benefit of those who have not read the earlier volumes of this series, to trace briefly his adventures and those of his friends up to the time this story opens.

Bobby Blake was a bright, wide-awake American boy, who had been brought up in the small but prosperous inland village of Clinton. He was the only son of parents who were in comfortable circumstances. Bobby was frank, merry and straightforward, and a great favorite with the boys of his own age, of whom he was the natural leader.

Bobby’s special chum was Fred Martin, son of a Clinton business man, who lived only a few doors away from the Blakes. Fred was freckled, redhaired, and had the hot impulsive temper that often goes with that color of hair. But he was good and generous of heart, and he and Bobby got on famously together. Fred was constantly getting into trouble of one kind or another, and Bobby was kept busy trying to prevent his friend from reaping the consequences of his quick temper. Bobby never looked for trouble, though he was always ready to defend his rights and would not let himself be imposed on. The boys were inseparable, and wherever one was found the other was pretty sure not to be far away.

When Bobby was ten years old, Mr. Blake was suddenly called away on business to South America, and as Mrs. Blake was going with him, it became necessary to send the lad away to boarding school. Bobby and Fred were feeling very badly over the prospect of their being separated, when, to the delight of both, their parents decided to send them to Rockledge School together. The school was a fine one, located on a beautiful sheet of water called Monatook Lake. Here the chums found that they had to study hard, but they also had lots of fun and adventure. Some bullies tried to tyrannize over them, but failed in the attempt, and how Bobby came out ahead of them is told in the first volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Rockledge School."

Vacation time found Bobby spending a few weeks at the summer home of Perry Wise, or "Pee Wee," the big, fat boy whose laziness and enormous appetite were a source of good-natured fun for all the Rockledge boys. Here they had a great variety of sports, for the home was on the sea coast and there were abundant opportunities for swimming, boating and fishing. The hunt for a missing motor boat added greatly to the excitement of their visit.

Their stay was cut short by a message from Bobby's parents to meet them at Porto Rico, where they expected to stop on their homeward journey. Bobby was wild to meet them, the more so because at one time their ship had been reported as shipwrecked and lost. It was arranged that Fred should go with him, and the boys embarked in high spirits. Their ship caught fire, however, and they with others found themselves adrift, landing at last on a volcanic island, narrowly escaping with their lives.

"The fellows at Rockledge will hardly believe us when we tell them all we've gone through," declared Bobby, as they were on their way home.

"It will sound as if we were stretching things," admitted Fred, "but I guess they'll believe us when we cross our hearts. Anyway, we know it's true."

They found the Fall term at Rockledge full of sport and interest and they had some surprising experiences. Many of these were due to the warm rivalry that existed between Rockledge and Belden School, a rival institution on the further side of Monatook Lake.

When the Christmas holidays came, Bobby and a number of his special chums were invited to visit Snowtop Camp belonging to an uncle of "Mouser" Pryde. This was up in the Big Woods. There were wildcats near there, to say nothing of a big bear that made lots of trouble for them before the boys got the best of him. There was a snowslide too that buried their house and gave them some lively work to dig themselves out.

With the coming of Spring, the boys of Rockledge were alive with enthusiasm

over baseball. Bobby and Fred became members of the Rockledge nine, and it was Bobby's fine work as a pitcher in the most important games that enabled the Rockledge boys to beat Belden out and win the baseball championship of the school league.

"I tell you what, he just had the Belden fellows eating out of his hand," was the way Jimmy Ailshine, or "Shiner," as he was called, expressed his opinion of Bobby's work in the box.

An entirely new experience came to Bobby when he and Fred and several of their schoolboy friends went out West to a ranch owned by a relative of Sparrow Bangs. Here they made friends with the cowboys and learned to ride, and they also fell in with a moving picture company and took part in the making of a film. The way they discovered the plot of some Mexicans and lawless characters and were able to thwart it forms the subject of a very exciting story.

There was still a part of their vacation left, when they returned from the ranch, and Skeets Brody urged them to spend this in making a trip in his father's automobile. A copperhead snake that took possession of their cave furnished an exciting feature of the trip, which was further enlivened by an encounter with gypsies. They rescued two little children from these vagabonds of the road, though at considerable risk to themselves, and had the good fortune to restore them to their father.

The boys returned to school in high spirits, and in the intervals of their studies practiced strenuously in order to "make" the football team. This time there were two other schools besides Belden that they had to battle with, and they found their work cut out for them. In fact they came within an ace of losing the deciding game, but how Bobby rose to the occasion and carried the ball over the goal line for a touchdown and a glorious victory is told in the volume preceding this, entitled: "Bobby Blake On the School Eleven; or, Winning the Banner of Blue and Gold."

And now on the very day following that victory, we see Bobby working as he had never worked before, to save the inmates of the sinking boat from death in the icy waters of the lake.

The boys who had been thrown into the water when the boat went down rose to the surface, dashed the water from their eyes and looked wildly about them.

They spied the advancing boat, which was now close at hand, and two of them struck out for it. A third tried to swim, but seemed to be so chilled and bewildered that he could make no progress. He did manage, however, to keep his head above water. The fourth, it was evident could not swim at all. He splashed about feebly for a moment and then sank.

By this time Bobby's boat was right among them. The two foremost swimmers grabbed the stern, as the boys suspended rowing. Bobby reached over and grabbed a third one, who almost pulled him out of the boat.

Just then the water broke alongside and the head of the boy who had gone down appeared. His eyes were glassy, and he was almost unconscious. Lee was the nearest one to him and reached over to grab him. He caught his hair, but the drowning boy's weight was too great, and the boat tipped so sharply that Lee was dragged over the gunwale.

He came up spluttering and gasping, but still holding on to the other. Bobby surrendered the boy he was holding to Fred, and grasping an oar held it out to Lee. The latter caught it and Bobby pulled him up to the side of the boat.

"Take him in first!" gasped Lee, indicating his helpless burden. "I can hold on to the boat."

By using all their strength and being especially careful not to upset the boat, the rescuers lifted the half drowned boy on board. Then came Lee's turn and that of the other three, two of whom managed to clamber over without help.

"Now," said Bobby with a sigh of relief, when all were safely in the boat. "We've got to work like beavers to get back to shore. It's no joke to be soaked to the skin on so cold a day as this. Here, Lee," he went on, turning to the shivering lad, "take this coat of mine."

"I won't do it," said Lee, "You need it yourself."

"Not a bit of it," replied Bobby. "I've been rowing so hard I'm all in a sweat, and the work getting home will keep me warmer than I'll want to be. You've just got to take it."

Despite Lee's protest, Bobby put the coat around him. Fred and Sparrow followed suit with regard to the other boys, whom they made lie down in the boat so as to escape the wind. Then they took the oars and pulled vigorously for the shore.

Cheers greeted them as they approached. The news of what was going on had spread like wildfire, and all of Rockledge School was down at the shore, including Doctor Raymond, the head of the institution, and Mr. Leith and Mr. Carrier, two teachers. A doctor also had been summoned and many of the townspeople had hurried on foot and in autos to the spot.

There was a hubbub of excited exclamations, as the boat reached the little landing stage. The spectators had seen the figures dragged aboard, but from that distance could not tell whether some of them were alive or dead.

The moment the boat slid alongside the float, eager hands were outstretched to help, and great was the relief when it was found that no life had been lost.

The rescued ones were hurried up to the school, where their wet clothes were stripped from them and they were given hot drinks and placed between warm blankets.

Doctor Raymond was so busy in supervising this work that he had no time more than to tell the rescuers that he was proud of them and would see them later in his study. But others crowded around them and made much of them, while showering them with questions.

“It was nothing at all,” said Bobby with characteristic modesty. “We simply happened to be nearest and the boat was handy and we piled in and rowed out to them. Any one else would have done the same if the chance had come to them, and you fellows are making too much out of it.”

“That’s all very well,” said Skeets Brody with a grin, “but I notice just the same that when anything has to be done and done in a hurry it’s Bobby Blake that’s ‘Johnny on the spot’.”

CHAPTER III

A CLOSE CALL

Now that the danger was over, the crowd began to melt away, and the boys, who in the excitement had forgotten all about lunch, suddenly remembered that they had been overlooking what was to all of them a duty and to most of them a pleasure and made a break for the dining hall.

Pee Wee was especially remorseful that he had so far forgotten himself.

“Gee!” he observed, as he took out his watch. “Lunch time has been over for more than half an hour. I hope they haven’t cleared the table.”

“If they haven’t, you will when you get to it,” jibed Skeets. “That’s one place where you can be depended on to work.”

“That isn’t work—it’s fun,” admitted Pee Wee, as he started to put his watch back in his pocket. But in his haste it dropped from his fingers and fell with a bang to the ground.

There was an exclamation from the boys, who crowded around Pee Wee as he looked ruefully at the watch, whose crystal had been broken.

“Did it stop?” asked Fred.

“Of course it stopped when it hit the ground,” put in Billy. “What did you expect it to do—go right through to China?”

Pee Wee favored Billy with a glare that expressed his opinion of that lad’s frivolity.

“Of all the idiots—” he began, and then words failed him and he tapped his forehead significantly.

Nothing abashed, the graceless Billy grinned.

“It wasn’t so bad,” he said complacently. “I don’t know how those things come to me but they do—just like that,” he added snapping his fingers airily.

“He hates himself—I don’t think,” remarked Fred, making a playful pass at Billy, who dodged so adroitly that the blow passed over his head and caught the luckless Pee Wee in the stomach almost making him drop his watch again.

“Say, what are you up to?” he demanded indignantly, rubbing the injured spot with his hand. “Haven’t I had hard luck enough for one day without you fellows rubbing it in?”

“You seem to be doing all the rubbing,” laughed Fred. “Sorry, old boy, but that stomach of yours is so big that nothing can miss it.”

“Stop picking on poor little Pee Wee,” chuckled Sparrow. “Cheer up, Pee Wee. What if another Ingersoll did bite the dust? You’ll have a good excuse now for being late at recitations.”

This silver lining to the cloud was not without its effect on Pee Wee, and putting the battered watch into his pocket, successfully this time, he hurried to the dining hall, where the savory odors of the meal that the housekeeper had prepared soon made him forget all his troubles.

The boys at the tables were bubbling over with interest at the stirring events they had witnessed, and Bobby and the rest of his crew had all they could do in answering the questions that were showered upon them.

“Don’t you feel awfully sore and used up, Bobby?” queried Howell Purdy, his voice a little muffled because his mouth was so full.

“Not so very,” responded Bobby. “I suppose I will to-morrow though. The second day is always worse than the first.”

“If our boys ever pulled that way in a race, we’d have no trouble in beating out Belden,” remarked Shiner. “You fellows were simply lifting that boat out of the water. As it was, you didn’t get there a minute too soon either.”

“Not a second too soon,” corrected Sparrow. “That fellow who couldn’t swim will never come nearer to death than he was to-day. My heart was just about in my mouth when I saw him go down.”

“Lee had a close call too when he was pulled overboard,” put in Skeets.

“Oh, as for that, Lee can swim like a fish,” remarked Fred. “But he got a wetting just the same and had to sit in his wet clothes until we got back to the float. I hope it hasn’t hurt him.”

“He isn’t very strong, but he’s as plucky as they make them,” commented Skeets, “and he certainly knows how to swing an oar.”

“We had one bit of luck to help us out,” said Bobby, “and that was that one of the boats hadn’t been put away in canvas. If it had been, we could never have got it out in time. As it was, it was close to the door, so we could slide it out in a jiffy.”

When at last the meal was finished and even Pee Wee had had enough to eat, Bobby’s first thought was of Lee. He saw Mr. Carrier hurrying through the hall and asked him about the Southern boy whom he had already learned to like very much.

“Lee Cartier was very badly chilled,” was Mr. Carrier’s response, “and that, combined with over exertion, has made the doctor a little anxious about him. I guess it would be better for you boys not to see him for a while. But the other boys are getting along all right, and they just told me that they would like to see

you and the other members of the boat crew that rescued them. By the way, Blake, you and the other boys who went with you did nobly to-day and I'm proud of you. It was a splendid piece of work."

Bobby flushed at the praise and would have disclaimed any special credit, but Mr. Carrier smiled and went on. Bobby hunted up Sparrow and Fred, and the three went to the room which had been placed at the disposal of the boys they had rescued.

They found the four seated before a glowing fire, wrapped in hot blankets and eating with evident relish an abundant meal that had been brought up to them. Apart from their ruffled hair, they bore no sign of the ordeal through which they had passed, and which had so nearly cost the lives of all of them.

They jumped to their feet as their three rescuers came in and surrounded them, shaking hands and offering fervent thanks for the help they had brought them at the moment of their deepest need.

"Why, you are Belden boys!" exclaimed Bobby, as he took a good look at them. "I suppose I ought to have known that before, but I was so busy that I didn't have a chance to see much of your faces."

"Then, too, we looked so much like drowned rats that you probably wouldn't have recognized us anyway," laughed the eldest one of the quartette. "Yes, we're Belden boys, all right, and live ones too, thanks to you. If it hadn't been for you fellows, all four of us would have been at the bottom of the lake by this time. My name is Wilson and this is Thompson and this is Livingston and this is Miner," he added, introducing himself and his companions.

"I know Livingston and Miner already," responded Bobby, after having introduced Sparrow and Fred in turn. "They played against our team in the football game yesterday."

"Sure thing," agreed Livingston, while Miner smiled assent, "and we didn't think when we were trying to keep you away from our goal line then that you'd be saving our lives to-day."

"Tell us how it all happened," said Bobby, as the party seated themselves comfortably before the open fire.

"I suppose it was a bit of foolishness on our part," replied Wilson, who seemed by common consent to be the spokesman of the Belden group, "and I'm the most foolish of the lot, because I was the one who proposed the trip. We were all feeling a little sore and blue over the defeat our team suffered yesterday, and to get our minds off it I proposed to the rest of the fellows here that we should take a row on the lake. We noticed a little water in the bottom of the boat when we started, but thought that might be due to the rain we had a few days

ago. It was only when we had got out beyond the middle of the lake that we noticed that the boat was leaking badly. We tried to stuff the leak with, our handkerchiefs, but in jabbing them in with an oar, we pushed too hard and widened the crack so that we could do nothing with it, and the water began to come in faster than we could bail it out. This side of the lake was the nearer, and we began to pull toward it as hard as we could. It was just about that time I guess that you saw us. I tell you we felt good when we saw you rush to the landing and get out the boat. It braced us up and made us keep up the fight till the last minute. But toward the end I thought it was all up with us. Thompson here was the worst off of any of us, for he can't swim a stroke."

"I sure thought that I was a goner," broke in Thompson. "I think I must have gone all through the pain of drowning, for the last thing I remember was that my lungs seemed bursting. I don't even recall being pulled into the boat. It sure was a close call."

"Yes," agreed Bobby soberly as he gazed into the fire, "it was a close call."

CHAPTER IV

FACING THE BULLY

There was silence in the room for a minute or two. The boys all sensed the nearness of the tragedy that had been so narrowly averted, and each had an inward shudder as he thought of what might have been.

But though the death angel had passed so close that they had almost heard the rustling of his wings, here they were after all alive and safe, and their spirits rose while their hearts swelled with thankfulness.

“Well,” remarked Wilson, breaking the silence, “this will be a lesson to me, as the darky said when he was about to be hanged. I don’t get in any more boats unless they’re as dry as a bone.”

“And even then I’ll keep out of them,” said Thompson with emphasis. “Dry land is good enough for me, at least, until I learn how to swim.”

“Wouldn’t care to have us row you back to Belden, eh?” queried Bobby with a grin.

“Not on your life,” laughed Miner. “They’ve ’phoned over that they’ll send an auto for us and we’ll go back in style. But we’ll never forget till the last day of our lives what you fellows have done for us. And if I ever hear any fellow knock Rockledge, he’ll have a fight on his hands right away.”

Bobby laughed, as he and his two companions rose to go.

“Oh, Belden and Rockledge will have many a fight yet,” he said, “but they’ll be good-natured fights on the baseball or football fields, and may the best school win.”

They exchanged hearty farewells with the Belden boys, and went out of the room and down the corridor. On the way they passed Bill Snath, who favored them with a malicious stare in passing and uttered the word “heroes,” in a sneering tone, as he went by. It was spoken in a low tone, but loud enough for Fred, who was nearest him, to hear it, and his temper took fire at once.

“What was that you said, Bill Snath?” he demanded, as he turned on his heel.

“Nobody spoke to you, redhead,” returned Snath, snapping out the epithet with a good deal of relish.

This was like a spark to powder, and Fred’s face became as red as his hair.

“You take that back!” he cried, rushing up to Snath, who had stopped and was regarding him with a tantalizing grin.

“Suppose I don’t, what are you going to do about it?” demanded the bully, his tone the more confident because he could see behind Fred’s back the tall figure of Mr. Leith, the head teacher, coming up from the other end of the hall.

“I’ll show you what I’m going to do about it,” Fred replied, and was starting to unbutton his coat, when Bobby, who had come up, restrained him.

“Mr. Leith’s coming, Fred,” he warned him. “Cool off now and come along. He’s close behind you now.”

There was no need of saying anything else, and Fred by a great effort restrained himself. Mr. Leith came by and looked curiously at the flushed face of the boy. He said nothing however, but when he had reached the other end of the hall stood there as if in meditation.

“It’s lucky for you that he came along just then,” Fred said in a low tone to the bully. “If you have nerve enough to come somewhere out of sight of the school, we’ll settle this thing right now.”

“You’re three to one,” Snath replied. “If you were alone I’d make you sing small.”

“They’ll only go along to see fair play,” answered Fred. “But if you like, I’ll go with you alone. I’ve taken about all I’m going to take from you. Bill Snath.”

“You’ll have to take all I care to give you,” drawled Snath, feeling perfectly safe as long as Mr. Leith was in sight.

As at that moment Mr. Leith began to come back along the hall, there was nothing more to be done or said and the boys separated, Snath sauntering toward the teacher with affected nonchalance, while Fred with Bobby and Sparrow went in the opposite direction.

“That fellow gets my goat,” growled Fred. “He never goes past without a nasty look or word. He’s getting just as bad as Sandy Jackson, and he needs to be taken down.”

“He’s aching for a thrashing,” agreed Bobby, “and that’s twice to-day he’s come near getting it. But if I were you, Fred, I’d take as little notice of him as I could. If you hadn’t paid any attention to what he said about heroes, he’d have thought we didn’t hear him, and that would have made him sore. As it is, he’s tickled to death because he thinks he put one over on us.”

“But he called me redhead!” exclaimed Fred, “and no one can do that in earnest without a fight.”

“That of course is different,” admitted Bobby. “I wouldn’t let any one call me names and get away with it. But as far as we can, the best thing is to let him alone. Some time or other he’ll get to the end of his rope, just as his pal did and get out of Rockledge School.”

“I guess Bobby’s about right,” remarked Sparrow. “I suppose it’s always better to go round a skunk than take a kick at him. But I don’t blame Fred for feeling sore. I feel the same way.”

The chums went out on the steps of the school, where they found a group of their friends waiting for them.

“How are the fellows getting along who were nearly drowned?” asked Skeets.

“Fine and dandy,” replied Fred, who by this time had regained his usual good nature. “Not one of them is going to kick the bucket. And what do you think, fellows? They’re all Belden boys.”

“Belden boys!” echoed Shiner. “Our chief rivals! That’s what you call heaping coals of fire on their head.”

“I guess coals of fire would have felt comfortable when they were out in the lake,” laughed Mouser. “But I’m mighty glad they’re getting along all right. If any of them had died, I’d expect to hear their ghosts walking about the halls of the building to-night.”

“Listen, to him talk,” said Howell Purdy scornfully. “You can’t hear ghosts walk. They just float around as soft as anything.”

“That’s right,” came in a chorus from the boys, who had involuntarily gathered a little closer together at the talk of ghosts.

“No, he isn’t right,” chirped up Billy. “Mouser had it straight when he talked about hearing ghosts walking.”

“There you are,” said Mouser, glad of the reinforcement.

“It’s easy enough to say that,” put in Howell, “but how are you going to prove it? All the books I ever read say that they don’t make any noise. You can’t bear them coming. So what do you make of that?” he added turning triumphantly toward Billy.

The latter however seemed not to be a bit disturbed.

“All the same I’m right,” he asserted with quiet confidence.

“How can you prove it?” demanded Howell defiantly.

“That’s the talk” came from the others. “Prove it, Billy. Put up or shut up.”

“All right,” replied Billy, accepting the challenge. “I know that ghosts walk because I’ve heard them do it!”

CHAPTER V

PUTTING ONE OVER

There was a shout of amazement from the boys in which could be detected an element of unbelief and derision. But there was also a note of awe that was balm to Billy's soul. Any one who was so familiar with the supernatural was not to be regarded lightly. Billy felt that he had scored a decided hit and swelled out his chest importantly.

"When did you hear them walk?" asked Skeets, looking about him a little apprehensively.

"You're just kidding," declared Shiner, stoutly. "I don't believe a word of it."

"I think that Billy's getting us on a string," affirmed Fred, although his eager eyes showed that he was none too sure of it.

Billy waited for the storm of protest and comment to subside.

"I mean just what I said," he affirmed. "Cross my heart and hope to die if I don't."

This solemn affirmation helped to quell the doubters, especially as there was nothing to arouse suspicion in Billy's sober face.

"Well then, tell us all about it," urged Mouser, who was anxious to obtain confirmation of his own belief.

"It was in our town when old General Bixby was buried," explained Billy, amid a silence in which one could have heard a pin drop. "There was a big turnout and the band played awful solemn music."

He paused for a moment.

"Yes, go on, go on," urged Skeets excitedly. "Was it then that you heard the ghosts walk?"

"Yes," replied Billy. "It was then that I heard the Dead March."

There was a moment of stupefaction, as the idea filtered into the minds of Billy's dupes. Bobby grasped it first.

"Run, Billy run!" he counseled. "They'll kill you for that!"

But Billy had already edged his way to the rim of the group and by the time they lunged for him was safely out of reach. Then he danced a jig and went through various gestures expressive of his pity and contempt for the victims who had let themselves so readily be taken in.

"It's too easy," he shouted. "It really isn't sportsmanlike to take advantage of

such innocent boobs. It's like taking candy from a baby."

"It's no use," declared Bobby. "Billy is a hopeless case."

"He sure is," agreed Mouser, whose faith in ghosts had received a severe bump. "I was watching his face too, but he was so sober that I fell for it and fell good and hard. The only satisfaction is that the rest of you fell for it too."

Just then Dr. Raymond, the head of the school approached, and the boys subsided. The doctor smiled pleasantly at the group and singled out Bobby.

"I'd like to have you come to my office in a few minutes, Blake," he said, "and you also Martin and Bangs. I have something to say to you."

"Very well, sir," the boys assented.

The doctor passed on, and the boys looked at each other. Usually an invitation to the doctor's office portended something unpleasant, and was not looked forward to with any degree of enthusiasm.

"Now you're going to catch it," chaffed Skeets.

"What have you roughnecks been up to now?" demanded Shiner with mock severity.

"Perhaps he's going to scold you for falling for my jokes," Billy rubbed it in.

But the three who had been summoned only smiled. There had been times after midnight spreads and other escapades, when such an invitation would have made them decidedly uneasy. But just at the moment their consciences were clear, and it was without misgiving that a few minutes later they knocked at the doctor's door and were told to come in.

The doctor was seated at his desk, but rose as they entered and motioned them to seats. He was a tall, rather spare man of middle age, with keen eyes and the face of a scholar, in which could be seen also the experience of a man of affairs. There was an air of natural dignity about him that warned any one that he would be an unsafe man to trifle with. But although he was a strict disciplinarian and the boys stood in wholesome awe of him, he was yet tolerant and broadminded and absolutely just. Any boy that was summoned before him for an alleged offense could be certain of being heard in his own defense, and of getting a "square deal;" and wherever possible, justice would be tempered with mercy.

He had built up a reputation for Rockledge School that was spread far and wide. His instructors were well chosen, the manners and morals of the boys were carefully looked after, and parents had no hesitation in confiding their boys to his keeping. The institution was fortunate in its location, standing on the shores of Monatook Lake, a beautiful body of water, which afforded facilities for bathing, boating and fishing in Summer and for skating and other ice sports in Winter. In addition to these natural advantages, the school had a well-equipped gymnasium

and excellently laid out fields for football, baseball and other sports. For training both the mind and the body, Rockledge School left little to be desired; and this was so well understood in that part of the country that there was usually a waiting list of applicants for admission to the strictly limited number of pupils.

“I have sent for you boys,” the doctor said, after they had seated themselves, “to thank you on behalf of myself and the school for the gallant thing you did today in saving those boys from drowning in the lake. It took a lot of pluck and hard work, and I’m proud of you.”

The boys looked embarrassed.

“How is Lee Cartier getting along, Dr. Raymond?” asked Bobby eagerly, glad to change the subject. “Mr. Carrier told me that he wasn’t well enough for us to see him.”

The doctor’s face took on a worried look.

“It’s a little early to tell yet,” he replied. “Dr. Evans, who has just gone, told me that the drenching he had received and the exposure afterward while you were getting back to shore had been a severe shock to his system. He comes from the South, you know, and hasn’t been up here long enough to get hardened to our climate. There is a possibility that he may be in for a serious illness. Still, we’ll hope for the best. I won’t keep you any longer,” he said, rising as a signal of dismissal, “but I want once more to say to you that you have done honor to yourselves and the school.”

The boys bowed themselves out and closed the door behind them.

“The doctor’s a brick, isn’t he?” remarked Fred, as they went down the hall.

“You bet he is,” agreed Sparrow. “He’s the real goods.”

“He’s all wool and a yard wide,” was Bobby’s tribute to the head of Rockledge School.

A week passed swiftly by and then another, and by that time Winter had come in earnest. There had as yet been no snow, but the weather had become intensely cold and the lake was beginning to freeze over. At first, the ice looked like a gigantic spider’s web shooting out in shimmering threads until the entire surface was covered with a crystal coating. Then the ice began to thicken at the shores, and it was evident that with the continuance of the cold weather it would soon be possible to skate from one end of the lake to the other.

Skates were gotten out and polished and sharpened. Some of the boys busied themselves with making ice sails, which they could hold in their hands and which would carry them like the wind along the glassy surface without the expenditure of any effort of their own, save what was required to hold the sails. This contrivance had a special appeal to Pee Wee, who was a profound believer

in any device that would save labor. He was far too lazy however to make one for himself and had written home asking his folks to buy and send him one. To the other boys' suggestion that it be especially reinforced or made of sheet iron, he turned a deaf and scornful ear.

But before the ice was quite hard enough to be trusted, the snow took a hand. Up to then there had been nothing but a few flurries that did scarcely more than whiten the ground. But one afternoon, as the boys came out of their last recitations, they saw that the skies were lowering and that a steady snowstorm was in progress.

Ordinarily this would have been welcomed, but just now the boys had their minds set on skating, so that the sight of the whirling flakes was something of a disappointment.

"There goes our skating up the flue," commented Shiner, as he looked on the ground on which there was already an inch of snow. "The lake will be no good, if it's all covered with snow."

"And by the time the snow's ready to melt, the ice will melt too," mourned Sparrow.

"And I just got a notice from the express company this morning that my ice sail was there," complained Pee Wee.

"Oh, stop your grouching, you poor fish," said Bobby. "In the first place the snow may not amount to anything. In the second place, if it does, we can get busy and sweep off enough of the ice on the lake to skate on. And in the third place, what we may miss in skating we can make up in coasting."

"The fellow worth while is the one that can smile

When everything's going dead wrong,"

chanted Skeets. "I guess that means Bobby," he added, giving the latter a nudge in the ribs.

"Well, what have we got to growl about anyway?" said Fred, falling into his chum's mood. "Here we are well and strong and able to put away three square meals a day"—here Pee Wee pricked up his ears. "Now if we were shut up in a room like Lee Cartier, we might have something to kick about."

"Poor Lee!" remarked Bobby regretfully. "He's certainly had a rough deal. He's lucky of course that he didn't get pneumonia. But it's no joke to be kept in his room so long. I'm going over to see him for a while as soon as supper is over."

Which he did, accompanied by Fred and Sparrow, who had expressed a desire to go along.

CHAPTER VI

FIRE!

The other schoolboys found Lee in the private room that had been set apart for him, propped up with pillows in a big easy chair and wrapped snugly in a bathrobe. His face was pale from his illness, but it lighted up when he saw his visitors.

“I was just wishing you fellows would drop in,” he said, as they shook hands with him and pulled their chairs up close.

“It must get awful poky cooped up in the room so long,” said Bobby sympathetically.

“It sure does,” rejoined the boy from the South. “Of course I have books to read that help to pass away the time, but that isn’t like being with the fellows. Not that I’ve read very much this afternoon,” he went on, “because I’ve been too busy looking at the snow. Do you know that this is the first real snow storm I have ever seen?”

“Is that so?” queried Fred in astonishment. “We see so much of it every year that it gets to be an old story with us.”

“You’ve got an awful lot of fun coming to you,” put in Sparrow. “There’s skating and ice sailing and coasting and snowballing and lots of things.”

“Not forgetting muskratting and fishing through the ice,” added Fred. “Maybe we didn’t have a lot of fun the winter we spent up in Snowtop Camp, eh, fellows?”

“You bet we did,” agreed Sparrow, and launched into a long description of that memorable winter holiday in the Big Woods, not forgetting the bear and the wildcat and the snowslide that buried the house, and other adventures, to all of which Lee Cartier listened with the most rapt attention and interest.

“It must have been great,” he murmured with a sigh of envy. “I can see that I’ve got a lot of fun waiting for me as soon as I can get outdoors again. And I hope it won’t be long till then. The doctor said to-day that I could probably be outdoors in a week.”

“That’s bully,” said Bobby. “But do you really mean, Lee, that you’ve never seen snow before?”

“Oh, I’ve seen little flurries of it once or twice,” replied Lee, “but it’s never amounted to anything, and it’s melted just as soon as it struck the ground. Down

in Louisiana, where I come from, it's practically summer all the year round. While it's been snowing here to-day, people have been going in swimming down there. The darkeys are going round barefooted, women are fanning themselves, and men are going round on the shady side of the street."

"Nobody getting sunstruck, is there?" queried Fred with a grin.

"Well, perhaps not as bad as that," smiled Lee, "but take it altogether it's almost as different there from what it is here as day is from night."

"I saw a picture the other day of some boys shinning up cocoanut trees somewhere in the middle of January," remarked Sparrow. "It seems funny to think there should be such differences in the same country."

"I'd like to spend some time down South," said Bobby. "I've been out West and almost everywhere else in the country except the South. Of course we had a taste of what it was like when we went to Porto Rico. But I'd like to be somewhere in the South for weeks at a time, and learn just how different things are from what they are here up North."

"You'd enjoy it all right," affirmed Lee. "You can fairly live outdoors all the year round, and you'd find lots of things that would be strange and interesting. I'd like to have you on my place where I could go round with you and show you the sights."

"That would be fine," agreed Bobby. "What town in Louisiana do you live in, Lee?"

"I don't live in any town," replied Lee. "The nearest town is Raneleigh, and that isn't much more than a store and a railroad station. Mother and I live on a plantation. My folks have lived there for generations. My great-grandfather had the property in the old days when Louisiana belonged to France."

"I guessed you were French or of French descent because of the name," said Bobby. "Let's see, wasn't there a Cartier who had something to do with the discovery of America?"

"There was a Cartier who discovered parts of America in 1534," replied Lee, "and he, I believe, was an ancestor of mine. That's one bit of history that's been pretty well dinned into me," he added with a smile. "Our people, you know, put a lot of value on their ancestry, though I never cared much for it. My mother too was of French descent, as one can tell from her first name, Celeste."

"Is the plantation a big one?" asked Bobby.

"Pretty big," replied Lee, "though not as big as it was before the Civil War. That was in the days when people kept slaves, and our folk had a lot of them and thousands of acres of land. But after the war was over, a lot of the land was sold, and now we have only a few hundred acres. And I don't know how long we'll

have that,” he added, a shadow coming over his brow.

“What do you mean?” asked Fred with ready sympathy.

“Oh, we’re having trouble about the boundary lines of the property,” explained Lee. “Some of the stones that mark the lines are missing, and there’s a neighbor of ours named Boolus who’s claiming part of the property. We’re sure he is wrong, but we’re not able to prove it, and he’s making us lots of trouble. He’s one of the meanest men in the parish and everybody hates and despises him. But he’s got lots of money and tricky lawyers, and it looks as though he were going to get the best of us. But I don’t want to bother you about my troubles,” Lee added, brightening up. “I only wish I had you fellows down with me on the plantation while we still own it. I think I might be able to show you lots of things that would make you open your eyes, such as alligators and—”

“Alligators!” exclaimed Fred. “Do you have them down there?”

“You see you’ve made Fred open his eyes already,” said Bobby with a laugh.

“There are lots of them,” said Lee, “and big ones too. There’s a big swamp on the edge of our property that they say is full of them. It’s lots of fun hunting them.”

“Have you ever hunted them?” asked Sparrow with intense interest.

“I’ve never gone after them alone,” replied Lee, “but I’ve gone along with hunting parties and seen them caught.”

“How do they do it?” asked Fred.

“They dig them out of their holes,” explained Lee, pleased that he could tell the boys something outside the range of their experience. “You see the alligators have holes or burrows in the neighborhood of the water, where they crawl in at times. The hunters go along until they spy one of these burrows, which are not very deep below the surface of the ground. Then one of them takes a stout rope, makes a noose in it and hangs this over the entrance to the hole. Others take a sharp spear or stake, and prod into the ground above where they know the alligator is lying. That stirs him up and he crawls out of his hole to see what’s the matter. As he comes out he sticks his head into the noose, and the man above tightens it before he can back out. The brute tries to pull back into his burrow, but all hands get hold of the rope and yank him out. As his body appears, other ropes are passed around him, and by the time he’s all out he’s pretty well trussed up. Sometimes though, he puts up an awful fight and breaks the ropes, and then you have to look out. If you ever come within reach of his jaws or the swish of his tail, it’s all up with you.”

“It must be awfully exciting,” exclaimed Fred.

“It is that all right,” agreed Lee. “Then we have lots of other sports in which

there's plenty of fun. There's badger hunting, and coon hunting with the dogs at night, and once in a while a panther comes round, and take it altogether there isn't much dullness on the plantation. I only wish you fellows could share the fun with me."

"There's nothing I'd like better," said Bobby, and his companions nodded assent. "But Louisiana's a long way off, and I guess we'll have to take it out in wishing. I suppose we'll have to go now," he added, reaching for his cap, "though I'd like to stay for hours and hear you tell us things about the South."

"It's done me a lot of good to have you fellows drop in," said Lee. "The days seem mighty long here with no one but the doctor and the nurse to see and talk to. Come in again just as often as you can."

"We sure will," replied Bobby, "and you must hurry and get well so as to be around with us again."

That night Bobby found it hard to get to sleep. The talk with Lee had brought novel ideas into his mind, and he lay awake for a long time, conjuring up visions of what life must be on a plantation.

When at last he did fall asleep, he dreamed that he was pushing a flatboat along a Louisiana lagoon. On the shores about him were a number of what seemed to be logs of wood. Suddenly one of them moved and slipped into the water, and he saw that it was an alligator. One after the other, things that looked like logs did the same. The presence of so many of the ugly brutes made him uneasy, and he made his craft move faster to get out of the vicinity as soon as possible. Just as he was congratulating himself that he had gotten out of the danger zone, the water broke at the side of the boat, and a pair of great jaws appeared, above which were the menacing eyes of a big alligator. The brute made a lunge at the boat and nearly overturned it. Bobby tried to beat him off with the pole, and while he was doing so, another alligator appeared on the other side of the boat. A moment more and the water was fairly alive with the fearsome creatures, and Bobby was surrounded by a circle of open jaws and frightful teeth and flaming eyes. He struck out desperately, but to no avail. The circle closed around him, and one of the brutes with a blow of his tail stove in the side of the boat. He felt himself sinking, saw a terrible pair of jaws reach out to seize him and—woke up to find himself sitting bolt upright in bed while a cold sweat bedewed his forehead.

It was a minute or so before he could realize that it had been only a dream, and then with a feeling of immense relief he adjusted his pillow and burrowed his head into its soft folds.

The snow was beating against the windows, and the contrast between the

wintry storm and the hot lagoon of his dream brought a smile to his lips.

“Gee!” he said to himself. “If any alligators were up this way they’d freeze to death sure.”

He lay listening in dreamy content, when he became conscious of another noise that was not like that of the snow on the windows. It sounded more like a crackling. He sat up in bed and listened. The sound became more distinct. And then to his nostrils came the odor of smoke.

He was out of bed in a twinkling. He opened the door of his room and the odor grew stronger. He traced it along the hall to the door of a storeroom at the end of the corridor.

He flung open the door and fell back appalled. The storeroom was a seething mass of fire!

CHAPTER VII

AT RISK OF LIFE

For a moment Bobby's heart stood still.

The next instant he had slammed the door shut, so as to prevent the spread of the flames as much as possible. Then he raced through the hall, banging on the doors of the various rooms and shouting at the top of his voice:

"Fire! Fire! The school is on fire!"

There was a sound of answering shouts from the startled inmates of the rooms, and doors were torn open, showing frightened and bewildered faces.

Not stopping for a moment, Bobby ran up the stairs to the room where hung the great bell of the school. He grasped the rope and pulled it back and forth with all his might, and the bell sent out its clangor into the night, rousing the people from their slumbers for miles around.

Down the stairs Bobby sprang and rushed to the telephone. He called up the fire station in the town of Rockledge and told the news, getting an answer that the engine would be rushed out as fast as possible.

Then Bobby ran back to his room, pushing his way through the confused and shouting groups of boys who had rushed into the halls in all stages of dress and undress, and began hurriedly to slip on his own clothes, answering as well as he could the questions put by Fred, who was already nearly dressed.

"Are the fellows all out?" asked Fred, as he slipped on his jacket.

"I guess so," replied Bobby, as he finished lacing his shoes. "I banged on all the doors, and then too the ringing of the bell would wake the dead. I passed most of them already out in the hall. Oh, but there's Lee!" he fairly shouted, jumping to his feet. "His room is off from the rest and it's just across from where the fire is! We've got to get him out."

He threw open the door and started down the hall. But just then flames burst through the door of the burning room and swept completely across the hall, barring the passage.

Like a flash, Bobby was back in the room. He seized a towel and thrust it into the pitcher of water that stood on the washstand. Then he wound the dripping folds about his head.

"Take the pitcher and dash the rest of the water over me!" he shouted to Fred. "Quick!"

Fred did so and Bobby darted out of the room.

Down the hall he went and made a flying leap through the flames holding his breath as he did so, in order that he might not inhale the fire. He reached Lee's door and rushed in.

The room was full of smoke, and Lee, half stupefied by it and hardly knowing what he was doing was staggering about. Bobby grabbed him by the arm and shook him.

"Brace up, Lee!" he cried.

With the other hand he picked up a heavy bathrobe and threw it over Lee's head and shoulders. Then he started to lead him to the door, but Lee had not been on his feet for so long that his knees gave way under him.

At that instant, Fred, who had also drenched himself from head to foot, appeared at his side, and Bobby heaved a sigh of relief.

"Let's wrap his head and shoulders in this bathrobe," panted Bobby. "Then you take his feet and I'll take his head, and we'll make a break to get through."

Fred helped as directed, and closing their eyes when they neared the darting flames, they got through with their burden just in time to deliver Lee into the hands of Dr. Raymond and Mr. Carrier, who had come rushing in half dressed from the adjoining building. The half-unconscious boy was taken to a safe place and ministered to, and then Dr. Raymond and the teachers turned their attention to fighting the fire, first having made sure that all the pupils were accounted for.

By this time the flames had gained considerable headway, and had broken through the partitions into adjoining rooms. Hand grenades were brought into use, but could do little toward checking the fire. Then a bucket brigade was organized, and the boys worked like Trojans in passing the buckets from hand to hand. But the flames were not entirely extinguished until help arrived from the town. Then a powerful stream was turned on and the fire was speedily gotten under control.

It was after midnight before the danger was over, and much later than that when the fire company thought it safe to depart, leaving one of their number to guard against any renewal of the flame from the sodden and smouldering embers.

Then the boys, who were utterly fagged out by the excitement and the hard work they had been doing, had time to take an account of matters. Some of the rooms had been burned out altogether, including that occupied by Bobby and Fred. They had had time however to remove most of their clothes and personal belongings, but the other contents of the rooms were practically a total loss.

Personally they had gotten off with only trifling hurts and burns. Fred's hair

had been singed and Bobby's hands had some blisters, incurred by that rapid rush through the flames, and some of the other boys had minor injuries, incurred chiefly in the effort to save their belongings. But none had perished and none had been seriously hurt, and in this they found ample reason for thanksgiving.

"Gee, Bobby, but it was lucky that you woke up just then!" exclaimed Shiner. "If you hadn't, a lot of us might have been burned to death."

"It's lucky that I had that nightmare," replied Bobby with a grin, and he narrated the details of his fight with the alligators in his dream. "If I hadn't been shocked awake by that," he concluded, "I'd have been as sound asleep as the rest when the fire broke out."

"It was an awful plucky thing that you and Fred did when you went through the fire for Lee," commented Mouser. "A little later and nobody could have got to him and he'd have been a goner sure."

"I only hope it hasn't set him back," replied Bobby. "He wasn't in shape to stand much excitement."

Dr. Raymond and the rest of the teaching staff came up just then to make arrangements for the sleeping quarters of the boys who had been turned out of their rooms. Some were doubled up in rooms that had been left intact, and others were taken over in the adjoining wing, where some spare cots were installed for their use. None of the boys felt that they could sleep any more that night, but they obeyed orders just the same, and as a matter of fact all of them were asleep long before morning dawned.

Having seen them all provided for, the doctor went back to his quarters, but not without first having a word with Bobby and Fred.

"Again the school and myself are under a debt to you, Blake," he said. "You have shown again the quality of which I spoke to you two weeks ago, that of quick thinking. There is no doubt that if you and Martin had not acted as you did in regard to Cartier, he would have died in the flames."

"I never thought much of nightmares," Bobby said to Fred, later on, as they crept into bed, "but I sure am glad I had that one. That dream alligator that nearly had his teeth in me was the best friend I ever had."

"Yes," agreed Fred, "and I'll tell the world that he was the best friend Rockledge School ever had."

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED VACATION

The boys had been told before they retired that there would be no lessons the next day, and the breakfast hour was put one hour later, to the satisfaction of all but Pee Wee, who was inclined to question the wisdom of the arrangement. To put off a meal on any pretext was to him a violation of the proper order of things. Still, as it occurred to him later, there was some satisfaction in the thought that he would have a better appetite and be able to eat more; and this reconciled him to the situation.

Of course there was only one topic of conversation among the boys during and after the meal. The fire had banished everything else from their minds and conjecture was rife as to what changes if any it would make in the routine of the school. The incidents of the night were gone over from every angle, and the part that Bobby and Fred had played was more discussed than any other feature.

The boys made an inventory also of their personal losses. In most cases that was not great. One or two had forgotten watches or scarf pins in the confusion, but cherished the hope that some of these might be found in the debris when the ruins had time to cool.

“I hope you didn’t lose your joke book, Billy,” remarked Shiner.

“I hope you did,” put in Fred with a grin.

Billy looked scornfully at his would-be-tormentors.

“I don’t have to depend on any joke book,” he replied loftily. “I get the best things I spring on you dubs right out of here,” and he touched his forehead.

“How can you?” queried Sparrow. “Mr. Leith was telling us the other day that you couldn’t get anything out of a vacuum because there wasn’t anything in it.”

Billy favored him with a stony stare.

“Just to prove to you that you’re wrong,” he said, “I’ll ask you fellows a simple question, and I’m willing to bet that none of you can answer it. That’ll show where the vacuums are.”

There was no immediate acceptance of the challenge, and the scorn in Billy’s eyes became more pronounced.

“Just as I thought,” he announced. “Every one of you has rooms to let in his upper story.”

“Oh, well,” remarked Mouser, stung into acceptance, “we’ve stood so many of

Billy's jokes that one more won't count. Go ahead, Billy, and get it off your chest."

The invitation was none too cordial, but Billy pounced on it.

"All right," he said, "here's the question. What's the best material for footwear?"

"You tell him, razor, you're sharp," murmured Shiner.

"You tell him, garter, you've got the snap," remarked Howell.

"You tell him, goldfish, you've been round the globe," put in Fred.

Billy glared at the dispensers of these frivolities.

"You fellows are just trying to gain time to think up an answer," he remarked cuttingly. "Come across now with the answer and prove that you're not the dumb-bells I think you are."

"Why, leather is the best material for footwear I suppose," hazarded Bobby.

"Wood lasts a long time; lots of people wear nothing but wooden shoes in Holland and other places in Europe," suggested Skeets.

"How about canvas?" queried Shiner. "I've got a pair of tennis shoes that I've had for more than two years, and they're almost as good as ever."

"All wrong," pronounced Billy. "You'll have to do better than that."

They cudged their brains, but the list of possibilities seemed about exhausted, and at last they gave it up.

"Well, Billy, let's have it," said Fred. "What is the best material for footwear?"

"Banana peels," Billy answered promptly.

The boys looked blankly at each other.

"Come again," urged Mouser, "I don't get you."

"Why, you fatheads," said Billy, "even you ought to know that banana peels make the best slippers."

What might have happened to the perpetrator of this outrage will never be known, for at that moment a summons came from Dr. Raymond for all the boys to come to the assembly hall of the school.

When they obeyed and had all taken their places, Dr. Raymond, who was seated on the platform with Mr. Leith and Mr. Carrier, and who looked worn and haggard after a sleepless night, arose to speak.

"The fire of last night was of course a great misfortune," he said among other things, "not especially in a financial sense, for, as you may be glad to know, the building and furniture were fully covered by insurance. But it is regrettable that so many dormitory rooms were destroyed, for it makes it necessary for some of the pupils to suspend their studies for the month or more that may be necessary

before the part of the school damaged by fire can be rebuilt. It may be necessary for them to work a little harder when they return in order to make up for lost time. With the exception of those who are thus excused, the work of the school will go on as usual. While we all are sorry that the fire occurred, that after all counts for little compared with the fact no one was seriously injured. I want before you all to say publicly what I have already said to them personally, that Blake and Martin by their quick thinking and brave action have brought credit to themselves and honor to Rockledge School.”

Following his remarks, he read the list of those who would be given the unexpected and yet most welcome vacation. The boys listened breathlessly, each one hoping that he might be among the favored ones, and when the reading finished there were many stifled sighs of disappointment on the part of the majority, while the eyes of the elect glowed with satisfaction. Bobby and Fred were on the list, as well as Mouser and Shiner and Lee, but none of their other close friends were included in the dozen or more to be excused.

The exodus was not to take place for a day or two, because time was required for packing and for proper notification of their parents. Telegrams were already coming in from the latter who had heard or read of the fire, and the teaching staff had plenty of work in sending reassuring messages in reply. How the fire had started was a mystery.

When finally the boys were dismissed, they gathered in groups, discussing eagerly the program that had been mapped out by the head of the school. Some were jubilant, others despondent.

“Scubbity-yow!” cried Fred, executing a jig. “Best news I’ve heard since Sitting Bull sat down.”

“I love my books, but, oh! you vacation,” chuckled Shiner.

“If you fellows fell in the water, you’d come up with a fish in your mouth,” remarked Billy enviously.

“Never mind, Billy,” comforted Fred. “You’ll have all the more time to think up some poor jokes to spring on us when we get back.”

“I don’t know any poor ones,” replied Billy. “All of mine are good, too good anyway for you boobs to guess, I notice. By the way,” he continued, brightening up visibly, “here’s one of the best I ever thought of. Why is—”

“Officer, he’s crazy again,” groaned Fred.

“Choke him off, somebody,” urged Mouser.

“But listen,” pleaded Billy.

“Not on your life,” was Shiner’s heartless rejoinder. “Here’s where we get a chance, fellows, to make Billy stew in his own juice. It’ll break his heart to have

a joke all ready to spring and nobody to listen to it.”

“But you fellows don’t know what you’re missing,” warned Billy. “Why ought a cook—”

“We’ll admit she ought, right off the reel,” interrupted Skeets, “so suppose we let it go at that.”

But Billy was not to be shaken from his prey, and he held on like grim death.

“Why ought a cook to get good wages?” he demanded.

“Because she needs the dough,” replied Mouser promptly. The suddenness of the response nearly took Billy off his feet.

“You must have heard that somewhere,” he said in a crestfallen way.

“Noah sprang that on Mrs. Noah when they were in the Ark,” jibed Mouser.

“I knew you wouldn’t have guessed it of your own accord,” retorted Billy, getting at least that much satisfaction out of his discomfiture.

Shortly after dinner, Bobby and Fred went to call on Lee. They found him in much better condition than they had expected. They had feared that the excitement of his experience the night before might have given him a set-back, but on the contrary his eyes were bright, and there was more color in his face than had been there at any time since he had been taken ill.

He was fervent in his thanks to Bobby and Fred for having saved his life, but they waved these aside and made as light of their own part in the proceedings as possible.

“It would certainly have been all up with me if it hadn’t been for you fellows,” declared Lee. “I suppose the smoke must have stupefied me before you came, because I can just remember staggering about the room without even having sense enough to find the door. It was an awfully plucky thing for you boys to do, and I owe it to you that I’m not dead this minute.”

“You certainly look to be far enough from dead now,” laughed Bobby.

“Perhaps the shock and shaking up did me good instead of harm,” rejoined the boy from the South. “I certainly feel better than I did at this time yesterday.”

“All the same, I guess the doctor wouldn’t prescribe it,” said Fred with a grin.

“Probably not,” smiled Lee. “By the way I hear that you two fellows are going to have a vacation.”

“Right you are,” chuckled Fred. “And maybe we’re not tickled to death about it, eh, Bobby?”

“You bet!” returned Bobby happily. “But you’re on the list too, Lee, although for that matter you’ve been having about all the vacation you wanted for the last two weeks.”

“That was the wrong kind of vacation.”

“Of course you’ll have to spend it here,” conjectured Fred.

“I’m not so sure of that,” replied Lee. “I was speaking to the doctor this morning and he said he thought I’d be able to make the trip home in two or three days from now. He thinks the warm southern weather is just what I need to bring me around all right again. So I telegraphed to my mother this morning about it and asked her to answer right away.”

He had barely finished speaking when there was a knock at the door, and a messenger entered with a telegram.

“Here it is now!” exclaimed Lee, his face lighting up with expectancy. “If you fellows will excuse me I’ll see what she says.”

He ran his eyes eagerly over the telegram, which was an unusually long one, and before it was finished gave a whoop of delight.

“Sounds as though you had good news,” remarked Bobby, as he saw the flushed face and sparkling eyes of his friend.

“I should say so!” cried Lee, waving the yellow slip above his head. “Listen to this part of it, fellows: ‘I cannot tell you how grateful I am to the brave boys who saved your life, and I want you to be sure to bring them along with you for a visit, if they would care to come.’ How about it fellows? Will you come along with me?”

“If we would care to come!” repeated Bobby. “You bet we’ll come!”

“Will a duck swim?” asked Fred, wild with delight at the vista opened up by the invitation. “That is,” he added a little more soberly, “if the folks at home will let us go.”

“Of course,” agreed Bobby. “But I haven’t much doubt about that. They let us go West on a ranch, and I don’t see why they shouldn’t be just as willing to have us go down South on a plantation. Come along, Fred, and we’ll write to them now, so that the letters will get to them to-morrow.”

“Why not telegraph?” asked Fred, who was bubbling over with excitement and impatience.

“It would cost too much,” replied practical Bobby. “We’ll have to write good long letters to explain everything and get them to let us go.”

“Put it strong,” counseled Lee. “I’ll be terribly disappointed if you can’t go with me. And I know that my mother will, too. I want to show you what life is on a real old-fashioned Southern plantation.”

“Don’t you worry,” replied Bobby. “If we can’t go, you can be sure that it won’t be any fault of ours.”

They put all their powers of persuasion into the letters they wrote, and were especially urgent that the answers should be sent at once. Then they waited with feverish impatience for the replies.

These were not long in coming, for the second day after they wrote they received the answers. They tore the letters open with quaking hearts, for fear that they might prove unfavorable. And their delight was beyond bounds when they found that they might go. There were long letters of advice and injunctions to take the best care of themselves. And there was also in each letter a substantial check to cover all expenses of the trip. It was made plain to both that the ready agreement to let them go was largely due to their behavior at the time of the fire, and was in the nature of a reward.

To save a great deal of unnecessary traveling, it was arranged that the boys should go directly from Rockledge School to New York. It was thought best that they should go South by boat, instead of rail, and a separate letter to Dr. Raymond requested that he should telegraph for passage and stateroom in advance, and make what other arrangements might be necessary for the trip.

As may be imagined, the next two days were busy ones for the three boys. But at last all was ready, and with a big send-off from their chums, they took the train for New York. The journey was a pleasant though uneventful one, and they reached the city too late to do anything but go directly to their stateroom on the boat.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, they took up their position on the rail and watched the scene of busy life on the pier. There was great noise and animation as the last freight was put into the hold and belated passengers hurried down to the vessel. But at last order was brought out of confusion and the bell rang the signal for "All Ashore."

CHAPTER IX

OFF FOR THE SOUTH

Amid the jangling of engine room bells, the hiss of escaping steam, and the hoarse cries of the deck hands, the boat moved majestically out into the broad river, two small but very efficient tugboats pushed and hauled at the heavy steamer, butting their stubby noses desperately against her towering sides to counteract the effects of the strong tide. Long strings of heavily loaded barges, towed by other snorting tugs, passed up and down stream, while numerous ferryboats added their bit to the heavy river traffic.

Leaning over the rail, the three friends were absorbed in watching this busy scene. To them it seemed impossible that their own boat could get safely started without colliding with any of the swarming smaller craft. But after much maneuvering and tooting of whistles the big steamer finally got her nose pointing downstream and headed slowly for the lower bay.

“Gee!” exclaimed Bobby, drawing a deep breath, “I don’t understand yet how we got out here without bumping something. I always thought it was kind of hard to dodge eleven men on a football field without coming to grief, but this makes it look easy.”

“Well, it always did seem to be easy enough for you, as far as that goes,” remarked Fred. “But don’t forget we’ve got lots of chances yet to hit something before we get to New Orleans. The man that steers this overgrown canoe may go to sleep and land us on some nice hard rocks, or we may hit a floating wreck, or —”

“Don’t stop,” urged Lee, as Fred hesitated a moment in search of some other ghastly possibility, “you’ll have us really enjoying this trip pretty soon. Somebody please tie a life preserver on me.”

“Well, perhaps you’ve never been on anything bigger than Monatook Lake, and it’s only right that we experienced sailors should prepare you for the worst. Of course, we may be lucky enough to get there all right, but whatever happens, you can’t say we didn’t warn you.”

“This is a nice time to warn a fellow, isn’t it?” said Lee, with a grin, “but I’m not going to ask the captain to stop the boat now and let me walk ashore, so you may as well save all those cheerful predictions for some other time.”

“He won’t scare worth two cents, will he?” laughed Bobby. “But maybe when

he gets his first dose of seasickness he won't feel so cheerful."

While the boys were talking, the ship had made steady progress, and now, passing the Statue of Liberty, was well into the lower bay. Here the tugs left it, and the great steamer vibrated from stem to stern as its powerful engines took up the task appointed them. In quick succession they passed the Ambrose and Sandy Hook lights, and began to feel the roll and heave of the great blue ocean.

"Isn't this great?" exclaimed Bobby. "Just fill your lungs with that air, fellows."

"The air is fine, all right," said Fred. "But a little something to fill my stomach wouldn't be so awful bad, either."

"That sounds like Pee Wee," laughed Bobby. "But since you mention it, I begin to feel hungry too. How about you, Lee?"

"You bet," exclaimed the boy from the South, but his voice lacked the tone of sincerity. Fred looked at him and grinned.

"What's the matter, Lee?" he inquired. "You don't mean to tell me you're feeling seasick, do you?"

"Of course I'm not seasick."

"No, of course he isn't seasick," said Bobby, with a wink at Fred. "He just doesn't feel well, that's all. People are often that way on salt water. It must be something about the air, I guess."

"Yes, that's probably it," agreed Fred, in a tone of deep sympathy. "What you need, Lee, is a good bang up supper to set you up. How would a nice pork chop or two hit you?"

"I don't know how they'd hit me, but I do know that something is going to hit you pretty quick, if you don't stop talking about eats," retorted Lee. "You two go on down and eat your heads off. I'm going to stay up here a while. I had a big lunch, anyway."

"Well, you probably won't have it much longer," was Fred's parting shot, as he and Bobby started on a run for the dining room.

There were a number of empty places around the tables, but Bobby and Fred enjoyed the meal hugely, with appetites no whit affected by the uneasy motion of the ship. When they had finished, they went on deck again, and found Lee coiled up in a steamer chair, and looking far from happy.

"Guess I'll have to admit that I'm seasick," he said, with a somewhat feeble grin, "but I've got lots of company, anyway. Most everybody I've seen so far seems to be as bad or worse than I am."

"Oh, well, it probably won't last long," said Bobby. "If you can get a decent

rest to-night, you'll be all right in the morning."

"I wouldn't mind so much now if we did hit some of those rocks Fred was talking about," went on the boy from the South. "If I could get onto a nice solid rock right now, I know I'd feel a whole lot better."

But when the next morning came, the ocean was very calm, and Lee felt almost himself again, so that he could aid his two friends in their attacks on the excellent meals that were provided for them. They read, played deck games, and altogether enjoyed themselves immensely. On the second day of the trip, they noticed that the air was becoming perceptibly warmer, and knew that they were getting into southern waters. Schools of porpoises raced with the ship, and the boys never tired watching them shooting through the water just under the ship's bows, and keeping up their speed without any apparent effort. Several times they saw little flying fish, and once Fred was sure that he saw a shark, but when the ship came up with the object that he had seen, it proved to be nothing more ferocious than a half submerged log.

"Some sailor, you are," said Lee, anxious to get even with Fred for some of the remarks passed on his own seamanship. "I may not be as salty as some people think they are, but still I can tell fishes from trees."

"Well, I'm glad you know that much, anyway," said Fred. "You certainly are coming along fast. Some day, when you get over calling portholes windows, you'll be a real sailor."

"I don't think I ever want to be a sailor," retorted Lee. "Good old solid ground is good enough for me. Seems to me this old tub is jumping around worse all the time."

"It would be strange if it didn't," said Bobby. "The wind is getting stronger every minute, and it's working up some pretty big seas."

Almost as he finished speaking a big wave dashed against the bow, and showered them with spray.

"I'm going some place where it's dry!" gasped the boy from the South, and dashed for the companionway. Bobby and Fred lingered a while, but were soon, forced to seek shelter in the lee of a deckhouse. They could see members of the crew going about making every movable object fast, and they guessed that they were in for a storm.

CHAPTER X

HALF A GALE

In an incredibly short space of time a heavy sea was running, and the big ship, which at its dock had seemed so solid and immovable, was tossed about almost wholly at the will of the angry waves. The bow would rise up and up as it met a rushing hill of frothing green water, then, as the giant wave rushed astern, the bow would dip, and the whole vessel would seem to be coasting down into a frothing valley. Crests of the big rollers, picked up and flung aboard by the howling wind, drenched any hardy soul who ventured on deck. Sometimes the bow would not lift quickly enough to an onrushing wave, and the water would crash down on the forecastle with a tremendous impact and rush aft, sweeping any movable object along with it.

The engines were throttled down to “half speed ahead,” which eased the laboring of the vessel somewhat. Night fell early over a wild and desolate waste of tossing waters, and even the three carefree boys were sobered somewhat as they gazed through tightly bolted portholes at the scene without. Lee was frankly seasick again, and even Bobby and Fred had to admit that they “felt a little off.”

“But anyway, a storm like this isn’t likely to last long,” remarked Bobby. “It came up in a hurry, and likely will go down just as fast.”

“It can’t go too fast to suit me,” groaned Lee, “‘A life on the rolling deep’ may be all right for some people, but it rolls entirely too much to be popular with me.”

“Not to mention how deep it is when the ship happens to sink,” said Fred. “Whether we like it or not, we’ve got to admit that the man who wrote that poetry knew what he was talking about.”

“Well, it’s time for supper, and I’m going to have some,” said Bobby. “What do you say, fellows? Are you with me?”

“Guess you’ll have to count me out,” replied the boy from the South. “I don’t think food and I will ever be friends again.”

Bobby and Fred managed to satisfy their appetites, although the dishes persisted in dodging here and there in a most disconcerting manner, and never seemed to be satisfied until they had settled themselves comfortably in some one’s lap. Most of the passengers were keeping to their staterooms, and taken altogether, the meal was not exactly a cheerful affair. All three of the boys turned

into their berths soon afterward, and by dint of wedging themselves in with pillows and rolled up articles of clothing, managed to get a fairly good night's rest.

In the morning the wind appeared to have blown itself out, and as the boys were dressing a weak and watery shaft of sunlight came streaming through the porthole.

"That certainly looks good to me," said Lee, who still looked rather pale and unhappy. "If ever I get back on dry land, I'm going to stay there a while."

"It won't feel bad for a change," admitted Fred, "and with a little luck we ought to make it in another day or two. We'd have gotten in without this delay if it hadn't been for the storm."

After breakfast the boys went on deck, and found the ocean much moderated, although still far from calm. After a little, they found themselves near the door of the wireless room, and were soon chatting with the operator on duty, who seemed to be a genial sort of fellow. He and the boys were soon on the best of terms, and he explained the workings of some of the simpler parts of the apparatus.

"I suppose a night like last night keeps you fellows pretty busy, doesn't it?" inquired Bobby.

"Yes, we have to be right on the job," answered Quinn, the wireless operator, "although last night wasn't as bad as many I've been through. We didn't get an S. O. S. call once."

"From the way this ship was acting," said Lee, ruefully, "I should think it would be more likely that we would be sending a call for help instead of receiving it."

"Why, that wasn't any more than a brisk breeze compared to some of the blows I've been through," said Quinn. "I remember one night on the North Sea when it really did blow some. And as far as that goes, I'm willing to bet that everybody else on that ship remembers it, too."

"Was it so very bad, then?" inquired Bobby.

"Well, at that time I was doing duty on a converted yacht. We were guarding a convoy, and one by one the other patrol boats made for port, being unable to stay out any longer. But our captain refused to give up, and finally we were the only boat left. Well, the wind kept blowing harder and the seas rising, until the only wonder is that we weren't swamped altogether. Tremendous seas were following us, and at last one monster came right aboard over the after rail. It slammed up against the wireless shack, and before we knew what had happened, we and the shack were carried bodily forward. We thought that our last minute had come,

but, luckily for us, the wireless house was slammed up against the forward deck house. Then it went to pieces entirely. I made a grab for the first thing my hand met, which happened to be a mast stay, and hung on for all I knew how. It seemed to me that I was under water for an age, but the big wave finally passed, and I crawled back to the deck more dead than alive. Yes, that was a real rough night at sea, I'll admit."

"How about the other wireless men?" queried Fred. "Did they come through all right?"

"Well, by a miracle neither was swept overboard, but Pearsall, who had just joined the ship a week or two before, broke his right arm. But he considered himself lucky to be alive at all. We all did, for that matter."

"I should think you would be," said Bobby, "and I suppose you had plenty of other narrow escapes besides that one."

"Plenty is right," assented Quinn, "Why, I remember one winter afternoon we got an S.O.S. from a munition ship that had caught fire. It was some eighty miles to the west of us, and by the time we reached it, it was right on the edge of dark. When we got there, the fire was at its height. Most of their boats had been wrecked by the explosions of ammunition as the fire reached it, and most of the crew were in the water, some with life preservers, and others clinging to bits of floating wreckage. It was like going through a barrage to get near them. But we lowered our boats and finally got the last man safely aboard. Then we steamed away at a rate the old hooker had never hit up before, because we knew that when the fire reached the main hold there would be a blowup that would pretty well clean everything that happened to be around right off the water. And we weren't a bit too soon either, because we hadn't covered more than half a mile when the blazing wreck exploded with a slam that you could hear for fifty miles. As it was, we were pretty well shaken up, but got off without any serious damage. But it was pretty ticklish business while we were cruising round a cable's length away, picking the crew out of the water."

CHAPTER XI

QUICK THINKING

“It must have taken some nerve to do it at all,” declared Lee admiringly.

“Well, we knew they’d have done the same thing for us, if conditions had been the other way round,” said Quinn. “If seamen didn’t help each other out that way, the life would be even harder than it is.”

The boys were eager to hear more of the wireless man’s adventures, and he, nothing loth, spun them more than one yarn of exciting episodes in far corners of the earth, for he had been almost everywhere that ships go. He was often interrupted by messages coming or going, but the boys were fascinated by his stories, and could hardly tear themselves away when dinner time came.

“That man has surely seen a lot,” remarked Bobby, while they were eating an excellent meal, “and he knows how to tell about what he has seen, too. I’m sorry we didn’t get acquainted with him earlier on the trip.”

“So am I,” agreed Lee, “but he’ll be on duty again this evening, and if we get a chance we can look him up then.”

After lunch the three friends went on deck again. The sea by this time was quite calm, and the boys strolled over to the port side and, leaning on the rail, gazed idly out over the broad expanse of waters.

Suddenly the lads heard a shrill yell and a heavy splash alongside the ship. One of the mess boys, a young negro, had been sitting carelessly on the rail not far from where the boys were standing, when a sudden lurch of the vessel had thrown him off his balance and he had made a clean dive overboard.

For a second the boys were stunned by the unexpectedness of the accident. Then Bobby whipped out his jackknife, cut loose a life preserver that Fred was trying to loosen, and tossed it to the struggling negro in the water. He judged his distance so accurately that the buoy landed within a foot or two of the unfortunate darkey, who with a desperate struggle caught hold of it.

Meanwhile, Fred and Lee were shouting “man overboard,” and the cry, passed from mouth to mouth, reached the bridge. The engine room telegraph rang “stop” and then “full speed astern.” Almost before the big ship had come to a shuddering standstill, a boat had been lowered, and in short time they had the gasping darkey boy aboard.

“Mah Lan’ Sakes!” he sputtered, “Ah don’t known who-all threw me dat life

p'server, but whoevah did saved mah life, Ah reckon, an I'se shuah enough grateful."

"Well, who was it threw you the preserver, and how in time did you come to fall overboard and make us all this trouble?" inquired the mate, who in his official capacity thought more of the time lost than of the narrow escape from death the little darkey had had.

"Ah cain't say, suh, jes huccome I to fall ovahboahd," said the little darkey. "Seems like Ah don't nevah go to git me a little rest on dis yeah ship but whut somethin' happens. Ole ship jes gives a roll an' heaves me clean ovah de side. Ah ain't sure who give me dat life p'server, but seems like they was three fellers standin' by the rail, and one of 'em done heave it out at me so it pretty near lands plumb aroun' mah neck."

"Yes, but don't you know who it was?" persisted the mate.

"Well, suh, seems to me it was one of them," pointing to where Bobby, Fred and Lee were standing, "but Ah couldn't rightly say which one."

"Was it one of you?" inquired the mate, turning to them.

"Well," said Bobby, "I guess I'll have to plead guilty. We heard him splash overboard, and luckily there was a life preserver right near us, so I threw it over to him."

"It was rather lucky for young 'Rastus here," commented the officer. "Your name is 'Rastus, isn't it?" addressing the little darkey.

"Yessuh, dat's part of it," returned 'Rastus, with a grin that seemed to show every tooth he possessed.

"What's the rest of it?" inquired Bobby.

"Mah full name am 'Rastus Abimilech Belshazzar Johnson," said the little negro, evidently taking no small pride in this pretentious title.

"It's a wonder we're still afloat with a name like that aboard," exclaimed Mr. Parr, the mate. "But you'd better get down below, 'Rastus, and get some dry clothes on."

"Ah sho' craves to git me some dry duds," said 'Rastus. "An' furdermo', 'fore Ah goes Ah wants t' thank, yuh, white boy, for heavin' me dat cork doughnut de way yuh did. Ah'd be confabulatin' wid de little fishes down at de bottom of de ocean if yuh hadn't."

"Oh, that's all right," said Bobby. "Next time you'd better be sure you've got a good toe-hold before you decorate the rail."

"Yessuh," said 'Rastus, meekly, and departed for the lower regions of the ship, leaving a wet trail on the white deck to mark his going.

The crowd of passengers that had assembled all wanted to shake hands with Bobby at once, and were inclined to make a hero of him, but nothing was further from that young gentleman's mind, and as soon as possible the three friends made their escape.

"Whew!" exclaimed Bobby, mopping his face, "you'd have thought I had really done something, to listen to that crowd."

"Well, I should say you have done something," chuckled Lee. "You've saved the longest name I ever heard in my life from getting drowned, haven't you?"

"Well, I guess that's right enough," laughed Bobby. "If I had known 'Rastus' full name, I'd have slung him two life preservers, for fear one wouldn't be able to float it."

"It is a mighty big name for such a little rascal," said Fred, "but he seemed grateful enough, Bobby. Maybe he'll do you a good turn some day. You never can tell."

CHAPTER XII

UNDER SUNNY SKIES

It was early one morning that the ship warped into her berth at New Orleans. The three friends were up bright and early, as they knew that the steamer would dock shortly after dawn, and they did not want to miss any of the excitement of the event. The big wharves were swarming with negro stevedores, who joked and sang good-naturedly as they shifted huge bales of cotton and boxes containing all manner of goods. Ships already at their docks, either loading or unloading, sent up puffs of steam as their cargo winches lifted huge nets full of barrels and boxes from the seemingly inexhaustible holds, or consigned them to the same place. Mule teams, horse teams, and big rumbling automobile trucks came and went, getting in each other's way and giving rise to short but forceful arguments on the part of their drivers. In a word, all the varied bustle and activity of a large and busy port was spread out for the boys to view from their vantage point on the upper deck.

On the dock for which they were heading, a group of negro laborers was waiting for the vessel to be made fast, and suddenly one of them started a spirited "buck and wing" dance, the others singing, whistling, and keeping time by clapping their hands. As the ship crept up to the dock at a snail's pace, many of the passengers crowded over to the starboard side, where the boys were standing, and when the perspiring dancer finally ended with a double shuffle and a bow, he was rewarded by a shower of coins that rained down from the side of the ship which was now being warped up to the dock and made fast.

"Some pep to that boy," commented Fred. "You'd think they'd save their energy for the work ahead of them."

"Oh, a negro always has time and energy for a little fun, no matter how hard he has to work," replied Lee. "I've seen them dancing and cutting up after a long day of cotton picking, and that's about as hard work as I know anything about."

But there was no longer much time to spend on the deck, for now the gangplank had been shot out and the passengers were beginning to stream over it. This reminded the boys that they also had some strapping and bundling to do, and they rushed to their stateroom and got to work. In a few minutes all their packing had been done, and with warm good-bys to the officers and many of the passengers, with whom they had become favorites, they left the steamer.

"Seems like an old friend, already," commented Bobby, as they walked along

the pier. "I don't wonder that sailors fall in love with their ships."

"I suppose any place begins to seem like home after you've been there for a while," replied Fred. "But as for me give me terra cotta every time."

"Terra firma I suppose you mean," laughed Lee.

"Let it go at that," said Fred carelessly. "What's one word more or less between friends?"

A stalwart young negro was lying on a bale of cotton, basking like a cat in the hot sun. The leader of a gang of roustabouts came hurrying along looking for men.

"Got a job for you, Sam," he said. "This steamer's got to be unloaded in a hurry. Come along now and I'll put you in a gang."

"Nothin' doin, boss," replied the negro with a yawn.

"Why, what's the matter with you?" remonstrated his would be employer. "It was only yesterday you were striking me for a job."

"Ya-as," replied the other, as he yawned and turned over for another nap, "but dat war yesterday. Ah made two bits dis mornin', an now Ah got money in mah pocket. Go 'way, man, an' let me sleep."

With a gesture of disgust the other hurried away to look for more likely material. The boys looked at each other and laughed.

"You see from that what we're up against down here," said Lee. "That's the way most of them are. As long as they have money enough for their next meal, they're perfectly satisfied. That man with a few cents in his pockets is as happy as if he were a millionaire."

They had about two hours before it was time for their train to start, and as it was nearly noon, the first thing they did was to get a hearty meal. Then they spent a little while roaming about the beautiful and busy city, so different in many respects from what Bobby and Fred had been accustomed to in the North. They were especially interested in viewing the spot where, behind cotton bales, Andrew Jackson and his men had held off the flower of the British Army and won the most notable victory of the war of 1812.

"It was great," said Bobby, as he looked at his watch. "But hurry up, fellows. We'll have to get a hustle on, or we'll miss the train."

But Lee did not seem especially alarmed.

"I guess we'll have time enough," he said. "The train we're going to take doesn't bother much about timetables. Still there's no use in taking chances."

His conjecture was correct, for although they got to the station on time, it was some time after the scheduled hour when the wheezy old engine pulled out of the

depot. And after it got started it rambled on in a careless, happy-go-lucky way, as though it did not care much when it got to its destination.

It was a mixed freight and passenger train. There were perhaps a dozen freight cars, with one passenger coach attached to the end of the train. It ran along a single track, which was little more than “two streaks of rust and a right of way.”

Most of the stations at which the train stopped were small ones, but there were one or two of respectable size. When the train came to a halt at these, there were usually several negro women who walked along the side of the passenger car, offering their wares to the travelers. Their chief stock in trade was fried chicken, and this smelled so good that the boys bought repeatedly, until Fred at last declared that he'd be ashamed after that to look a chicken in the face.

“You want to save room, fellows,” remonstrated Lee. “My mother will have a corking good supper waiting for us, and she'll want to see you put it away.”

“She needn't worry a bit about that,” mumbled Fred, with his mouth full. “We may have our faults, but we never go back on grub. Just put us at the table and trust us to do the rest.”

Both Bobby and Fred were impressed by the leisurely way in which life seemed to flow on in the various places through which they passed. Even the soft haze in the atmosphere was suggestive of rest and quiet. In the little towns, dogs lay in the dust in the middle of the road, not at all disturbed by the fear of being run over. Merchants in their shirt sleeves sat in front of their stores, with chairs tilted back, exchanging gossip with farmers, who had come in with their produce and were in no hurry to get back. Even the people coming toward the station to take the train sauntered along with no fear of being left. Some of them stopped to chat with the engineer, who leaned against the side of his cab, chewing a straw and showing in every movement that time was the last thing in the world that could bother him. Then after a while he would get up in his seat, and the train would begin to move, with much wheezing and creaking, as though disgruntled at being disturbed.

“Any mattresses on the train?” queried Fred, as he looked around him. “Looks as if we'd spend the night here, at the rate we're going.”

“Not quite so bad as that,” laughed Lee, “though I don't wonder that you think so. But we've only two more stations now before we come to Raneleigh. That's the nearest station to the plantation.”

“Do we have far to walk to get to your place?” asked Fred, as he viewed their collection of suit cases rather apprehensively.

“Oh, we're about six miles from the station,” rejoined Lee carelessly.

“Six miles,” gasped Fred. “Scubbity-yow! And on a hot day like this. I can see

where I melt into a grease spot.”

“Hold your horses,” said Lee. “You won’t have to walk a step. One of the men will be at the station with a buckboard and a pair of mules. Ever ridden in a buckboard?”

“Yes,” replied Fred, “many a time out on the ranch. But I’ve never ridden behind mules. Do they step fast?”

“Not that you could notice,” grinned Lee. “Their strong point is in standing fast. Once in a while we have to build a fire under one of them to get it to budge. You’ll know a good sight more about mules than you do now when you go back to school.”

“School!” groaned Fred. “What’s the use of spoiling a perfectly good day by talking about school. We’ll have to go back soon enough. Let’s forget it while we’re here.”

In less than an hour they were approaching Raneleigh, and Bobby and Fred craned their necks in order to get a glimpse of the town. All they saw however as the train lumbered up to the platform was a general store, that stood opposite the station, and three or four dwellings located irregularly along a dusty street.

“As a matter of fact it isn’t a town at all, only a station,” explained Lee, as he led the way out on the platform. “Ah, there’s Jim!” he exclaimed, as a rather decrepit old negro came hobbling up to meet them. “How are you, Jim?”

“Tol’able, jess tol’able, Marse Lee,” replied Jim. “Ah sho’ am glad to see you-all.”

“These are my friends, Bobby Blake and Fred Martin,” said Lee, as he piled the bags in the back of the buckboard. “They’ve come down to stay awhile with me on the plantation.”

The old man took off his tattered hat and made a sweeping bow.

“I’s proud to meet de young gem’lum,” he said. “Missus tole me dey waz a comin’. We sho’ will try ter give dem er mighty good time.”

CHAPTER XIII

FLYING HEELS

The six dusty miles from the station to the plantation would have been tedious ordinarily, but the boys were too full of high spirits to let little things like dust and heat affect them. The buckboard creaked and jounced along, and the mules seemed to have even more than their share of the general disinclination to hurry. The old negro gave the boys news of all that had been going on at the plantation since Lee's last time home.

"Ah'm afraid dat Marse Jim Boolus am fixin' to make you an' you ma all de trouble dat he kin," said the old darkey, shaking his head. "Seems like he's gettin' meaner and more no-account every year dat passes over his haid."

"The old rascal!" exclaimed Lee, with flashing eyes. "I'll make him sorry some day for all the trouble he's caused my family."

"Dere's lots of odder folks feels de same way," said Jim. "Ev'body in de parish hates him like pisen, but de more people hates him de mo' he seems to like it."

On the boat Lee had said quite a little of this Jim Boolus to Bobby and Fred. He was a mean old skinflint, who had thriven on the misery of others, and by many a shady deal had brought ruin on honest people. While everybody knew him to be unscrupulous and dishonest, he was so cunning and crafty that he always managed to keep out of the grip of the law. At present he was trying to prove his ownership to a large part of Mrs. Cartier's estate, and she was in serious danger of losing it.

The boys were still discussing ways and means to frustrate the wily schemings of the crafty old land shark when the buckboard turned off the dusty road, pursued its leisurely way up a long graveled avenue shaded by stately trees, and drew up before a wide-flung old mansion flanked by wide verandas. Before it had stopped Lee jumped out and ran to meet a pleasant faced lady who was descending the steps. After their first affectionate greeting Lee introduced Bobby and Fred to her.

"These are my two friends, Mother, Bobby Blake and Fred Martin," he said. "I guess you've heard so much about them in my letters to you that you hardly need an introduction."

"Indeed yes," she smiled. "And I hope that Lee's mother will be just as good

friends with you as Lee is.”

Mrs. Cartier was so gracious and hospitable that the boys were quickly at their ease and felt as though they had known her a long time.

Lee showed them their room, a beautiful large one with big, comfortable looking beds and dark, cool curtains at the windows.

“When you fellows have gotten some of the dust off you, come on down and I’ll show you around,” said Lee, as he left them.

“Well,” remarked Bobby, when he and Fred were alone, “it looks to me as though we had come to a pretty fine place to spend our vacation. Mrs. Cartier certainly has a way of making a fellow feel welcome.”

“She certainly has,” returned Fred, “I’ve often heard about Southern hospitality, and now I know what it’s like.”

“I wish we could do something to fix that skinflint old neighbor of theirs,” continued Fred, after a pause.

“Well, there’s no telling; maybe we can,” said Bobby.

Shortly afterwards Bobby and Fred went downstairs, and found Lee waiting for them on the veranda.

“I thought you fellows must have been overcome by the excitement of that buckboard ride and dropped asleep,” grinned Lee. “You never used to take as long as that to get spruced up back at school, especially when you happened to get up late and thought you’d be late for breakfast.”

“When in Rome do as the Romans do,” quoted Bobby. “When you hit a place where everybody seems to take things easy, why be in a hurry?”

“Hurray!” shouted Lee. “I can see that you’ve got the making of a Southern gentleman in you, all right. ‘Never be in a hurry’ is one of the first things you learn around here.”

“That’s all right, sometimes,” put in Fred. “But when you’re toting a football down a field with the goal posts looking to be about ten miles away, and eleven fellows doing their best to grab you around the knees and sit on your chest, hurrying is the one thing you’re most anxious to do.”

“Right!” laughed Bobby. “Not to mention the way the coach feels about it.”

“Well, I’ll have to admit that a coach *doesn’t* believe in taking things easy,” said Lee, “but then, I guess probably most coaches don’t come from the South.”

The others agreed that this was very probable, and then set out on a tour of the plantation. This covered several hundred acres, and in the days “before the war” had evidently been a profitable estate. Besides the big, rambling old mansion, there were numerous barns and outbuildings, including what had formerly been

quarters for numerous slaves. Most of these buildings were unused and out of repair now, and, except in the busy planting and picking seasons, there were only five old servants on the place. Aunt Dinah, the cook, deserved first place, because she was past master (or mistress) of the art of cookery, and could turn out dishes that had spread her fame for miles in a country of good cooks.

Uncle Josh, a faithful old darkey, whose wrinkled face was framed in snow white hair, acted as “handy man” and did odd jobs where-ever they were needed, although forever complaining about a mysterious ailment that he invariably referred to as “de misery in mah back.” There were three other more or less lazy but entirely good-natured darkeys, who did whatever else was necessary in a carefree but somewhat inefficient manner.

“They mean well enough, and they think the world of mother and me, but unless somebody’s watching them they’ll never hurt themselves with overwork,” explained Lee. “When I’m through school and college and can take charge of this place, I’m going to get more action or know the reason why.”

He took Bobby and Fred through the big barn, where now only a few horses and mules were stabled, although there was room for a hundred. As they passed one stall, there was a flash of vicious hoofs, which narrowly missed Fred, who was the nearest.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, as he jumped back, “I pretty near stopped something that time. That beast must have a grudge against me, I guess.”

“Oh, it isn’t against you, in particular,” said Lee. “He’s got a grudge against the whole human race. That’s old Baldy, and I really believe he’s the meanest mule that ever lived, and if you know anything about mules, you’ll realize that that’s saying something. I should have warned you about him, but I didn’t think about it.”

“Oh, well it doesn’t matter as long as he missed me,” said Fred. “You can bet I’ll watch out for him in the future.”

“It’s a circus to see the darkeys when they have to harness him,” said Lee. “They’re all afraid of him, and yet they respect him, too, because he’s as strong as two ordinary mules, and when he feels like it can do a hard day’s work. I think they’re going to hitch him up in a little while, and if you like we’ll hang around and watch the fun.”

You can be sure Bobby and Fred had no objection to this, and sure enough, in a little while two husky colored men appeared and took down the necessary harness from pegs on the wall.

“Are you going to hitch up old Baldy?” asked Lee.

“We aim to, Marse Lee,” said one, whose first name was Mose, and whose

last name nobody ever seemed to have heard. "But dat mule doan always calculate to do jest whut we wants him to."

"Deed he don't," agreed the other. "Las' time Ah come near him, he done took de seat outen my pants, an Ah shore thought Ah was headed straight for Kingdom Come 'fore Ah could get away from him."

The negro who had spoken first approached the stall cautiously, but the mule heard him coming, and, with ears laid viciously back, lashed out at him with flying heels. But the negro was on his guard, and jumped to one side barely in time to save himself.

"Reckon ole Baldy ain't feelin' friendly toward me to-day no-how," said Mose, with a somewhat nervous grin. "Reckon Ah'd better untie him from de stall nex' door."

He went cautiously into the stall adjoining that of old Baldy, and reached over gingerly to untie his halter. But the mule was not to be caught napping, and he made a wicked nip at the negro's hand. He just missed the hand, but caught the ragged coat sleeve in his white teeth, and tore a long strip from it.

"Mah goodness!" exclaimed the negro, "Ah'd rather monkey wid a load o' dynamite dan wid dat mule."

"Try it again, an' I'll take his mind offen you," said the other negro.

He picked up a long rake from a corner, and with this began prodding at the rear end of the mule, while his companion again cautiously approached the halter. This ruse was successful, for the animal was so occupied with trying to kick the rake handle into bits, that he hardly noticed anything else, and Mose had no trouble this time in untying the halter.

"Watch out dare, niggah!" he admonished his assistant. "Everybody git out of de way an' let this critter sail."

The boys scattered to places of safety, as the mule, finding his head free, backed out of the stall and made for the open door. There was a fenced-in yard surrounding the stable, and he galloped around this, kicking up his heels and hee-hawing. The two negroes dashed pellmell after him, followed by the laughing boys.

"Now the real fun will begin," said Lee. "Just watch them try to harness him up."

CHAPTER XIV

BALDY GIVES IN

The two darkeys had their blood up now, and were resolved to get that mule harnessed or die in the attempt. Mose had the big padded collar, and his companion had the bridle. They crept up warily toward old Baldy, who, with the wisdom born of many such encounters, refused to be cornered, dashing out with surprising speed every time things began to look bad for him. But at last the negroes maneuvered him into a corner from which there was no escape, and then, with a sudden rush, threw themselves at him. Mose caught him round the neck, while the other leaped to his back and clung there with hands and knees. They were wise in the ways of mules, also, and enjoyed a tussle like this, although their enjoyment was tempered by a wholesome respect for the kicking and biting ability of the animal.

But before they could get the collar over his head, Baldy rushed across the yard kicking and rearing, dragging the two negroes after him as though their weight amounted to nothing at all. The negroes held on gamely, though, and at last the mule, despairing of shaking them off, suddenly threw himself down and rolled completely over. The darkeys however had anticipated some such action, and let go just in the nick of time to save themselves.

“That was a narrow escape,” said Bobby, somewhat anxiously. “Aren’t you afraid they’ll get hurt, Lee?”

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “It takes a lot to hurt them, and they’ve done this many times before. Just leave it to them.”

The mule struggled to his feet with his tormentors clinging to him. Suddenly he gave a lightning-like whirl that shook Mose loose in spite of all he could do, and before he could recover himself Baldy had lashed out and caught the darkey fair and square. Fortunately for Mose, he still had hold of the big padded collar, and the mule’s hoofs landed on this with a smart whack. Mose was propelled along several feet, and then, losing his balance, rolled over and over in the dust.

The three boys thought he was badly hurt, and rushed out to his rescue, but before they had gone ten feet the negro had bounded to his feet, just in time to avoid the mule, who was rushing toward him with mouth wide open and wicked teeth gleaming. Temporarily the fight had been knocked out of Mose, and he fled ignominiously for the fence, with old Baldy in hot pursuit. With the other negro clinging desperately around his neck, it was a ludicrous spectacle, and as Mose

cleared the fence in a wild scramble with the mule not ten feet behind him, the boys shouted with laughter.

“That was a close shave!” gasped Fred at last. “Old Baldy is out after dark meat to-day, I can see that.”

“Looks to me as though the mule had won the decision,” said Bobby. “How about it, Lee?”

“Oh, they can’t give up now,” said Lee. “That mule would never be worth a cent to us again if they let him win. But I’m going to see if a little strategy won’t help them out.”

“You two wait a minute,” he called to the negroes, who were by now both on the safe side of the fence, mopping at their streaming faces, and started on a run for the barn. He soon emerged, carrying a heaped measure with oats. Baldy was at the other end of the yard, watching proceedings with deep suspicion. Lee emptied the oats on the ground within two feet of the fence, and then rejoined his friends.

“You two wait until he starts to eat the oats, and then jump on him,” he shouted to the negroes.

“Yessah,” responded Mose, with a grin. “’Clare to goodness, Ah’d clean forgot dat you can ketch more flies wid honey dan yuh can wid vinegar.”

When Baldy saw the tempting heap of oats, it occurred to him that a little something to eat wouldn’t be so bad, and he sidled over to them and began eating. The darkeys secured the harness that they had been forced to drop, and crept cautiously up on the mule, who was now thinking only of how delicious oats could taste to a hungry mule. Mose mounted the fence just back of old Baldy, while his companion crept close to the mule’s other side. Suddenly Mose leaped squarely on his back. With a frightened snort the mule jerked his head up, and at that second Mose slipped the heavy collar over his neck. At the same moment the other negro slipped the bridle over his head, forced the bit into his mouth, and before he could flick his tail old Baldy found himself arrayed in harness. The suddenness of the attack seemed to take all the spirit out of the mule, and when he found himself actually harnessed he submitted with only a few feeble kicks and bucks as protest against the trick that had been played on him. He was soon hitched to the wagon, and it rattled out of the yard with the two colored men on the seat laughing and throwing insults at the subdued Baldy.

“That was some inspiration you had, Lee,” said Bobby. “I thought at one time you’d have to call in the police if you wanted to get him harnessed.”

“Oh, that’s an old trick,” said the Southern lad. “I’ve seen those same darkeys do the same thing, but I guess this time they were so rattled they didn’t think of

it.”

“Well, I’m glad they didn’t do that at the beginning,” said Fred. “We’d have missed a lot of fun if they had. I don’t think I’ll ever forget how funny Mose looked streaking for the fence with that mule snapping his teeth right behind him.”

“Yes, old Mose was a scared darkey, all right,” laughed Lee. “But now, I don’t know about you fellows, but I for one am beginning to feel as though I could appreciate some of Aunt Dinah’s cooking.”

“Well, suppose you lead us to it and let us show you how we feel about it,” said Bobby. “As they often remind us in school, it’s deeds that count, not words.”

“All right, then, just follow me and I’ll give you a chance to demonstrate,” said Lee.

“Lead on,” said Fred, “and remember that we’re with you to the last doughnut.”

“Oh, I know I can count on you,” returned Lee, as he and his friends headed for the house. “But I know you can’t eat too much to suit Aunt Dinah. The more you pack away, the more she thinks you like her cooking. She is sure an artist when, it comes to performing on a cook stove.”

Arrived at the house, the boys found that Lee’s praise of Aunt Dinah’s abilities had been well founded. Creamy, luscious biscuits, tender, juicy fried chicken, with various tempting side dishes, were topped off by an apple pie that Fred later referred to as “a dream,” and when they finally adjourned to the spacious veranda they felt at peace with all the world.

“Why, I feel so good I think I could even forgive Ap Plunkit for soaking me with a baseball, the way he did last season,” said Fred.

“Well, Lee, if you ever had a grudge against Fred, now’s the time to hit him,” said Bobby. “He wouldn’t even try to hit you back. He’d just shake hands with you and forgive you.”

“I’d advise *you* to try it,” said Lee, scornfully. “I know it always takes an awful lot to make Fred mad, but still, I’m not going to chance it.”

Mrs. Cartier, who was an interested listener, laughed. “That’s all that boys seem to think of—eating and fighting,” she said. “Sometimes I wonder how they ever get time to study.”

“Well,” said Bobby, “at school, especially, there always seems to be some one who’ll bully everybody else, if he gets the chance, and so once in a while we just have to show him that he can’t.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “The world always seems to have plenty of trouble

makers.”

CHAPTER XV

THE LAND SHARK

“Like Jim Boolus, for instance,” said Lee, his face clouding over. “What is he up to now, Mother? Has he been trying to make trouble again?”

“He’s always trying to do that,” responded Mrs. Cartier, “and the worst of it is, he so often succeeds.”

“Lee was telling us something about him,” said Bobby, “but I’m afraid Fred and I don’t understand it very well, anyway.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Cartier, “our family has owned this plantation over a hundred years, and until recently there was no question of our ownership. But now, this Jim Boolus has laid claim to all the southern half of our land, and while we and all our neighbors are morally certain that his claim is dishonest, we find it a difficult thing to prove according to law.”

“You see,” explained Lee, “when my great-grandfather bought this land it was wild country, nothing but woods and swamps. He had it surveyed at that time, and the four corners were marked off by four large stones. When he bought the land, the southern end included a small part of the big swamp, or Shadow Swamp, as it is known in this neighborhood. The first Cartier, by means of hard work and at great expense, managed to drain the part of the swamp included in his land, and it was on this reclaimed land that the boundary stones were set up. For many years this was one of the most fertile parts of the plantation, but then came the war, and while that was going on the swamp crept up on the drained land and swallowed it up, and with it the boundary stones that would, I believe, prove our ownership.”

“But couldn’t the swamp be drained again?” asked Bobby. “If it were, maybe the stones could be located again.”

“No,” said Lee, shaking his head doubtfully, “the chances are the stones would have sunk below the surface of the ground by now, and anyway, it would cost so much to drain it now that it would be out of the question for us.”

“Is it such a big swamp, Lee?” inquired Fred.

“Oh, yes, it covers a good many miles. For the most part, nobody can get through it at all, but there are one or two secret paths through it, and I’ve been told that there are small bits of dry ground, too, if you know where to find them. Some of the negroes around here know their way through, and before the war

runaway slaves used to hide there sometimes. But any one who didn't know the place would probably get lost and swallowed up before he'd fairly got into it."

"Sounds inviting, all right," said Fred. "The more I hear about it, the more I think it would be a good adventure to explore it."

"You wouldn't say that if you were as familiar with the place as we people around here are," said Mrs. Cartier, shaking her head. "Two sons of a neighbor of ours were lost in it two or three years ago, not to mention many others."

Fred said no more at that time, but Bobby, who was nearest him thought he heard him mutter something about "better luck next time."

"But you were telling us something about a river that ran near the plantation, weren't you?" asked Bobby. "Whereabouts does that lie?"

"Well, it's that river that really makes the swamp, in a way," explained Lee. "The country is rather low hereabouts, anyway, and when the river hits the swamp it spreads out. You can follow its course right through, though, and come out on the other side, if you don't happen to get pocketed in some blind bayou or lagoon."

"Well, perhaps we could do some exploring by water, anyway," suggested Fred, hopefully.

"That is possible," said Mrs. Cartier. "We have a small motor boat, and any time you boys care to use it you may have it."

"That will be fine!" exclaimed Bobby and Fred.

"We can go to-morrow afternoon, if you want," said Lee. "I want to drive to the village in the morning to get some things for mother, but if we start early, we can get back in time to get the boat and go for a short trip, anyway."

Both Bobby and Fred were enthusiastic at the prospect, and for the rest of the evening little else was talked of except plans for the coming outing.

It was arranged that Bobby should accompany Lee on his trip to the village, while Fred was to stay at home and look over the motor boat to make sure that everything was in readiness to start when his two friends got back. After making these arrangements, the boys said good-night to Mrs. Cartier, and went to their rooms. They were all three excited at the prospect of fun and adventure the next day.

CHAPTER XVI

JIM BOOLUS APPEARS

The three boys slept the deep and dreamless sleep of healthy boyhood, and only woke when the sun was streaming in at their windows.

“What do you know about that?” said Fred, as he leaped out of bed and started dressing in a wild attempt to overcome lost time. “We were going to get an early start, and here it is nearly eight o’clock and we’re just getting up.”

“Well, Lee said they never had breakfast before eight or half past,” said Bobby, “so probably if we hurry we’ll be all right anyway. There’s no use our rushing ourselves when nobody else does.”

“Yes, but that motor boat may need some fixing,” said Fred. “Motor boats almost always do, as far as I can see.”

“Mrs. Cartier said that this boat was in perfect order,” Bobby reminded him.

“There never was a motor boat that was in perfect order,” retorted Fred. “At least, that’s what I heard my uncle tell my father, and he’s had so many of them he ought to know by this time.”

“You don’t seem very hopeful about it,” said Bobby, laughing. “But here I am dressed before you, even though you started first. That proves that it doesn’t pay to get excited.”

“Well, I never did anything yet that did pay,” declared Fred. “The only kind of things I seem to know how to do are the things that *cost* money.”

“Aw, come on and have breakfast,” said Bobby, “maybe you’ll feel better then.”

“Well, I’m willing to find out, anyway,” grinned Fred, and the two sallied forth in the direction of the breakfast room. At the head of the stairs they almost bumped into Lee as he came tearing around a corner.

“Confound it!” exclaimed the Southern lad, “I’ve pretty near killed myself hurrying, thinking that you fellows would be all through breakfast, by this time, and here you are just going down.”

“Yes,” said Bobby, slyly, “if we stay here much longer, we’ll be just as lazy as the other people in this part of the world.”

“I don’t see how either one of you could get any lazier than you always have been,” laughed Lee.

“I’m not too lazy to beat you downstairs, anyway,” said Bobby, and as Lee

instantly accepted the challenge by starting downstairs three steps at a time, they made a tremendous racket which brought Mrs. Cartier to the door of the breakfast room in alarm.

“Good gracious!” she exclaimed, as the boys jumped the last six steps together and landed in a heap at the bottom. “Did you fall? Is any one hurt?”

“I guess nobody’s hurt,” gasped Lee, as the laughing boys picked themselves up. “We were just trying to see who could get down first. You saw the finish, Mother—tell us who won. We’ll leave it to you.”

“I should say it was a tie,” she laughed, greatly relieved. “It looked to me as though you all landed in a heap at the same time. Bobby seemed to be on top, so probably he won.”

“Well, we’ll let it go at that,” grinned her son. “I wonder what Aunt Dinah has fixed us up for breakfast.”

“Perhaps you’d better go in and see,” answered his mother, and the boys were not slow in following her advice. The old Southern mammy had provided in her usual bounteous manner, but the boys were in too much of a hurry to properly appreciate all the good things spread out before them. Even Lee hurried, with the result that in a very short time they found themselves out at the barn, where Mose had a horse already harnessed.

“We’ll make the best time we can, and get back early,” promised Lee, as he and Bobby climbed into the buggy.

“All right, I’ll be waiting for you,” responded Fred, and his two friends dashed out of the yard, upsetting the dignity of numerous hens, who flapped wildly to right and left, squawking their protests.

“Now, if you’ll show me the motor boat, Mose,” said Fred. “I’ll look it over and make sure everything is all right.”

“Yassuh,” said the darkey, “it’s a goodish piece from here, but Ah reckons us kin walk it in fifteen minutes.”

“Guess I can stand it if you can,” said Fred, and they started out.

Meantime, Lee and Bobby had reached the dusty highroad and were going along at a spanking pace. Their horse had been in pasture several days with nothing to do, and seemed to enjoy a good run with nothing but the light buggy behind him.

“If we can keep this up, it won’t take us long,” observed Bobby.

“Yes, but we can’t,” said Lee. “There is some pretty sandy going before we hit town, and that will slow old Jerry down.”

They soon reached a bad stretch of sandy road, which was so narrow that

there was no more than room enough for one carriage. When two met, each had to pull partly off the road in order to pass, and this happened once or twice, the drivers of the other outfits recognizing Lee and greeting him pleasantly.

After passing the last rig, they had gone perhaps half a mile, old Jerry stopping at frequent intervals to rest, when they saw another buggy approaching them. As it drew nearer, Lee gave an exclamation.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Bobby. “Anything wrong?”

Lee’s face was flushed as he pointed to the oncoming buggy.

“There comes the meanest man in the world,” he exclaimed, his voice shaking. “That’s Jim Boolus, the fellow that’s trying to steal our land.”

The buggies were quite close together by this time, and the man in the other one evidently overheard Lee’s last words. He was a lean, dyspeptic looking old fellow, and the look of hatred and rage that his face now wore did little to improve his appearance.

“You’d better be keerful, young feller,” he snarled, as the buggies came close, “there’s a law in the land for them as uses hard words.”

“Yes, and there’s a law for people who try to steal what doesn’t belong to them, too,” retorted Lee. “Pull out there and let us pass, please.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE RUNAWAY HORSE

“Pull out yourselves, consarn ye!” shouted Jim Boolus, his face purple with rage. Then, seeing that Lee made no move, he suddenly snatched his whip from its socket, and made a savage cut at Lee’s horse.

Old Jerry reared and would have bolted forward, had not Lee held him quiet with all the strength he possessed. Bobby was infuriated by Boolus’ cruel action, and in a second he was out of the buggy and was leading the old miser’s horse off the road. With a yelp of rage Boolus made a cut at him with his whip, but Bobby dodged just in time, and the stinging lash landed on Boolus’ horse instead. The unfortunate animal, already greatly excited by the altercation, gave a leap to one side, cramping the front wheels against the buggy. The light rig careened over, and then, as the horse started forward at top speed, it turned over completely, rolling Boolus out into the deep sand at the roadside. The frightened horse dragged the overturned buggy a short distance, but then his harness broke, and he streaked down the road in a cloud of dust and sand, leaving the wrecked buggy lying on its side.

Jim Boolus staggered to his feet and gazed after his fast disappearing horse for an instant, then turned toward the boys. For a moment they were bewildered at the sudden development of events, but when they saw that Boolus was unhurt the comic side of it struck them both at the same time, and they shouted with laughter. But their discomfited enemy failed to see any humor in the situation.

“I’ll sue ye for this, see if I don’t!” he yelled, dancing about in his rage. “You’ll pay for that buggy, or I’ll know the reason why.”

“I don’t see where I come in,” said Lee. “You hit your own horse and he ran away. Both of us saw you do it, and we could swear to it in court. You don’t suppose any one around here would believe you if you tried to tell them anything else, do you?”

Boolus glared at the boys, but the truth of what Lee said was so evident that he could think of no suitable retort.

“And now,” continued Lee, “I and my friend here wish you a very pleasant walk to wherever it is you were going,” and with these words he spoke to Jerry, who started off. As they looked back the boys could see the old skinflint still standing in the road shaking his fists at them, until a sudden turn hid him from view.

“Well, that’s one time Mr. Jim Boolus got the worst of it,” said Bobby, wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes. “The look on his face as he picked himself out of that sand heap was worth going a long way to see.”

“It surely was,” agreed Lee, “but I’m rather sorry it happened just the same. He’ll hate us worse than ever now, and he won’t stop at anything to get even.”

“Well, don’t worry about it,” advised Bobby. “Anyway, he got the worst of it this time, so maybe he will again.”

“Well, I hope so,” said Lee. “He always does the meanest thing he can think of, anyway, so probably this won’t make much difference.”

They reached the village without further adventure. Lee carried out the commission his mother had given him, and they started back immediately.

“We’re late as it is, on account of that ruction with Boolus,” said Lee. “Fred will think we’ve gotten lost, sure.”

“I guess when we tell him what delayed us he won’t mind very much,” said Bobby, with a twinkle in his eye. “He’ll never get over being sorry that he wasn’t with us when it happened.”

They passed the wrecked buggy lying in the same position, but there was no sign of its owner, and the boys concluded that some one had probably come along and given him a lift. When they reached the plantation, they found Fred waiting for them at the gate.

“I thought you would be here an hour ago,” he exclaimed impatiently. “What’s been keeping you?”

“Jump in, and we’ll tell you while we’re going up to the house,” said Lee, and then he and Bobby told him all about their encounter with Boolus. As Bobby had predicted, Fred was greatly disappointed at having missed the adventure.

“But I’ll have to admit you made good use of that extra hour,” he conceded. “I was getting mad as a hornet when you didn’t show up on time, because I’ve got the motor boat all provisioned and ready to start. And it’s a peach of a boat, too,” he added.

“Well, that’s the kind we want,” said Bobby. “I’m all ready to start at a moment’s notice.”

“We’ll have to go to the house first,” said Lee, “but that won’t take us long.”

To save time, Lee told Mose to go to the boat landing and wait for them there, so that he could take the horse and buggy back when they got there.

“We Southerners just hate to walk when we can ride,” he explained. “Besides, it will save time.”

Mrs. Cartier insisted that they have lunch, although if left to themselves the

boys would have preferred to start their trip and eat in the boat. They told her about the encounter with Jim Boolus, and when they saw how anxious she became they felt sorry for the first time that it had happened. However, there was nothing to be done about it, and after a hasty meal they said good-bye to her, jumped into the buggy, and in a short time were at the tiny boathouse.

This was situated in a small creek or inlet, and was built right over the water, so that one had only to open the doors and guide the boat out. The boat itself was a staunch little twenty-foot craft with a dependable two-cylinder motor to drive it, and Fred had seen to it that Mose should have the brass work shining. The negro had been far from enthusiastic over this job.

“Whut’s de use to scrub up all dat brass,” he had argued, “when it won’t be no time at all before de mist from de ribber has it green ag’in. Seems t’me it would be more sensible like to spend de time restin’ out in de nice warm sun.”

“You might as well say it’s no use eating because you’ll only get hungry again,” Fred had told him. “I’ll bet you don’t believe that though, do you?”

“Nossuh,” said Mose, with a broad grin, “dat’s a diff’rent breed o’ cats, suh.”

Apparently convinced by Fred’s argument, he had fallen to with a will, with such good results that the motor boat now looked spick and span enough to go in some water festival.

“It sho looks nifty,” admitted Mose, “but mah elbow aches yet when Ah reflects how hard Ah had to dig befo’ Ah got it dat way.”

“Never mind,” said Lee, as he gave the flywheel a twist that set the motor to chugging in a business-like manner. “When we come back we’ll bring you some swamp chickens for supper, Mose.”

“Whut’s dem swamp chickums?” inquired the negro. “Cain’t seem to rec’lect no sech fowl no-how.”

“Oh, certainly,” said Lee, with every appearance of conviction. “They have black combs, red tail feathers, and blue eyes. You must have seen one, haven’t you?”

“Nossuh, an’ whut’s more, Ah don’ believe dey never was no sech a kind of a chickum,” said Mose.

“All right, then, just you wait till we bring you one back,” said Lee, and guided the boat out into the sluggish river, leaving Mose scratching his woolly head on the bank.

The river was perhaps a hundred feet wide at this point, and flowed so slowly that it was hard to believe that there was any current at all. The banks were covered with trees that grew right down to the water’s edge at this point, but as the little craft chugged its way upstream, the trees gave way to high, rank grass,

with here and there a lofty cypress tree shooting up out of the rank vegetation.

“We’re on the edge of the swamp country now,” explained Lee. “In another hour we’ll be right in the heart of it.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A SCOUNDREL'S TRICK

"What's the chance of catching some fish?" inquired Bobby. "There's nothing better than fresh caught fish grilled over a wood fire."

"There are plenty of fish if you have the luck to catch them," said Lee. "They generally eat the bait off my hook, and then go away laughing at me."

"Huh, I never saw a fish laugh, myself," said Fred; "it must be very interesting."

"Oh, it is," Lee gravely assured him. "We'll just land at a good place I know of, and maybe you can have a demonstration."

They chugged on a little further, and then Lee gave the wheel a twist and headed for a high green bank that rose above the general level of the flat swamp country. When about two hundred feet away he shut off the motor, and the boat glided gently on with its momentum and grounded easily on the muddy bank.

"Here we are," said the Southern youth. "Get out your fishing lines, and we'll see what we can do."

It did not take the boys long to rig up their tackle, and then Lee jumped ashore, followed by Bobby and Fred. Together they pulled the bow of the boat up onto the bank, and then cast their bait.

"Now to hear the laughing fish," said Fred. "Do they laugh very loud, Lee?"

"Not as loud as some poor fish that I know of," retorted Lee.

"Wow!" exclaimed Bobby, laughing. "That had all the earmarks of a dig, Lee."

Fred opened his mouth to make a cutting remark, but at that moment his reel whizzed, and for the next five minutes he was too busy to say a word. The fish fought gamely, and the frail rod at times bent almost double and threatened to snap. But at last Fred landed the gleaming fish on the grass.

"Good work!" applauded Lee. "After that I take back my unkind words, Fred."

"That's all right," said Fred, "nothing could make me mad now. Isn't that fish a beauty? I'll bet he weighs all of three pounds."

"Wouldn't be surprised," assented Bobby. "Two or three more like that, and we can have a feast."

But the required number failed to materialize, and after half an hour of patient

angling, the boys decided to try their luck in a new location. Accordingly they moved some two or three hundred yards further upstream, and cast again. Here the fish were biting better, and in a little while even Lee had caught a fair sized fish, while Bobby and Fred each had two to their credit. Content with this haul, they decided to go back to the boat and continue their journey. They strung the fish on a bit of line, and then made their way back to where they had left the craft.

But the motor boat was nowhere to be seen!

For a moment all three were too surprised to speak. Bobby was the first to break the dazed silence.

“It looks as though we were up against it, fellows,” he said, soberly. “How do you suppose that boat got away, anyway?”

“It must be we didn’t pull it up far enough,” said Lee, “although I didn’t think the current was strong enough here to float a chip away. But now it looks as though I made a bad mistake.”

“I don’t think there is any mistake about this,” said Bobby, who had been doing some quick thinking. “That boat would never have floated away unless somebody had helped it to. We had it drawn up too far for that.”

“But who in the world would there be here to set it adrift?” inquired Lee, in bewilderment.

As though in answer to his question, there was a sudden stir and rustle in a tall bunch of swamp grass in back of them, and as they whirled about they saw a young negro boy leap from the grass and start running as fast as his legs could carry him.

“After him, fellows!” yelled Bobby, and the three comrades took after the negro at top speed. The latter was fleet, but he was no match for Bobby who soon outdistanced his companions and was close on the negro’s heels. The darkey, hearing the pursuit so close to him, suddenly turned, and Bobby thought for a second that he was going to show fight, but instead he fell on his knees and started to beg for mercy.

“D—don’t hit me, white boy,” he stammered. “Ah was made to do it, ’deed Ah was.”

“Do what?” asked Bobby. “I haven’t accused you of doing anything yet.”

“Nossuh, you hasn’t, and Ah wouldn’t have shoved off dat boat, neider, if mah boss hadn’t done tole me he’d skin me alive if Ah didn’t.”

“I know this coon,” said Lee, who with Fred came up panting at this juncture. “He works for Jim Boolus, and I reckon that explains how our boat came to get adrift. How did you know we were here?” he continued, addressing the negro.

“Ah was rowin’ Marse Boolus down de ribber,” answered the darkey, “an’ fust thing Ah knows he spies you-all’s boat wid its nose stuck up on de mud bank. ‘Dat’s de Cartiers’ motor boat,’ he says to me, gettin’ all excited. ‘Suppose young Cartier and dose fresh friends o’ his’n must be aroun’ somewhere!’”

“‘Yessuh,’ Ah says, and keeps right on rowin’. But we hadn’t gone no distance ’tall when he tells me to quit.”

“‘Gimme dem oars, you fool nigger,’ he says, ‘Ah’ll row dis boat in, and Ah wants you should step ashore an’ heave dat boat off de bank.’”

“Ah jes’ had to do like he says, ’cause Marse Boolus is a powerful mean man when he gits riled. But Ah hadn’t any more dan got ashore when he hears one of you white boys shoutin’ somethin’, an’ he thinks you’re comin’ back for your boat. Wid dat he starts pullin’ away like mad, leavin’ me up on de bank. Ah shoved off de boat, anyway, thinkin’ dat he’d come back an’ pick me up, but he jes’ kep’ right on goin’, and here I is.”

“We ought to pitch you into the river and let you swim after him,” said Lee, angrily.

The frightened negro rolled his eyes. “Ah’s sorry, boss,” he whimpered, “but Marse Boolus would jest as soon land me wid an oar as not if Ah didn’t do what he tole me to.”

“It’s no use bothering with him,” said Bobby. “The damage is done now, and we’ll have to try to get out of this mess some way.”

“I suppose Boolus is chuckling now to think how he’s got even with us,” said Fred, clenching his fists. “I wish now he’d fallen out of that buggy onto some nice hard rocks instead of into soft sand.”

“Well we’re in a pretty pickle, anyway,” said Lee, as the full extent of the calamity began to dawn on him. “We’re somewhere about the middle of the swamp, without any way to get out unless we swim, and no provisions except a few fish.”

“Oh, it may not be quite as bad as that,” said Bobby. “How do you know there’s no way out except by the river? There’s probably some path through, if we can only find it.”

“Yes, but that’s a big if,” said Lee. “But I guess we might as well go back and get those fish and cook them. We’ll have to camp out to-night, anyway, and then see what we can do in the morning.”

As nobody could suggest anything better than this, they made their way back to the river, taking the negro with them. “There’s no knowing what he’ll be up to,” said Lee. “We’d better keep an eye on him.”

They cleaned and cooked the fish, and ate them in silence, each one busy with

his own thoughts. The flat and dreary swamp spread out on all sides of their camp, except that bounded by the river. As evening came on, a cold white mist arose from the morass, causing them to shiver and throw more wood on their fire. Fortunately there was a plentiful supply of driftwood along the shore, and they resolved to keep the fire going all night, each one taking a turn at standing watch and putting fresh fuel on. As twilight deepened into night, strange noises arose on every side; the croaking of frogs, the weird calling of water fowl, and above all the fierce hum of mosquitoes that came in clouds to add to the discomfort of their situation.

“Where’s that darkey?” exclaimed Lee suddenly.

They had momentarily forgotten him, and now, when they looked around, there was no sign of him. He had disappeared into the surrounding blackness, and the boys knew that it would be hopeless to look for him.

“It’s just as well, anyway,” said Fred. “He had a treacherous look in his eyes, and I feel better now that he’s not around.”

“Yes, but the chances are he knew of a way out of this place,” said Lee, “and we might have made him show it to us. But he’s gone, and there’s no use worrying about it, I suppose.”

“Well, if he can get out, we can, too,” said Bobby, hopefully. “We’ll get a start as soon as it’s light enough to see, and maybe we’ll be home in time for lunch.”

CHAPTER XIX

IN DESPERATE PERIL

Bobby stood the first watch, Fred the second, and Lee the last. Nothing of any importance occurred during the night, although the swamp all around them seemed teeming with life. Above the croaking of frogs and the hum of night insects there rose at times a strange bellowing noise, that sent shivers creeping over Bobby and Fred, and which they were at a loss to explain. But next morning Lee told them the source of the strange noise.

“What you heard were alligators,” said Lee. “There are lots of them in this swamp, and we’ve got to look out for them. They’re pretty fierce, and they’ll attack anything under the sun.”

“Gee!” said Bobby, “if I had known that, I think I’d have spent the night up a tree. I could hear one pretty close while I was keeping the fire going, too.”

“Probably he was attracted by the light of the fire,” said Lee. “But I don’t think they’d bother any one on land, as a rule. But they’ll tackle anything in the water, and if they once get a grip with those pointed teeth of theirs, its all over for the one that’s caught. The alligator just drags him down under the surface, waits until he’s drowned and then drags him up on the nearest sandbank and swallows him at his leisure.”

“That’s fine—for the alligator,” muttered Fred, with a slight shiver which was not all the result of the clinging mist. “I don’t think I’ll do much swimming while we’re in this swamp.”

“I’d advise you not to,” said Lee. “I sure hate ’gators, but just the same I wouldn’t mind finding a few of their eggs for breakfast.”

“Eggs!” exclaimed Bobby and Fred together.

“Certainly,” said Lee, laughing at their amazed look. “I don’t care for them much as a rule, but one or two now wouldn’t be half bad.”

“Good-night!” exclaimed Fred. “What do they taste like, anyway?”

“Oh, they’re not so bad. They have a rather unpleasant musky taste, but if you’re hungry enough you don’t mind that. The darkeys think they’re fine, and spend a lot of time hunting them out.”

“Where do you find the eggs?” inquired Fred.

“The ’gators dig out holes in the sand or mud, fill them with eggs, and then cover the whole thing over with more sand,” said Lee. “After a while the heat of

the sun hatches out the eggs, and then the mother 'gator takes charge of the little fellows and protects them until they're big enough to take care of themselves."

"Well, I feel hungry enough now to eat an alligator egg omelet," said Bobby. "I think we'd better get started, and maybe we'll run across one of those cute little nests Lee was telling us about."

After eating the last of the fish they had caught the day before, the boys started out, intending to follow the river as nearly as possible. But they soon found that the ground kept getting softer at every step they took, and were forced to bear away from the stream, although still keeping as near as possible to the right direction. Lee was more experienced than the other boys in the matter of making progress over this kind of treacherous footing, and he took the lead. On every side dark pools of water oozed up through the quaking ground. Here and there tussocks of grass had formed, and these offered the only footing to be had at all. Even these were very soft and shaky, and it was necessary to leap continually from one to the other in order to avoid sinking in. At rare intervals some larger hillock than usual would give the boys a chance to rest a few minutes and get their breath, and it was on one of these that they paused at last, panting and tired.

"Gee!" exclaimed Bobby, as he mopped at his streaming face. "A mile of this is worse than ten miles on hard ground."

"Harder, and a lot more dangerous," agreed Lee, soberly. "One fall into one of those green pools and you'd be done for. It would suck you down so fast that nothing could save you."

The heat was growing intense, and, aided by the rank steam that ascended from the rotting vegetation, seemed almost unbearable. But the boys knew that they had to keep on, because if darkness found them before they reached some firmer ground, their fate would be sealed. After nightfall they would be almost certain to fall into one of the green and stagnant pools and be sucked down to a horrible death.

Even as the boys tried to rest and get their breath, they could feel their feet slowly sinking into the muddy grass, and as they lifted their feet pools of water formed in the depressions left by them.

"Guess it's a case of 'keep moving,'" said Fred, as one foot sank in to his ankles and he pulled it out with difficulty. "This swamp is the last place in the world I'd pick for a hike if I had my choice."

"There's no choice about this," said Bobby, setting his lips grimly. "We're here, and we've got to get out just as soon as we can. Let's go!"

Somewhat rested by their brief halt, they started on again. Suddenly Lee, who

was ahead, shouted a warning.

“We can’t get any farther this way!” he cried, as Bobby and Fred caught up with him, and he pointed ahead. The boys saw a large stagnant pond, covered with green scum, from which protruded the rotting trunks of trees. At intervals around the bank lay what appeared to be other logs, but even as they looked, one of these seeming logs stirred, and crawling slowly through the ooze, flopped into the water with a loud splash.

“We’re blocked, sure enough,” said Bobby. “We’ll have to go back and try some fresh path.”

“Looks that way,” assented Lee. “And I hope we find some bit of solid ground soon, fellows, because I’m pretty near all in. I can’t go much further.”

For the first time the boys realized the deadly danger in which they stood. The strenuous exertions necessary to keep away from being swallowed up by the black mud, the terrific heat, and the deadly gases that rose continually from the rotting vegetable matter, were all combining to sap their strength. And if that once gave out they realized there was no alternative but death in the clinging, suffocating mud.

Bobby felt his own heart sink, but he showed nothing of this in his manner as he said: “Ah, we’ll be all right in a little while, Lee. We’re bound to hit dry ground pretty soon. Keep a stiff upper lip and we’ll get through right enough.”

“Well, you’d better set the pace, and I’ll do my best to keep up,” returned the Southern boy.

Accordingly, Bobby started off, followed by Lee, with Fred last. Bobby had become somewhat used to picking his way over the grass tussocks by this time, and in addition he seemed to have a sort of instinct which, told him what path to take and which to avoid. Under his guidance they made better progress, and after a time Fred remarked:

“I may be only dreaming, but it seems to me that the ground is getting a little firmer. What do you fellows think?”

“I reckon it is,” panted Lee. “I’ve heard the darkeys say there was an island in the swamp somewhere, and maybe we’re getting near it.”

Sure enough, they soon spied higher ground ahead of them, with some trees growing on it. The sight gave them fresh courage, and they struggled gamely on, until at last came a time when they could put foot to ground without feeling it sink into slimy mud.

CHAPTER XX

THE ALLIGATOR'S JAWS

"Thank Heaven," gasped Lee, as the three boys threw themselves down and lay panting in the grateful shade of a big tree. "I'm all in. I couldn't possibly have gone half a mile more."

"I guess we're about as bad," said Fred. "I'm willing to admit that I was never so near the end of my rope. Any one would have thought you knew this island was here, Bobby, from the way you headed for it."

"It was just a guess," declared Bobby. "I figured that probably if we got further away from the river the ground might be less swampy and it would pay us to go in that direction even if we were getting farther from home."

"We wouldn't have got there very fast the way I was heading you anyway," said Lee. "Poor mother will be terribly worried about us."

"Yes," agreed Bobby soberly, "that's the trouble; when, we fellows get into trouble of any kind, our mothers suffer more over it than we do."

In a short time they had recovered a good deal from their strenuous exertions, and now all three found themselves ravenously hungry. But to feel hungry and to satisfy that hunger were two very different things, as they soon discovered. They had read of people marooned on islands in the ocean, but in every such case there had seemed to be a convenient flock of goats or a handy beach strewn with shellfish. But after the boys had thoroughly ransacked their island, they found no such convenient supply. The place was only about a quarter of a mile across, hemmed in on every side with brown water and black mud.

Luckily, however, they had hung onto their fishing rods, and they had no difficulty in digging up a plentiful supply of worms in the rich earth. Fred was the first to get a bite, and he reeled in the fish as fast as he could, being much too eager to see the fish toasting over a fire to make any attempt to "play" him. It was not long before they had four small fish, and these they proceeded to clean and kill without wasting any time over it.

"Scubbity-yow!" exclaimed Fred, as he bit into the delicious morsel, "I never knew a fish could taste so good. These fellows are only samples. We'll have to get busy and catch about a hundred more before I'll feel satisfied."

"If you'll eat a hundred, I'll catch them for you," laughed Bobby.

"And I'll clean them and cook them for you," seconded Lee.

“All right, go ahead and start in,” said Fred, but the others were not to be taken in so easily.

“No, you don’t,” laughed Bobby. “You get busy and catch some yourself. I’ll bet you couldn’t eat two more to save your life.”

“Well, I’d have a lot of fun trying, anyway,” said Fred, regretfully. “But if you fellows are too lazy to catch fish for me, I suppose I’ll have to do it myself.”

“Looks a lot that way,” agreed Lee, as he cast his line into the water. “You’d better hurry, too, before Bobby and I have them all out.”

They caught and ate fish until they could eat no more, and then lay down in the shade to rest.

“This might be worse, I suppose,” said Bobby, chewing reflectively on a long blade of grass. “A couple of hours ago it would have seemed like Heaven to us.”

“It isn’t so bad here,” said Lee, “but we can’t stay here forever, and after we leave we’ll be as badly off as we were before.”

“Likely,” admitted Bobby, “but then, on the other hand, it doesn’t seem possible we’ll strike anything worse than we went through this morning, anyway.”

“Oh, cut out worrying about the future,” broke in Fred. “For my part, I’ve had enough to eat—although I’ll admit a steady fish diet is beginning to get tiresome—and I’ve got a soft and shady place to lie where I can hear the little birdies singing. So why worry, say I.”

“Yes,” said Lee, scornfully, “and you can hear the pretty alligators singing, too, if you listen hard. Not to mention the mosquitoes and bull-frogs.”

“Better let him be cheerful while he can, Lee,” said Bobby. “He’ll soon forget how happy he is after we get started again.”

“Well, we’ve got a lot to be thankful for, anyway,” contended Fred. “Suppose we’d all been as fat as Pee Wee, and had to go hopping through this everlasting swamp like—like—”

“Like turkeys on a hot stove?” suggested Lee.

“That seems to about cover it.” said Fred, with a laugh, “even if it isn’t very complimentary to us. But as I was saying, if we’d all been as fat as Pee Wee, we’d never have got here at all. This swamp was never intended for heavyweights.”

“I don’t think it was ever intended for any kind of human being,” said Lee.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Bobby. “It strikes me that this would be an ideal place to put Ap Plunkit and Ben Tompkins, for instance.”

“Wow!” yelled Fred, delightedly. “You certainly had an idea that time, Bobby.

And while we're at it, why not Sandy Jackson and his friend, Snath? Seems to me they'd fit in pretty well, too."

"Come to think of it, though," said Bobby, with a serious air, "don't you think it would be playing it rather low down on the poor alligators! What have they ever done to us that we should wish that bunch on them?"

"Perhaps you're right," conceded Fred. "I hadn't thought of that before. But I guess some of those big fellows we saw this morning are able to take care of themselves."

"I don't know who those fellows are you're talking about, except Snath," said Lee, "but if they're any meaner than alligators, I don't want to know anything about them. They're the meanest things alive, I think."

"Speaking of 'gators reminds me," said Bobby, "why not try and locate some of those eggs you were telling us about, Lee? A little change of diet wouldn't do us any harm."

"All right, let's look for some," said Lee, springing to his feet, "that is, if Fred isn't having too good a time doing nothing to be disturbed."

"No rest for the wicked," groaned Fred, scrambling to his feet. "Lead on, Lee, I'm with you."

The three boys followed around the shore, looking for a sandy beach, which, as Lee told them, was the most likely place to find the eggs. Lee had cut himself a sharp stick, and when they had at last found a sandy place, he stuck this into the sand at intervals, afterwards examining the end to see if it had found a nest. After quite a time spent in fruitless proddings, he at last met with success. The end of the stick came up dripping yellow.

"Here's a nest!" he shouted. "Dig in, fellows and we'll soon have all we want."

Suiting the action to the word, he began scooping up the sand with his hands, and Bobby and Fred followed suit. In a short time they had uncovered a small heap of alligator eggs, each one about the size of a goose's egg. Absorbed in their find, they had no thought of danger, until suddenly Bobby, chancing to glance up, gave a wild yell of warning. Springing to their feet, Fred and Lee saw a huge alligator, measuring a good fifteen feet, almost on top of them, great jaws gaping and small, vicious eyes snapping wickedly!

CHAPTER XXI

A TERRIBLE MOMENT

All three boys jumped for safety, but Fred's ankle turned in the soft sand, and he fell, striking his head against a stone as he went down. Stunned, he lay an easy prey for the alligator, that made for him with all the speed of which it was capable.

For a brief second Bobby and Lee stood rooted in their tracks, appalled at the horrible menace to their friend. Then, quick as a flash, Bobby leaped toward the ugly monster, picking up the stick Lee had been using for hunting eggs.

The alligator was not ten feet from Fred when Bobby leaped in front of it, and using the stick as a club, dealt the ferocious brute a stinging blow on the end of its snout. The vicious little eyes blinked, but the monster did not stop. Again Bobby struck, with all the strength of his sinewy young arm. The great jaws snapped wickedly, but the alligator could not stand this severe pain in the only sensitive part of his anatomy, and it stopped a moment, glaring at this presumptuous human who looked so small and yet could hurt so much. Following up his advantage, Bobby struck again, and at the same second Lee dashed in and, exerting all his strength, lifted Fred in his arms and staggered off with him.

The alligator, infuriated at being thus deprived of its prey, made a wild lunge at Bobby, who tried to land another effective blow on the sensitive snout. But this time he missed, and the big reptile caught the stick in its jaws, snapping it to splinters. Bobby was thrown off his balance and nearly followed the stick, but recovered his poise just in time, for the alligator turned with surprising agility and slashed at him with its heavy tail. Had that deadly blow reached its mark Bobby's career would have ended. He could not recover his balance in time to run, but as the powerful tail whizzed toward him he seized the only chance left him, and leaped clear over it. The alligator never got another chance at him, for when he landed he was off like a shot after his chums. The alligator followed him for a few steps, but apparently saw that it was hopeless to try to catch him, and turning, dragged itself down to the water, which it entered with a sullen splash.

Bobby, seeing this over his shoulder, slowed down and called to Lee, who laid Fred on the ground and started trying to revive him. By the time Bobby arrived Fred had opened his eyes, and now, with Lee's help, he made shift to sit up.

“What happened to me?” he inquired, feebly.

“Not near as much as almost happened to you,” said Bobby. “You came pretty near waking up inside an alligator. But how do you feel now, Fred?” and he knelt beside his chum to examine a bad looking cut just over his temple.

“Oh, a little dizzy but I guess I can still sit up and take notice,” said Fred, with a weak grin. “I remember falling now, and I suppose I must have knocked my head on something. What happened after that?”

“Oh, nothing much,” said Bobby. “I took the alligator’s attention off you, and Lee toted you away to a safer place than the neighborhood of that nest. I’ve got an idea that must have been the owner of those eggs that attacked us.”

“The way you tell it, it doesn’t seem like much, but I’ve got an idea you and Lee saved my life,” said Fred.

“Oh well, we only did what you would have done for either of us if we had been down and out,” said Bobby, “so let’s forget about it. The worst part of it is we’re as far as ever from having alligator egg omelet.”

“Well, let’s go back and get them, then,” said Fred coolly, getting to his feet. “My head still feels a little funny, but anyway I can keep a look-out, while you two get the eggs. We won’t be caught napping this time, and I guess we can run faster than any ’gator.”

“I like your nerve, anyway!” exclaimed Lee, “Here you’ve been within an ace of being gobbled up by that ugly brute, and still you want to go back and have another try at her precious eggs. Likely enough she’ll get you for good this time.”

“I’m game to try it, anyway,” said Bobby. “But I don’t think you’d better come, Fred. That was a pretty bad crack you got, and you’d better wait here while we try it.”

“Not a bit of it,” protested Fred. “I feel all right now, and I’m going to have alligator eggs for supper if I have to go for them alone.”

“All right then, back we go,” said Bobby, and the three boys retraced their steps to where they had all three narrowly escaped death only a few minutes before. When they arrived, there was no sign of the alligator, however, and it did not take them long to uncover the eggs. There was a large number of them, each one about the size and shape of a large goose egg, and the boys took off their coats and wrapped as many of the eggs as they could carry in them. But they took no chances of being surprised this time, and kept a sharp look-out. And it was well they did, for they had no more than got the eggs wrapped up than Lee gave a shout of warning.

“Here she comes, fellows!” he yelled, “let’s go!”

The boys needed no second admonition, but after a startled glance, took to their heels in most earnest fashion. For sure enough, the mother alligator, after cooling her smarting nose in the water, had had an uneasy feeling that all was not well, and had started up the bank to investigate. When she caught sight of the boys she gave a bellow and dragged herself through the sand at increased speed, but the boys did not wait for her coming this time, and were soon at a safe distance.

“Gee!” exclaimed Bobby, slowing down. “It’s a lucky thing that alligators can’t run fast. If they could, I guess we’d have to live in trees.”

“They’re slow enough on land, but you ought to see them in the water,” returned Lee. “They can go fast enough then, believe me.”

“I’ll believe you right away, without putting it to a test,” laughed Fred. “An alligator’s mouth seems too full of teeth to suit me.”

“Yes, they have got a pretty complete outfit,” said Lee, “and they keep growing in all the time, the new ones forcing out the old. I’ve heard that a ’gator has four or five sets of teeth during a lifetime.”

“Gee!” exclaimed Bobby. “I should think one set like that would last any animal a lifetime.”

“Yes, but they often break them taking bites out of people who try to steal their eggs,” said Lee. “It must hurt the poor alligators when they break a tooth that way.”

“That’s the only reason I ran so fast,” said Fred. “I wasn’t afraid of the alligator, but I didn’t want the poor thing to hurt its teeth on me.”

“Oh, we believe that,” said Lee sarcastically.

“Well, if you believe that, you’ll believe anything,” said Fred brazenly. “I’ll have to think up something real good next time.”

“I don’t mind telling you fellows the real reason why I ran, if you coax me,” declared Bobby.

“I’ll bite,” said Lee. “Why did you run?”

“Because I couldn’t fly,” replied Bobby.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DISTANT HOWL

“That sounds like one of Billy’s jokes,” declared Fred, “and I can’t say anything worse than that about it.”

“No, that’s a pretty hard knock, all right,” admitted Bobby, “but I’ll try not to do it again.”

“As a punishment, I vote that we appoint Bobby to try the first alligator’s egg,” suggested Lee.

“Second the motion!” shouted Fred enthusiastically. “You’re unanimously elected, Bobby.”

“Well, somebody had to try Limburger cheese the first time,” said Bobby, “so I suppose I might as well be the goat this time. But you’ll have to tell me how to cook them, Lee.”

“You can cook them any way, the same as a hen’s egg,” said Lee. “But I suppose, seeing we’ve nothing to boil water in, that we’d better roast a few and try them that way.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” said Bobby. “As long as I’m to be official taster, they’ll probably taste just as bad one way as another.”

During this conversation, the boys had been heading for the spot where they had eaten lunch, and having reached it they proceeded to build a fire. They soon had a good blaze going, and in accordance with Lee’s directions, let it burn down until there was nothing but red embers left. Then they dug out a space under the ashes, placed a few of the eggs in the hollow, and raked the hot ashes over them.

“Leave them there a few minutes, and they’ll be fit for a king to eat,” said the Southern boy.

“Seems to me you’re what Mr. Leith would call an unbounded optimist,” said Bobby. “I’ve got my doubts if they’ll even be fit for me to eat, let alone a king.”

“Well, we won’t have long to wait to find out,” said Lee. “I imagine they’re pretty nearly cooked now.”

“Oh, don’t be in a hurry,” said Bobby. “I’m perfectly willing to wait a while, you know.”

“Maybe you are, but we’re not,” retorted Lee, as he scraped the fire aside and fished out an egg. “Here you are, Bobby, I’ve tasted them before and they’re not really so bad, especially when you’re hungry. Go to it.”

“How do you eat the things, anyway?” asked Bobby, looking doubtfully at the strange object. “I suppose neither of you happens to have an egg cup and a spoon in your pocket, have you?”

“I usually carry them around with me, but I reckon I must have lost them,” said Lee, sarcastically. “Just chip the end off, and go to it, Bobby. You’ll enjoy it, believe me.”

“I’d like to believe you, but I’m afraid I can’t,” said Bobby. “Well, I can only die once. Good-by, fellows. Here goes.”

He chipped part of the thick outside covering off the egg, and very gingerly took a small bite.

“What’s it like?” questioned Fred, watching him anxiously. “Is it as bad as I think it is?”

“It isn’t bad at all, if I only had a little salt to go with it,” said Bobby, taking another and larger bite this time. “You fellows had better dig in, or there won’t be any left.”

“What does it taste like, anyway?” asked Fred, doubtfully.

“Alligator egg,” returned Bobby, munching away. “I was elected to try these eggs first, but there was nothing in it about telling you fellows what they tasted like. Try ’em for yourselves.”

“But that was the idea that you should taste them, so you could tell us whether they were good or not,” complained Fred.

“You should have thought of that at the time, then,” said Bobby. “It’s too late now. Help yourself. After all, the only way to learn is by experience, as the coach is always telling us back at Rockledge.”

“Well, I’m getting hungry enough to eat an alligator, much less its eggs. Pass me over one of those things, will you, Lee?”

“Sure thing,” said that individual, “and while I’m about it, I reckon I’ll have one for myself.”

Presently all three boys were munching away, and after they had each eaten two of the eggs the general verdict was that they “were not half bad.”

“I only wish I could get a few home with me,” said Bobby, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I’d like to give a few to our cook, Meena, and see what she’d do about it. She says she doesn’t like boys, and I’ve got a hunch she’d like this one less after that.”

“I wish I had a few of her doughnuts,” sighed Fred. “I don’t think she likes me much, but sometimes I can’t help liking her after I’ve eaten some of the good things she cooks.”

“Please don’t mention it,” returned Bobby. “It makes my mouth water just to think of it. Those eggs are filling, but that’s about the best you can say of them. But I suppose we ought to be thankful to have even them. Those and what fish we can catch wouldn’t keep us going very long, though. When shall we make another try to get out of this everlasting swamp?”

“I think we’d better start as soon as it’s light enough to see, to-morrow,” said Lee. “I hate to think of tackling the bog again, but we’ve just got to do it.”

“Well, then, that’s settled,” came from Fred. “We’ll get a good sleep to-night and start strong, anyway. Don’t you think it would be a good idea to cook a lot of those eggs and take them along with us? There’s no telling how long it may be before we find any other food.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Bobby. “Let’s get busy and cook some right now. Thank fortune they are fresh.”

Before long the boys had a dozen of the alligator’s eggs cooked hard. By the time they had finished this task, it was nearly dark, and after gathering a good supply of firewood they built up the blaze and lay down to discuss their plans for the morrow.

As night came on all manner of strange noises arose from the swamp, chief among them being the snorting bellow of the alligators. Suddenly, in a momentary lull, they heard, far off, a wild, long-drawn cry, that hushed their voices and set their hair creeping.

The shrieking wail, carrying an indescribable note of ferocity and menace, rose and fell, and then was gone, eclipsed by the nearer noises of the swamp, that now resumed their usual volume.

“What was that?” whispered Fred, as the boys gazed wide-eyed at each other.

“That was the cry of a cougar,” said Lee, his voice a trifle shaky.

“A cougar!” exclaimed Fred, “what’s that?”

“It’s a kind of panther,” explained Lee. “There used to be a lot of them around here, but now there aren’t many left. What there are, though, are fierce enough to make up for that.”

“Gee!” exclaimed Bobby. “I hope that fellow doesn’t take it into his head to pay us a visit.”

“He wouldn’t be likely to come into the swamp this far,” said Lee, although there was not much conviction in his voice. “But we’ll have to be on our guard anyway. We’d better stand watches to-night and keep the fire going.”

“We’d probably have had to do that, anyhow,” said Fred. “Your Southern winters aren’t like the ones we’re used to up North, but just the same it’s pretty cold sleeping out at night without any blankets.”

“I should say so,” said Bobby. “It’s fairly warm when the sun’s shining, but I thought I was going to freeze to death last night, sure.”

The boys listened anxiously for a repetition of the wild cry that had so disturbed them, but apparently the cougar was not coming in their direction, for they heard nothing further to indicate his presence. Nevertheless, they kept a good fire going all that night, which prevented the one on watch from seeing two glowing green eyes whose owner prowled restlessly about just beyond range of the firelight, as silent as any shadow but more to be feared than the bellowing alligators, who made the night hideous with their noise.

CHAPTER XXIII

TRACKED BY A PANTHER

But in, the morning there was no sign of this midnight prowler, and with the rising sun the boys gave little thought to the weird sounds of the night before. They were up at the first break of dawn, somewhat sore and stiff from the effects of their hard bed, but still full of “pep” for anything the day might have to offer.

They had decided to follow in a general way the course that had taken them so far, that is, head in the general direction of home, but still keep away from the impassable low ground in the vicinity of the river. Bobby wanted Lee to take the lead, but the latter objected.

“I got us into a pretty bad mess the last time,” he said, “and you got us out again. So now, you’d better lead again.”

“Oh, it was mostly luck on my part,” Bobby replied. “How did I know we were going to hit on this island?”

“Your brand of luck is what we need, then,” said Lee. “Let’s hope it will hold out long enough to get us out of this swamp.”

“Well, I’ll do my best, then,” said Bobby, “but don’t blame me if I land you at the bottom of some nice mudhole.”

“I’ll take a chance on your getting through all right, and it will be more than luck that does it, too,” said Fred.

“Let’s go, then,” urged Bobby; and the three friends resumed their perilous journey.

They had by this time become so expert in choosing the best spots to step that they found their progress less arduous than they had expected. But now a new difficulty arose, for the sun became clouded over, and this left them at a loss as to direction, this having been their only guide so far.

Bobby grew more and more anxious as the haziness continued to increase, and at last called a halt on a bit of high ground that was a little harder than the surrounding bog.

“Looks as though we’re rather up against it now, fellows,” he said. “If we can’t see the sun, we won’t know what direction we’re going in, and chances are we’ll just be getting in deeper all the time instead of getting out.”

“But we can’t stay here,” objected Lee. “We’ve just got to keep going, and hope we’ll come out somewhere, anyway. We know we’re headed about right

now, so why not try to keep on that way?"

Bobby shook his head doubtfully, but as there seemed to be no alternative, except to return to their island, he started on again. Indeed, he felt far from certain that he could find the island again, or he might have proposed going back to it.

Fortunately, the ground seemed to be getting somewhat firmer, but as they progressed the trees and undergrowth became so dense that they found increasing difficulty in making progress. Several times Bobby stopped and peered about uneasily among the trees, apparently in search of something which he could not locate.

"What's the matter, Bobby?" asked Fred, at last, made uneasy by his friend's uneasiness. "What are you looking for, anyway?"

"I may be wrong," said Bobby, stopping again, "but I can't help feeling as though we were being followed and watched by something. I thought I saw something in the underbrush just a little while ago, but it was gone so quickly that I couldn't be sure."

"What did it look like?" queried Lee, quickly.

"I'm not sure, as I say, that I saw anything," said Bobby, "but it just seemed to me as though I saw a flash of light brown against a tree trunk, and then it disappeared so quickly that I thought I might be mistaken."

"Light brown?" whispered Lee, with a frightened look in his eyes. "Bobby, that's the color of a cougar, and you remember that cry we heard last night—"

His voice trailed off into silence, and the boys peered fearfully through the matted tangle of vines and underbrush. They could see nothing to confirm their fears, but suddenly a twig snapped not far from this, and they thought they could hear a stealthy rustling.

"What would we better do, Bobby?" asked Fred, anxiously. "If we only had a gun with us, we could soon take care of that fellow if he comes after us, but as it is—"

He had no need to finish the sentence, for his companions knew what he meant. Unarmed, with not even a knife among them, except, of course, their pocket knives, they would be no match for the savage beast that was stalking them. In all probability, as Lee told them, the panther would wait until toward dark, and then leap on them at the first opportunity.

"If that's so," said Bobby, who had been doing some quick thinking, "it seems to me as though we'd best pick out the place to fight it out instead of leaving it to Mr. Cougar."

"Yes, but one place looks about as bad as another to me around here," said

Lee. "What's your idea, Bobby?"

"I think we'd better get up a tree," said Bobby, "then if he comes up after us, as he'll probably do if we keep him waiting long enough, we'll have a chance of beating him off with clubs. On the ground here there's hardly room enough to move, and he'd have us at his mercy."

Bobby had hardly finished speaking when they heard another stick snap, closer this time than before, and although still they could see nothing, they had little need of their eyes to tell them that the peril was close and imminent.

"There's a big tree over there," said Bobby, pointing to a towering giant that stood somewhat apart from the rest. "We'll make for that, but take it easy, so it won't look as though we were in a hurry."

He started toward the tree indicated, pausing only long enough to pick up a stout section of a fallen branch that lay at his feet. Fred and Lee followed his example, and they made quietly for the tree, controlling an almost overpowering impulse to break into a run. They kept a wary lookout, and before they reached it, all three saw the cougar plainly as he crossed a slight opening in the underbrush. He was gone again in a second, but the boys knew now beyond any doubt who their enemy was.

"We'll be lucky if he leaves us alone until we get up the tree," said Fred, voicing the thought that was in all their minds.

"We'll have to chance that," said Bobby. "I'll be the last one to go up, and I'll pass the clubs up to you."

By this time they had reached the tree, still unmolested by the panther. Lee started up first, and then Fred. Bobby admitted afterward that he spent a nervous two minutes on the ground, waiting for them to get far enough up so that he could start. Every second he expected a lithe form to hurl itself upon him. In reality it was only a few seconds before Fred reached down for the clubs, for both he and Lee were climbing faster than they had ever done before in all their active lives. The boys passed the clubs from one to the other, two climbing while the other hung on and held them, and in this manner they quickly negotiated the twenty odd feet to the heavy branches. As they swung themselves into a broad fork they noticed for the first time that their fingers were torn and bleeding from contact with the rough bark, but they were too thankful at being there to worry about that.

"Gee!" exclaimed Bobby, drawing a long breath of relief as he peered downward in search of their foe, "I expected to feel that brute's claws in my shoulder every second."

"So did I," said Fred. "If he'd attacked us while we were shinnying up, it

would have been all over for us.”

“We’re a long way from being safe yet,” Lee reminded them. “That beast can climb a tree like a cat going over a fence, and he won’t leave us alone here, you can bet on that.”

“Well, let him come,” said Bobby, coolly, as he drew his jackknife and proceeded to whittle a handle on his club. “We’ve got a chance here anyway. I only hope he doesn’t try to starve us out. We can’t stay up here forever, if he decides to play a waiting game.”

“There he is!” shouted Lee, almost before Bobby had ceased speaking. And sure enough, the cougar, apparently deciding that he would no longer keep to cover, came bounding out into the little open space at the base of the tree. He glared upward with baleful eyes and paced quickly around the tree a few times, switching his long tail and growling ominously.

The boys gripped their clubs and braced themselves, expecting the brute to come climbing upward at any second. The cougar seemed in no hurry, however, but kept circling the tree, growling louder all the time and evidently working himself into a greater rage with every step.

“Hold my club a minute, Fred,” exclaimed Bobby, suddenly. “I’ve got an idea,” and without further explanation, he set feverishly to work hacking off some of the smaller branches near him. Without exactly knowing what his plan was, Fred and Lee started cutting too, and between them they soon had quite an armful. Bobby then took all these branches, and with some fish line he drew from his pocket he proceeded to lash them to the tree just below the crotch in which they were perched.

“When, he comes, that will slow him down, and give us a chance at him,” explained Bobby.

“Fine,” exclaimed Fred and Lee together. “But look out, fellows!” Lee added, “he’s getting ready to climb!”

The panther, who had been watching these proceedings suspiciously, seemed suddenly to make up his mind, and with a vicious, spitting snarl leaped to the trunk of the tree and started up at a terrific pace. The boys gripped their clubs, and with wildly beating hearts awaited the onslaught of the ferocious animal.

CHAPTER XXIV

SWALLOWED UP BY THE BOG

The cougar quickly reached the screen of branches that Bobby had arranged, and here he hesitated, not understanding the nature of this obstacle. The tawny head was within two feet of the boys, and they found themselves looking fairly into the wicked green eyes that glared at them through the frail network of branches.

But the panther had little chance to solve the puzzle before him, for with one accord the boys, wielding their clubs with a strength born of desperation, rained blows upon his head. The cougar growled and spit furiously, and struck viciously at them with wicked claws extended. But he was at a disadvantage, for he could only use one paw, being forced to cling to the tree with the others. For a few minutes he battled furiously, and it seemed as though he would force his way past the barrage of blows descending on him. One sweep of his paw caught Fred's club and tore it out of his grasp, and it was only by a tremendous effort that Fred kept himself from following it to the ground. Then Bobby, risking all on one blow, let go his hold on the branch, where he had been steadying himself, stood up to his full height, and, grasping his club in both hands, brought it down with tremendous force squarely between the cougar's eyes. Stunned and bleeding, the animal had received all the punishment it could stand for the present, and, still spitting furiously, it backed down the tree and leaped to the ground.

The boys were panting and well-nigh exhausted, but they still had strength left for a cheer as they gazed down at their discomfited enemy.

"That was hot work while it lasted," panted Fred. "If it hadn't been for that scheme of yours, Bobby, it would probably have been a different story."

"It did help some," admitted Bobby. "But we're not through with that brute yet. You can see he's working himself up to come after us again."

"I've got to get another club," said Fred, as he started hacking at a stout branch with his knife. "I don't know how I ever kept from falling when he knocked that stick out of my hand."

"It was lucky he connected with the club instead of with your hand," remarked Lee. "You'd better get that branch cut as quickly as you can. That beast will be up here again inside of five minutes."

"All right, I'm ready for him," said Fred, as he cut through the last tough fibre

and found himself provided with a serviceable club. "We can give him the same dose he got before."

The cougar was still full of fight, and Fred had hardly regained his position when the fierce brute came swarming up the tree again. But this time he did not stop at the screen of branches, most of which had been torn off in the previous struggle, and in spite of a staggering fusillade of blows he managed to reach the crotch in which the boys were standing.

"Out onto the branches, fellows!" yelled Lee. "It's our only chance!"

Before the panther could get his balance and reach one of them, the boys had scrambled out on three separate branches, leaving the cougar in undisputed possession of their former vantage ground.

It was a breathless moment for all three, as they waited to see which one the animal would attack first. The cougar himself seemed undecided at first, glaring from one to the other, spitting and growling, viciously. Then, perhaps because he had happened to choose the largest branch, the ferocious beast started creeping toward Lee, his wicked yellow eyes staring fixedly at his victim.

"Help me out, fellows, or I'm a goner!" cried the Southern lad despairingly.

His friends had no intention of leaving him to his fate. Some three feet above Lee's branch were two others, almost parallel to it. Bobby and Fred, both moved by the same thought, selected each a branch and crawled cautiously out in the wake of the advancing cougar.

The latter was proceeding cautiously, for the branch bent and swayed with his weight, and anyway, his prey seemed so securely within his reach that he saw no cause for hurry. He was so intent on Lee that he either did not notice the swaying of the branches over his head or else thought it not worth noticing. Lee kept edging further and further out on the branch, until at last the cougar, feeling it bend perilously beneath him, paused a moment in his deadly progress. This was Bobby's and Fred's opportunity, and they were not slow in taking advantage of it. They poised their clubs a second, and then, at the same time, brought them down full force on the wicked yellow head beneath them.

No panther that ever lived could withstand that crushing impact, and the cougar went limp, lost his hold on the branch, and went crashing to the ground, twenty feet below, where he lay twitching convulsively.

"Now's our chance to make an end of this customer for once and all!" yelled Bobby. "Come on down, fellows, and we'll finish him this time."

Lee hastily scrambled back from the end of the branch, and all three boys slid down the trunk of the tree to where the cougar lay, still stunned from the terrific blow and from its fall.

“Quick,” said Bobby, “grab hold of him, and we’ll throw him into that big bog-hole we passed when we left the main path.”

“Right!” exclaimed Fred. “But we’ll have to act mighty quick. He’s apt to come to life any second.”

It was all the boys could do to lift the big brute, but, with the strength of desperation, they managed it somehow, and half carried, half dragged, the unconscious panther to the slimy green pit that they had almost tumbled into themselves while making for the tree. The pit was surrounded by an expanse of treacherous quicksand, and into this they shoved the cougar. The greedy quicksand received its victim with avidity, drawing the cougar down and down into its slimy depths, until with a dull sucking sound it closed over the bloodthirsty brute’s head.

The boys watched, fascinated, and almost found it in their hearts to pity their late enemy. He was gone as completely as though he had never existed, and the treacherous sand stretched out smooth and unbroken, not a quiver on its surface to tell that it had added one more victim to its already long list.

“Gee,” exclaimed Bobby with a shudder, “that’s a terrible way to die, although that brute deserved all that was coming to him.”

“Well, it’s pretty certain that he won’t bother us any more,” remarked Fred. “And I think we’re mighty lucky to be alive.”

“I’ll say so!” exclaimed Lee, fervently. “I gave myself up for lost when I found myself out on that limb with the panther not ten feet away from me. That was an awful wallop you fellows gave him.”

“A wallop in time saves nine,” misquoted Fred, with a grin.

“It probably saved the nine that the cougar was figuring on giving me,” said Lee.

“Looks to me as though that wallop lost nine,” said Bobby, slyly.

“How do you make that out?” inquired Fred.

“Why, it lost that big cat’s nine lives, didn’t it?” inquired Bobby, innocently.

“It certainly did,” admitted Lee, laughing, “and you can bet I was in a position to appreciate it, too. The business end of that panther was getting entirely too close to me for comfort.”

“Well,” said Fred, “it must be Bobby’s turn next to get in a tight place. First I nearly get eaten up by an alligator, and then Lee pretty near furnishes a hearty meal for a hungry cougar. What variety of animals do you prefer, Bobby?”

“Oh, I’m not jealous of all the attention you fellows get,” returned Bobby. “You can have your little pets and welcome.”

“How generous he is, Lee, isn’t he?” said Fred, sarcastically. “But don’t forget the old saying, Bobby, that ‘he who laughs last, irritates.’”

“That must be a mighty old saying, all right—so old that everybody’s forgotten it but you,” said Bobby.

“That just goes to show what a fine memory I have,” retorted Fred. “Whenever you can’t remember an old proverb, you try to make out that there never was such a one. Your memory is nothing but a hole with no bottom in it.”

“All right, pick on my memory all you want to,” grinned Bobby, “but remember ‘it’s a long worm that has no turning.’”

“You fellows had better cut out all those fake proverbs and get down to business,” warned Lee. “We’re just as far as ever from getting out of this swamp, and we don’t even know where we’re going to get our next meal. Why don’t you exercise your minds on this problem: when do we eat, and if so, how?”

“You certainly start off with a terribly hard one,” said Fred. “Can’t you think of anything easier than that, Lee?”

“I’m getting so hungry that I can’t think of anything else. It’s hours since the last of those alligator eggs disappeared,” complained Lee.

“Then you shouldn’t have thrown the cougar into the quicksand,” retorted Fred, “he might have made tough eating, but it would have been a lot better than nothing.”

“I thought of that,” admitted Lee. “But I was more anxious to keep him from eating me. Besides,” he added, “you and Bobby never thought of anything but getting rid of him at that time either.”

“No use crying over spilt milk,” said Bobby, philosophically. “We’ll have to move and trust to luck for something to eat.”

As neither of the others had anything better to suggest, they plodded back to the path they had been following when they were so rudely interrupted by the cougar. The haze had lightened considerably, and the sun shone through with the appearance of a big red ball, enabling the boys to pick their way for a short time, but then the haze settled down thicker than ever, and they found themselves entirely at a loss. Their only consolation was that the ground appeared to be getting steadily higher and firmer, and they felt that they had left the worst of the bog behind them. But the faint path they had been following grew less and less distinct, and before they fairly realized it they were hopelessly lost. For a time they stumbled on through a maze of vines and creepers that grew steadily thicker, until at last they became practically impassable. Then the boys were forced to call a halt, and they gazed at each other questioningly.

CHAPTER XXV

THE HUNTER'S CABIN

Such a predicament would have discouraged older hearts than theirs. The long wandering in the swamp, the fight with the alligator and then one with the cougar, and after all to find themselves apparently no nearer deliverance than when they started—it was a bitter pill to swallow.

But no one of the boys was of the kind that accepts defeat easily, and after the first pang of something akin to despair had vanished, they pulled themselves together and faced the situation bravely.

“We’re a long way from being licked yet,” declared Bobby. “We’ll have to go back a way, and keep our eyes open for some sign of a path leading off from the one we used to get here.”

“Yes, but if there had been, one, we’d probably have seen it as we came along,” objected Fred.

“But on the other hand,” argued Bobby, “we didn’t know then that this path would lead us into nothing at all, the way it has, and we weren’t keeping such a sharp lookout for something better. At any rate, seeing that we can’t fly over the tops of these trees, it seems to me that’s our only chance.”

“Looks that way to me, too,” agreed Lee, “and the quicker we go the better, because it’s going to get dark within another two hours.”

“All right, then,” said Bobby, decisively, “right about face, and we’ll be on our way.”

They had gone about a mile, and were beginning to give up all hope of ever getting out of their predicament, when suddenly Bobby came to an abrupt halt.

Some ten feet off the narrow track they were on, stood two giant boulders, close together, with hardly room between them for a grown man to squeeze through. The boys had hardly noticed them when they had passed them going in the other direction, but now Bobby’s keen young eyes had seen some sign on one of them that caused his heart to leap. He ran over to the larger of the two boulders to verify his discovery, and there, sure enough, almost erased by the wind and weather but still perfectly plain to keen eyes, was the outline of an arrow rudely daubed on the face of the rock.

“But it seems to be pointing right between the rocks,” said Lee, as all three boys bent over the faint outline.

“Sure it is,” said Bobby, excitedly, “and right between the rocks is exactly where we’re going next,” and without further words he forced his way through the bushes that choked the narrow gap between the rocks, Fred and Lee following close at his heels.

Bobby glanced quickly about him, and was not long in finding what he sought. There was a small semi-circle of gravel and shale at the back of the boulders, and at the edge of this little clearing, faint but unmistakable, was a narrow path leading into the dense undergrowth.

“Hooray!” shouted Bobby. “This is the first sign of anything promising we’ve seen since Boolus stole our boat, and I’ll bet Meena’s crullers to crocodile eggs that this path will lead us out to civilization.”

Fred and Lee were equally excited, and with renewed hope they entered the narrow path and pressed forward, making little of the vines and fallen tree trunks that retarded their progress.

Night was descending rapidly, and in the heavy woods it was almost dark when, panting and spent, the three boys staggered out into a little clearing, and before them could just make out the outlines of a rude log cabin, almost covered by vines.

“Thank Heaven!” exclaimed Lee. “I was beginning to think we’d have to spend another night in the swamp, and I’ve had enough of that to last me some time.”

The others were hardly less relieved. The cabin at least would shelter them and keep out marauders like the cougar, and they felt sure that in the morning they would find a path leading from it to the outer world.

There was no sign of life about the cabin, and the door opened readily enough when they raised the latch by which it was fastened. The interior was pitch dark, but Bobby lit one of his few remaining matches, and by its feeble light they peered about the little place.

“Here’s luck,” exclaimed Fred, and from a dusty shelf reached down one of several long tallow candles. “Whoever left them there must have known we’d be along and would need them.”

“Whoever left them there, did it a long while ago,” said Lee. “Look how thick everything is with dust!”

“Well, you could hardly expect him to stay here and keep things clean for us,” grinned Fred. “That’s asking too much, Lee.”

“Oh, I’m not kicking,” disclaimed Lee. “This place looks solid enough to keep the rain out, and maybe if we look around we’ll find other things besides the candles.”

“I’ve heard of Eskimos eating candles,” said Bobby, “and I’m pretty nearly hungry enough to try one myself.”

“Well, you tried the alligator eggs first, so you ought to be willing to sample these too,” said Fred.

“Maybe I will, at that,” said Bobby, “but not until I’ve made sure there isn’t anything else to be had.”

“There seems to be a closet of some kind over there,” said Fred, pointing to the opposite wall. “Let’s see what’s in it.”

“Probably nothing but a large amount of air,” said Lee, sceptically.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out, and that’s to look,” said Fred, and, suiting the action to the word, he strode quickly across the room and opened the door of the closet.

“Scubbity-yow!” yelled Fred. “Look at that, will you!”

Neatly ranged on shelves were cans of meat and vegetables, sufficient to feed the boys for weeks, if the necessity arose.

“Gee!” exclaimed Bobby. “It doesn’t look as though we’d have to eat candles yet awhile, does it?”

“I should say not,” said Lee, jubilantly. “And there’s a big pot in the corner too,” he cried, a moment later. “I reckon whoever provisioned this cabin must have intended to stay here a while.”

“Looks like it, all right,” agreed Bobby. “But let’s get busy and open one or two of those cans. How would you fellows like some baked beans?” he inquired, looking over the labels. “Think you could punish them in a proper manner?”

“Lead us to it,” yelled Fred, and Lee rubbed his stomach in a most expressive manner. Whoever had provided the food had been so far neglectful as to forget the convenient can opener, but Bobby’s jackknife proved a convenient substitute, and it did not take them long to get a fire going in the rough grate that decorated one end of the little cabin. As the odor of frying pork and beans filled the air, the boys could hardly restrain themselves until they were heated through, and when at length Bobby pronounced the feast ready, they fell on it like so many wolves.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MIDNIGHT PROWLER

“Yum yum!” exclaimed Fred, “I’ve eaten lots of beans in my short lifetime, but never any that tasted half as good as these.”

“They are just about what the doctor ordered,” conceded Bobby.

“And when we get through these, how would a nice can of peaches taste?” put in Lee.

“Scubbity-yow!” shouted Fred. “Peaches, did you say? Say, I think I’d be contented to spend the rest of my life here. Bobby, we certainly owe you a vote of thanks for getting us here the way you did.”

“It was mostly luck,” disclaimed Bobby. “If I hadn’t happened to notice that arrow on the rock we’d be wandering around in the cold, cold world yet, probably.”

“Well, after all the hard luck we’ve had, I think we had a little good luck coming to us,” said Lee.

“Looks as though we had it, for the time being, anyway,” replied Bobby, as he sawed away at the can of peaches. “Here, you fellows pass your cups and I’ll fill them up with something that will make your hair curl.”

His friends were not slow in accepting this invitation, and they ate the luscious fruit with an appreciation sharpened by the privations they had been through. As Bobby remarked, “nobody knew how good things were until they hadn’t been able to get them for awhile.”

“I don’t know about you energetic Indians,” said Lee, when he had finished his peaches with a sigh, half of contentment and half of regret that they were gone, “but I’m just going to lie on the floor in front of that fire and loaf for awhile,” and suiting the action to the word, he threw himself down full length on the floor.

“I don’t know how Bobby feels,” said Fred, stretching luxuriously, “but I don’t think I’d mind a little rest myself. Most of that energy Lee’s talking about seems to have oozed out of me, someway.”

“Same here,” admitted Bobby. “And it’s funny, too. Outside of fighting alligators and panthers and ducking mudholes and quicksands, we haven’t really been doing anything the last few days.”

“A little more of this,” remarked Fred, “and a football game will seem quiet

and restful. We'll be going to sleep in the middle of it."

"I don't know about that," said Bobby, "but I do know that it won't be very long before I get to sleep to-night."

"I suppose that whoever owns this cabin won't thank us for eating his food," went on Fred, as all three boys lay luxuriously at ease and gazed into the radiant heart of the fire.

"If we ever get out of this wilderness, I'll find out who the place belongs to, and we'll pay him for what we take," said Lee; "I know if it were mine, I wouldn't grudge the food to any one who needed it as badly as we did."

"I wonder who *does* own it," speculated Bobby.

"I haven't any idea," admitted Lee, "but lots of the people around here keep places like this for hunting, and I suppose that's what it's been used for."

"Nobody would have to hunt very long around here before he found something, it seems to me," said Bobby. "It seems as though it were the other way around, and the animals come and hunt us."

"Well, that doesn't matter, as long as they don't get us," said Lee, "and I guess we're as safe in this cabin as we would be sleeping at Rockledge."

"Yes, or safer, in one way," said Fred. "If the cabin should catch fire, all we'd have to do would be to open the door and walk out, while when the school caught fire we didn't have it quite so easy."

"That's true enough," agreed Bobby. "But while we're talking of this place being safe, I vote we fasten the door better than it is now. There's nothing but a latch holding it, and I'd feel safer if we could make it a little more secure."

"We might jam a chair against it," suggested Fred, "the floor is pretty uneven, and we could jam the chair in between one of the planks and the door, so that an elephant would have a hard job getting in."

"That's certainly the way we want it," said Lee, laughing. "The harder it is to get that door open, the better I'll sleep."

"Wow!" exclaimed Fred, with a tremendous yawn. "Speaking of sleep, let's fix things up and go to sleep. I feel as though I could win the long distance sleeping championship without half trying."

"You'll have to go some to beat me out," laughed Bobby, scrambling to his feet. "Let's see if Fred's plan to fasten the door will work."

"Nothing surer in the world," boasted Fred, "just watch me."

Just in front of the door one floor board was warped so that it was perhaps half an inch higher than those alongside it. The cabin was equipped with three rude but very strong chairs, and seizing one of these, Fred jammed it in between the

door and the uneven board so that any one or anything attempting to enter would have to tear up the floor before it could gain admittance.

“There!” exclaimed Fred, stepping back to view his handiwork, “I guess any one that wants to come in here now will have to ask our permission first.”

The windows of the little cabin were small and criss-crossed with stout scantlings, so there was no chance of any denizen of the woods making them an unwelcome visit by means of that route. It was Lee who suggested the only remaining possibility.

“I wonder if any friends of that cougar could get down the chimney,” he speculated.

“We’ll soon see,” said Bobby, crossing over to the fireplace. He glanced in under the hood that projected from the fireplace to keep the smoke out of the room.

“I don’t think there’s any chance of that,” he stated. “The flue isn’t more than eight or ten inches square, and anything that could get down there couldn’t do us much damage. Besides, the fire will be going most of the night, and I guess that would do the trick, even if the chimney were four times as big as it is now.”

Reassured on this point, the boys threw more wood on the fire, for the sake of light as well as warmth, and selected their bunks for the night. There were four of these built against the wall opposite the fireplace, and they were filled with twigs and dead leaves, making a comfortable enough bed for those who were tired enough not to be particular about where they slept.

“I guess there’s not much choice,” said Bobby, “so I’ll just tumble into the one nearest me.” Which he proceeded forthwith to do. The others each selected a bunk, and followed his example.

The fire crackling cheerily on the hearth made the cabin pleasantly warm, and the boys were just dropping off to sleep when they were suddenly brought back to wakefulness with a jerk by a stealthy scratching sound at the door, followed by a low growl. For a few seconds after this there was silence, and then the boys could hear the door creak as some strong body pushed against it.

Thanks to the strong barricade against it, however, the stout door defied the efforts of the would-be intruder, and the boys, sitting up in their bunks with every sense alert, could hear the soft pad-pad of feet encircling the cabin. Then there was a sudden fierce scrambling and scratching, and the beast, whatever it was, was on the roof. It prowled restlessly about, stopping every now and then to tear at the roof with rasping claws. But the cabin was constructed in stout fashion, and was not to be entered so easily.

“What do you suppose it can be, fellows?” questioned Lee in a low voice,

which trembled a little in spite of himself. “Do you think it can be another cougar?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” whispered Bobby. “Maybe it’s the mate of the one that we killed to-day. She may have tracked us to get revenge.”

“I’ll bet that’s just what it is!” cried Fred. “Suppose we had had to sleep in the woods to-night. We’d be goners, sure.”

The others nodded, and they all three listened to see what the night prowler would do next. The brute examined every foot of the roof, and the boys could hear it sniffing suspiciously at the chimney. They blessed the man who had constructed the cabin with such a wary eye for such contingencies, and congratulated each other on being safe within instead of out in the woods and practically at the mercy of the savage brute.

The beast overhead finally seemed to come to the conclusion that it could not get in from the roof, and it leaped to the ground and the boys could hear it going away. For a long time they listened for it to come back, but it did not, and at last, far away, they heard the same wild scream they had heard while on the island in the swamp, but this time there seemed to be a note of grief as well as ferocity in the cry. It rose, cut wailingly through the darkness, and then died away.

For a long time the boys sat tense and expectant, not knowing at what moment the beast might return. But as nothing further happened, drowsiness at last overcame them, and after throwing a fresh supply of fuel on the fire, they dropped off into deep slumber, from which they were only awakened by a golden shaft of sunshine that pierced in through one of the little windows.

“Gee,” said Bobby, sitting up and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, “I feel fit for anything now, and hungry enough to eat nails. It’s your turn to cook, Fred. Hustle around and see if you can get breakfast as well as I got supper last night.”

“Huh! I’ll show you what real cooking is like,” said Fred, leaping out of his bunk. “What shall it be—humming-birds’ tongues or bird’s-nest soup?”

“I think I’d rather have some bacon, if it’s all the same to you,” said Bobby, with mock seriousness. “There’s a fresh jar of it in the closet.”

“Oh, well, if you’d rather have ordinary, everyday bacon,” said Fred, “I’ll have to give it to you, I suppose,” and he soon had some appetizing slices sizzling in the pan.

“That cougar last night seems like a bad dream now,” remarked Lee. “I don’t mind admitting I felt mighty nervous while he was prowling around.”

“I guess none of us exactly enjoyed it,” returned Bobby. “But it may not have been a cougar at all. Maybe it was only a wildcat.”

“Possibly,” said Lee, doubtfully, and Fred terminated further discussion at this

point by serving out the crisp bacon, together with some hardtack that he had fried in the grease. This was soon eaten, and after Fred had been complimented on his cooking, the boys cautiously unfastened the door, and, seeing no signs of the beast, whatever it was, that had disturbed them the previous night, ventured forth to explore their surroundings.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MOCCASIN SNAKE

The hearty breakfast and the bright sunshine, added to the consciousness that they had found a shelter to which they might retreat in case of need put new zest into the boys, and they felt much more hopeful and lighthearted than they had twenty-four hours earlier.

“Somehow I have a hunch that this is going to be a lucky day for us,” remarked Bobby, as he led the way.

“Here’s hoping that you’re right,” said Lee. “We’re certainly about due for a change in fortune. Poor mother!” he added, anxiety coming into his eyes, “she must be worried to death. It’s safe to say she hasn’t slept a wink since we’ve been gone. I’ve no doubt she has searching parties out looking for us, but in this swamp they might hunt for days without coming across us.”

“We’ll trust in Bobby’s hunch,” Fred encouraged him. “They’ve often come out all right. I think he’s got a rabbit’s foot hidden about him somewhere.”

“If I had, we’d been out of this swamp long before this,” laughed Bobby. “Now,” he went on, “there’s one thing we’ve got to do, and it’s more important than anything else. Wherever we go, we’ve got to know how to find our way back to this cabin. In the first place, it’s the only safe place to spend the night. Then the very fact it’s here shows that parties come to it sometimes and we may have the luck of falling in with them.”

“Yes,” said Fred, “that’s good advice. But how are we going to do it?”

“By using this,” replied Bobby, showing him a small hatchet that he had fastened to his belt. “I found this in one corner of the cabin this morning and I brought it along. We’ll chip off pieces of bark from the trees as we go along and that will help us to find our way back.”

He illustrated this by slashing a bit of bark off a tree that they happened to be passing.

“That’s bully,” said Lee, greatly relieved. “I was just worrying about the chance of not being able to find our way back again.”

They went on, looking carefully for some sign of a trail, by following which they might again reach the plantation and friends.

Soon they found themselves on marshier ground than that near the cabin, and they turned in another direction to find better footing.

The ground was covered with rotting leaves and bits of broken branches. Fred was picking his way, and was just about to step on what seemed to be an unusually thick stick, about three feet long, when there was a warning shout from Lee who was several feet in the rear.

“Look out, Fred!” he yelled. “It’s a snake, a moccasin!”

The warning came too late. Fred’s foot had already touched one end of the seeming stick. Like lightning, an ugly head upreared at the other end and struck savagely at the intruder.

“Run!” shouted Lee. “Run for your life!”

Fred obeyed and ran as fast as the marshy nature of the ground permitted. The snake pursued him gliding through the tussocks, his baleful eyes like two flaming points.

Bobby had turned at Lee’s cry, and in a moment had grasped the situation. He had the hatchet in his hand and threw it with all his might at the snake, that was now close on Fred’s heels. He had no time to take careful aim, but by great good fortune the sharp blade struck the reptile a little behind the neck. It stopped instantly and writhed about, beating the ground and hissing horribly.

Lee in the meantime had picked up a club, and with a few blows from this put an end to the snake. Then he and Bobby hurried to their comrade, who had seated himself on the trunk of a fallen tree, pale and panting.

“Did he bite you, Fred?” cried Bobby, his heart convulsed with fear for his chum.

“I’m afraid he did,” replied Fred, in a tone that he tried to keep firm. “He gave an awful dig at my foot.”

In a moment Bobby was on his knees and was taking off Fred’s shoe. There were tiny holes in it where the snake’s fangs had penetrated. The stocking too was torn, and Bobby’s heart sank as he stripped it off.

But a great wave of thankfulness swept over him when he saw that the skin was not broken. He looked it over most carefully, but there was not even a scratch. By the narrowest of chances, Fred had escaped. His stout shoe had saved him.

“You’re all right, old boy,” said Bobby, though his voice trembled. “That snake came mighty near doing for you but didn’t quite make it.”

Fred almost collapsed as he realized that he was safe, for he had feared the worst.

“If he had struck above the shoe top it would have been good-night,” said Lee, who shared to the full the joy and relief of his friends. “Those moccasins are the deadliest snakes of the South. People are more afraid of them than of

rattlesnakes. A rattlesnake will give warning, but a moccasin never does. Then too a rattlesnake is only too glad to get away from you if you will let him, but the moccasin will chase you, just as this one did. My, but you had a narrow escape. The snake was gaining on you and would have wound himself around your leg in another minute and then it would have been all over with you.”

Bobby brought a little water from a pool near by and carefully washed the stocking, scrubbing the shoe also, to remove any trace of the poison that there might be on them. Then after they had partially dried, Fred put them on and they all went over to look at the hideous reptile. It lay perfectly still and there was no doubt that it was dead, but to make assurance doubly sure, Bobby recovered his hatchet that lay a few feet away and with one stroke struck off the moccasin’s head.

“Gee, he’s an ugly looking sinner,” murmured Fred.

“Sure is,” agreed his chums in unison.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GREAT DISCOVERY

Now that the snake was certainly beyond the possibility of doing them further harm, the boys could inspect it at their leisure. But even in death the venomous reptile inspired them with horror. Fred shuddered as he looked at him and thought of what might have been if the snake had struck a little harder or had overtaken him in that desperate chase.

It was about a yard in length, and the body was strong and thick. The short tail was provided with a row of shields and there was a horny appendage at the end. The long triangular head had shallow pits on the nose and the mouth was very wide. The color was a coppery brown and there were reddish brown bands on the sides that became wider on the lower end of the body, giving an appearance something like moccasins, and from these the snake derived its name.

What the boys specially noticed was a white band that ran round the creature's mouth.

"That's what gives it the other name it's known by," explained Lee. "People call it the cotton mouth, because that white streak looks like cotton."

"It's the ugliest thing I ever saw!" exclaimed Fred. "I only hope I never see another. You bet that I'm going to watch my step for the rest of the time we're in this swamp."

"Once we get out of this, you're not likely to see one again," Lee assured him. "They're mostly found in wet, marshy places and I've never seen one on dry parts of the plantation. There are plenty of them in the low-lying rice fields, and the darkeys stand in deadly fear of them."

"I don't blame them," remarked Bobby. "But come now, fellows, let's get along. There's nothing to keep us here any longer, unless," he added with a laugh, "Fred wants to take this fellow's head along as a souvenir."

"Not on your life!" declared Fred emphatically. "I'll see that head often enough in my dreams as it is. Gee, Bobby," he continued with a sigh of relief, "it was a mighty lucky thing you had that hatchet along with you."

"And luckier yet that he threw it just right," put in Lee. "That's what comes from being a good ball player. One learns how to throw."

"Don't give me any credit for that," protested Bobby. "I might just as well have hit him with the handle instead of the blade. Luck sure was with us."

They left the loathsome reptile and made their way to higher ground, picking their steps with exceeding care and avoiding as they would the plague anything that looked like a thick stick.

Bobby was going ahead as fast as the tangled vines and shrubbery would let him, when he gave an exclamation and fell to his knees.

“What’s the matter?” asked his companions in alarm, running up to him.

“Stubbed my toe on something hard,” explained Bobby, rising to his feet and brushing himself off, “and barked my shins in the bargain as I went down. Kicked against a stone, I imagine.”

“That’s funny,” said Lee. “There are mighty few stones around here. It must have been a stump.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter much,” replied Bobby. “It brought me down all right, whether it was wood or stone. But just for curiosity, I’m going to find out.”

He kicked away the grass and twigs and bent down to look.

“Why, that’s queer!” he exclaimed. “It’s stone, as I thought, but it isn’t a rock. It’s been shaped with a chisel and it looks as though it had figures or letters on it.”

“How on earth did a thing like that get here?” asked Fred, in a puzzled tone.

“I can make out something like the letter C,” said Bobby. “C-A-R-T——why, Lee, I believe it’s your name!”

The next instant he leaped to his feet, as the full significance of his discovery flashed upon him.

“Hurrah!” he shouted. “Glory hallelujah! Lee, we’ve found one of the boundary stones of your mother’s property.”

“What?” cried Lee, all a-tremble with excitement.

“Are you sure?” queried Fred, dropping on hands and knees beside his friend.

“It sure looks like it,” affirmed Bobby, digging away like mad to uncover more of the stone.

The others followed his example and made the dirt fly, for all the world, as Fred said afterward, “like dogs digging out a woodchuck.”

A few minutes of hard work, and enough of the stone was uncovered to permit them to make out the inscription. It was time-stained and weatherbeaten, but read as follows:

S.E. Limit of property of N. CARTIER, Laboulaye Parish, La.

Then followed some surveyor’s signs and symbols, which to the boys were like so much Greek. Underneath these however was an arrow pointing in a certain direction, and Bobby studied this for several minutes with great attention.

“What do you make of it?” asked Fred curiously, as he noted his friend’s puckered brow.

“This arrow means something,” replied Bobby, “and I think we’d better follow in the direction in which it points. I tell you what we do. You stand here, Fred, and Lee and I will follow the line of the arrow. If you see us getting out of line, you wave to us and set us right.”

This was agreed to, and Bobby and Lee set out. They had gone a distance of perhaps two hundred yards, when Bobby’s keen eyes saw a rim of stone just projecting above the ground. They cleared away the moss and rubbish about it and found that it was another landmark, practically the same as the first, except that in this case the arrow pointed slightly in another direction, showing that the boundary line veered at that point.

They shouted to Fred and he quickly rejoined them.

“Now,” said Bobby jubilantly, “the rest will be easy. All we’ve got to do is to report the location of these two stones and a surveying party can go from stone to stone and so trace out the whole boundary line of the property.”

“Look!” exclaimed Fred suddenly, pointing to the right.

They looked and saw a figure just vanishing behind a tree.

CHAPTER XXIX

'RASTUS ABIMELECH BELSHAZZAR JOHNSON

"Who can that be?" asked Fred, as the startled boys focused their eyes on the tree.

"Search me," replied Bobby. "But whoever it is, we want to talk to him right away. It isn't likely he intends any harm, and maybe he'll know a way to get out of this swamp."

"More likely he's lost in it, just the same as ourselves," conjectured Fred, but followed Bobby and Lee who had already started in the direction of the tree.

When they were within twenty feet of it, they halted.

"Hello there!" sang out Bobby. "Come out from behind that tree, please. We want to talk to you."

A woolly head peered cautiously around the side of the tree and then a diminutive darkey boy appeared in full view.

Recognition on both sides was instantaneous.

"Why," cried Lee, "that's the boy who fell overboard on the way down from New York, the one that Bobby saved by throwing him the life preserver!"

"The one with the long name!" exclaimed Fred. "Let's see, it was—"

"'Rastus Abimelech Belshazzar Johnson," finished the little darkey proudly, with a grin that showed all his white teeth. "An' Ah sure am spifflicated to meet all you young gem'mun agin, speshul dis one what saved mah life," indicating Bobby.

"Maybe you can do the same for us now," said Bobby. "We're lost in this swamp. Do you know the way out?"

"Ah sho will," replied 'Rastus, and a moment flash of his gleaming ivories. "Ah wuz bo'n an' brung up only a few miles fum heah. Reckon Ah cud fin' mah way fru dis yeah swamp wiv mah eyes shet."

This was indeed good news to the boys, who felt as if a thousand tons had been lifted from their hearts.

"Fac' is," continued 'Rastus, "Ah cum along wiv a pahty what wuz lookin' fur you-all. Dey's only a little way fum heah, an' Ah specs Ah'd better go an' info'mation dem dat you-all ez heah."

"You bet you would," cried Lee. "Hurry up, 'Rastus, and you'll find that this was the best day's work you ever did."

“Rastus is going to be our Moses to lead us out of the wilderness,” cried Fred gleefully.

“Mah name ain’t Moses,” replied their deliverer. “It am ’Rastus Abimelech Belshazzar Johnson.”

“And a mighty good name it is,” said Bobby, “and one that we’ll always remember. But now let’s see how quick you’ll be in finding the other people and bringing them here.”

“Ah sho will,” replied ’Rastus, and a moment later he had vanished like a shadow among the vines and tree trunks.

“Thank heaven,” cried Lee as they looked after his retreating figure. “Before night we’ll all be back in the home that I began to fear we’d never see again.”

“It’s glorious,” agreed Bobby, “but after all, perhaps it’s all for the best that we’ve had to stay in the swamp as long as we have. If help had come yesterday, for instance, we wouldn’t have found the boundary stones. That’s paid us for all the trouble and danger we’ve been through.”

In a few minutes they heard the sound of voices, and soon a party of four men came in sight, with ’Rastus Abimelech Belshazzar Johnson proudly leading the way.

There were broad smiles on their faces as the boys rushed forward to meet them and it was hard to tell which group was the more delighted. All talked together, and there was a general hubbub until the excitement quieted down a little.

The leader of the party was a Mr. Lanfranc, the Parish Clerk of that section, a big, bluff, genial man, who was a great friend of the Cartier family.

“I can’t tell you how relieved we are to find you boys,” he said, as he slapped Lee affectionately on the shoulder. “We’ve been beating the swamp for you for the last two days. But it covers so many miles of territory that it’s almost like looking for a needle in a haystack. But thank God that we’ve found you at last, alive and well. Your poor mother has been almost crazy about you. Here, ’Rastus,” he continued, turning to the little darkey who stood by, all smiles and swelling with a sense of his importance, “you go right away to the Cartier place and tell Mrs. Cartier that we’ve found the boys, that they’re all right, and that we’ll be home before night.”

With another flash of his white teeth, ’Rastus was off on his errand.

“We’d go right away,” explained Mr. Lanfranc to Lee, “only we have a rendezvous with another party to meet them at noon only a little way from here. As soon as they know you’ve been found we’ll have a bit of lunch and then we’ll all make tracks for home. But how did it come about that you got lost?” he

continued. "I understand you went away in the motor boat. What became of that?"

"Jim Boolus stole it from us," replied Lee.

"What!" cried Mr. Lanfranc.

He listened while Lee told him of the confession they had extorted from the negro boy who had acted as the tool of Boolus, and his face grew dark with wrath, that was reflected on those of the other members of the party.

"The old scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "That caps the climax. For a long time he's been the bane of this parish. But up to now he's been so cunning that the law has had no chance to get a grip on him. But this time he's overreached himself, and the minute we can lay our hands on him we'll clap him in jail. It will be a double satisfaction to do that, because of the way he's been trying to get your mother's property away from her. I'm afraid he may do that yet."

"No, he won't!" cried Lee jubilantly. "We've found the boundary stones of the property!"

CHAPTER XXX

JIM BOOLUS TRAPPED

“Say that again,” cried Mr. Lanfranc, delight and incredulity struggling for the mastery.

“Sure as shooting,” affirmed Lee with a happy laugh. “It isn’t more than an hour ago that we came across them. Come here and I’ll show them to you.”

The whole party hurried to the precious memorials and examined them closely. The Parish Clerk was skilled in such matters, which came within the duties of his office, and he confirmed the belief of the boys that these were the only things necessary to make Mrs. Cartier’s title to the property absolutely secure.

“This has been a great day,” he said, as he rose from his knees after making notes of the inscriptions on the stones, “not only because we have found you boys, but because we’ve been able to put a crimp in the plans of the greatest rascal in this part of the parish. It was a clever thing, by the way, that you boys caught on to the meaning of these boundary stones.”

“Oh, as for that,” said Lee generously, “all the praise must go to Bobby here. He was the one that figured it all out.”

“Some boy,” said Mr. Lanfranc approvingly, and Bobby flushed to his ears.

“It’s a queer coincidence,” continued Mr. Lanfranc, “that we ran across Boolus, accompanied by one of his negroes, in another part of the swamp, no later than yesterday. He said that he was out hunting, but I didn’t see that he had any gun. But here come the other fellows,” he added, as he caught sight of a party of three coming into view, “and as it is pretty near noon, I guess we’ll have our lunch right now and hurry back home. I can imagine how impatient Mrs. Cartier will be to have you with her as soon as possible.”

The newcomers were quite as delighted as the first party had been, to learn that the missing ones were found and that their anxious search was ended. They chose a spot on higher ground in a clump of trees, and set to work on the abundant lunch with which they were provided. The boys, with their minds free for the first time in days, thought it was the most delicious repast they had ever tasted.

They had not quite finished when Bobby caught sight of two figures at the edge of a fringe of trees some distance away.

“Here come two other men,” he announced.

“Is that so?” said Mr. Lanfranc with some curiosity. “I wonder who they are. Hunters I suppose.”

“No,” cried Lee, who had been studying them closely. “It’s Jim Boolus and that darkey of his.”

“So it is,” confirmed Mr. Lanfranc, after another look. “Lie down flat, all of you. I’m curious to see what the old rascal is up to.”

They stretched themselves flat on the ground and looked through the bushes at the approaching couple.

All unconscious of the scrutiny, they came on, Boolus in the van, his eyes scanning the ground as they advanced.

Suddenly he caught sight of one of the boundary stones, which, having been largely uncovered during the investigation of the markings were now in plain sight. With an exclamation of satisfaction, he hurried toward it, and fell on his knees to look at it closely. Then he rose to his feet and rubbed his hands together in glee.

He beckoned to the colored youth, talked to him for a minute or two and then both set to work digging about the stone, using some implements that the attendant had brought with him.

“What are they after?” asked Fred in a whisper.

“I know very well what they are after,” replied Mr. Lanfranc in a low tone that held grimness in it. “He’s hanging himself with his own rope.”

The couple worked hard for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and then with great effort dragged the heavy stone out of its hole and laid it on the grass. Then after resting a moment each took one end, and half carrying, half dragging it, moved toward the edge of a bog that lay twenty yards away.

“Halt!” shouted Mr. Lanfranc, and at the same moment the whole party rose to their feet and poured out from among the trees.

At the sudden command, Boolus and his helper dropped the stone as though they had been shot. In a moment the members of the party were upon them. The negro started to run, but one of the men caught him and dragged him back by the collar.

“So, Jim Boolus,” said Mr. Lanfranc, “you robber of widows and orphans, we’ve caught you at last. You’ve kept out of the grip of the law for a long time, but it’s got you now. The evidence is so clear that the jury will convict you without leaving the box. You stole the boat of these boys and left them to starve and die, for all you cared—”

“I didn’t,” denied Boolus, “and you can’t prove it.”

“This boy has confessed that he did it at your direction,” declared Mr. Lanfranc, indicating the negro.

“You don’t suppose a jury would take the word of a negro against that of a white man, do you?” replied Boolus, who thought he saw a ray of hope.

“Against such a white man as they know you to be, I think they would,” answered Mr. Lanfranc. “But let that pass. Just now, all of us have seen you commit a crime. Two minutes more and that stone would have been swallowed up in the bog. The removal of boundary marks is a serious crime and a state prison offense. You’re due for a good long time behind the bars, Jim Boolus. Come along now,” he commanded, cutting short abruptly the mumbling appeals for mercy that the detected wretch was beginning.

The whole party took up the march, and in a few hours reached the nearest town, where Jim Boolus was committed to the charge of the sheriff, who took him to the jail. There he stayed until, a few weeks later, he began his long prison term.

The boys hurried at once to the plantation, where Lee flew to his mother’s arms. She hugged and cried over him, as mothers do, and then Bobby and Fred came in for a welcome scarcely less warm. It was a glorious reunion and one of the happiest occasions that the boys had ever known.

“Do you remember what I said about a hunch this morning?” Bobby asked Fred, when, at the end of that jubilant day, they were getting ready for bed.

“Yes,” agreed Fred, “your hunch was right. It sure has been our lucky day!”

“And to think we found those boundary stones,” put in Lee. “That’s the best ever. My mother will want to thank you for that—when she gets over all this excitement over our return.”

“Gee, but we’ll have a story to tell, when we get back to Rockledge,” was Fred’s comment. “Lost in a swamp, and fighting a cougar, and a moccasin snake, and sinking in the mush—”

“They won’t believe the half of it,” added Bobby. “It sure was a lot of adventures!”

“Well, now you’ve got to settle down to good times on the plantation,” said Lee.

“I wonder if we’ll get back that motor boat,” cried Bobby, suddenly.

“I don’t know,” answered the Southern boy. But it may be added that the boat had already been found and was returned to the Cartiers the next day.

Delightful days on the plantation followed. The boys avoided the big swamp,

but they visited the cotton and the rice fields, and had the best of times.

“And now, back to school!” sang out Bobby one day, and here, getting ready to return to Rockledge, we will leave the lads.

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WESTY MARTIN IN THE LAND OF THE PURPLE SAGE

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