

FICTION

Frank Gee Patchin

The Pony Rider Boys in Louisiana

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



eBookTakeAway

FICTION



Frontispiece: The Pole Was Jerked From the Fat Boy's Hands.

The Pony Rider Boys in Louisiana

or

Following the Game Trails in the Canebrake

by Frank Gee Patchin

Author of *The Pony Rider Boys in the Rockies*, *The Pony Rider Boys in Texas*, *The Pony Rider Boys in Montana*, *The Pony Rider Boys in the Ozarks*, *The Pony Rider Boys in the Alkali*, *The Pony Rider Boys in New Mexico*, *The Pony Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers*, *The Pony Rider Boys on the Blue Ridge*, *The Pony Rider Boys in New England*, etc., etc.

Illustrated

Philadelphia Henry Altemus Company

Copyright, 1924 by Howard E. Altemus

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

[CHAPTER I--SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY](#)

A study in black and white. "I'm the Duke of Missouri." Waxed floors too much for the fat boy. "I sometimes fall off a house to give me an appetite."

CHAPTER II--BOUND FOR THE CANE JUNGLE

Picking out their new ponies. Favors for the brave. Girl friends see the Pony Rider Boys in daring horsemanship. Tad ropes a pickaninny. The colored population treated to an unusual exhibition.

CHAPTER III--IN CAMP ON TENSAS BAYOU

Living with the snakes in the canebrake. Barred owls make the night hideous. Stacy's slumbers greatly disturbed. Little rest for the Pony Rider Boys. Stacy lays the foundation for trouble.

CHAPTER IV--NATURE BLOWS OUT A FUSE

The camp aroused by an explosion. Tents found ablaze. "The campfire has blown up!" Ichabod denies responsibility. Chunky admits his guilt. "Gentlemen, I shot a pig."

CHAPTER V--MAROONED IN A SWAMP

The cook finds Tad's feet out of doors. Strange sights in the jungle. On an island made over night. Snake and bird battle on high. Pony Riders are castaway for three days. A forest of perils.

CHAPTER VI--TAKING DESPERATE CHANCES

Dogs and birds welcome the sunlight. Tad blazes a trail on the cypress knees. "Have all you boys got scents like deerhounds?" Tad Butler amazes Bill Lilly, the guide.

CHAPTER VII--A SWIM IN TENSAS LAKE

Chunky goes in with the alligators. Tad's bullet speeds true. A narrow escape. Stacy up a tree. Ned Rector knows a way to get the fat boy down. Lively times in camp. The Professor takes a hand.

CHAPTER VIII--WOODMAN, SPARE THIS TREE

"No one can stay mad at me for very long." Chunky comes down in a heap. How they wound the hunter's horn. Stacy Brown is left behind and forgotten.

CHAPTER IX--THE FAT BOY HUNG UP

"Whoa, you fool horse!" "Give the baby his horn." A narrow escape from death. Down goes the fat boy again.

CHAPTER X--IN THE HEART OF THE CANEBRAKE

The bush-knife a dangerous weapon. Stacy found dangling in the air. Keeping company with an owl. Tad takes a perilous plunge. Chunky mixes it up with 'gators again.

CHAPTER XI--ON THE BIG GAME TRAILS

Roped on the verge of death. It takes the whole outfit to rescue the fat boy. "That 'gator won't have any further appetite for fat boys." Bear sign in the west.

CHAPTER XII--THE QUEST OF THE PHANTOM DEER

On the trail of a she-bear. Tad Butler's champion shot. A deer instead of a bear. Mighty hunters get a shock. "He's gone!" gasp the Pony Rider Boys.

CHAPTER XIII--THE MYSTERY IS SOLVED

On the trail of the stolen doe. "I'll break my neck if I ride any faster." Tad meets a suspicious character. Chunky makes a discovery. "Your nag has blood on his flank!"

CHAPTER XIV--THE FAT BOY DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF

"I remain right here. Stacy, wind the horn!" The stranger grows threatening. "A fellow who will steal a deer will not hesitate to lie!" The woodsman takes a shot at Tad. Chunky turns the tables on the man.

CHAPTER XV--PLUCK AND THE DEAD DOE

Just a preliminary skirmish. "I'll get you yet, you young whelp!" Stacy disarms a bad man. "Now get out of here as fast as you can ride!" Traveling amid perils.

CHAPTER XVI--THE HORN POINTS THE WAY

Joy and anger in the Pony Rider camp. Ichabod licks his chops at sight of Tad's doe. The story of the theft arouses Bill Lilly. "I reckon I've seen that hound before." Another day is coming.

CHAPTER XVII--WOLVES ON THE TRAIL

Stacy's hat no longer hits his head. Cane bears grow savage. Hounds set on the trail. Flying, snarling, yelping heaps of fur. Dogs and wolves in a battle to the death. Tad and Stacy jump into the fight.

CHAPTER XVIII--A STAND IN GRIM EARNEST

Wolves leap on the fallen fat boy. Tad battles with the beasts with revolver and bush-knife. Chunky sails in with a club and proves himself a hero. Professor Zeppelin sees red.

CHAPTER XIX--WHAT TAD FOUND ON THE TRAIL

Vénison steak and boiled bayou water. Bill Lilly is excited over Butler's discovery. "The cold-blooded scoundrel!" The guide hits the trail with blood in his eye.

CHAPTER XX--MAN-SIGNS IN THE CANEBRAKE

"He'll get a dose of lead if he doesn't watch out!" Tad finds a fresh trail. Lilly turns up a snaketrap. A moccasin in a bucket. Death traps laid by a bad man.

CHAPTER XXI--SURPRISES COME FAST

Alligator Pete gets the drop on the guide. Bill Lilly in a tight place. "Look out, this gun might go off!" The tables quickly turned.

CHAPTER XXII--OUTWITTED BY A BOY

Tad Butler ropes the enemy. "I'll kill you for that!" Pete stands on his head. A sign of surrender. The prisoner of the Pony Rider Boys. Butler takes a long chance.

CHAPTER XXIII--ICHABOD GETS A BIG SURPRISE

"De 'gator done gwine away, sah." Hounds and Pony Riders take the trail for bear. "They've got her!" A strange sight. A bullet that went home. Tad charged by a ferocious she-bear.

CHAPTER XXIV--CONCLUSION

In a dire predicament. Butler fights Mrs. Bruin. A hand and paw conflict. Tad's knife driven home. Laid up for repairs. Smugglers caught and punished. The triumph of pluck.

CHAPTER I

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

"Professor Zepplin, I believe?"

"The same. And you are?"

"Major Clowney, sah, at your service," answered the tall, gray-haired, distinguished-looking southerner who had greeted the Professor at the railway station in Jackson. Four clean-cut, clear-eyed young men, who had left the train with the Professor, stepped up at that juncture and were introduced to the southerner as Thaddeus Butler, Ned Rector, Stacy Brown and Walter Perkins, known as the Pony Rider Boys.

The Major regarded the young men quizzically, then shook hands with each of them, bowing with true southern courtliness over each hand as it was extended toward him.

"Isn't he the fine old gentleman?" whispered Stacy, otherwise and more familiarly known among his companions as Chunky, the fat boy.

Tad Butler nodded. The Major was a type that they had heard of, but never had known. He was a relic of the old South.

"It gives me great pleasure, gentlemen, to welcome you to Jackson. My old friend Colonel Perkins wrote me asking that I do what I could for you. I am delighted at the opportunity to serve him as well as these fine young gentlemen. You will wish to go to your hotel?"

"Yes, if you please," bowed the Professor.

The Major apologized for the humble hotel to which he conducted them, explaining that it was the best the little southern town afforded.

"I shall look for you to dine with myself and family this evening," he added.

The Professor expressed his appreciation, the boys murmuring their thanks. Tad Butler said he feared they were not in condition to accept home hospitality to which the Major replied that he and his family would feel honored to receive the party, no matter in what condition they might be forced to come.

"Did the Major fight the Germans?" questioned Chunky.

"No, they are all colonels, majors and captains down here," replied Tad laughingly.

It was agreed that the Professor and his party were to go out to the Major's home at five o'clock that afternoon, meet Major Clowney's family, and have dinner with them, after which a pleasant evening would be spent.

"You will no doubt wish to rest after your tiresome journey, Professor. At a quarter to five I shall send one of my servants to lead you to my home. My wife and daughters are impatient to meet you, my old friend Colonel Perkins having told us not a little about your young friends."

"You are very kind, sir," declared Tad.

"In the meantime, if you will give us the benefit of your advice, we shall look about us for a guide and for some horses, as I have been given to understand that we might procure all of these here in Jackson," said the Professor.

"It is all arranged, sah, all arranged," answered the Major. "It has been my pleasure to attend to all of the details. How many rooms will you require?"

Having received this information from Professor Zepplin, Major Clowney bustled about, sternly ordering the colored porters around, giving directions for the fetching of the equipment of the boys from the station, then making a personal inspection of the rooms assigned the Professor and the boys, ordering this and that thing changed, until it seemed as if all the forces of the hotel were jumping about at the Major's command.

"There, sah, I think you will be as comfortable as this miserable hostelry can make you. And now I shall leave you to

your rest," he said.

The Major, after once more shaking hands all around, bustled out, leaving the boys to themselves.

Chunky blinked solemnly.

"Pinch me, fellows. I don't know whether I am awake or dreaming," said Stacy.

"You will wake up by and by," answered Ned.

"A splendid gentleman," nodded Tad thoughtfully. "We might all profit by Major Clowney's courtliness. Did you ask him what arrangements he had made for us, Professor?"

"No. He no doubt will explain when we see him this evening. Depend upon it, he has left nothing undone."

"Except to make the weather cool," answered Stacy. "Whew, but it's hot. Where is our baggage? I want to get into some togs that aren't so hot as these glad clothes."

"The baggage should be here very soon," answered Walter. "The men went after it before we came upstairs."

"I never saw so many colored folks in my life," declared Chunky. "Everything looks black to me now. I wonder if they are all black in this part of the country?"

"This is what is known as the Black Belt of the South," answered Professor Zepplin. "I believe there are four blacks to every white in this section. Further in we may find the proportion even greater."

"A regular study in light and shade," observed Rector.

"You had better keep tight hold of your valuables," advised Tad. "These gentlemen are light-fingered, I have heard."

"They better not take any of my stuff," bristled Stacy belligerently. "We know what to do to them if they do."

"Don't cry before you're hurt," advised Ned. "Who wants to take a look at the town?"

"I don't care anything about the town; I want to sleep," declared Chunky.

"That's right. Sleep is good for children," jeered Ned.

"Is that why you sleep so much?" wondered Stacy innocently.

"Ned, I will go with you," interjected Tad, by way of changing the conversation. "We have plenty of time, and need not dress before four o'clock. It is now only half past one."

Walter and the Professor decided that they would remain in the hotel, so Tad and Ned started out. Before they were out of the house, Stacy had thrown himself on the bed in his room, and was sleeping soundly. It was after three o'clock when Butler, returning to the hotel, shook Stacy awake, urging him to hustle his bath and dress. The boys were eagerly looking forward to the evening before them, for it was to be their first visit to a southern home. They were looking forward with a different sort of eagerness to the journey on which they were about to set out--a journey to the nearly trackless, vast canebrakes of Louisiana. It was a wonderful bit of country into which they were headed, but as yet they knew practically nothing of its wildness and its manifold dangers, nor did they give thought to this phase of their summer's outing, for, the greater the thrills, the keener the enjoyment of the Pony Rider Boys.

Following the return of Tad and Ned, all hands withdrew to their rooms to dress. The other boys finished dressing some time before Stacy made his appearance, strolling dignifiedly into the parlor where his companions were awaiting him.

"Well, here I am," announced Stacy.

The Pony Riders gazed at him in amazement.

"For goodness' sake, where did you get that outfit?" demanded Tad, the first to find his voice.

"How do you like it, fellows?" grinned Chunky.

"Well, if you aren't the dude," giggled Walter.

"You mean the duke. I am the Duke of Missouri. What do you think of me," urged Stacy.

"I'll say you are unspeakable," growled Ned Rector.

Stacy Brown's outfit was rather unusual. He was dressed in a white suit with a collar so high and tight that the blood was forced up into his face, a streak of red showing in the part of the hair of his head, while Chunky's second chin hung over the front of the collar, extending down to the root of his liver-colored tie. His appearance was so ludicrous that the boys burst into a peal of laughter.

Professor Zeppelin eyed the fat boy with disapproving eyes.

"Where did you get that outfit, young man?" he demanded sternly.

"I bought it in Chillicothe. Think I stole it?"

"Certainly not."

"What do you think of it?" insisted Stacy.

"Most remarkable," answered the Professor, regarding Chunky with a slow shake of the head.

"Are you going to dinner in that rig?" demanded Ned.

"Of course I am."

"Then I guess I shall stay home," decided Rector.

"I don't care whether you stay home or go. I will make a great hit with the ladies, you see if I don't."

"Let me give you a piece of timely advice," said Tad.

"Well, what is it?"

"Don't try to shine your shoes on your trousers. It shows so on white, you know."

Stacy growled.

"Haven't you anything else to put on?" questioned the Professor.

"I might put on my pajamas," answered the fat boy innocently.

Professor Zeppelin grunted.

"I guess we can stand it if he can, Professor. The outfit isn't so bad, after all," said Tad.

"Of course it isn't," agreed Chunky. "The trouble with you fellows is that you are jealous."

"We could stand the white suit all right. But that liver-colored tie is enough to drive a man to do something desperate, Stacy," declared Tad laughingly. "Where did you get it?"

"Bought it at the five and ten cent store in Chillicothe. Isn't it a wonder?"

"It is," agreed Tad.

"One of the wonders of the world," added Ned.

"It might be a great deal worse," said Walter seriously, whereat a wave of laughter rippled over the little party.

"I suppose we shall have to put up with it, boys," said the Professor reflectively, "though I can't understand why you ever thought of such an outfit. Go put on another tie."

"All right, if you insist," promised the fat boy, rising and stumbling from the parlor. Stacy took plenty of time. They

called him twenty minutes later, with the information that Major Clowney's colored man was waiting for them. "I will be there in a minute," answered Stacy. "My collar button is two sizes larger than the button hole."

When the fat boy finally made his appearance a groan went up from the entire party. From the liver-colored tie Chunky had changed to one of the brightest red they had ever seen. Instinctively the boys held their hands over their eyes.

"Oh, oh!" groaned Ned. "This is too much."

"I agree with you. Take that thing off instantly!" commanded the Professor.

"Can't I please you folks at all?" wailed the fat boy.

"You can if you will put on a respectable tie," answered Professor Zeppelin.

"I--I haven't any others."

"I think I have a tie in my trunk," said Tad.

"Please get it for him, then," directed the Professor.

"Yes, for goodness' sake do," urged Rector. "Stacy is bound to disgrace us."

"That would be impossible in some cases," retorted the fat boy sarcastically.

"Come on, Chunky," called Tad. "We will see what we can do for you."

Tad fixed Stacy out with a white tie, and assisted him to arrange it, after which Stacy once more placed himself on exhibition, this time meeting the approval of his critical companions, though his face was redder than before, and the collar seemed to draw more tightly about his neck than ever.

"We will now proceed," announced the Professor gravely.

"And be very careful that you don't fall down, Chunky," warned Tad.

"I don't intend to fall down. But why shouldn't I fall down if I want to?" demanded Stacy.

"That collar might cut your head off," replied Tad soberly.

"Then for goodness' sake fall down," grunted Ned Rector.

"I reckon I shall be the one to cut a dash instead of cutting my head off," retorted the fat boy pompously. "As I said before, you fellows are jealous. You're mad because you didn't think to bring along a white suit."

Stacy suddenly found himself standing alone in the parlor of the hotel, the others having already started down the stairs. He made haste to follow them, joining the party in the lobby where the Major's servant was waiting for them. They at once started out, Stacy the center of the admiring gaze of pretty much all of the colored population of Jackson. Stacy was elated, his companions amused.

Major Clowney and his wife welcomed Professor Zeppelin and the boys to the hospitable southern home on the broad, pillared veranda that was large enough to admit a coach and four. The boys were then conducted into the drawing room, and Stacy Brown's feet nearly went out from under him the instant he stepped into the room. Following his hostess Chunky followed a perilous track of rugs on a waxed floor. The fat boy's face was now redder than ever, and the perspiration was streaking down his cheeks and getting into his eyes through his strenuous efforts to keep his feet on the floor. There were Millicent, Muriel and Mary of the daughters, Millicent being the eldest, each sweet-voiced, soft-spoken, each possessing a refinement and charm that the Pony Rider Boys never had met with among the young folks at home. Mrs. Clowney's gentle manners reminded Tad Butler of his mother, and he told her as much on their way into the house.

The Professor was first introduced to the young ladies. Stacy's turn came next. He did not dare make his best bow, for at the slightest movement his feet would slip on the insecure rug beneath them. As a result his bows were stiff affairs, nor could he bend his head to any great extent on account of the high "choker" collar. The other boys were keenly alive to Chunky's distress, and they took a malicious pleasure in it.

While the others were being introduced, Stacy with great difficulty navigated himself to a chair, to the back of which he anchored with both hands gripping it firmly.

"What's the matter, Stacy?" whispered Tad, as he strolled past his fat companion.

"I--I forgot to bring my roller skates," mumbled Stacy. "How am I ever going to get anywhere on this skating rink?"

"Take short steps," advised Tad. "Long strides will finish you."

Chunky adopted the suggestion with the result that he managed to move about the room with more or less dignity. But his undoing came when Miss Millicent took his arm as the family and guests moved toward the dining room. Chunky forgot himself in the enthusiasm of the moment, and all at once his feet shot up into the air.

"Oh, wow!" moaned the fat boy as he sat down on the floor with such force as to set the chandeliers jingling, nearly pulling Miss Millicent down with him. Had Stacy not had the presence of mind instantly to disengage his arm from hers, the young woman surely would have sat down on the floor beside him.

To their credit be it said that the other boys never smiled. They were too well bred for that. Neither did Chunky smile, but for an entirely different reason. As he scrambled to his feet, making a further exhibition of himself in the effort, a red ring might have been observed about his neck where the collar had pressed into the boy's full neck.

Major Clowney and Mrs. Clowney were all consideration for the hapless Pony Rider Boy, the Major declaring that every rug in the room should be removed and a carpet put down in its place. He said it was criminal to have such a trap in the house.

"I do hope you didn't hurt yourself," said Miss Millicent sympathetically.

"Oh, not at all. I frequently sit down that way before dinner," answered the fat boy.

"Do you, indeed?" smiled the young woman.

"Oh, yes. You see it gives me an appetite for dinner. It's great. You should try it. Of course at first you should go outside and sit down on the ground where it's soft. When you get used to that you may try the floor."

Miss Millicent laughed merrily. There was no resisting Stacy's drollery.

Once more they took up their interrupted journey to the dining room, where the boys found themselves in charming surroundings. In spite of Stacy Brown's awkwardness, the Clowneys soon discovered that the Pony Rider Boys were well worth knowing. The lads were self-possessed, and their experiences in the saddle in many parts of the country enabled them to talk interestingly. As usual, Stacy made most of the merriment, and every time the fat boy spoke a little wave of good-natured laughter rippled around the table.

"I fear," said Miss Millicent, in answer to Stacy's description of how he got an appetite, "that I should prefer to fast."

"Oh, you wouldn't after you got used to the other way," the fat boy assured her.

"That is Stacy's way of apologizing for his appetite, Miss Clowney," said Ned across the table.

"No one need apologize for a healthy appetite," replied the Major promptly. "The apology, should come for the opposite reason."

Chunky bowed his approval of the sentiment.

"That is what I always tell the boys," he said. "Sleep out of doors all the time and you will get an appetite that will be almost annoying," he promised.

"Ah--ahem," interrupted the Professor. "Major, did I understand you to say that you had procured a guide for us?"

"Yes, yes. I have been enjoying our young friends to the extent that I forgot all about the business end. I have obtained the services of Bill Lilly as your guide."

"Is he a good one?" asked Ned.

"The best in this part of the country. He knows the brake as do few other men. Another man, Pete Austen--otherwise known as Alligator Pete--was eager to get the job, but I consider him an unreliable man. There are stories abroad not at all to the credit of Austen. But you may depend upon Lilly in any and all circumstances."

"How far is the brake from here?" asked Tad.

"A day's ride will take you to it. You never have been in the brake?"

"No, sir."

"Then you have a new experience before you, Mr. Butler. Lilly will meet you at your hotel at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, and you may start at once, though it would please me to have you remain with us longer."

"Perhaps we shall see you when we return from the brake," said Tad.

"I should think you young men would not want to go into that awful place," said Miss Millicent with a shudder.

"And pray, why not?" questioned Tad.

"It is such a horrible place."

"Oh, you don't know us fellows," interjected Stacy. "We are used to horrible places. I reckon there aren't many such in this country that we haven't been in. What is there so horrible about this--this canebrake?"

"Snakes, lots of them, foul deadly fellows," answered Miss Millicent.

"Ugh!" exclaimed the fat boy, his eyes growing large.

"Alligators, wild animals, almost anything that you might think of you will find in the canebrake," she added.

"Don't frighten the boys before they get into the brake," begged the Major.

A grim smile curled the corners of Professor Zeppelin's lips. He was rather sensitive on the subject of timidity so far as his young friends were concerned.

"Major, I fear you do not know my boys."

"How so, Professor?"

"They are unafraid. They are afraid of nothing. My life would be much easier were they a little less so."

"Fine! Chivalrous, too, eh?"

"Indeed, yes," nodded the Professor.

"Yes, I have saved the lives of lots of folks," declared Stacy pompously.

"Do tell us about it," urged Miss Clowney.

"I couldn't think of it. I'm too modest to brag about myself."

In the meantime Tad Butler, the Professor and Major Clowney had become absorbed in the subject of big game, which the three were discussing learnedly. The hosts were amused at Stacy Brown, but they were irresistibly drawn to Tad, both because of his sunny disposition and the lad's keen mind, so unusual for one of his age.

The dinner came to an end all too soon to suit the Pony Rider Boys, and the party moved towards the drawing room. Stacy, seating Miss Millicent, strolled to one of the broad, open windows which had been swung back against the wall on their hinges. The fat boy thought this window opened out on the veranda, so he stepped out for a breath of air, but his feet touched nothing more substantial than air. Stacy took a tumble into the side yard, landing on his head and shoulders. The young women of the family cried out in alarm when they saw the fat boy disappearing through the window.

"Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" cried the Clowneys, rushing to the window, the Major leaping out with the agility of

youth.

"Hurt?" piped a voice from the darkness. "Certainly not. Just settling my dinner, that's all. I usually do this. Sometimes when I am out in the woods and there isn't a house to jump from, I just climb a tree after dinner and fall out."

"I think we had better get Stacy home before he gets into more serious difficulty," said Tad in a low tone to the Professor.

"I agree with you, Tad. However, he has done his worst, I guess. Look at his coat. It is ripped for six inches at the shoulder," groaned the Professor.

"That must have been where he hit the side yard," smiled Tad, after quiet had been restored.

After half an hour of pleasant conversation, during which the fat boy entertained Miss Millicent with stories of his prowess in mountain and on plain, the Pony Rider Boys took their leave, voting the Clowneys the most pleasant people they had ever met.

With this pleasant evening their social amusement was at an end. On the morrow they were to begin their rough life in the open again, and during their explorations in the canebrake they were destined to have many thrilling experiences and some adventures, the like of which had never befallen any of the hardy Pony Rider Boys.

CHAPTER II

BOUND FOR THE CANE JUNGLE

Eight o'clock on the following morning found Tad Butler strolling up and down in front of the hotel for his morning airing. By his side walked Bill Lilly, whom Tad had found waiting for them in the lobby of the hotel.

Bill, who was to guide the party through the maze of the canebrake, was a type. He was a spare man, with a long, drooping, colorless moustache, gentle blue eyes, and a frame of steel and whipcord. Billy, it was said, had been known to follow the trail of a bear on foot for days until he finally ran the animal down and killed it. When night came he would throw himself down on the trail and go to sleep or crouch like a wild turkey high up in the crotch of a giant cypress. Unlike the guides of the north, Billy loved to talk. He had not, however, looked forward to the task before him with any great enthusiasm, believing that he was to guide a party of soft-muscled boys through the jungle, boys who would need looking after constantly. He had not thought to find a seasoned woodsman like young Butler. Though Tad had said nothing about himself, Lilly's experienced blue eyes told him that here was no tenderfoot, but a woodsman after his own heart.

Shortly afterwards the rest of the party came down. Tad introduced them to the guide, then proposed that they look the horses over. Stacy demurred. He said he never could pick out a horse before breakfast, so, to save argument and grumbling, everyone went in to breakfast, while Lilly sat down and talked with them, making known to the party his plans for the coming trip.

Tad was especially interested in the horses that Billy showed them half an hour afterwards. These were hardy little animals, a cross between a standard-bred saddle horse of the north and a mustang. They were tough, wiry animals, owned by a rancher on the outskirts of the town. The guide had not picked out the horses, preferring to leave that to the boys, provided they knew what they wanted.

They did, especially Tad Butler. He went over the whole herd, finally choosing a white-coated, pink-nosed animal for himself, after having roped the animal, which did not propose to be caught.

Both the owner and the guide opened their eyes at Tad's skill with the rope.

"That one has a nasty temper," warned the guide.

"I know it," nodded the Pony Rider Boy.

"But he is sound and can stand a lot of grilling."

"I want that black yonder," cried Chunky.

"I think not," said Butler.

"Why not?"

"He is wind-broken. We don't want any of that sort."

"I guess you boys don't need any of my help in picking out your mounts," grinned Lilly. "Where did you get your knowledge of horses, Master Butler?"

"He just couldn't help it. He was born that way," Ned Rector informed them.

One by one Tad chose the animals, and when he had finished the owner agreed that Tad had picked out the best stock in the herd. They had brought along their trappings in a wagon, and the boys now proceeded to saddle and bridle the horses they had decided to take. Then they mounted and raced up and down the road, trying out the little animals as well as they could. Their riding was a revelation to Bill Lilly and to the rancher. Bill said it was as good as a circus.

"But," he added, "you don't want to try any of those tricks in the brake," shaking his head as Tad swooped down at a fast gallop, scooping up Stacy Brown's sombrero that had been lost from the fat boy's head, and deftly spinning it towards Chunky, both at full gallop. The fat boy caught it fully as deftly, and solemnly replaced it on his head.

Each of the horses was tried out until the boys finally had settled upon those that they thought best fitted to take with

them into the woods. Next came the packing of kits, the stowing of supplies, and a hundred and one petty details, all of which Tad supervised, knowing pretty well what would be needed by the party. Of course, not knowing the country into which they were going, he was forced to consult the guide frequently about this or that detail.

When the boys returned to the hotel they did so astride of their new horses and in their cowboy outfits, attracting a great deal of attention in the little southern village. Major Clowney said the young ladies of his family were eager to see the boys before they left. This gave Tad an idea.

"Boys, what do you say to going over to the Major's home and giving the ladies an exhibition of rough-riding?" he cried.

"Hurrah! Just the thing," shouted the others.

"Would it please them, Major?" asked Tad, glancing at the chuckling Major.

"They would be delighted, I know."

"What do you say, Professor?"

"Yes, by all means, Tad." The Professor was proud of the horsemanship of his young charges, and was quite willing, indeed, that they should show off their skill before the Clowney family.

Receiving their tutor's permission the boys removed the packs from their horses, while the Professor, leaving his mount secured to the tie rail, accompanied Major Clowney on foot to his home.

The Pony Rider Boys made what they called a grand entry. They swept down in a great cloud of dust on the Clowney mansion, whooping like a pack of Indians on the war path. All the colored people in the establishment ran out into the street to see the exhibition, but by the time they had gotten outside the fence that enclosed the lawn the cloud of dust had rolled on far down the street.

The ladies of the family were leaning over the fence clapping their hands.

"There they come back," cried Miss Millicent. "That is Mr. Butler in the lead."

Tad, sitting his saddle as if he were, indeed, a part of it, swept past, lifting his hat. Miss Millicent flung a long-stemmed rose toward him. The rose fell short, landing at the side of the road.

With marvelous quickness of thought the Pony Rider Boy swerved his pony to one side, threw himself over and caught up the rose by the very tips of his fingers. He came within a fraction of an inch of missing it, but the recovery was beautifully done, arousing great enthusiasm among the spectators, few of whom ever had seen any such rough-riding.

Stacy flung his hat into the air, letting it fall to the ground, then other hats went the same way. Taking a short ride up the street, the boys wheeled and came back at a terrific pace, swinging down from their saddles and scooping up their hats. Tad, however, suddenly changed his mind about recovering his hat. He had discovered a little colored boy of about ten years running across the street to get out of the way. The youngster made even greater haste when he saw Tad heading towards him, and placing one hand on the fence enclosing the Clowney grounds, the youngster vaulted.

Tad's rope was whirling about his own head. He let it go while the feet of the pickaninny were still in the air. The loop caught one of the colored youngster's feet and was suddenly jerked taut, and the pickaninny landed on his head and shoulders on the lawn with Tad's rope drawn tight around the little fellow's ankle. The pickaninny was yelling lustily.

Butler brought his horse down so suddenly that the animal plowed up the dirt all the way to the fence. The slightest mistake or error of calculation might have resulted in serious injury to the little colored boy, but Butler was confident of himself, the only uncertainty being his mount, which of course he did not know very well. The white horse played his part like a veteran cow pony.

How the spectators did applaud! They went wild with enthusiasm, but the colored people did not cheer; they stood in wholesome awe of Tad Butler's ready rope. There was something almost uncanny to them in the way the lad had roped the pickaninny, and they took good care to crowd back farther from the street lest the boy might take it into his head to rope another of them.

"Will these horses jump, Mr. Lilly?" called Tad.

"As high as themselves," answered the guide.

Tad tried his mount over the yard fence and was delighted at its jumping skill. Then the others poured over into the yard, a veritable mounted cataract.

Next they gave an exhibition of rescuing a dismounted companion, jerking the boy up from the ground while the rider's horse was at full gallop. There seemed no end to the stunts that the Pony Rider Boys could do, and they gave the spectators everything they knew along this line. Professor Zeppelin's eyes were glowing. He was proud of the achievements of his boys, and well he might be, for their performance had been a most unusual one.

The lads brought their exhibition to a close by approaching the fence in a slow trot, and slipping from their saddles without the least attempt to be spectacular. This was as much of a surprise to the spectators as had been the more startling feats, for they had not looked for so slow a finish.

"We don't want to tire out our horses, you know," explained Tad. "They have a long journey ahead of them today."

"Yes, we could do a lot more if it weren't for that," added Stacy Brown pompously.

"It was splendid!" cried the young ladies. "It was marvelous."

"The finest exhibition I have ever witnessed," declared the Major. "Do you shoot also?"

"We are the only ones who really do," admitted Stacy modestly.

"I am afraid our friend Stacy is laying it on a little too strong," laughed Tad, "though we are not what you might call bad shots, especially in the case of Stacy Brown. Why he once shot Professor Zeppelin's hat off and never touched a hair."

The fat boy flushed. Further teasing along this line was interrupted by the servants coming out with a pitcher of lemonade, which the boys drank sitting on the lawn in the shade of the trees. After a visit of half an hour, Billy Lilly said they had better be going if they were to make Tensas Bayou that night as they had planned to do, so bidding good-bye to their new-found friends, the lads rode away, waving their hats in response to the fluttering handkerchiefs of the Clowney family. Proceeding to the hotel, packs were lashed to the horses, and shortly after that a cloud of dust just outside the town marked the trail that the Pony Rider Boys were following on their way to the jungle.

CHAPTER III

IN CAMP ON TENSAS BAYOU

Darkness had fallen when the Pony Rider Boys party finally had picked their way through the outer edge of the jungle, and, despite the darkness, had continued on through the tropical growth, guided unerringly by Billy Lilly to the site he had chosen for their camp.

"Billy must belong to the owl family," was Tad Butler's comment as their guide rode confidently ahead, calling back directions to them.

Behind Lilly rode another and not unimportant member of the party. This was Ichabod. Ichabod was of the color of the night, black. He had been recommended by Major Clowney as a man who would be useful to them. Ichabod was as solemn and dignified as an African tribal chief. In fact, he was an excellent understudy for Stacy Brown when the latter was in his most dignified mood.

Ichabod could cook, could make and break camp and, what was almost as useful, he could handle the hunting dogs, and knew the canebrake fairly well, but Ichabod was afraid of snakes; that was his worst failing. One afraid of snakes had better keep out of the canebrake. The dozen hunting dogs that Lilly had brought with him were in charge of the colored man, who had handled them before and whom the dogs knew and liked.

"File left. Look out that you don't get into the water," called the guide. "Here we are. Make camp."

"I will go cut the firewood," said Tad.

"No, no," objected the guide. "I was speaking to Ichabod. You all remain on your horses until we get the fire going and I have beaten up the camp site."

"Why so?" questioned Butler.

"On account of the reptiles."

"Oh, fudge!" grunted Tad. The other boys laughed and slipped from their saddles.

"I guess you don't know my boys," objected the Professor, who, not to be outdone, descended from his saddle.

"As you wish. But remember, I am responsible for these young men," answered Billy.

"We are responsible for ourselves, sir, and we are not exactly tenderfeet, Mr. Lilly," said Tad. "If you will show me some firewood trees I will do as I suggested, get wood for the campfire."

"Leave that to me. You will have plenty of opportunity to work after we get settled to our trails. You will break your neck if you go to floundering about over the cypress knees."

The boys did not know what was meant by "cypress knees," and at that moment there were other matters to occupy their minds, so they did not ask. The boys began working away at their packs, loosening the cinches, piling the packs on the ground in an orderly manner born of long experience in the woods. They did not need a light to do this work. In fact, they could just as easily have pitched camp in the darkness as in the light. In this instance they did not do so, knowing that Lilly had definite plans as to where and how the camp should be made.

They soon heard the sound of the guide's axe. Ichabod was humming to himself, the dogs were barking and the horses neighing, while the Pony Rider Boys were shouting jokes at one another.

"Where is that fat boy?" called Rector, not having heard Chunky's voice during the last few minutes.

"I don't know. Stacy!" called the Professor.

Tad struck a match and holding it above his head glanced keenly about him. The light revealed Chunky sitting with his back against a tree, his head tilted back, mouth wide open, sound asleep. Tad had the fat boy by the collar instantly.

"Here, here! Whatcher want?" demanded Stacy rebelliously as he was roughly jerked to his feet.

"Don't you know better than to lie down in a place like this?" demanded Tad.

"Why not?"

"You don't know what there may be about here. Didn't you hear the guide say there were reptiles here?"

"Re--reptiles?"

"Yes."

"Oh-h-h, wow!"

"If you must sleep, try it standing up. Get on your horse and take a nap. That will be safer," advised Butler.

"I--I guess I don't want to go to sleep," stammered Stacy.

"I thought not. Here is some punk, if you want it, Mr. Lilly."

"How do you chance to have punk?"

"Oh, I frequently find it useful, especially in wet weather," answered Tad.

"I have some of the same in my kit, but it isn't available just now. There, that's better," nodded Billy.

A little crackling flame had leaped up flinging flickering shadows over the scene. The dogs were sitting about on their haunches regarding the proceedings expectantly, knowing that supper time would soon be at hand.

"Where shall we pitch your tent, Mr. Lilly?" asked Tad.

"I will take care of that. You may pitch your own if you wish. You know how and where better than I can tell you."

Tad did. He laid out the guide's tent so that the opening would be towards the fire, placing it as close to the fire as possible, almost too close it seemed.

"Why so close?" questioned Lilly, tugging at his long moustache.

"To catch some of the smoke from the campfire," replied Butler.

"For what?"

"To drive away mosquitoes. I hear there are a few here."

"You'll do," declared Lilly with an emphatic nod. "I guess you *have* been in the woods before."

The tents were arranged in a semicircle close about the fire that was now blazing higher and higher.

"Is there any danger of firing the forest here, Mr. Lilly?" asked Butler.

"No, not here. Everything is too damp. All this part of the forest is really a swamp. Wherever you find the cypress you will find moist ground."

"But where is the canebrake?" questioned Ned.

"On the ridges, the higher ground."

"Near here?"

"Within a few paces," answered the guide. "I will fetch some of it in to show you after we have had our supper. I guess you boys must be hungry, eh?"

"Hungry?" cried Stacy. "No, just empty, that's all."

Ichabod was already at work getting the supper, and tempting odors filled the air, with Stacy Brown squatting down with the dogs, greedily watching the preparations for the evening meal. While this was being done, Lilly was trampling

down the brush, slashing the thorn bushes with his long bush knife, clearing away, so far as possible, all hiding places for trouble-hunting reptiles.

Smoking hot waffles were served to the hungry boys for supper. The voice of the fat boy under the influence of the waffles soon was stilled, his cheeks were puffed out and his eyes were rolling expressively. Chunky was very near to perfect happiness.

"The bayou is just back of the tents," warned Lilly. "Be careful that none of you falls into the water in the darkness. I should not advise much roaming about in the night until after you have become accustomed to this forest. You will find it far different from any you have ever visited before."

"I have observed as much," nodded the Professor. "But what are those peculiar formations that I see all about us?"

"Yes, I was wondering about them," said Tad.

"You mean the cypress knees?"

"Those long, crab-like formations standing up from the ground three or four feet," said the Professor.

"They are the cypress knees. In reality they are a sort of root of the tree itself. They make great hiding places for all sorts of reptiles and small animals, and they are the finest obstacles in the world to fall over."

"I should think the horses would break their legs over them," said Tad.

"A horse unfamiliar with travel in the swamp would do so. But you will find your animals very wise. They know the game down here, though up in the Rockies they undoubtedly would break their own necks and those of their riders as well."

"Every man and beast to his trade," observed the Professor reflectively.

Billy Lilly agreed with a long nod.

"Ichabod, bring in an armful of cane so the gentlemen may see it," he directed.

The sticks that Ichabod fetched resembled bamboo more than anything the boys ever had seen. These canes they found to be hollow, having no pith, being divided on the inside every few inches into sections.

"As I have already said," continued the guide, "the canebrake stretches along slight rises of ground for miles and miles, forming a very striking feature. The canes stand so thickly that they crowd out other growths and make fine hiding places for wild animals and reptiles. They stand in what might be called ranks, each but a few inches from its companion, extending to a height of fifteen or twenty feet, straight and tall."

"They should make fine fishpoles," said Tad.

"They do. They are used for that purpose. The leaves commence about two-thirds the height of the plant, and the peculiar feature of the leaves is that they seem to grow right out of the stalk."

"The cypress trees appear to be very tall here," said Professor Zepplin.

"Yes, they are. They are said to be rivaled in size and height only by some of the red gums and white oaks. In towering majesty they are really unsurpassed by any tree in the eastern forests. The redwoods of the Sierras, of course, can't be beaten by anything else in this country. There are thousands of acres of cypress and cane down here, and for a place in which to get lost the canebrake has no equal. You don't want to get lost in this forest, young gentlemen."

"We don't intend to," answered Rector.

"If we did it would not be the first time that we have lost our way," laughed Tad.

"Yes, Tad and I got lost up in the Maine woods. I never had so much fun in my life," piped Stacy. "But then there weren't any creeping things up there. I guess I'll go to bed. I'm sleepy."

"It is time we all turned in," agreed the Professor.

But there was not much sleep for the Pony Rider Boys for a long time. The unfamiliar noises of this suffocating swamp, the buzzing of the mosquitoes fighting to get into the tents, but driven back by the smoke, kept sleep away also, except in the case of Stacy Brown who began snoring almost as soon as he touched his bed.

A weird hooting and yelling that seemed to come from every direction at once brought the boys to a sitting posture about an hour after they had turned in.

"Good gracious, what's that?" demanded Ned.

"I don't know," answered Tad. "It isn't like anything I ever heard. I guess it must be some kind of wild animal."

"Those are barred owls," called the guide from the adjoining tent. "I thought their racket would wake you boys up. But you will get used to them."

"Do they howl all night?" asked Tad.

"Yes, usually, and sometimes in the day as well."

"I see our finish so far as sleep is concerned. But I am going to sleep just the same," growled Chunky.

Late in the night the campers succeeded in getting to sleep. The fire died down and the mosquitoes at last reached their victims. Stacy was the first to be awakened by the pests. He slapped and growled, and growled and slapped; then after a time he got up quietly, piling the bundle of cane on the fire, and placing heavier wood on top of that. Then, well satisfied with having done his duty, the fat boy went back to bed. But Stacy had laid the foundation for a lot of trouble that would arouse the entire camp ere many more minutes had passed.

The trouble came with a bang, with a report that sounded as if the camp had been blown up, accompanied by the yells of the boys as fire and burning sticks were hurled into the little tents.

CHAPTER IV

NATURE BLOWS OUT A FUSE

"We've blown out a fuse!" yelled Tad.

"Shut off the current!" cried Ned Rector.

"I'm shot, I'm shot!" howled the fat boy, leaping out into the open, as had Rector and Walter. "Help! Help!"

"Get back!" shouted Tad. "Don't go out there barefooted. Don't--"

Bang! Bang! Bang! The explosions became so rapid that the boys could not have counted them had they desired to do so.

A dull red glow showed in two of the tents.

"We are on fire!" yelled Butler. "Use your blankets. Stamp it out!"

Tad did not take his own advice not to step out in bare feet. He sped swiftly to his pony, and, grabbing a heavy blanket, raced back and into his own tent where, by this time, the flames had started up briskly. Throwing the blanket on the flames, Tad trod up and down, dancing a jig as he sought to beat out the flames. His quick work smothered them in short order, but at the end the boy's feet were swollen and blistered.

The guide had not been idle all this time; he had used the same tactics as had Tad, assisted by Rector, while Stacy Brown was dancing up and down yelling "Fire!" at the top of his voice.

"Stop calling for the firemen and go to work," ordered Tad. "The firemen can't hear you."

"They would be deaf if they couldn't," answered Ned from the adjoining tent. "What do you think you are yelling about, anyway?"

"Fire, fire!"

"You are slower than cream on a cold day," laughed Tad. "The fire is out."

"Then if there's nothing else to do will someone please tell me what blew up?" asked Ned.

"That is what I should like to know," nodded Tad.

"Why, the campfire blew up," Stacy informed them.

"We know that, but what caused it?"

"I--I don't know unless you fellows threw in some cartridges," replied Chunky.

"Cartridges!" exploded Ned. "Don't you think we have better use for our ammunition?"

"Guide, what is the meaning of this?" questioned the Professor.

"We will find out. I am somewhat curious myself. Ah!"

"What have you found?" asked Tad, springing into the tent where Lilly was pawing over some sticks that had fallen inside.

Lilly handed a stick of cane to Tad, who observed that the stalk had been blown out as if from an interior explosion.

"I don't understand, Mr. Lilly."

"Some of that cane got in the fire and blew up."

"Why, I never heard of such a thing," wondered Tad.

"Yes, it is quite common. This stuff is very combustible when dry. When in that condition, and the hot air is confined in the hollow sections, there is sure to be an explosion and loud one, too. That is what happened here tonight."

"Did you put cane on the fire, Mr. Lilly?"

"No, I didn't. Ichabod, did you?"

"No, sah, Ah doan' put no cane on dat fiah, sah. Ah reckons Ah know'd bettah dan to do a thing like dat, sah. Ah suah does."

"Hm-m-m!" mused the guide reflectively. "Any of you boys put cane on the fire?"

No one answered. Tad shot a keen glance at Stacy who was standing at the opening of his tent.

"Well, what have you to say for yourself, young man?" demanded Tad.

"I? Nothing," answered the fat boy.

"That was a nice trick to play on us when we were sleeping so soundly, now wasn't it?" demanded Tad.

"I--I didn't know the stuff would go off like a gun. I--I--"

"We might have known who did it," chuckled Rector.

"I am glad you admit it, Stacy," said Tad with a grin. "Better to make a clean breast right at the beginning. You know we are sure to find you out, no matter how cute you may think you are."

"I--I didn't do anything."

"No, you didn't do anything. You merely put some cane on the fire so it would explode and give us a scare. You nearly burned up the outfit."

"Stacy, did you do this?" demanded the Professor sternly.

"I--I guess I did."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, I was awakened by those villainous mosquitoes, so I got up, went outside, and put some wood on the fire--that's all I did."

"Well, what then?" urged the Professor.

"Then the whole business went off."

"He did not know the cane would explode," spoke up the guide, who had been tugging at his moustache while listening and regarding Stacy narrowly.

"No, no, that's right; I didn't know. How should I know that the stuff was loaded? Is this country full of stuff like that that will blow up if you look crosswise at it?"

"The cane always will explode when subjected to sufficient heat," replied the guide.

"First time I ever knew that trees would blow up. I--I guess this isn't much of a place to go around with matches in your pocket. Wha--what's that?" stammered the fat boy in a scared tone.

"Waugh, waugh, waugh."

The other boys now took heed. They too were wondering what the strange new sound might mean, and glanced apprehensively at Billy Lilly for the answer. The guide was still tugging at his moustache, grinning behind his hand.

"Waugh, waugh, waugh, waugh!"

This time the sound seemed nearer. The dogs were growling, some straining at their leashes, a dark ridge showing

along the back of each.

"The dogs have their rough up. Something is around here. I am going to find out what it is for myself," declared Tad Butler, slipping on his boots and snatching up a rifle.

"Where are you going?" asked the guide.

"I am going to investigate, that's all. You may know what that noise is, but I don't. It may be a bear for all we know."

Tad slipped out back of the tent. There followed a sharp flash, and a crash, then a series of wild "waugh, waugh, waugh, waughs," a great scurrying and floundering in the bushes.

"Ha, ha! Missed him, didn't you?" shouted the guide.

"I did not," answered the Pony Rider Boy calmly. Then the listeners heard Tad utter a groan of disgust. Billy Lilly slapped his thighs and laughed loudly.

"That's a good joke on the old scout, eh? That's certainly a good one. Well, what did you get?"

Tad walked in and shoved his gun into his tent.

"You knew what it was all the time, didn't you, Mr. Lilly?"

"Surely I knew. You didn't think I had been in these brakes all these years without knowing all about them, did you?"

"Wha--what did you shoot, Tad?" stammered Stacy.

"What did I shoot? Gentlemen, I shot a pig," answered Butler in a tone of disgust. "Pork! I am a rank tenderfoot. Stacy, please kick me."

"I--I can't. I'm in my stocking feet. Oh, I wish I had my boots on. I'll never get another opportunity like this," wailed the fat boy in mock sorrow.

This raised another laugh. Lilly forgot to tug at his tawny moustache and straightening back against a tree opened his mouth and uttered a loud "Haw, haw, haw."

"You laugh like a burro I knew down in New Mexico," observed Stacy, eyeing the guide narrowly, ready to run in case Lilly should take exception to his remark.

"Now, if you boys want any sleep, suppose we turn in again," suggested Lilly.

"I am going to feed the campfire first," answered Tad. "I don't propose to leave that to Master Stacy. Next time he will blow up the outfit."

"No, I reckon we had better set a watch over him. He's worse'n the mosquitoes," declared Billy.

CHAPTER V

MAROONED IN A SWAMP

"Hey, Tad!"

"Yes, what is it?" asked Tad Butler, wide awake in an instant in response to Stacy's quiet call.

"What's that roaring?"

"Rain, you silly."

"Oh, is that all?"

"Yes, what did you think it was?"

"I--I thought it was a tornado," answered the fat boy sleepily. "Goodness, it is coming down, at that!"

"I should say it is. At this rate we'll all get wet feet."

"We're lucky if we don't get more than our feet wet," returned Chunky. "I'm sleepy." In the next breath Stacy was snoring.

Tad lay quiet, watching the rain drown out the campfire that was now steaming and throwing off great clouds of fog. Soon there would be nothing left of their big campfire but the blackened, ill-smelling embers. The others evidently had not been awakened by the rain, or, if they had, they had not aroused themselves to discuss it as had Stacy and Tad. Little by little Tad dropped off, but it seemed as if he had no more than closed his eyes when he was awakened by the voice of Ichabod.

"Hey, Boss, Ah reckon, sah, you'd bettah pull in youah feet, sah. They's in de wet, sah."

Tad's feet, which had somehow got thrust out under the side of the tent, were in a puddle of water more than ankle deep. But so warm was the water and so soundly had he slept that the boy was wholly unconscious of his condition. Tad found, upon drawing in his feet, that they were not any too clean either. The black muck of the forest had smeared them.

"Have you any clean water, Ichabod?" he asked.

"Yes, sah. Ah done kitched a bucket full ob de rain. Dat am clean, sah."

"Thank you," said Tad, proceeding to scrub his feet. "I am almost as much of a sleepy-head as Stacy. No, I don't know enough to get the whole of me in out of the rain. What if a snake had chanced along and discovered my feet out there?"

Tad could not repress a shiver at the thought. After scrubbing himself and putting on his stockings and boots the lad, still in his pajamas, stepped to the door of the tent. In his amazement at finding his feet outdoors he had neglected to take note of the state of the weather. The rain was still falling in torrents.

Tad judged from the faint light that day had only just dawned. From where he sat he could see the fog rising from the swamp. He could smell it, too, that fresh odor of wet vegetation, always so marked on the low lands.

Tad rubbed his eyes and looked again. Their camp was pitched on a very slight rise of ground, and to his amazement the camp now occupied a small island, all about it a lake of muddy water. The boy wondered, for the moment, if the Mississippi had overflowed and drowned out the jungle, but upon second thought he understood that the heavy rain was responsible for the flood. The ground was so saturated with moisture that it could hold no more.

From the water rose the knees of the cypress trees, like giant crabs rearing their bodies to get free of the water--knees twisted and gnarled, assuming all sorts of fantastic shapes. One could imagine that they were dragons and centipedes, while one formation looked like a camel kneeling. From beneath one of these knees the boy saw a dark spot wriggling through the water. Tad saw that it was a snake, but what kind he did not know.

Stepping back into his tent, he picked up his rifle, then returning to the door, scanned the water keenly.

"There he is. I see him." The lad raised his weapon, took careful aim at the black speck swaying from side to side as the reptile swam hastily away. Tad pulled the trigger.

The report of his rifle sounded to him like the firing of an eight-pounder cannon. When the smoke cleared away there was no sign of the black wriggling head. But on the other hand there was an uproar in the tents. The Pony Rider Boys, awake on the instant, leaped out into the open, in most instances splashing into the water up to their ankles, and as quickly leaping back into their tents, uttering yells.

Stacy Brown was not so fortunate. When he landed outside his tent he stepped on a sharp stub and in trying to recover himself, fell face down in the water with a loud splash. He scrambled up, choking and sputtering.

"Oh, wow!" howled the fat boy.

Chunky's face was streaked with black muck and his pajamas looked as if they had been dyed black.

"Oh, wow! Somebody pushed me! You did it on purpose."

"Oh, keep still," rebuked Ned. "Don't you see what has happened?"

"We've moved. Why didn't you wake me up before you moved the camp? What lake is this?"

"You evidently haven't got your eyes open yet, Chunky," answered Tad with a laugh. "Don't you see, we are marooned?"

"Why, so we are," cried Ned Rector.

"Surrounded by water?" exclaimed the Professor.

"Yes, that's the definition of an island," nodded Ned. "Entirely surrounded by water."

"But--but, who shot? I heard a gun go off," insisted Walter.

"I did," answered Tad.

"What were you shooting at?" questioned the guide, who, having pulled on his boots, had splashed out in front of the camp.

"I was trying my skill on something floating in the water over yonder."

"Funny time of day to be shooting at things," grumbled Ned.

"Did you hit the mark?" asked the guide, surmising that Tad had shot at a snake.

Butler nodded, and went back to put his rifle where it would keep dry.

"What are we going to do for firewood?" asked the Professor apprehensively.

"I have some dry wood in my tent," answered the guide.

"Oh, you have? So have I," grinned Tad, whereat Lilly tugged some more at his tawny moustache.

"They have got to wake up in the morning to get ahead of you, haven't they?" he nodded.

"I don't know. I am not so sure of that. If you had seen me when Ichabod awakened me, you wouldn't think so," replied Tad with a sheepish grin.

"What was it?" asked Ned.

"My feet were outdoors in the water, while the rest of me was inside."

"Ho, ho," jeered Chunky, poking his streaked face from his tent opening for an instant. "Lucky none of those savage pigs was about at that time or you might have lost half a pound or so of toes."

Chunky dodged back to avoid being hit by a handful of black muck that Ned shied at him, and which spattered over the front of the tent.

"You will have to clean that off," rebuked Tad.

"We will make Chunky do that. He was to blame for it," declared Ned.

"You will have a fine time making him clean the mud from the tent. By the way, what has become of my pig?" questioned Tad.

Lilly swung a hand in the direction of the bayou, a narrow channel now unrecognizable because of the water that covered the ground on either shore. Tad nodded his understanding of the gesture. Some of the reptiles there had made away with the dead pig.

"I was going to have that wild pig for my own breakfast," said the boy reflectively.

"You must have good teeth," smiled Lilly. "Those wild ones are tough as boot leather. We will have some bear meat one of these days."

"That's nothing," answered Ned. "We have had lots of that on our trips."

"How about venison?"

"That always is a luxury," smiled Tad. "Are there deer here?"

"Yes, but you will find shooting them in the brake is not the same as letting go at them in comparatively open woods. Here, it is a case of shoot quickly or miss your game."

"We can shoot quickly, but the next question is, can we hit?" laughed Tad.

"That's the mighty question," agreed Lilly. "If you boys can shoot as well as you ride and do other things, I reckon there isn't a deer in the brake that could get away from you."

"I guess I will practise on those horrible owls," said Ned.

"By the way, are they all drowned out?" asked Tad.

"Oh, no. They are here. If you want to see one, look up in that cypress yonder," answered the guide, pointing. "You will see what birds of prey they are. They are the worst in the woods, and the noisiest," added Lilly.

Tad and Ned looked. High up on a swaying limb was perched one of the long-beaked barred owls. The bird was having a desperate battle with something. At first the youngsters were at a loss to understand what that something was.

"It is a snake!" cried Tad.

"That's what it is. You have guessed right," nodded Lilly.

The boys watched with fascinated gaze this battle high in the air.

"What kind of snake is it?" questioned Ned in an awed tone.

"I reckon I don't know. Ichabod, what is that snake the owl has up there?"

"Ah doan' know, sah. Ah reckon it am jest snake."

"That is as near as a nigger can get to a direct answer," snorted Lilly.

"He doesn't know. That was what he was trying to tell us," said Tad.

Preparations for breakfast were well along by this time, though it was with difficulty that they had kept the fire up sufficiently to do the cooking. The rain was still beating down in torrents and a heavy mist hung over the jungle, a mist that would not be dispelled until the sun had come out and licked up the surplus water in the great swamp.

To the left and rear of the camp, though they could hardly make out the shore lines now, lay a small lake. Tensas it was

called. The waters were always foul and muddy, and alive underneath the surface, though the boys could only surmise this. They had observed no signs of life on the surface, but then they had had little opportunity to observe much of anything except the rain.

On beyond the camp they were now able to make out faintly the straight stems of the canebrake that stood row upon row in straight lines, as if they had been arranged by human hands on the lines run out by engineers.

Afterward the lads sat down to breakfast, which, of course, was eaten inside the tents. The boys now wanted to know what was to be done about their situation.

"Nothing at present," answered Mr. Lilly. "The water will not rise much more. You see it is running off in a pretty swift current already. Of course the water wouldn't interfere much, but the going would be sloppy. You wouldn't enjoy it."

"Is there water in the canebrake?" asked Tad.

"Oh, no. The cane is on higher ground, as I have already told you. There is one thing to be thankful for--the rain drives away the mosquitoes," smiled Lilly.

"Yes, but I dread to think what they will do when the rain stops and the sun comes out," answered Tad.

Everyone was wet. The rain had found its way through the little tents, and a constant drip, drip, drip was heard above the roaring of the deluge on the roofs. The interiors of the tents were steaming; the heat was greater than before the rain. The tents smelled stuffy, but the boys were good-natured. No one except Stacy uttered complaint. Being used to Stacy's growls, they gave no heed to him.

Later in the day the boys wrapped themselves in their rubber blankets and went to sleep.

For three full days did this state of affairs exist. Then the skies cleared as suddenly as they had become overcast. A burning sun blazed down, and the heavy mists rose in clouds. One felt that Nature was pluming herself after her long bath. Black squirrels chattered in the tops of the tall cypress, thrushes broke out into an incessant clucking, mockingbirds and finches burst into song, above which was heard the twitterings of thousands of sparrows.

One could not believe that he was in a forest so full of perils, with these sweet songs in his ears, the fresh odors of luxuriant vegetation in his nostrils. It did not seem possible that the cane just ahead of them was the haunt of savage beasts, that the little lakes and bayous were alive with alligators, savage garfish and monstrous snapping turtles, heavy as a man; that thick-bodied moccasin snakes, foul and dangerous, lurked near the shores, while further back in the forests lay copperheads and rattlers in great numbers.

This was the country into which the Pony Rider Boys had come in search of new experiences and thrills, and they were destined to have their full share of these ere they had finished their journey and reached the outer world again.

CHAPTER VI

TAKING DESPERATE CHANCES

It was wholly due to the foresight of Billy Lilly that the camp of the Pony Rider Boys was not washed into the bayou. Had they pitched the camp two rods from its present site, in either direction, their outfit would have been wrecked. As it was they were little the worse for their experiences although everyone was still soaked to the skin.

As soon as the sun came out Tad rigged up a clothes line and stripping down to his underwear hung his clothing up to dry. The same thing was done with his blankets.

The other boys thought this was an excellent idea, so they did the same. The water was going down rapidly and their island was growing gradually larger. All manner of driftwood, brush and heaps of muck lay strewn over the ground, and this Ichabod was clearing away as rapidly as possible. The colored man understood the needs of the camp without having to be told. In fact, it was seldom found necessary to give him orders.

The dogs, for the first time in days, pricked up their ears and began to take interest in life. They were busy brushing out their bedraggled coats in the sunlight, now and then bounding back and forth, barking and leaping and playing. The Pony Rider Boys sang snatches of song, joked, and enjoyed themselves to the full. They were restless under inactivity; they wanted to be up and doing.

Of course, the ground in the swamp was soft, so they decided to remain in camp another day. This time would be fully occupied in oiling and cleaning guns, which already had begun to show spots of rust, and in putting their equipment in shape.

Tad found time during this bright day to make short excursions out into the woods, even into the brake, the better to acquaint himself with the conditions round about them. He eyed the dense brake, the giant trees, the queer formations of the cypress knees, and the thick vegetation, with the keen eyes of the experienced woodsman.

"This is an awful hole," was the lad's conclusion. "I don't think I should care to be lost in this swamp. If the Dismal Swamp is any worse, excuse me, as Ichabod would say."

Palmettos he found growing thickly in places above the black ooze of the swamp, bushes of varieties that he did not know covered the ground thickly in places, while vines and creepers climbed the trunks of the trees, hanging in trailing festoons from the branches. Coon and possum were plentiful, but he did not see any of them.

Most interesting to Tad were the swamp rabbits. These lived mostly in the depths of the woods and beside the lonely bayous. These rabbits, he discovered to his amazement, could swim and dive like muskrats, being as much at home in the water as on the land. Tad never had heard of them before and he watched the antics of some of the little fellows curiously. While Tad moved about with caution, he was unafraid. His love of nature was too great to permit him to be afraid of it; even though he knew that at any second he might tread on a deadly reptile, so he strode on with the light, noiseless step of the experienced hunter and woodsman. Here and there Tad would strike a blaze on a cypress with his axe. He did not propose to be lost in this forest.

The sound of the camp horn calling to him warned the boy that he had strayed a long distance from camp. He answered the call by shooting his revolver three times in the air, to which the horn responded by two toots.

These horns were used by nearly everyone in the brake. Each person was supposed to carry a horn with him, the horn being useful not alone in calling the dogs, but in signaling positions to each other, and its notes could be heard a long distance in clear weather.

The boy discovered from the direction of the sound that he had made a wide detour to reach his present position. However, instead of trying to take a direct course back to the camp, as an inexperienced person might have done, the Pony Rider Boy cautiously followed his trail back, never for a moment losing sight of his blazes on the cypress trees. It was more than an hour later when he strolled into camp, the guide having blown the horn several times, which Tad had not answered after the first time.

"Look here, young man, where have you been?" demanded Lilly.

"I have been tramping. I went over to a round lake a good distance from here."

"A lake?"

"Yes, sir."

"That way?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know how far that is from here?" questioned the guide.

"I can't say that I do," answered Tad with a smile.

"More than three miles in a straight line."

"I thought so."

"How is it you didn't get lost?"

"Why should I? I blazed a trail out and just followed it back, that's all."

Billy threw up his hands.

"I don't know why you boys have me along. Any fellow who can dive into this swamp for three miles, then walk back just the same as if he were following the sidewalk at home, doesn't need a guide. See anything?"

"Oh, yes," answered the boy laughing. "I saw pretty much everything but deer and bear. But I saw a deer trail."

"You did?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"About half the way out. He crossed my trail and went into the canebrake to the north."

"Probably an old trail," nodded Lilly.

"No, sir, it was a fresh trail made since the rain. I could see that plainly. It was a buck, too, and I think I should like to get a shot at him. Do they have regular runways down here?"

"Yes, unless they are chased. Have all the rest of you boys got scents like deerhounds, eh?"

"I have," answered Stacy promptly. "Why, I can put my nose to a trail and follow it until the deer drops dead from fatigue. I probably am the best all-around deer-chaser in the country. You set me on a trail and see what happens."

"I can tell you what would happen," answered Rector. "You'd get lost in less than ten minutes."

"If I did I should find myself," retorted Stacy indignantly.

"Yes, you would!"

"I should like to follow that deer trail, Mr. Lilly," said Tad. "How about it?"

"The ground is too soft. The horses couldn't make much headway in the present condition of the muck."

"By the way, are there any other hunters in this vicinity now?" questioned Tad.

"I hadn't heard of any besides ourselves. Why?"

"Nothing much. I discovered some man tracks this morning."

Billy regarded the Pony Rider Boy steadily.

"Young man, is there anything you don't see?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes, I couldn't hope to see everything. But some things I can't help seeing. I found this man's tracks while I was examining the buck's trail in the muck. You know feet, man or beast, sink down a good way into the ooze in places."

"I reckon I do. Which way was he going?"

"The buck?"

"No, the man."

"Heading west."

"That's away from the camp," reflected the guide. "I wonder who it could have been? Was there more than one of them?"

Tad shook his head.

"I looked for others. The man was alone and he had a gun."

"Say, are you gifted with second sight?"

"No, sir."

"Then how do you know he had a gun, unless you guessed it?"

"I saw the impression of the butt where he stood the gun against the tree. He was looking at the deer trail, so he must have been along a short time before I passed there."

"I reckon I'll be looking into that," decided Lilly, rising and thrusting his hands in his pockets, striding slowly back and forth.

The subject was not again referred to, but later in the afternoon Lilly announced that he was going out to look over the trails, and left the camp. He returned just before supper.

"Well, did you find it?" asked Tad quizzically.

Billy grinned.

"I reckon I did. I reckon you-all knew what you were talking about."

"Who was it?" demanded Ned.

"Oh, I don't know about that. I guess it was some fellow heading for Stillman's plantation on the other side of the brake."

"How far is that?"

"Nigh onto twenty miles."

"Is there no other way to reach the place?" questioned Tad.

"Oh, yes, but it's a long way further. We will be on the trail ourselves tomorrow, I reckon. The ground is drying out fast. I didn't see any bear signs today, but they will be moving right smart, now that the storm is over."

That night the campfire blazed and crackled merrily. The boys got a good night's rest, the tents being dry and comfortable and the air more endurable than had been the case for the last three days. Twice during the night Billy got up, took a look at the weather, and heaped more wood on the fire. Tad heard him, but did not open his eyes, knowing what was doing, as well as if he had observed it with wide-open eyes.

It was shortly after daylight that the boy awakened suddenly and lay listening. He caught the sound of water being splashed about. A thought occurring to him, Tad slipped on his boots and taking his rifle up crept out under the rear wall of his tent.

A sight met his eyes that thrilled him through and through.

CHAPTER VII

A SWIM IN TENSAS LAKE

There, splashing about in the muddy water of the little lake, was the fat boy. At the moment when Tad first espied him, Chunky lay floating lazily on his back, kicking an occasional foot and sending up little spurts of water.

Stacy was enjoying himself greatly. He had been complaining all the day before that he hadn't had a satisfactory bath since he came into the woods. The guide had told him to dip up water in the buckets, then let it settle until clear, after which he might take his bath.

This sort of bath did not suit the fat boy. He determined that he would have a real bath or no bath at all, so at daylight that morning he arose, and after peering about to make sure that no one observed him, slipped on a pair of trunks and, barefooted, picked his way to the edge of the lake. Stacy sat down on the bank to gaze at the water. He knew it was deep from its appearance, but just how deep he neither knew nor cared. The deeper the better.

"I wish the water weren't so black. I'll be a sight when I come out, but at least I shan't feel so sticky," he muttered.

With that Chunky had permitted his body to slip down into the lake. He swam about in circles, for a time casting an occasional apprehensive eye in the direction of the camp, a short few rods away, but no sign of life was observable there.

After splashing about for a few moments the fat boy flopped over on his back for a delicious float. It is doubtful if Stacy gave thought to the fact that these were reptile-infested waters, waters literally alive with death-dealing monsters. Perhaps he did not know about it; at any rate, the boy was untroubled by thoughts of peril. He was humming to himself when Tad first saw him there.

At the same time Tad Butler's attention was attracted to something else. Little circles on various parts of the lake were to be seen. These circles were widening. It looked as if one might have carefully dropped a stone into the water here and there without causing a splash. The silent circles were growing with the seconds.

"Quick! Out of there!" yelled Tad. For once in his life, Butler was excited. "Swim for it!"

"What's the matter with you?" drawled Stacy. "I'm having the time of my life--"

"Alligators!" shouted Tad.

Stacy suddenly stopped moving his feet. The fat boy was paralyzed with fear. He seemed to have lost all power of movement. Tad might have leaped in to Stacy's assistance, but he had formed other plans almost on the instant.

"Ned! Mr. Lilly!" he shouted.

Just then a black spot that might have been a floating knot appeared on the surface of the water some thirty feet from where Stacy lay trembling. The black spot was the center of one of those widening circles.

Tad's rifle leaped to his shoulder. A crash echoed through the forest and seemed to rattle among the canes all down the line. There was a sudden and terrific commotion in the water where the black spot had been seen, a floundering and thrashing and a lashing of the waters, for Tad's bullet had sped true.

But there were still other circles, each now rapidly drawing nearer to where Stacy lay wide-eyed and motionless.

"Get him!" yelled Tad as Ned Rector sprang from his tent.

Ned comprehended on the instant. He saw Stacy out there in the water, Tad on shore with rifle held slightly forward from his stooping body, alert and ready to shoot. Ned did not wait. He took a running jump, landing in the lake with a mighty splash, and came up shaking the water from his face and lunged toward Stacy.

"Get out of this!" roared Ned.

"I--I can't," wailed the fat boy. "I--I'm too scared."

Ned Rector smote the fat boy with his doubled fist. It was the best thing Rector could have done in the circumstances, for it stirred Stacy to sudden activity. With a yell, Chunky threw himself over on his stomach and began striking out desperately for the shore, with Ned, yelling and threatening, following close behind.

Tad's rifle spoke again. It was just in time to stop a 'gator whose snout was suddenly thrust above the water a few feet behind Ned. All this had occupied only a few seconds, but they had been active seconds in every sense of the word, seconds fraught with peril and quickness on the part of two plucky boys.

A third time did Tad shoot. Though excited, his excitement did not appear to affect his aim, for the Pony Rider Boy had not missed once. With the third and last shot, Stacy's fingers clutched a bush on the lake edge. The boy pulled himself from the water and fell over in a heap on the bank.

"Get up. Get out of that!" commanded Tad. "Don't stop there."

"Hustle yourself," shouted Ned, himself losing no time in getting out of the water.

Chunky scrambled from the beach, then ran with all haste to his tent, with Rector following, making vain efforts to catch hold of the fat boy. He succeeded in overhauling Chunky at the entrance of the tent. Stacy, perceiving that he was going to be caught, found it convenient to stumble. Ned was upon him, but not before Chunky had picked up two handfuls of black, oozy muck, and as Ned fell upon him, Stacy plastered the contents of first one hand, then the other, over the face of his assailant.

Rector's mouth, nose and eyes were glued shut with the black stuff. Unfortunately for Ned he had opened his mouth at the instant when Stacy began painting his face.

"Now, maybe you will let me alone," jeered Chunky. "I guess I know how to defend myself."

"You're a fool," snapped Lilly. The guide was actually pale. "Why, didn't you know what was in the lake?"

"I'm busy. Come around after business hours," answered the fat boy, making all haste to discard his trunks and get into his clothes. He knew very well that, as soon as Rector was able to see and breathe, there would be trouble in the camp. Stacy proposed to be out of reach by that time.

The lad was out of the tent with remarkable quickness. He did not wait to draw on his boots, having heard the voice of Rector approaching. Stacy slipped out under the rear of his tent. He carried a rope with him. Making a bee line for a birch, he shinned up it almost with the speed of a squirrel, and a moment or so later was sitting hunched in a crotch, blinking down into the camp below him.

"Where's that ungrateful wretch?" raged Ned. "I'll skin him alive once I set eyes on him. Where is he?"

"He may have gone back in the lake," answered the guide. "I shouldn't be surprised at anything he did after that foolish play."

"I saw him go into his tent a few minutes ago," spoke up Walter.

"Stacy!"

The Professor called several times, but Master Stacy merely chuckled to himself.

"I guess he is all right. Don't worry about him, Professor," advised Tad. "You will find that he is in hiding somewhere about the camp. Hello, Ned, what's the matter?"

"That fat cayuse plastered a pailful of muck on my face," complained Rector. "And to think he would do such a thing after my having saved his life."

"Yes, who would have thought it?" agreed Tad. "What were you trying to do to him at the time?"

"I was after him to give him a trouncing."

"Oh, well, you can't blame him for defending himself, can you? By the way, Mr. Lilly, there are three dead 'gators out there. What are we going to do with them?"

"I reckon we won't do anything."

"Isn't there any way of getting them out?"

"No safe way that I know. You have just got one of your companions out of difficulties. Please don't go to getting into any on your own account."

"I don't intend to."

"Say, but you certainly can shoot. You plunked those killers squarely in the eye every shot. I'm pretty good with the gun myself, but for quick, accurate shooting there haven't many of them got you beaten."

"I had to shoot straight. Somebody would have been killed if I hadn't," answered Butler.

"You're right they would. But where is that boy. Where--"

Lilly uttered an exclamation and leaped aside as something came twisting down, striking him on the head and bouncing off on the ground. Tad found himself several paces to one side of the spot where he had been standing. Both men held the same thought. They thought it was a reptile that had dropped from the tree. Then Tad's quick eye discovered that it was a rope that had fallen from the tree. Glancing up, he made out the figure of Stacy Brown huddled in a crotch high up.

"Hey! There's a big bird up that tree. Watch me shoot him out," cried Tad, raising his rifle.

"Wow, oh, wow! Don't shoot! It's I, Stacy," yelled the fat boy.

"What--what--what's that?" stammered the guide. "That boy up a tree?"

"Yes, and to think I came near shooting him," answered Tad, in a voice loud enough for Stacy to hear.

"How did you get up there?" demanded Lilly in amazed wonder.

"I flew up. Didn't you ever see me fly? Why, I am a bird. And you didn't know that?"

"I--I guess you are, at that. I am getting to the point where I'll believe almost anything of you youngsters. Did he really fly up there?"

"He says he did," answered Tad with a grin. Tad knew how Stacy had climbed, for the rope already lay at the foot of the tree, but this form of climbing trees evidently was new to Bill Lilly.

"Come down out of that!" yelled Ned, catching sight of the boy up the tree.

"Where is he?" demanded the Professor.

"Up a tree," laughed the guide.

"Come down!" commanded Professor Zeppelin.

"Chase Ned Rector away and I will."

"I'll stay right here till he comes down and then I am going to give him a thrashing," declared Ned firmly.

"Then I don't come down," declared Stacy firmly.

"I know two ways to make you," answered Ned.

"How?"

"Place some food down here under you on the ground--something that has an odor and something you like."

Stacy did not reply, but a troubled expression appeared on his face.

"What is the other way?" asked Tad, chuckling over the situation.

"I am not going to tell you. That's a dark secret. Are you coming down, Stacy Brown?"

"I am not, Neddie Rector."

"Very good. Stay there all the rest of the day if you want to."

"I just love to be up a tree. There's another 'gator out there. Pass me up a gun and I will shoot him. Look, there's a whole pond full of them."

"No you don't. You don't catch me that way. I know what you are up to. You are trying to stampede us down to the lake, then you will clamber down and make a get-away. No, sir, there isn't anything green in my eye that you can notice," retorted Ned.

"Except some of the green stuff that I rubbed in with the black," answered Stacy in a jeering voice. "Why don't you come up here if you want to get me?"

"I believe I will, at that."

"If you do, you will get a kick in the face," threatened Chunky.

"You haven't any boots on. You can't hurt me."

"No, but I can dig with my toes. If you don't believe me just come up here and try me. I dare you to come up! I double-dare you to come up here. Ya, ya, ya! 'Fraid-cat, 'fraid-cat!" taunted Stacy.

The others were laughing. Ned's face was flushed.

"I'll show you whether I can get you down. We shall see whether I am a 'fraid-cat or not."

Rector ran to his tent, reappearing at few seconds later with an axe, Stacy in the meantime following the movements of the other boy with anxious eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

WOODMAN, SPARE THIS TREE

"Now, what are you going to do?" questioned the guide.

"I'll show you. Everyone get out of the way."

Ned Rector swung the axe, burying the blade in the tree.

"Ned, Ned!" warned the Professor.

"He won't have to cut it down. Stacy will come down long before there is any danger," answered Walter.

"Pshaw! You don't know how to chop," jeered Chunky. "George Washington, with his dull little hatchet, could out-chop you with one hand."

Ned was making the chips fly just the same. His hat had dropped off and perspiration was rolling from his forehead, for his axe was not making as much impression on the tree as he had confidently expected it would. He made lots of chips, but they were thin ones.

"Woodman, spare this tree," pleaded a mocking voice from above.

"I will spare the tree, but I won't spare you," retorted Rector. "We shall have this tree on the ground within fifteen minutes."

Stacy was tugging at a small bushy limb, but Ned was too busy to observe what the fat boy was doing. After considerable effort Chunky succeeded in breaking off the limb. He poised it carefully for a few seconds, then let go. The limb was not heavy, but in falling that distance it gained considerable momentum. The limb caught Ned fairly on top of the head, causing him to stagger back and sit down heavily, while his companions shouted and jeered, Billy Lilly looking on with a broad grin on his face.

"Stop this instantly!" commanded the Professor. "I'll not have such goings on. Stacy, will you come down out of that tree?"

"I will not."

"I command you to come down."

"Command *him*. Don't command *me*. How can I come down when Ned Rector is using the axe? He might chop me in two."

"Stacy!"

"Professor!"

"Ned, put away that axe. We can't have anything like this."

"But he smeared my face with mud after I had saved him from the 'gators," protested Ned.

"He--he jumped on me. I had to stop him," answered the boy up the tree.

The Professor motioned to Ned to go away, which Rector did rather unwillingly.

"Now, come down here."

Stacy hesitated, then wrapping both arms about the tree trunk he started down slowly. As he went he gained momentum, and the last eight or ten feet he shot down barely touching the tree, landing in a heap in the mud at the feet of his laughing companions. Stacy was up in a twinkling, fully expecting to find Ned Rector sprinting towards him. Ned, however, had remained by the tents.

"You never mind! I'll take it out of you some other time. I'll owe you a thrashing until some more convenient time,"

warned Ned, shaking his fist at Stacy.

"Now, young man, what excuse have you to offer for going into the lake?" demanded the Professor, laying a firm grip on Chunky's shoulder.

"What excuse?"

"That is what I asked."

"Be--be--because I wanted to take a bath," answered the fat boy.

"Go to your tent and finish dressing."

"Yes, I guess Ichabod has breakfast nearly ready," added the guide.

Stacy pricked up his ears at the word "breakfast," and started on a trot for the camp.

"I'll fix you for that, one of these days," threatened Ned as Chunky sprang into his own tent, appearing neither to have seen nor heard Ned. The same condition existed at breakfast. Ned was casting threatening glances at the fat boy, which the latter was pleased to ignore. Once during the meal Chunky, chancing to catch Ned's eye, winked solemnly, whereupon Ned forgot his anger and laughed aloud.

"That's the way it always ends. No one can stay mad at me for very long," wailed the fat boy. "That's the way my fun is always spoiled."

"Do you like to have folks mad at you?" questioned Lilly.

"Of course I do. What's the fun of living if somebody isn't making life interesting for you?" replied Stacy, gazing earnestly at the perplexed face of the guide.

"I--I never heard it put just that way before, but I reckon maybe there's something in what you say," reflected Billy.

"Of course there is. There is always something in what I say. I'll leave it to Tad, if there isn't."

"I agree," laughed Butler. "But let's talk about the canebrake. Where do we go from here, Mr. Lilly?"

"I reckon we will lay our course for Sunflower."

"What is that?" asked Ned.

"A flower," answered Stacy. "The common garden variety, like some persons we know."

"You mean Sunflower River, do you not?" asked Tad.

"Yes. What do you know about it?" inquired Lilly, raising his eyebrows.

"Not very much. I know there is such a place some twenty miles to the westward of where we are located at present," answered Butler.

"As I have said before, you boys don't need a guide."

"No, I think we need a guardian as much as anything. I move that we appoint you as Master Stacy's guardian," suggested Ned.

"Carried," shouted Walter.

"Excuse me, as Ichabod would say. I may be something of a success as a guide, but as the guardian of our young friend I fear I should be a miserable failure. I am too slow for a job like that. It needs a younger and more active man than myself for that position."

"You are right it does," piped up Stacy.

"It needs a hustler to keep going with Stacy Brown. When do we strike camp?"

"After breakfast," answered Tad.

"That means you fellows will have some work to do," nodded Chunky.

"It means you will have to do your share," replied Tad sharply. "You needn't think we are going to do your work for you this trip. Any man who shirks will be punished."

"How?"

"We haven't decided that yet. When we get into camp on the Sunflower River we are going to hold a meeting and draw up rules and regulations for the guidance of the Pony Rider Boys. Every man will have to abide by those rules, including Professor Zeppelin," declared Tad.

"I agree to them in advance. It is an excellent idea," approved the Professor.

"Better not be too sure about that," laughed Tad. "We may make some regulations to which you will find it hard to submit. They will be very stringent."

"Yes," urged Chunky. "The Professor needs discipline."

"So do some others," muttered Tad.

Immediately after breakfast the boys began their work of packing.

They were glad to break camp after their experiences on Tensas Lake. It was not a comforting feeling to know that the waters almost underfoot were alive with dangerous reptiles. Then again these might come on shore in search of prey. Such things had been known. Beyond this the boys were eager to get into the heart of the canebrake and begin following the game trails of the southern jungle, an unknown section to most American people. Only a comparatively few sturdy hunters and rangers have followed these trails. The perils are too great, both from fever and from the denizens of the big swamp.

"How are we ever going to drive our horses through?" questioned Tad.

"That is easy when you know how," smiled Lilly.

"But it was all I could do to get through on foot when I was out the other day."

"You will find these horses are pretty handy in the swamp. The ordinary animal would be of no use at all. I will lead the way and show you something that will perhaps be new to you in forest travel."

"It is all new to me," answered Tad.

"All you folks have your horns with you in case we get separated. If you do, wind the horn until you get a reply."

"Wind your horn?" wondered Stacy Brown.

"Yes."

"What do you wind it with?"

"Oh, a piece of string," retorted Ned.

"Winding the horn is blowing it, Stacy," Tad informed him. "Blow it for keeps in case you get lost or are in trouble."

"Oh! Funny names you have for things down here. Won't it scare all the game out of the woods?"

"It will if you blow the horn," laughed Ned.

Laughing and joking the boys hurried the work of breaking camp, folding their tents into neat packages, putting every piece of equipment in its proper place. The boys liked to attend to all these details themselves, having been in the habit of doing things in the same way for so long. Then again they knew where everything was, right where to put their hands on any part of their equipment no matter how dark the night might be.

When they were ready, the guide looked over the outfit and nodded approvingly.

"I'll take the lead," he said. "Give your horses their heads. They will know how to follow; in fact, they will know better than you boys. After you have ridden the brake for a time you will know it as well as I do. And look out that you don't get sidewiped and dismounted by any of those low-hanging vines."

"I should like to see the vine that could unhorse me," answered Stacy.

The outfit started with the guide leading, Ichabod next, then Tad and the others. Stacy's saddle girth slipped as he grabbed the pommel to mount, causing him to sit down suddenly. The others were too fully occupied to notice his mishap, nor did they hear him call to them to wait for him. The riders swept away at a brisk running trot, which these experienced horses always adopted in working through the swamp or the canebrake.

The way Lilly bored through the forest was a revelation to the boys. In and out among the great tree trunks he rode, dodging cypress knees, leaping fallen trees where not too high, slashing right and left with his long bush-knife, cutting a vine here or a limb there, leaving a broad, easily followed trail that even a novice would have had little difficulty in following, though of course at a slower pace.

The boys were convulsed with laughter at the way Lilly bored his way through the jungle, the banged tail of his cob standing straight out, the tough little animal's ears laid back on its head, and nose thrust straight ahead. To Tad Butler the wild ride was a delight, only he would have preferred to be the one up in front, slashing and hewing the way for the others, for Tad was a natural leader and would have enjoyed work of this kind.

In the meantime Stacy Brown had been left far behind, out of sight and out of sound of the rapidly moving outfit. As yet he had not been missed.

CHAPTER IX

THE FAT BOY HUNG UP

Stacy fumbled and fussed until he had cinched the girth tightly, the horse chafing at its bit, eager to be after its companions. Then the fat boy thrust a foot into the stirrup, one hand grasping the pommel of the saddle, the free hand giving the animal a sharp slap on the flanks.

Chunky's horse started with a leap and a snort. The boy's toe slipped from the stirrup before he had succeeded in swinging the other leg over the saddle. Then something else occurred that was not a part of Stacy's programme. The pommel caught under his belt, suspending him from the saddle. The pony now was tearing along the trail in the wake of the others at full speed.

"Whoa! Whoa!" yelled Chunky.

The horse paid no attention to its master's command, and increased rather than lessened its pace. Stacy's toes were dragging on the ground, his body being pinioned to the side of the animal, which was literally cracking the whip with the unfortunate fat boy. As it was, Stacy's feet touched only the high places along the trail.

Whack!

The boy's body sidewiped a tree.

"Ou-u-u-c-h!" yelled the Pony Rider Boy. "Whoa, I tell you, you fool horse!"

But there was no stopping the animal. It plunged on and on, thorn bushes tearing the trousers of the lad, drawing blood as the sharp points raked his flesh, threshing him against trees and stumps until there was scarcely a spot on his body that was not at least black and blue. The animal was plainly frightened, and Chunky realized that it was running away. The reins were out of the boy's reach and he was powerless to pull himself up or get a leg over the saddle. The horse did not give him time for anything.

Suddenly the boy's fingers closed over something cold. It was the bush horn. His heart gave a leap. He tugged at the horn until he had succeeded in pulling it from the saddle bag. But when he tried to put the end in his mouth, Stacy came near losing some teeth.

A trembling blast from the bush horn rang out. Then another and another until the birds ceased their song. The blasts of the horn were alternated with the yells of the fat boy.

Off ahead the others of the party were riding rapidly, though not so rapidly that Brown and his frightened horse were not overhauling them.

Tad's keen ears finally caught the sound of the horn. He turned in his saddle, and for the first time realized that Chunky was not with them. The ride had been so exciting thus far that none had given any heed to what was going on at the rear. The boys supposed Stacy was trailing along behind them.

Placing his horn to his lips, Butler gave a long, winding blast.

The guide pulled his horse up short, as did the others.

"Stacy is not with us," shouted Tad.

"Where is he?" called the guide.

"I don't know."

"Why, why, he has been right behind us all the time," returned the Professor.

"I am not sure of that. I haven't looked back once. Ichabod, have you seen Master Brown?"

"Ah doan' see him."

"There goes Stacy's horn again."

"Yes, he is coming on," said Ned.

"There's something wrong with him," cried Tad. "I can tell by the excited way in which he is blowing the horn."



'Look at Him!'

At about that time they heard him coming. The sound of the horse threshing its way through the bushes was borne plainly to their ears, and suddenly boy and horse dashed into view. The Pony Rider Boys opened their eyes in amazement.

"Look at him!" yelled Ned.

Tad whirled his own horse about and started for Stacy, with Billy Lilly not far behind.

At this juncture the fat boy's belt gave way, and he disappeared under the horse. The boys groaned, fully expecting to see Chunky trampled to death. But the horse was far too active to tread on its fallen rider, and cleared the boy's body in a swerving leap.

"Catch the horse!" cried Tad, dashing toward the fallen Chunky and throwing himself from his saddle, at the same time slipping the bridle rein over his animal's neck so that his own mount would not run away.

"Are you hurt, Chunky?" cried Tad, gathering the fat boy up in his arms.

"Hurt? Hurt?" answered Stacy somewhat dazedly, blinking rapidly and passing a trembling hand slowly over his face. "No, I reckon I'm not hurt. I scratched that race."

"But, but, what happened to you?" demanded Professor Zeppelin excitedly.

"Ha--ha--happened?"

"Yes, yes."

"Why nothing happened to me. I--I was just trying out a new stunt," answered the fat boy, a smile rippling over his countenance.

"Oh, fudge!" grunted Ned. "What's the use bothering with him? He won't tell on himself."

"Neither would you if you had been dragged half a dozen miles by the back of the neck," snapped the fat boy.

"How far?" asked Lilly.

"Half a dozen miles."

"Is there any water near here, Mr. Lilly?" asked Tad. "Master Stacy's body is covered with blood and scratches."

"Yes. You-all lead him over here to the right. I reckon we can find some water."

"I don't want any water," wailed Stacy.

"Yes you do," insisted Tad.

"I don't. I guess I know what I want and what I don't want. Water will make it hurt. I want something to eat. All my breakfast has been shaken down until I can't feel it at all."

Tad nodded to the guide, who tethered his horse and hurried away to fetch water. In the meantime Butler was removing Chunky's torn clothes. Even the underclothing had been torn to shreds.

"My, what a mauling you did get," observed Walter sympathetically.

"Serves him right," answered Ned.

"I don't understand how this thing occurred," said the Professor.

"I think he got hung up by his belt, sir," answered Tad. "Wasn't that what happened, Stacy?"

"I--I guess so."

"Tell me about it," urged Tad.

"Ouch!" howled Chunky as Butler dabbed a wet cloth against the torn skin of the fat boy.

"Ned, you hold him."

"With pleasure," grinned Rector, taking firm hold of Stacy.

"You let go of me," raged Stacy.

"I am going to hold you, even if I have to tie you," retorted Ned. "If you don't want rough treatment just stand still and take your medicine. Tell us how it occurred. That will take your mind from your aches and pains."

"I--I had one foot in the stirrup. The beast started and I slipped. Then I got hung up."

"He got hung up. Hooray!" cried Ned.

Chunky tried to punch him, but Rector laughingly thrust the fat boy away from him.

"If you will stand still it will be ended in a moment, Stacy," soothed Tad. "My, what a drubbing you did get! So you got hung up?"

"Ye--yes. Then the fool horse ran away. I--I never walked so fast in my life. It--it was like sailing in the air. My feet were

straight out behind me most of the time. You ought to try it, fellows. It's great. I'll bet I should have made a hit in a circus with that."

"I hope you didn't destroy any of the cypress trees," observed the guide.

Stacy gave him a resentful look.

"Walter, get another pair of trousers from Chunky's kit. This pair isn't fit to be worn again," directed Butler.

Walter Perkins hastened to obey Tad's order, and in a few minutes they had fixed the boy up so that he was reasonably comfortable, though his body was sore and it hurt him even to laugh.

"I don't know what we are going to do with you, young man," reflected the Professor, chin in hand, eyes fixed coldly upon the face of the fat boy.

"You--you don't have to do anything with me. I can do quite enough for myself."

"I should say you could," grinned Tad. The others laughed.

"I shouldn't want as much done to me," added Ned.

"Are you able to ride?" questioned the guide.

"No, I guess I'll walk. I'm not hankering to sit down. I don't know that I'll ever be able to sit down again." Chunky groaned dismally.

"Perhaps we had better make camp here," suggested the Professor.

"I don't think this is a good place to camp," answered Tad. "The ground is too low. How far is it from here to the Sunflower, Mr. Lilly?"

"About five miles."

"Oh, we can make that all right. I will lash my blanket to Stacy's saddle, and after he has ridden a few moments he will be all right."

Chunky agreed grumblingly, taking a keen pleasure in having others wait on him. He enjoyed his present situation even though his wounds were painful. In a few minutes they had prepared the saddle for him and assisted him into it.

"Now see if you can keep out of trouble," directed Tad.

"Give the baby his little horn to blow," jeered Rector.

"'Wind,' you mean," corrected Stacy. "They wind down here; they don't blow."

"Well, 'wind,' then, if you like that better," grumbled Ned.

"I do because that is the right way to say it. Your early education was sadly neglected. Did they take you out of school to dig early potatoes before the spring terms closed?" questioned Stacy innocently.

"Are you trying to roil me, Stacy Brown? If you are you might as well save your breath. I am too tickled at your predicament to get angry with you," averred Rector.

Lilly gave the word to move, whereupon the party fell into line again with the same formation as before, Stacy stubbornly insisting on keeping at the rear, the boys flinging back jokes at him. In this manner they went on for some distance, at first slowly, then gradually increasing their speed. Now and then the boys would glance back to grin at the fat boy, who was having considerable difficulty in keeping up. They noticed that he was not sitting with his full weight in the saddle. Instead, he was half standing in his stirrups because it pained him to sit down and take the jolting of the trotting horse.

"Look out for the vines. Keep in the trail," called the guide.

The boys, for the moment, forgot their companion at the rear of the line. They swung around in a curving trail, Lilly

slashing and shouting directions at them, Stacy standing a little higher in his stirrups to see what all the shouting was about. Then, all of a sudden, the fat boy was swept from his saddle, kicking, yelling, while the horse lurched forward and started into a long, loping gallop now that it was freed from its burden.

"Hi, look there!" yelled Ned Rector, as Stacy's riderless horse came trotting up to them.

"More trouble!" groaned Tad Butler, wheeling and starting back over the trail at as fast a gallop as possible over the rough ground.

CHAPTER X

IN THE HEART OF THE CANEBRAKE

"That boy!" muttered the Professor, as everyone turned sharply and started back, Lilly outdistancing all save Tad, who now rode the jungle fully as well as the guide, except that Tad had never used the bush-knife. It was a dangerous weapon in the hands of an inexperienced rider. With it one was likely to do his horse as well as himself a serious injury.

They heard Chunky's yells for help long before they reached him, and even after reaching a spot where they might have seen the fat boy, they did not at once catch sight of him. They were looking for Chunky on the ground, believing that he had fallen and been left by his horse, while as a matter of fact Stacy was in the air, six or eight feet above the ground.

While standing high in his stirrups he had been caught across the breast by a tough vine that grew between two trees across the trail, so high that the guide's bush-knife had not reached it. Stacy had thrown out both hands to protect himself. The vine had slipped neatly under the lad's arms. The next second he was dangling in the air, with the horse trotting on ahead. And there they found him, swaying back and forth, howling lustily, afraid to let go for fear he would hurt himself when he struck the ground, but almost ready to let go no matter what the consequences might be.

The Pony Rider Boys, when finally they did catch sight of their companion, uttered shouts of merriment.

"Hanged at last!" howled Ned Rector. "Oh, I never thought I should live to see this happy moment!"

Tad brought his horse down just before reaching the fat boy.

"Hello, Chunky, what are you doing up there?" demanded Tad.

"Having a swing," answered Stacy sheepishly. "Come on up, it's fine."

"Thank you, but I don't see any way of getting up," chuckled Tad.

"Easiest thing in the world. All you have to do is to ride under the vine, reach up and grab hold of it, then let your horse go right on about his business."

"Is that the way *you* did it?" questioned Butler.

"Something like it," admitted Chunky. "Are you going to help me down?" was the urgent question.

"What do you think about it, Professor? Wouldn't it be better to leave him up there where he cannot get into any further difficulties?" asked Tad, turning to the Professor.

"I am inclined to agree with you, Tad," reflected the Professor gravely.

"How long have you been there, Stacy?" asked Walter.

"Long enough. Come, help me down."

"Let go and you will come down much more quickly than we could help you," suggested Ned.

"But I don't want to fall," wailed the boy.

"Oh, very well, then, stay where you are," retorted Ned.

"I will help you down, Stacy," offered Tad, riding under his companion. "Now, let go."

"I--I'm afraid."

Tad grabbed the fat boy's legs, giving them a violent tug, whereupon Stacy and the vine came tumbling down. In trying to catch Chunky, Tad Butler was himself unhorsed, and the two boys landed on their heads and shoulders on the soft ground with the yells of their companions ringing in their ears.

"Get up!" commanded the Professor sternly. "This sort of thing has gone far enough."

"Tha--that's what I say," stammered Chunky, wiping the muck from his flushed face. "A good old-fashioned country road is good enough for me. I don't like this kind of traveling."

"Do you want to be sent back?" demanded Professor Zeppelin grimly.

"No-o-o-o," drawled Stacy. "Not if I have to go back over that trail. That's the stickiest mess I ever got into."

"Your behavior is somewhat sticky, too," observed the Professor, with a smile. "Now, if there is no objection, I move that we proceed on our journey, but I wish Master Stacy to ride just ahead of me so that I may watch him."

"Who--who's going to watch you?" stammered the fat boy.

"Don't worry. We will look after the Professor," laughed Tad. "You must remember that he hasn't been getting into quite so much trouble as you have."

"He will," answered Stacy. "He's just been lucky, that's all."

The party, after again assisting Stacy in his saddle and placing him between the Professor and Tad, moved on once more. The distance to their next camping place was now less than a mile, and they soon reached the Sunflower without further disturbance, tearing their way through the dense cane, making a crashing that must have been heard a long distance away.

The Sunflower was a stream some fifteen rods wide by several miles long, with little bayous reaching off into the swamp every now and then, lonely, silent bayous, beneath whose surfaces lurked many perils.

"Do we swim across?" asked Walter.

"Master Stacy may want to. I do not believe the others will care about doing so," answered Lilly with a smile and a brief nod.

"Where do we make camp, Mr. Lilly?" called Butler's cheery voice.

"Straight ahead on the little rise of ground, Master Tad."

"Any choice as to position?"

"Use your own good judgment."

"Thank you, sir," was Tad's response. "Stacy, how is your heart today, after all your experiences?"

"It's weak," whispered Chunky hoarsely.

"Then I have a good remedy for it. Go out and cut some wood, but no more cane as you value your life. We don't propose to have another campfire blow up in the middle watches of the night and scare us to death."

"No more cane fire in this camp, young man," affirmed the guide.

Chunky very reluctantly shouldered an axe, after they had dismounted and removed the lashings from their packs, and after some delay they heard an occasional whack of the axe, then silence. The camp was pretty well settled when Tad sang out for Chunky.

"Where is that boy with the wood? Ichabod is waiting for it. Chunky!" he called.

There was no response.

"Ned, I guess you will have to go look for him. I hope he hasn't chopped his head off."

"Oh, he couldn't do that if he wanted to," laughed Walter.

"You don't know him. Stacy Brown can do most anything that other folks would think they couldn't. Chase him up, Ned."

"Which way did he go?"

"North, along the bank. He probably has gone into the swamp a little way to get out of the cane. I'll blow the horn."

Butler did blow several blasts, but there was no answer. Tad was not worried, knowing that Stacy could not have gone far and realizing that he would leave a plain trail in case he had strayed into the swamp.

A few moments later Ned's horn was heard. He had found Stacy sound asleep, sitting with his back against a tree, while at his side on a log was a great, hook-beaked, barred owl blinking at him wisely. Ned said the owl was enough like Stacy to be his own brother.

Ned was obliged to cut the wood himself, as Stacy refused to do a thing because Rector had used him roughly in waking him up.

"You treat me as if I were a bag of meal," complained Chunky.

"No, I wouldn't insult the meal to that extent," snorted Ned. "Get over there and sit down till I have the wood cut. You will then tote it to camp."

"I will then *not*," retorted Stacy belligerently.

"You will *yes*. Remember I owe you one. If you don't watch out I will make it two and settle both accounts out here while I've got you alone," warned Ned.

Stacy pondered over this for several moments while watching his companion swing the axe, and evidently decided that Ned had the better side of the argument.

"All right," said Stacy finally. "I'll carry my share of the wood. It isn't that I am afraid of you, you know, but my heart won't stand any undue excitement."

"Oh, fudge!" grunted Rector, pausing to wipe the perspiration from his face and forehead.

Stacy started back with the wood before Ned had finished, but carried only about enough wood to burn ten or fifteen minutes. Ned had to fetch the rest, for Stacy refused to go back for more, knowing that Ned would not assault him here in the camp.

Along the water's edge the great cypress trees reared themselves into the air, and a few rods back of them the dense cane. The party was now in the heart of the canebrake, in which they had reason to believe lurked much of the game of which they were in search.

One of the big cypress trees stood just in front of the camp, its awkward knees twisted and bent, extending some four feet above the ground. Below the knees were watery caverns, black and oozy, foul and unhealthful. Stacy sat perched on one of these knees gazing thoughtfully down into the black pool.

The others were busy about the camp and failed to observe him. After a time the fat boy went out to hunt for a pole. He wanted to try the water to see how deep it was. He returned a few minutes later with a tall cane, the foliage still fresh at its top. It had been broken down, he knew not how and cared less.

"Going fishing?" questioned Ned, fixing a grinning gaze on the fat boy.

"I may be, then again I may not be."

"I hope you have luck."

"I hope I do."

"And I hope you fall in."

"I hope I don't."

Stacy perched himself on one of the cypress knees, and, letting the bushy top down, began poking about in the black pool. He felt something move under the pole in his hand, and gave a vicious prod. There followed a sudden commotion down in the water, then the cane pole was jerked down with terrific force.

It all occurred so quickly that Chunky did not think to let go of the pole until it was too late to do so. But there was time

in which to yell. Stacy uttered a wild, piercing scream, for he saw what had caused the disturbance below. A huge snout, with a pair of jaws that seemingly worked on a loose hinge--Chunky didn't have to be told that the swimming reptile was a huge alligator!

CHAPTER XI

ON THE BIG GAME TRAILS

Tad Butler was the only one of the party to grasp the note of wild alarm in Stacy's voice. Nor did even Butler comprehend what had caused it.

Tad, however, saw the fat boy lose his balance after clutching desperately at the cane stalk.

At that moment, engaged in straightening out the coils of his lasso, Tad had just slipped the coil into his left hand, the honda in his right. As he did so Butler had swung the rope over his head, intending to catch Stacy, giving him a slight scare.

Just as Stacy's feet shot upward Tad let go the rope, dropping the loop neatly over Master Brown's left foot and drawing taut instantly. Chunky, thus caught, sprawled between the cypress knees and the black pool, looking more like a giant spider than anything else.

"Ow, wow! wow! In the name of goodness!" shrieked Stacy.

"Keep cool, if you can!" Tad yelled to the frightened victim. Then, to the other boys:

"Get him out as quickly as you can, fellows! You'll have to be lively now! Something is wrong with our comrade."

"What is it, where is he?" cried the boys.

"There, under the tree at the end of my rope. Be quick. There's something down there. Be careful that you don't get in, too. I've got him fast, but he may squirm loose."

Tad had snubbed the rope around a tree and now began hauling in. Chunky's legs were spread wide apart, and Tad hauled him up little by little until the fat boy's legs were on either side of one of the cypress knees, the knee pressing against his body. Chunky could be hauled no further unless he were to be split in two. But Butler was satisfied that the fat boy was out of the reach of anything that might be down in the pool.

Lilly was the first to reach the scene, followed in great strides by Professor Zeppelin and the other two boys. Now the problem of getting both the boy's legs on one side of the cypress knee was presented to them.

"Get--get me out of here! I've got a rush of blood to the head," pleaded Chunky.

"You are fortunate if you don't get more than that," snapped Billy Lilly.

"Did de 'gator done git him?" questioned Ichabod apprehensively.

"Not yet. He may," answered the guide. "Let up on the rope a little, Master Tad."

"You had better pass another one about his waist first, in case anything happens to this rope. Get your rope, Ned. I can hold him here until you have him safely secured."

Ned ran for his rope. All this time Stacy Brown was hanging head down, looking into the pool, face to face with the terrible thing that he saw down there. He couldn't keep his eyes closed, try as he might. A strange fascination seemed to force him to look into the big, bulging eyes of the 'gator patiently waiting for him down in the black pool.

Ned, returning with his rope, climbed over on the knees and leaned over to secure it about Stacy's waist. He quickly turned a pale face up to those gathered about the scene.

"Hold fast to me, please. I don't fancy furnishing a meal for that fellow down there," said Rector in a quiet voice.

"What--what is it, Ned?" gasped Walter.

"Never mind what it is. Just take tight hold of me. Hold my legs, if you please, Mr. Lilly."

The guide did so, and Ned lost no time in taking a double hitch about Stacy's waist. Lilly nodded to Tad to lower away on the rope, which Tad did slowly and cautiously.

"Don't--don't let me down in there!" yelled the fat boy, squirming and fighting and kicking.

"Stop it!" commanded the Professor sternly. "If you will behave yourself we may be able to get you out, but if you don't keep quiet we may let you go."

A moan was the only answer to the Professor's warning. Lilly now grabbed one of the truant feet, jerking it over to the other side of the cypress knee against its mate.

"Haul away, Master Tad," the guide sang out in a cheery voice. "I guess we've got the young gentleman this time."

While Butler was hauling in on his rope, Lilly and Ned Rector were pulling the fat boy up by his feet, each having hold of a foot. Stacy came out squirming like an angleworm being pulled from the ground after a spring rain. He surely would have fallen in again if they had not held to him by main force.

"There, you wooden-headed--" began Ned.

"Tut, tut!" warned Professor Zeppelin.

Stacy was tossed to the ground a safe distance from the scene of his late unpleasantness, where he lay rubbing that part of his person where the rope had fairly cut into the skin. Stacy was still sore from contact with the thorn bushes, and the rope was an added aggravation to his already tender skin.

"You may thank Master Tad and Ned for having saved your life, Tad first of all," reminded the Professor.

"For getting into difficulties, young man, you win the blue ribbon in all classes," declared Billy Lilly. "How did you ever come to get in that hole?"

"He was fishing for something," grinned Tad.

"And he got a real bite," added Ned.

"He came near furnishing a bite for that gentleman in the pool. That was the quickest move I ever saw," continued Lilly, gazing admiringly at Tad. "How you can handle a rope! That's one thing I never could do."

"How did you manage it so quickly, Tad?" asked Walter, his face still pale from fright.

"I was casting at him for fun at the time. My getting him was not due to any unusual quickness on my part, for the rope was in the air when he lost his balance. I merely jerked it down over one foot, and I guess it was lucky for him that I was preparing to play a joke on him, at that."

"I should say it was," muttered the guide.

"You come with me, old boy," said Tad, taking Stacy by an arm and leading the fat boy to his tent. They did not know what Tad said to his companion, but they did know that Stacy looked very solemn and greatly subdued, when, after a ten-minute interview, Tad permitted Stacy to leave the tent. The fat boy sat down without a word, gazing reflectively into the campfire, and did not speak again, except to answer questions in monosyllables, until they had finished supper.

That night, as usual, the music of the barred owls, their weird screeches and yells, filled to the exclusion of all other sounds except the busy buzz of the giant mosquitoes. The latter were kept out pretty well by the smudge that Lilly built in front of the tents and that he kept going through most of the night. Stacy turned in early, having very little to say to any one. But by the next morning he had forgotten all about his narrow escape and was the same old Chunky, ready for any opportunity that might present itself for getting into trouble.

Shortly after daybreak Tad slipped on his boots, and, with rifle under his arm, sauntered out to the cypress tree, where he perched himself on the knees at the edge of the black pool. The boy waited patiently for half an hour, keeping a close watch of the pool, but he discovered nothing.

After a time Butler gathered up some rotten sticks and dropped them in. He had not been at this long before a loud splash below told him that his bait had been seized, and a moment later the bulging eyes of a 'gator slowly protruded from the water, the eyes gazing up at the boy perched above them.

"Now I reckon I have you, my fine gentleman," muttered Tad, slowly bringing his rifle into position.

It was perhaps three seconds later when Tad Butler's rifle, roaring out its deadly message, brought every man in the camp from his tent. They saw Tad sitting on a cypress knee, gazing down into the black pool, a satisfied grin on his face. Lilly understood at once what was going on.

"Did you get him?" he cried.

"I did," answered Tad calmly. "He won't have any more appetite for fat boys. Are there any more of them down there, do you think, Mr. Lilly?"

"I reckon there are plenty there."

"Then I am going to make it my business to thin them out," said Tad.

The bang of the Pony Rider Boy's rifle was heard three more times that morning. That appeared to have rid the black pool of its dangerous residents. While Tad was watching the pool Stacy Brown was dancing about the camp in search of something to occupy his mind and time, but the others kept a close watch on the fat boy and kept him out of mischief.

Early in the morning Mr. Lilly had gone out with rifle and dogs in search of "bear sign." The dogs were barking eagerly as he left camp, but the animals were disconsolate when, along towards noon, hunter and dogs returned to camp.

"Nary a sign," answered Lilly in response to Tad's questioning look. "There's game here, just the same. The dogs scented something this morning. Of course, I don't know what they scented, and what bothers me is that I couldn't find any sign."

"How did the dogs act?" asked Tad.

"As if they were mad about something."

"I guess they must have been mad with you for taking them out on a wild goose chase," suggested Stacy wisely.

"No doubt, no doubt," nodded the guide.

"I'll tell you what, I'll go out and find the trail for you. I don't suppose there is a better trailer in the country than myself," declared Stacy. "Why, I can run a trail with my nose, even though it's ages old."

"Are you speaking of your nose or the trail?" asked Ned.

"The trail, of course. My nose isn't ages old."

"Nor will it be if you don't watch out and keep away from trouble," warned Tad. "What are your plans, Mr. Lilly?"

"We will go out in the morning. Between us we ought to pick up something. This afternoon I will take a run about to see what I can pick up; then in the morning we will get an early start, all hands going out."

"That will be fine," approved the boys.

They were enthusiastic over the guide's report when he came in that night with the good news that he had found some "bear sign" about four miles to the west.

"Do you think that was what the dogs scented when you were out before?" asked Tad.

"I reckon it must have been. What you-all been doing this afternoon?"

"Oh, 'gator hunting."

"Get any?"

"I have cleaned them out."

The guide laughed.

"I reckon if you were to go swimming in there you'd change your mind. They are moving back and forth all the time. It

would take your time for the next several years to clean them out of this river. Remember, we start early in the morning for the hunting grounds."

Early in the morning meant just as the dawn was graying in the east, and before the light really had filtered through the tall cypress. All the boys turned out cheerfully, including Chunky, who didn't utter a grumble. Ned said Chunky must be sick, but Chunky declared that he always got up that way, and that it was Ned who was so grouchy that he thought everyone else was. The other boys mischievously sided with Stacy and against Ned Rector.

After a hasty breakfast a light pack of food was stowed in the pockets of the saddles, and the boys jogged from the camp, leaving Ichabod in sole charge. Lilly rode ahead, slashing as usual, Chunky being sandwiched between Tad and the Professor.

The "bear sign" had been discovered in the canebrake about three miles from camp. It was to this point that the guide was heading. Arriving there he called the party about him for their instructions. They were to split up, and at least two of them were to pass through an exciting experience ere they returned to their camp on Sunflower River.

CHAPTER XII

THE QUEST OF THE PHANTOM DEER

The dogs were tugging at their leashes, having already scented the trail, when Lilly called his hunters about him to give them their directions. It was decided that Tad Butler and Stacy Brown were to proceed to the north, posting themselves between two ridges of cane in the swamp, and there to wait until they were called in by the guide's horn later in the day.

Ned was given a post to the south, while Walter Perkins and the Professor were to remain with Lilly. Taking all things into consideration the three boys who were to guard the north and south were in much the better positions, as it was believed that the bears would take one of these two directions, breaking from ridge to ridge until they found a hiding place in one or the other of the canebrake ridges.

Tad and Ned were each equipped with a bush-knife, with a horn to each party. Lilly considered that the boys needed no further advice from him, the lads having had experience with bear before this and all being good shots and well-trying hunters at big game.

"Look out that you don't get lost if you get on a chase," he warned. "One is likely in the excitement of a chase to forget to blaze his trail. It isn't any use to get game if you can't get back to camp with it."

The boys knew this, too. Stacy declared that such a little thing as the canebrake didn't worry him in the least; that he could find his way out with his eyes shut.

"Don't try it," warned the guide tersely.

"I am glad I haven't the responsibility of looking after Chunky," chuckled Ned Rector. "Tad, you have your work cut out for you."

"All take your positions. We will wait here until you have done so, then we will free the dogs. Blow your horns, one long blast when you are ready, then lie low," directed the guide.

"Come on, Chunky; I'm off," cried Tad, springing into his saddle, armed with rifle, bush-knife, horn and hunting knife, Chunky having the usual equipment without the bush-knife and horn.

The two boys fought their way through the jungle and were soon out of sight and sound of their companions. Ned, too, was on his way to his post, thus placing the two outside parties about five miles apart, with the guide, Professor Zeppelin and Perkins, somewhere midway between the outside parties.

After some time had elapsed, Ned's horn was heard. He had farther to go than Tad. The latter's horn sounded fully half an hour after Ned's.

Lilly unleashed the dogs, and with joyful yelps they scattered, diving into the thick cane, darting here and there, in search of the trail, which they found, and started away in a very few minutes. To the surprise of Lilly, the dogs headed west instead of going either north or south, as he had looked for them to do.

"He will round back sooner or later and break for the other ridges," was the guide's confident prediction. "The boys will get a chance at the bear unless I am greatly mistaken."

Lilly and his two companions now started at break-neck speed in pursuit of their dogs. Through cane, through soft, swampy land they urged their ponies, slashing to the right and left with the bush-knife. The yelping of the dogs could be heard far ahead of them.

"Good trail," observed Lilly. "The hounds are making excellent time. That's a favorable sign."

"But we shan't get a shot at the game if it is going so far away," objected Walter.

"You can't tell about that. The bears are just as likely to double back here as to go on. You never can tell about those fellows. They are sharp and they can cover ground faster than we can in the woods. This nearest one is a she-bear and a big one."

"How do you know?" questioned Walter.

"I can tell by her tracks and the way she works. It is easy when you know. There, the dogs are out of hearing now. Gracious, she's making a long run. We will take a short cut across this way. That ought to bring us across the trail and we may be able to head her off."

While all this was taking place Tad Butler and Stacy Brown were standing beside their horses close to the canebrake. They too heard the barking of the dogs, and realized that the game was getting farther and farther away.

Suddenly Tad heard what he thought was the sound of a breaking twig off to the north of them.

"Chunky," he whispered, "you stay here and watch the horses while I make a scout. I believe that bear has given them the slip and has come over into the brake here. Don't make a sound. I will be back pretty soon."

"How long?"

"Half an hour at the most."

Stacy nodded. Tad tethered his horse, then taking his rifle from the saddle boot stole silently away. Stacy lost sight of him in a few minutes. Butler, proceeding as quietly as an Indian, had crossed the next cane ridge and had gotten nearly over a narrow stretch of swamp when he heard a sound in the cane just ahead of him. Tad crouched down and listened. Not a sound save that of the birds of the forest did he now hear. He had waited in that position for some time, when he heard something strike the ground in the canebrake just beyond him.

The boy straightened up. A flash of red and a crashing of the cane told him that his ears had not deceived him.

With characteristic quickness, Tad threw up his rifle and fired. A crash woke the echoes of the forest, stilling the songs of the birds in the trees. Then followed another crash.

"I got him that time. It's a deer," exulted the Pony Rider Boy. He did not pause to think that his had been a remarkable shot, or that he had fired while the deer was still in the air, making a leap for safety. The animal had caught sight of him as he rose to his feet, then leaped. Alarmed by the haying of the dogs, the deer had fled in Tad's direction, and perhaps it had halted because of the scent of the boy himself. At any rate Tad Butler's shot had been sure. His bullet had caught the animal just back of the shoulder, dropping the deer dead in its tracks.

Butler started on a run, crashing through the bushes and into the dense cane, and there lay the deer, a handsome doe. The young hunter felt regretful as he gazed down at the fallen animal.

"Well, I reckon I've got enough meat to keep us going for some time. Mr. Lilly will be glad to get this. Now, I must get the horses."

Tad jacked the deer up in the manner learned from his former guide in the Maine Woods, then started back for Stacy and the horses. Butler had a little difficulty in finding his way at first, thus losing fully twenty minutes, but finally he found the trail, and set off for the stock on a brisk run.

"Hey, what did you shoot at?" cried Stacy the instant he caught sight of his companion.

"At a deer," answered Tad, smiling happily, "and I got him, too."

"You did?" wondered Stacy.

"I surely did. We will go get him and take him back to camp."

"What about the bear?"

"I don't believe the bear will come this way. You heard them going off in the other direction, but perhaps you had better stay here and watch while I get the deer."

"No, no, I'm going with you," protested Chunky.

"Very good, if you want to. I don't think we shall lose much. Then again I may need your help in loading the beast on my horse."

"Is he a big one?"

"No, it is a doe," answered Tad, climbing into his saddle, Stacy doing the same with his mount.

"Hurrah!" shouted the fat boy. "We are the mighty hunters. Give us a fair show and send the rest of the folks about their business and we will show them how to get game. But I'm sorry we didn't meet the bears."

"So am I. Still, we have some food that is better than bear meat."

The boys hurried along Tad's trail as fast as possible. They crossed the swamp places, on through the canebrake and into the partially open swale where Tad had stood when he shot.

"It is right over there," called Tad. He pushed on, but as he reached the spot he stopped and rubbed his eyes. There was no deer there.

"He's gone," gasped Tad Butler.

"A regular phantom deer," jeered the fat boy. "Oh, what a joke on you. Won't the boys have the laugh on you?"

"This is no joke," answered Tad slowly. "I'm going to find out what it is right now."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MYSTERY IS SOLVED

Butler's first act was to dismount, tossing the bridle rein to Stacy. Tad then hurried to the spot where he had left the deer hanging.

"I guess the bear has been here all right," chuckled the fat boy. "Did you really kill a deer, Tad?"

"Can't you take my word for it?" demanded Tad somewhat testily.

"Oh, yes, of course. Don't get touchy about it."

"I think I have reason to be touchy. I not only lose my deer, but my companion doubts that I ever had one."

"I was only joking, Tad."

"All right."

"What do you think?" Stacy resumed.

"I don't think. I am trying to see." Tad stood still before destroying the clues by tramping about on the scene. The poles on which the deer had been hung had been flung to one side. He could see where the deer had fallen to the ground when the poles had been removed, and his first impression was that a bear had chanced that way and torn down the dead animal. But Tad knew that a bear would not have dragged the prey away, that the bear, if hungry, would have made a meal of it, then crawled away somewhere to sleep or rest. The deer had disappeared. That meant that some person had carried it away.

The Pony Rider Boy circled slowly about the scene, using his eyes to good advantage. He saw the prints of a heavy boot in the soft ground; then he discovered that the bushes had been crushed down where the doe had been dragged. It was a plain trail up to a certain point, and there the trail changed. Further investigation showed the lad that a horse had been tethered to a tree nearby, and it was at the base of this tree that the dragged-trail came to an end.

Butler understood the meaning of this when he discovered quite a pool of blood on the leaves of some trampled bushes. Some person had stolen his deer and loaded it to the back of the horse. Following the trail still farther, Tad saw that the man had ridden away with his prize.

"It is plain theft, nothing more or less," muttered the boy, as he started back to Stacy.

"Well?" questioned the fat boy.

"Stolen!" answered Butler sharply.

"You don't say so? Who did it?"

"How should I know? I shouldn't be surprised if the man saw me hang the deer there, then as soon as I got away he stole the carcass. Wasn't that a measly trick?"

"Beastly," agreed Stacy.

Tad stood pondering.

"What are you going to do about it--tell Mr. Lilly?" questioned Stacy.

"Well, hardly that. I am going after that deer," answered Tad with a firm compression of the lips. "You may go back to camp if you wish."

"No, sir! If there is going to be any fun you may count me in every time. But we may get lost."

"We can't get lost on that trail. By the time we have passed over it in the wake of the other man it will be plainly marked."

"How do you know there wasn't more than one?" asked Stacy.

"Because the tracks of one horse are all there are here. One man and one horse, that's all."

"Hm-m-m! But he may be a long way from here by this time."

"He cannot have gone far in this short time. Then remember, he is carrying a heavy load. No horse can travel fast in this swamp, especially when carrying a man and a deer, unless the man walked. In that case his progress would be still slower."

"Yes, but what are you going to do if you do catch up with him?" urged Chunky.

"Get my deer," answered Tad firmly.

"Let's be going," urged Stacy after a moment's reflection.

Tad needed no further urging. He quickly led his horse around the spot where the deer had been dropped, then blazing a tree on four sides for the guidance of Billy Lilly in case the latter should find it necessary to follow them, Tad started off on the trail of the deer thief, followed a short distance to the rear by Stacy Brown.

The trail was not difficult to follow; even a novice could not well have missed it for the thief had used his bush-knife freely in getting away. Tad had little use for his own bush-knife, except here and there where he found it possible to make a short cut where the other man had made a detour to find better going for his heavy load. These short cuts saved quite a little of the distance. Tad imagined that they were going a third faster than the man they were pursuing. If that were the fact they should overhaul him very quickly.

"Say, how much farther have we got to go?" finally called Stacy.

"Keep quiet," warned Tad. "Don't call. The trail is growing fresher every minute. We cannot be far from him now. I think we had better slow down a little. Make as little noise as possible."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," grumbled Chunky.

"It may have a great deal to do with it. You do as I tell you."

They were not as near as they thought, and the man was making better time than they had deemed possible. At the rate the boys were going Tad felt that they should have overhauled him at about this time, but there was neither sight nor sound of a human being, though the trail itself was still plain and fresh.

"More speed," directed the Pony Rider Boy.

"I'll break my neck if I ride any faster," objected Stacy.

"Then stay here and wait for me."

"I won't."

The horses settled to their work as if they understood what was expected of them. They leaped cypress knees, fallen trees, and tore through the forest at a perilous pace, but they were making more noise than either of the boys realized. So much noise did they make that horseman some distance ahead of them heard them plainly.

Tad suddenly pulled his horse down to a walk. Ahead of him, sitting his saddle easily, was a tall, bearded man. The latter's horse was white, with pink nostrils, something like Tad Butler's mount. The rider was raw-boned and armed with rifle and bush-knife, besides a revolver that protruded from his belt. But there was no deer on the horse, nor any trace of a deer.

"Howdy, stranger," greeted the man.

"Good afternoon," answered Tad, eyeing the man narrowly. "Have you seen anything of a man carrying a deer?"

"A deer?"

"Yes, sir."

"I reckon I saw a fellow with a buck some twenty minutes back."

"Where?"

"Oh, he went on past here."

"Which way did he go?"

"That way," answered the stranger, pointing on to the westward.

"Did you know the man?"

"Never sot eyes on him before, kiddie," answered the man. "But you seem mighty interested?"

"I am," was the terse reply. Tad was using his eyes to good purpose, but trying not to let the man know that he was doing so.

"Somebody you know?"

Tad shook his head.

"But we would like to know him," interjected Stacy.

"For what, kiddie?"

Tad gave Chunky a quick glance of warning.

"Oh, nothing much. We thought we should like to hold a conversation with him, that's all," answered Stacy carelessly.

"You are quite sure it was a buck that he was carrying?" questioned Butler.

"I reckon I ought to know."

"I think you are mistaken."

"Eh?"

"It was a doe."

"So?"

"Yes, sir. It was *my* doe," persisted Butler.

"Yours?" in well-feigned amazement.

"It was. I shot him and someone stole him. If you know anything about the man who took him, I would ask you kindly to tell me. He may have carried the carcass away under the impression that the man who killed the doe had abandoned it."

"This man wasn't under any seech impression, kiddie."

"How do you know?"

"Wall, in the first place it wasn't a doe and in the second place the fellow killed it himself, I reckon," drawled the stranger.

"May I ask who you are?"

"That doesn't cut any figure."

"It may cut more than you think."

"What do you mean?" demanded the stranger, peering angrily at Tad.

"That I am going to have that deer if I have to hold up every man in the canebrake," was Tad's firm reply.

"I reckon you've got your work out out for you," chuckled the fellow.

Tad gave him another look, and swung down from his stirrup.

"Stacy, you remain where you are."

"What are you going to do?" demanded the fat boy.

"Take a little look around. Keep your eyes peeled," he warned in a lower tone, intended for Chunky's ears alone.

The fat boy nodded. Stacy was unafraid. In fact he was pleased and he shrewdly suspected that the man before them knew more about the stolen doe than he had told them. He was positive that the stranger was shielding the real thief, and that Tad knew it. "Trust Tad for seeing things," was the fat boy's reasoning.

Butler *was* seeing things.

"What do you reckon you are going to do?" called the man.

"I want to look about here a bit, that's all. I don't suppose you have any objections?" questioned Tad sarcastically.

"You are a mighty pert young fellow, it strikes me."

Tad did not reply. He was following the trail of a horse to the north of where the horseman was sitting, narrowly watching Tad. In order to do so more fully, the stranger wheeled his mount about.

"Hello!" exclaimed Chunky.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded the man.

"Your nag must have hurt itself."

"What makes you think so?"

"He has blood on his flanks."

"That's so, kiddie. I reckon I must have pricked him with my bush-knife. I'll have to tend to that at the first opportunity," explained the fellow lamely.

"Pricked him with a bush-knife, eh?"

"Yes."

"Ha, ha, ha; haw, haw, haw!" laughed the fat boy mockingly.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FAT BOY DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF

"You laughing at me?" shouted the stranger angrily.

"No, that was a horse laugh," answered Chunky.

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean I was laughing at the horse. The joke is on the horse, you see. That's why I called it a horse laugh. Ever hear of a horse laugh? That was one of those things. You see, you can learn even from a kid."

The horseman, glowering, was gazing so fixedly at the fat boy that for the moment he had forgotten to watch Tad, who was now circling slowly about the two in ever-widening circles. Tad found that the broad trail made by the man who had stolen his doe ended where they were.

The lad came around again to the point where he had discovered horse tracks leading north from that point. He took up this trail again. Behind a fallen cypress, partially hidden in the foliage, the Pony Rider Boy discovered a dead deer. At first he did not go near to the carcass, pretending not to have seen it, but continued moving around the place, his object being to see where the deer had been hit. He found the wound very soon, for it was just back of the left shoulder.

Even then Butler gave no sign that he understood. He strolled back to Stacy, giving the fat boy a knowing wink, which Stacy, for a wonder, interpreted correctly. That is, he understood that his companion had made a discovery, but just what that discovery was, Chunky could not say.

"Well?" questioned the stranger sharply.

"Well?" answered Butler, a faint grin appearing on his face.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Of what?"

"That your doe isn't here?"

"I am satisfied," replied Tad evasively, not saying of what he was satisfied.

"If you want to catch the man with the buck, you'd better be heading on. He'll get so far away that you'll never catch him if you don't move."

"I am in no hurry now," replied Butler.

"What do you-all reckon on doing?"

"Remain right here until the rest of my party comes up."

The stranger started.

"Chunky, will you be good enough to wind the horn?"

Stacy grinned broadly.

"I reckon I'll wind the old thing up until she caves in or breaks her mainspring," chuckled the fat boy. Stacy placed the horn to his lips and gave a long, winding blast that drowned the songs of the birds and set the barred owls to cackling uneasily.

"Here, what are you doing?" cried the horseman.

"If you aren't deaf, you would know without asking such a question," retorted Stacy, taking the horn from his lips for a moment.

Tad in the meantime had seated himself on a log. His rifle was still in the saddle boot, but Tad had his rope and his revolver. The former he did not have much if any use for in the present circumstances, but he half expected to have use for the rope. He had tried to avoid a clash, and he hoped the man would take alarm and go away. The man did nothing of the sort. Instead, he forced the situation to a head.

"How long you going to stay here?" he asked, controlling his voice with evident effort.

"Until you go away, or until my party comes up," answered Butler.

"I reckon you'll stay here a long time, then. I am camping here. Your party has gone the other way and they won't get out to this brake before tomorrow some time."

"You seem to know all about it."

"I reckon I do."

"And you know all about that deer over yonder behind the down cypress?"

"If I do, that's my business. The doe is mine."

"You are wrong," answered Tad. "The doe is mine. You know it is."

"Well, for the sake of the argument, what are you going to do about it?"

"Take the deer back with me," answered Butler evenly.

"And what do you think I'll be doing while you-all are taking my doe away?"

"I don't care what you do. I propose to do what I please with my own property."

"Look here, kid. I've just been leadin' you along by the nose. Now, I'm going to talk straight."

"That's what I want you to do. But I doubt if you can talk straight--I doubt if you can tell the truth. A fellow who will steal a deer will not hesitate to lie," answered Butler, gazing defiantly at the horseman. The man flushed under his tan, flushed clear up under his hat.

"Layin' all that talk aside, how you going to prove that that doe is your property?"

"How are you going to prove that it isn't?" retorted the Pony Rider Boy.

"Because I shot him."

Tad chuckled.

"You will have a mighty hard time proving that. Listen! I tracked you here. I followed the trail right to this spot where it ends. Your story about seeing a man with a buck was not true. There is no trail beyond this place. You hoped we would go on, when you would have taken the doe from its hiding place and gone away with it. If you want a deer so badly, why don't you go shoot one? If you don't know how to shoot, come to our camp and I will divide this deer with you. But take it back with me I am going to, and I'd like to see you or anyone else stop me."

"That's the talk," cried Chunky. "That's what I call turkey talk. Why, you moccasin-chaser, I could eat you. I would if I weren't afraid of getting a pain in my stomach."

"Never mind, Stacy," rebuked Tad. "I will talk with this fellow. You, Mister Man, may think you are dealing with a couple of boys. We may be boys, but we know how to take care of ourselves. I am not making brags; I am simply warning you that we shall take the carcass back to camp with us, and if you interfere we shall have to defend ourselves."

"You touch that carcass and something will happen right smart, I reckon," warned the stranger, jerking his horse about and facing the fallen cypress.

"Chunky, you cover my retreat," ordered Tad in a low tone.

"You bet I will," answered the fat boy, chuckling happily. Stacy was the original trouble man. Trouble was meat and drink to him.

"Here, where you going?" shouted the now thoroughly enraged hunter as Tad turned his back on the man and walked briskly towards the cypress.

"I am going for my doe," flung back Butler.

There had been no answer to Stacy's signal on the horn, nor had Tad looked for any. He would have been surprised had there been, knowing, as did the stranger, that Billy Lilly and his party were miles away from that particular spot.

"Come back here!" ordered the man.

"I will when I get the deer," answered Butler.

The stranger, hot with anger, flung up his revolver and pulled the trigger. There followed a sharp report and Tad's hat dropped on the ground in front of him.

It was then that Tad Butler showed his cool nerve. Without looking back he stooped, and, picking up his sombrero, placed it on his head and started on. For the moment the shooter was too amazed to do more than stare. His face was working nervously. Whether he had intended to shoot the boy or not, Tad did not know, but he was inclined to think not.

Once more the fellow raised his weapon.

"Oh, by--the--way!" drawled Chunky.

The man turned sharply toward Stacy. He found himself looking into the muzzle of the fat boy's rifle.

CHAPTER XV

PLUCK AND THE DEAD DOE

"If you don't mind, just drop that little barker, Mister What's-Your-Name. It might go off and accidentally hit somebody. In that case I should have to shoot you. I'd hate to waste any lead on you, and I don't think you're worth the price of a shell."

For one uncertain moment the stranger sat with revolver pointed toward Tad, his gaze fixed on Chunky.

"Don't try any tricks. I can shoot just as quickly as you can, and I know I can do it a whole lot straighter. Drop it!"

The revolver fell to the ground, the man's lower jaw hanging so low that Stacy could look into his mouth.

The fellow twitched slightly at his bridle rein to turn his horse about, but the move was not lost on the watchful Chunky.

"Want to lose that horse? If so, just keep on with what you are doing! That little black spot in his forehead would make a dandy mark. After the horse is down I may conclude to decorate your features, too. Oh, I'm a terror when I get started. I'm not started yet. You may think I am, but I'm not. This is just a preliminary skirmish, as the Professor would say. When the real sortie begins the air will be filled with the yells of the dead and the silence of the living."

Growling under his breath the stranger checked his horse.

"I'll git you yet, you young whelp!" he threatened.

"Tut, tut!" warned Stacy. "Such language before an innocent boy like me? I am amazed. You must have had an awful bad bringing up."

"Stacy!"

The boy answered without looking around.

"Watch him. Don't forget yourself while you are having such a pleasant conversation. I shall have to have my horse here," called Tad.

"Drop it!" yelled the fat boy, swinging his rifle toward the horseman again. The latter was tugging at the rifle in his saddle boot. The man halted instantly.

"Upon second thought you may pull it out. First turn your back to me, but be slow about it, and after you get the gun from its holster, just let it fall to the ground with the revolver. I'll talk with you some more after you have done that. I mean business!"

The stranger knew that. He was perplexed. That boys should be so cool and so ready to defend themselves against an experienced woodsman passed his comprehension.

The horseman drew the rifle all the way out, Stacy warning, "Slower, slower," as the operation proceeded. The horseman's back being turned to the boy left the man at a disadvantage, and he did not dare to attempt a shot, knowing that the boy could fire at least twice before he could get into position to shoot once.

"Let go of it!" commanded Stacy sharply.

The rifle fell near where the revolver lay. Stacy chuckled audibly.

"Shall I give him the run, Tad? I have pulled his fangs. He can't do us any harm now," proclaimed Chunky.

"No," Tad rejoined quietly.

"What shall we do with him, then?"

"I want to have a talk with the fellow when I have finished my job. You hold him right where he is, old boy."

"Oh, I'll hold him all right. I'm keeping my eyes on a spot right behind his left ear. It's the prettiest mark you ever saw."

Tad grinned appreciatively. He was proud of Stacy Brown, for Stacy had distinguished himself and shown his pluck beyond any doubt.

The boy, tugging at the deer, finally succeeded in getting it to the back of his horse, where he lashed the carcass, the stranger watching the operation out of the corners of his eyes, and admitted to himself that he had made a mistake in his reckonings. Tad knew his business. The fellow could see that. The fat boy knew his business, too, as earlier events had demonstrated, and to the undoing of the woodsman.

"There, I guess the carcass will stay on until we get home. I hope we make it before dark," exclaimed Tad as he completed his task.

"What about the man?" inquired Stacy.

"Keep him covered until I tell you to let go."

Butler gathered up the man's revolver and rifle, from both of which he extracted the shells. Handing the latter to the fellow, he directed him to put the shells in his pocket.

Next Tad handed the man his weapons.

"Put them away and don't you dare to load them until you are at least a mile from here."

"Look here, what are you doing?" cried Chunky.

"I am returning his property," answered Tad.

"Here I go and draw the animal's fangs, then you go stick them back again! Why, he'll be shooting at us before he gets out of sight," protested the fat boy.

"I wouldn't turn a man into this swamp unarmed, Stacy. It might be sending him to his death."

"Serve him right," grunted young Brown.

"Chunky, I am amazed at you," rebuked Tad.

In the meantime the stranger with a look of puzzled amazement on his face was stowing away his weapons, gazing perplexedly at Tad Butler.

"Now, my man, I don't know who you are; I don't care who you are. But I hope you will have learned a lesson and that you will leave us alone after this. Do you know Bill Lilly?"

The stranger flushed again. Tad saw that the fellow did.

"Then you know that Mr. Lilly won't stand for any such doings as yours. I reckon if he had been in my place he wouldn't have let you off quite so easy, and if you bother us further I shan't, either. Now, sir, I want you to head your horse straight west. Ride until you get tired of riding, but don't make the mistake of thinking that you can come back and catch us napping. We shall be on the watch for you."

"Yes, you had better not come back," interjected Stacy Brown. "This gun might get unmanageable. You don't know what a terror it is when it gets on a rampage."

"I guess that is about all I have to say to you," continued Butler. "Except that I shall tell Mr. Lilly. He may take a notion to follow you and call you to account. However, I think you have been punished enough. Now get out of here as fast as you can ride."

"I'll be even with you, you young cubs!" shouted the angry voice of the stranger as he rode away.

"Shall I wing him, Tad?" yelled Stacy.

"Certainly not," rebuked Butler. "What right or reason have you to do it?"

"I--I told you he would strike when you put his fangs back in his jaw. He will be after us again, mind what I tell you," predicted Chunky.

"We don't care. We have our deer," answered Tad with a good-humored smile. "But don't you think it is time we were getting back? We shall be caught out after dark if we don't hurry."

Chunky agreed, so the boys started back over the trail, casting frequent glances to the rear, for Tad really believed that the doe thief would try to creep up on them and take his revenge. For that reason Butler carried his rifle across the saddle in front of him, ready for instant action.

"Here, here, we've forgotten something," cried Chunky after they had been going on for twenty minutes.

"What have we forgotten?"

"To eat."

"Oh, pooh! We can wait until we get to camp."

"We can do nothing of the sort! I can't wait another minute. I'm so hungry that my works are rattling around inside of me like the dishes in a pantry when a mad cat is let loose among them."

"You have food in your saddle bags," reminded Tad.

"But I want something warm."

"You may get it if you stop," warned Butler suggestively. "Take a nibble and let it go at that. When we get home we shall have some venison steak. How would that strike you?"

"Don't aggravate me," groaned the fat boy, rolling his eyes.

"Anyone would think you were going to throw a fit the way you roll your eyes and show the whites," laughed Tad.

"I shall throw one if you say any more about venison steak."

"All right. I won't find any further fault with you. I am proud of you, Chunky. I take back all the disagreeable things I have said about you. You are a plucky boy."

"Yes, I reckon I am about the bravest man that ever tackled wild beasts in the canebrake," agreed the fat boy. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was wondering," answered Tad reflectively. "It seems to me that there is something more to this affair than I first thought. Why did that man steal the doe, Chunky?"

"Cause he wanted it. Ask me something harder."

"I don't believe that was wholly the case."

Chunky cocked an inquiring eye.

"What do you think?" he demanded.

"I don't know as I think at all," laughed Butler.

"I thought not. You are always looking for something. I wish I had your imagination."

"What would you do with it?"

"Think up trouble that couldn't happen at all. But you see I could imagine it was going to happen, and get just as much excitement out of it as if it really had. It would be a whole lot safer, too."

"I agree with you," answered Tad, tilting back his head and laughing heartily.

Tad rode watching the trail with keen eyes. He had no difficulty in following it, but he saw that night would be upon them before they reached the camp, which would then make their progress slower and much more uncertain. Stacy was

not worrying. He was not given to worrying until face to face with an emergency--and not always then.

Twilight settled over the swamp and the canebrake, and the barred owls began their wild hoots and weird croakings, sounds that always made the fat boy shiver. He said it gave him "crinkles" up and down his back. He told that to Tad, and asked permission to wind the horn.

"I hardly think that would be prudent. If our late enemy should chance to be following us it would give him a pretty good line on us, wouldn't it?"

"Gracious! I hadn't thought of that. Do you suppose he is on our track?"

"I hardly think so. Still, he may be. We are not traveling fast, you know, while he, being light, can overtake us easily if he wants to."

"I reckon he has had enough of the Pony Rider Boys," averred Stacy. "He knows he'd be hurt if he got too familiar with us. You ought to have let me fan him a little while I had the chance."

"No. I am amazed that you should think of such a thing. But I am sure you don't mean it."

"I *do* mean it. You bet I mean it."

"You are not a safe person to be at large."

"Neither is he," retorted Stacy.

"I give up," laughed Tad. "There is no such thing as having the last word in an argument with you."

"Of course there isn't. That's what my aunt says, so she uses a stick. I can't answer that in the same way."

Tad halted to search for some torch wood. He found some after poking around in the dark for nearly half an hour. Some of the wood he gave to Stacy, and lighted a torch for himself. The torch flared up, sending ghostly shadows through the forest, causing the owls to break out in a chorus of angry protest.

Tad was now able to see the trail, though the light made the trail deceiving, requiring the utmost caution in following it. Once off the trail, the boy knew that they would be obliged to spend the night in the swamp or the canebrake, for to move about would be to get farther into the depths of the forest.

Stacy grumbled at their slow progress, but Tad's patience was the patience of the experienced woodsman who moved slowly, observing everything about him, listening to all sounds, thinking of everything that a woodsman in the depth of the forest should think of.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when Tad halted and held up one hand.

"What is it?" whispered Chunky.

"I thought I heard a horn."

"Yes, there it goes," cried Stacy.

The winding horn was a long way off. None but the keenest of ears could have caught the sound.

"Answer them," nodded Butler.

Stacy did. He wound the horn until he was red in the face. Tad had to stop him in order that he might listen for the other horn. He heard it again. They now knew that their companions were out looking for them.

It was about this time that Lilly discovered the four-sided blaze. He read its message instantly. Then he caught the sound of Stacy's answering horn.

"They are getting near. They will be here soon," announced the guide in a relieved tone.

"I told you, you couldn't lose Tad Butler," cried Ned Rector. "No, not even in the canebrake."

CHAPTER XVI

THE HORN POINTS THE WAY

Stacy tried to play a tune on the horn, the result being a series of squawks and discords.

"For goodness' sake stop it!" begged Tad.

"Don't you like my music?"

"I like music, but not your music. It's awful."

"Huh! You haven't any ear for music," complained Chunky.

Tad concluded that their horn had been heard, and that the searching party was waiting for them rather than start out over the trail which Lilly had seen but had not as yet read. He thought of course that the boys had strayed away on the trail of a bear.

Some time later, guided by the guide's horn fully as much as by the trail marks, Tad and Stacy neared their two companions. A twinkling light, now appearing and then as suddenly disappearing, seen far down the trail between the trees, told the guide that the missing boys were almost home.

"Hurrah! There they are," shouted Rector.

Lilly uttered a long-drawn call, which Stacy answered with a shrill whoop.

"I guess we have a surprise for them," chuckled the fat boy. "Won't their noses be out of joint? I reckon they will."

"Boys, are you all right?" shouted the guide when they came within hailing distance.

"Both right-side-up," answered Tad cheerily, while Stacy was marking time with hoarse toots on the hunting horn.

As they drew near, Ned and Lilly rode forward at a gallop to meet them. About this time they discovered that Tad was carrying something on his pony's back.

"What's that you have there?" called Lilly.

"Guess," shouted Chunky.

"A bear," ventured Ned.

"No. There aren't any bears in these woods--only snakes and owls," replied the fat boy.

"We have a deer," Tad proudly informed the guide and Ned.

"Well, you are some hunters," remarked Lilly approvingly. "Did you get lost?"

Tad shook his head.

"Oh, no; we held closely to the trail. There is no fun in getting lost, you know. Mr Lilly, did you find my double blaze?"

"I reckon I did. I knew, from that, that you had gone away after something, and I saw you knew what you were about. How far did you go?"

"Bout a hundred miles," replied Stacy.

"Not quite so far as that, I guess," laughed Tad. "We went a long distance, though, and it was the toughest traveling that I ever experienced."

"Shall I take the doe?" asked Billy.

"No, thank you, Mr. Lilly. My horse is tired, but I think he can stand it until we get home. Where are the Professor and

Walter?"

"At the camp. No need to fetch the whole outfit along. I thought you boys were lost, and that we might have a long hike of it through the night. I am mighty glad to see you safe and sound. Where did you get the doe?"

"Just a few rods from here."

"Eh?"

"Yonder." Tad pointed.

Lilly regarded him with a puzzled expression.

"Then what in the world were you dragging him off into the swamp for?"

"I will tell you about that when we get home," replied Tad. "It is a long story."

"And an exciting one, too," added Chunky, mysteriously.

"I'll bet you have been getting into fresh difficulties," jeered Rector.

"On the contrary, Ned, he has been helping me out of difficulties. Stacy showed himself to be the real man today. You will agree with me when you hear the story."

"Let's hear it, then," urged Ned.

"I couldn't think of telling it to you now. Stacy is famished; we are both tired and anxious to get home."

"Yes, and we are going to have some venison steak when we get back to camp. Oh, wow?" howled the fat boy.

The Professor and Walter heard them coming when later the party neared the camp. Both were out watching with anxious eyes. Tad shouted that they were all right, to the great relief of Professor Zepplin, and the Professor and Walter opened their eyes when they saw what Tad had shot.

"Help me get this animal strung up," requested Tad. "I have bled the doe, but that was all I could find time to do. The carcass should be strung up and dressed at once."

"Ichabod will attend to that," answered Lilly. "Here, Ichabod. Get these young gentlemen something hot to drink and eat, then look after this carcass."

"Yes, sah." Ichabod was grinning broadly. He had not believed that the boys were such mighty hunters. They had not shot a bear, it is true, but they had brought in what was better--a fine, tender doe, and the colored man was actually licking his chops in anticipation of the treat before him. Next to a 'possum stew Ichabod went silly over venison steaks.

None of the party had eaten supper, so that all the appetites were on keen edge. In a few moments there was a steaming pot of coffee ready for them, with some hastily fried bacon. This, with a heaping plate of waffles which the colored man had baked earlier in the evening, made a most palatable meal. Stacy's voice was stilled. He began before the others and ate so voraciously that his companions were forced to eat more rapidly by way of self-protection.

"Let him eat. He has earned it," begged Tad in answer to the Professor's protest.

"Suppose you tell us what happened," suggested Lilly.

"Shortly after we arrived at our station," began Tad, leaning back, a slice of bacon in one hand, a waffle in the other, both poised half way to his mouth, "I heard something in the brake, and peering, I caught sight of this doe. She saw me at the same instant, and leaped. I shot her while she was still in the air," murmured Tad modestly.

"Was she in the cane?" interrupted the guide.

"Yes, sir."

"Good shot!"

"It was a quick one, and lucky. I caught her just back of the left shoulder. She went down in her tracks."

"Better than shooting bears," declared Rector.

"Having left Stacy with the horses some distance back I strung up the carcass, then hurried back to get my horse. When we reached the place where I had left the deer, there was no deer there. It had disappeared."

Lilly had forgotten to eat. He was leaning forward with eager face.

"Not there?"

"I examined the ground and found the tracks of a man," continued Butler. "Then I found horse tracks. I found also a trail on the ground where the carcass had been dragged over it to a tree and blood at the foot of a tree where the doe had been thrown down. From that point the dragging was not found. Instead, were the hoofprints of a horse. These hoofprints sunk into the soft ground deeper now, showing that the animal was carrying a heavier load."

"Indeed?" wondered Professor Zeppelin.

"Well, to make a long story short, we determined to get that doe. The trail was an easy one to follow, for the fellow who had stolen the carcass had to cut his way through over most of the trail. A blind man could have followed him."

Tad then went on to explain how they had eventually come up with the stranger, engaged him in conversation, repeating what the man had said about having seen a hunter with a buck, then proceeding to relate how the carcass had been discovered behind a fallen cypress.

"Then what?" asked Lilly in a low, tense voice, tugging violently at his long moustache.

"I went over to fetch the deer."

"A--a--a--and the fellow shot him. He shot Tad's hat right off," cried Stacy, forgetting to eat for the moment. Tad embraced the opportunity to take a bite of the crisp bacon.

"No, he didn't shoot again. Stacy leveled his rifle at the man and made him drop his revolver. Then Stacy made the fellow give up his rifle. There isn't much more to tell except that we got our doe, after which I returned the fellow's weapons to him and sent him on his way at a lively clip. That's all. You know the rest. We followed our trail home and here we are. How many bear did you get?"

"Not a smell," answered Rector. "But tell us some more."

"Did you find out what the fellow's name is?" questioned Lilly.

"We didn't ask him. But I tripped him into an admission that he knew you. Still, I don't know as that is of much consequence. Everyone down this way appears to know you."

"Pretty much all of them do," answered the guide. "What did the fellow look like?"

"He looked like some sort of a man to me," spoke up Chunky. "I reckon he was some sort of a man, but not much of a one at that. I'm sorry he didn't give me an excuse to plug him."

"Stacy!" warned the Professor reprovingly.

"Yes, Stacy is developing into a blood-thirsty young man," smiled Tad. "Still, he proved himself the genuine thing today. He was as cool as could be. I wish you might have seen the way in which he handled the fellow."

"What did he look like?" repeated Lilly.

"I beg your pardon. He was about your height, I should say, but somewhat thinner. He wore a long beard and his face was weazened. He had blue eyes and light hair. His horse was white, something like the one I am using now. Does that give you any idea, Mr. Lilly?"

The guide's face had contracted into a scowl.

"I reckon I've seen that hound before," growled Billy.

"Who do you think he is?"

"I wouldn't want to say, not knowing for sure. But if it's the fellow I think, you will most likely hear from him again."

"But what was his motive?" insisted Tad.

"Eh? Motive? Why, I reckon he wanted some steak for his supper," grinned Billy.

"That's what I told him," piped the fat boy.

Tad shook his head.

"That wasn't his only reason. He had another," declared the boy with emphasis.

"What makes you think so?" questioned Lilly, peering keenly at the brown-faced Pony Rider Boy.

"He saw that deer before I did. He must have. Why didn't he shoot if he wanted it?"

"You're a sharp one," chuckled Lilly. "I reckon Pete will have to get up before daylight if he thinks to get ahead of my boys."

"Pete?" repeated Butler.

"I was just thinkin' out loud," explained Billy.

"Do I understand you to say that he tried to shoot you, Tad?" questioned Professor Zeppelin.

"I wouldn't say that exactly. I don't think that at first he intended to hit me. Later on he was so mad that he would have done so had not Chunky held him in check."

"Stacy, I am pleased beyond words to know that you have in a measure redeemed yourself," declared the Professor with glowing face.

"Oh, I am always in my element when there is danger about. Yes, sir, I am a hummer when it comes to danger."

"Especially when a 'gator is chasing you," reminded Ned Rector.

"That isn't danger, that's just plain murder," answered the fat boy, rolling his eyes and showing the whites.

"Well, don't have a fit about it," chuckled Ned. "I will admit that you were a hero in this instance, but you will have to play the hero a lot more times before we even up for the cold feet you have shown in the past."

"You're jealous--that's what is the matter with you," retorted the fat boy.

"You are under the impression that you know the man, Mr. Lilly?" asked the Professor.

"I may," was the evasive answer.

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"Nothing just now. I reckon I'll think the matter over. I shall come up with the moccasins one of these days, then we'll have a reckoning that *will* be a reckoning."

"I sincerely hope there will be no bloodshed," said the Professor anxiously.

"There came pretty near being bloodshed today," replied Stacy. "Br-r-r-r!"

After supper Lilly went away by himself and sat down on the bank of the river, where he tugged at first one end of his moustache, then the other, while he pondered over the story told by Tad Butler and Stacy Brown.

"The copperhead!" grunted Lilly. "I reckon I don't want to see him. I'm afraid I couldn't hold myself. But we shall see, we shall see."

In saying this Lilly was a prophet, for before long they did see.

CHAPTER XVII

WOLVES ON THE TRAIL

Stacy Brown was so overcome with his own importance that evening that he could not unbend sufficiently to talk with his companions, save for an occasional word with Tad.

"Stacy has a swelled head," observed Ned Rector.

"He has a right to have. Can't you let him have the full enjoyment of his bravery?" laughed Tad.

"Did he really do anything worth while?" asked Ned.

"I have told you he did."

"He had a gun, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I don't see anything so great about what he did."

"Then I'll tell you. Had Stacy relaxed his vigilance, or been the least bit slow or uncertain, that fellow would have shot him, and Chunky knew that. If you don't think that took some nerve you don't know what nerve is."

"Oh, yes he does," spoke up Walter. "Ned has a lot of it."

"Nerve?" grinned Tad.

"Yes."

Rector gazed at Tad.

"Shall I feel all puffed up or get mad at that remark?" questioned Ned.

"That depends upon the way you take it, Ned."

Stacy sauntered past them at this juncture casting an indifferent glance in Ned's direction, then continued on his journey up and down the camp.

Ned said the fat boy reminded him of a pouter pigeon with its tail feathers pulled out.

"Do you know what the plans are for tomorrow?" inquired Tad.

"I think Mr. Lilly intends to go out on the trail again."

"What kind of trail?" asked Stacy, stopping before them.

"Oh, you have condescended to speak to me, have you?" demanded Ned.

"I am not addressing you as Ned Rector. I am addressing you as a part of the Pony Rider outfit," replied Stacy coldly.

A grin spread slowly across the countenance of Ned Rector. Then he laughed.

"Chunky," he said, "if I thought you were half as big a fool as you appear to be, I would throw you out of camp."

"What do you think about it, Tad? Would he?" questioned Stacy.

"That depends. Do you mean *could* he?"

"Yes."

"Then I will answer 'no.' I don't think any one boy in the camp could put you out if you had made up your mind to stay," replied Tad.

"There! You have an expert opinion, Mr. Rector. Kindly do not refer to the subject again," begged Stacy airily. "I can't afford to discuss such trivial matters. What kind of trail are we going out on, do you know?"

"Same old paw-prints--bears," complained Ned.

"Find any signs today?"

"Oh, yes, the dogs ran the scent out. The bears took to the water, and we didn't pick up the scent again, for the day was nearly done by that time. Mr. Lilly decided to come home, especially as he hadn't heard anything of you and Stacy, nor of me. He nearly had a fit when he found that you had not been seen or heard from."

"Didn't he think we could take care of ourselves?" demanded Tad.

"I told him you could, especially Chunky," with a mischievous glance at the fat boy. "But for some reason he was considerably upset over your absence. When we got to the four-blaze tree, I think he began to understand that you had your head with you."

"He didn't find the deer signs?" asked Tad.

"No. He would have done so, I guess, if we hadn't heard you when we did."

The guide joined the boys at this juncture. He was smiling good-naturedly, regarding Tad and Stacy, in both of whom he felt a new interest. They had shown the veteran guide something that day that he never had seen in lads of their age.

"Where do we go tomorrow?" questioned Butler.

"I am going to try to pick up the bear trail again. They gave us the slip beautifully today."

"Would it not be better to make a new camp farther in?" asked Tad.

"I had thought of that, but I think we are well enough located right where we are. The bears are likely to round back, for this is their stamping ground. I have seen several tree-hollows where they have made their winter quarters."

"Do the bears live in trees?" cried Walter. "I thought they always lived in caves and dens."

"In some parts of the country they do. There aren't any caves down here, so they seek out hollows in the trees far above the ground for their winter quarters, or else go into a hollow log. In the spring they come down and begin to feed on the ash buds and the tender young cane, called 'mutton cane.' At this season they are quite likely to take to killing stock on the plantations. Just now they are at their best, in weight, in cunning and killing abilities. One of these bears would as lief tackle a man as a yearling calf."

"I hope one tackles me. I need something to limber up my muscles. I haven't had anything exciting on this trip," declared Stacy Brown.

"Oh, you will get limbered up all right if you meet one of those fellows," answered Lilly, fixing his twinkling eyes on the fat boy. "They will fix your joints so they will bend one way as easily as another."

The plans for the morrow's hunting were explained by Lilly. The arrangements were to be about the same, the party being split up and stationed at different points in the canebrake. Tad, being considered the best woodsman, was to be sent on ahead with Stacy at or about the point where the dogs had lost the trail that day. The rest of the party were to draw in, eventually converging on that point.

Lilly had an idea that the bears would have returned to their own ground in the night. In that event they would be driven from the cane by the dogs again, in which case one or the other of the party might get a shot.

Tad and Stacy were pleased with the arrangement. It sent them off where they would be wholly on their own responsibilities.

"But don't go off on any long hikes as you did today," warned the guide.

"We shan't unless we have to," answered Tad. "If we get a bear and someone steals it, why, we shall have to go after it."

"Let me know before you do. I reckon I should like to have a part in that chase," said the guide almost savagely.

An early start was made on the following morning, Stacy solemn as an owl, the other boys full of laughter and joking, turning most of their pleasantry on the fat boy.

"I'll fetch back something for you tonight," threatened Stacy.

"A bear?" quizzed Ned.

"If one gets in my way, yes. If I can't do any better I'll fetch home one of those sweet-voiced owls that you are so fond of."

"Ugh! Don't you bring one of those horrible things here," protested Walter.

Tad and the fat boy rode away ahead of the others. Lilly's face wore a grin. He evidently looked for the pair to distinguish themselves, and perhaps he felt reasonably certain that they would fall to the trail of the bear. At least, he had his own reasons for grinning.

It was along towards noon, when the two boys had covered about half the distance to their destination, that Tad caught the sound of the dogs. The hounds were in full cry, though the cry was faint, showing that the animals were some distance away. The Pony Rider Boys listened attentively, trying to get the direction.

"It seems to me that they are heading towards us," said Tad.

Stacy agreed with a nod.

"Suppose we get over there in the cane where we shall not be so likely to be seen. Which way is the breeze?"

"Blowing that way," answered Chunky, pointing in a direction away from the cane.

"Then we don't want to go there. The breeze will carry our scent to the bears if any are between us and the dogs. I think we had better haul off to the eastward for half a mile or so. That should put us out of the direct line and yet place us within shooting distance."

They rode cautiously away, the horses now pricking up their ears, for the animals heard the yelps of the hounds and perhaps understood its meaning. That they were not baying told Tad that the dogs had not yet sighted their quarry. As soon as they got in sight of the bear they would bay deeply and hoarsely.

The barking grew louder as the dogs drew nearer, then all at once a new sound was borne to the ears of the Pony Rider Boys. It was a shrill yelping.

Tad looked at Stacy, and Stacy looked at Tad. The latter shook his head, indicating that he did not understand this new sound.

"If it weren't for the fact that we knew they were on the trail, I should think they were fighting," declared Butler.

"Why don't you go and find out?"

Tad reflected over this.

"I'll do it," he decided. "You follow on down parallel with the trail, Chunky. You can't miss your way if you will keep just at the edge of this row of cane, which will lead you to the place where we were to meet the others."

"No, thank you. Not for mine. I go with you if you go. You aren't going to leave me here all alone in the swamp, not if I know it."

"What, are you afraid of the bears?" scoffed Tad.

"No, I am not afraid of any bears that ever walked, but I'm afraid of those hideous owls," declared Stacy, glancing apprehensively up into the tall cypress towering above them.

"Well, you are a silly! All right; come along then. We shall probably scare the game away, but something is wrong over yonder."

Tad took the lead, driving as fast as he could, cutting a new trail with the confidence of an old hunter in the canebrake.

They burst out into an open space, open so far as cane was concerned, and gazed in amazement at flying, snarling, yelping heaps of fur.

"Look at the dogs! Look at the dogs!" cried Chunky. "They're fighting each other."

Tad's face flushed and his eyes flashed.

"Chunky, don't you--don't you see what it is?" cried Tad excitedly.

"Course I do. It's those confounded dogs fighting when they ought to be chasing bear."

"No! The hounds are fighting a band of wolves!" shouted Butler.

"Wolves?" gasped Stacy.

"Yes. The wolves have attacked our dogs. They have killed some of them. Are you game to tackle them?"

"I'm game for anything that spells trouble. Whoop! I'm the original wolf-killer from the plains of Arizona, if that's where they come from. Get to them! I'm with you."

Tad grinned harshly. Putting spurs to his mount he dashed straight toward the battling dogs and wolves. He had heard that wolves sometimes attacked the hunting dogs right ahead of the hunters themselves, but he had always considered this to be a hunter's story. Now he saw the verification before his own eyes.

"Use your revolver and be careful that you don't shoot me," yelled Tad.

Bang!

Stacy had let go almost before the words were out of Tad's mouth--and missed his mark. Butler rode straight at a snarling, yelping bunch. His bush-knife was in his right hand. Leaning over he made a pass at the nearest wolf but missed it because the horse jumped at that second, nearly unseating the boy.

Tad bounded on to the next fighting heap. This time a vicious swing of the bush-knife brought results. He wounded a wolf, sending the beast slinking away yelping.

In the meantime Stacy Brown's revolver was popping away, now and then fanning the body of a wolf with a bullet, but oftener missing the beast entirely. Still, Stacy was having the time of his life. He was yelling and whooping louder than the desperate combatants. Tad was amazed at the pluck of the attacking force. He never had supposed that wolves possessed the courage to attack dogs, especially in the presence of human beings. These wolves had not only the courage to attack the dogs, but they were snarling and snapping at the legs of the horses, now and then making a leap at Tad when he had interfered with their sport.

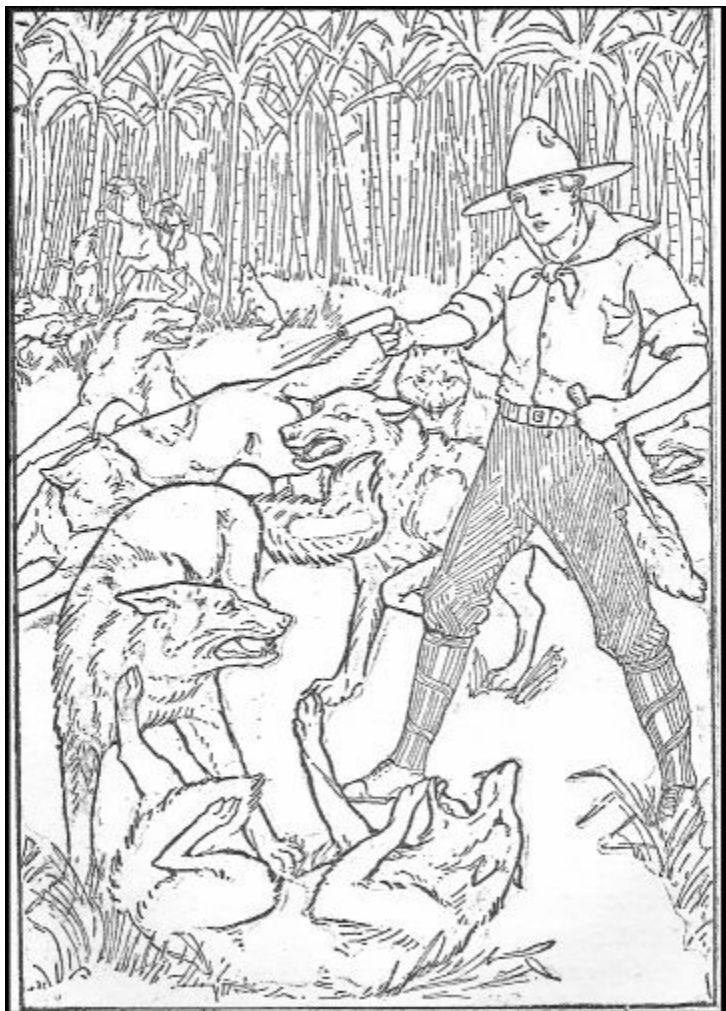
It was an exciting battle, the most exciting that the two boys had ever seen. It seemed to them that there must have been a full hundred of the cowardly beasts in the pack, though in all probability there were not more than half this number, which was an unusually large pack at that.

"Shoot carefully. Don't waste your ammunition," warned Tad.

"Whoop-e-e-e!" howled the fat boy, letting go a shot that this time sent a beast limping away, the shot having broken its leg. "Can I shoot? Well, I guess I can shoot. Ye-o-w!"

Tad's horse was getting so frantic at the frequent attacks on its legs that he could do nothing with it. Moments were precious because the dogs were getting the worst of the battle.

Suddenly Butler leaped from his horse thinking to be able to do greater execution on the ground. The wolves, perhaps believing that this was a signal of surrender, turned snarling upon him. At this juncture the horse jerked the check rein from his hand and jumped away, leaving the Pony Rider Boy standing there facing a large part of the pack.



Tad Butler Faced the Pack.

With the bush-knife in his left hand now, revolver in the right, the boy slashed and shot alternately. Nearly every shot and nearly every pass of the knife reached the body of a wolf, not always killing, but in almost every instance doing the animal no little damage.

It was likely to be a sad day for the brave dogs, which, the more they were overwhelmed, the more desperately they fought. Some of the dogs were already dead, or crawling away in their death agonies. All of the dogs would be killed unless the wolves were swiftly driven off.

"Chunky," yelled Tad, "can't you use your rifle without hitting the dogs?"

"I can try," panted the fat boy.

"Rustle it, then! Don't mind me. I'll try to keep out of the way of your bullets."

Stacy raised his rifle, taking quick aim at a big gray wolf. *Bang!* went the overcharged cartridge, with a noise so like that of a cannon that Stacy's horse leaped to one side, while the fat boy went in the other direction, landing on his head in the ooze.

Yelping in their mad joy, a dozen wolves charged upon the momentarily helpless Chunky.

CHAPTER XVIII

A STAND IN GRIM EARNEST

Freed from restraint Stacy's horse darted into the brake. There were now two horseless boys.

It was Tad to the rescue, firing, kicking, slashing with the bush-knife. Two of the bear hounds leaped into the rescue work with him.

"Are you hurt?" cried Tad.

"I--I don't know," replied Stacy, breathing hard.

"Get up and fight, or we're goners!"

"Oh, I'll fight!"

Instead of being frightened, the fat boy's face was flushed with anger when he got to his feet. In the fall he had lost his rifle and his revolver. With a yell Chunky launched a vicious kick at an open, snarling mouth just before him, kicking a mouthful of teeth down the beast's throat.

Tad snatched up the lost rifle and began to shoot into the pack until the magazine of the weapon had been emptied. He then clubbed the rifle and began whacking the heads of the wolves. Stacy recovered his revolver and resumed shooting, narrowly missing putting a bullet through his companion's body. As it was a bullet tore a rent in Butler's shirt at the side.

"Look out there!" he warned, without even glancing towards Chunky, keeping his eyes on the force ahead of him and beside him.

The dogs, taking fresh courage from the boys' defense of them, took up their battle with renewed vigor. Blood was dripping from the mouth of every one of them; some had rents torn in their sides, others were limping about on two legs, here and there fastening their fangs on a gray side or a gray leg as the case might be.

Stacy having emptied his revolver snatched up the limb of a tree, so heavy that he could hardly swing it, but when the limb landed it did great execution, leaving its imprint on the head that it hit. Every time he landed on a gray head, the fat boy would yell.

"Save your wind; you will need it," shouted Tad.

"They'll need theirs more."

Whack! Whack! Whack!

It was a battle royal. But the boys were gaining, as Tad quickly saw. The pack was beginning to be fearful. These doughty fighters were working sad havoc among them. Scarcely a beast there that did not bear marks of the conflict.

A long winding blast from a hunting horn sounded, but neither boy heard it. Each was too busy with his own salvation to give heed to anything outside of the work at hand. Again the horn sounded, this time closer than before.

A few moments later there were shouts and yells from the bush. Bill Lilly, followed by Ned Rector, Professor Zepplin and Walter Perkins burst from the bush riding like mad, Lilly swinging his bush-knife, whooping and yelling, the boys to the rear of him making fully as much noise.

The party halted, gazing upon the scene before them with startled eyes. They were for the moment too astonished to move or do a thing. Neither Tad nor Stacy realized that help was at hand, and the party had an opportunity, in those few seconds, to see what Tad Butler and the much maligned fat boy could do when they got into action.

The period of inactivity was brief.

"They've tackled the dogs!" roared the guide. "At them, boys, and be careful that you don't kill the hounds."

Red lights danced before the eyes of Professor Zepplin. Giving his horse the spur, he galloped into the thick of the

fight with his heavy army pistol in hand. Its loud report furnished a new note in the sound of conflict. And the Professor could shoot. Every time he pulled the trigger a gray wolf's body got a bullet from his weapon.

Lilly was laying about him with his bush-knife, as Tad had done before him. Ned Rector, too, plunged into the thick of the fight, losing his hat in the first charge, while Walter Perkins hung about the outside of the lines, letting drive at a beast that now and then came his way. Bullets and beasts were flying about rather too thickly to suit Walter. He felt safer on the outside, though he was doing his part.

The battle waged fiercely for a few moments after the arrival of Lilly and his party; then one by one the attacking band began sneaking away into the cane, some to be stopped by bullets before they reached the canebrake, others dropping from wounds already received. There was a lively scattering, with those of the hounds that were able to fight trying to follow their late assailants.

Lilly called them back, riding about and heading them off, shouting, commanding, aided by Tad Butler who understood what the guide was trying to do. The more seriously injured of the hounds were lying about licking their wounds. Some already lay dead where they had made their last stand.

"Too bad, too bad!" muttered Tad Butler, pausing from his strenuous work, breathing heavily as he gazed about. Lilly, having rounded up the dogs, was counting the loss. Four hounds were dead. Six others were wounded, one or two so badly that he knew they would die. But if the dogs had suffered, the attacking band had suffered much more heavily. A count showed twenty-five dead wolves, the biggest killing, save one, known in the canebrake. And of these twenty-five, Tad Butler and Stacy Brown had killed more than half, as nearly as could be estimated.

Stacy, his clothes torn and his shins bleeding, had thrust both hands into his pockets, and was strolling unconcernedly about, with chin well elevated, as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

Lilly galloped up to Tad and leaning over extended his hand.

"Good boy!" he said.

"Thank you," answered Tad with a grin.

"Good boy, Master Stacy!"

"Oh, that's all right. It was a mere trifle, not worth speaking about," replied the fat boy airily.

"If it weren't for the poor dogs, I'd laugh, young man. Master Tad, tell me about it," said Lilly.

"The wolves set upon the dogs."

"Did you see them?"

"No, sir, we heard them and hurried over here to see what was going on."

Lilly nodded to the others who had ridden up to listen.

"We tried to help them, but I guess some of the dogs were already past help even then."

"And saved the greater part of the pack," added the guide.

"But, is it possible that wolves will attack dogs, Mr. Lilly?" asked Tad.

"You have had the evidence of your own eyes. They do it frequently down here. It is a wonder they didn't finish you into the bargain. What puzzles me is why so many of them gathered on this trail."

"Does that mean anything special?" asked Rector.

"I don't know. It strikes me as queer."

Stacy stalked up pompously.

"Ah, Mr. Lilly, are there any other varieties of wild beasts down here that we haven't met up with? If so I should like an opportunity to meet them face to face. I don't want to miss anything, you know."

"It strikes me forcibly that you haven't missed much," answered the guide, grinning.

"Hadn't we better look after the dogs? We can talk afterwards," suggested Butler.

"Yes, yes," agreed the guide.

They hurried to the suffering hounds. Some had to be shot, but the most needed rest and their own treatment more than anything else, so it was decided not to try to move them until along towards night. A fire was built, and Lilly cut up one of the dead wolves, giving each dog a liberal portion as his reward. He had some coffee which he boiled. The coffee put new life into the two tired boys, who stretched out on the ground for a rest while the others talked over their courage and grit.

Tad lay with arms under his head, reflecting over the guide's peculiar remark about the pack of wolves. He wondered, too, why so large a pack had met and attacked the hounds. During the time of his rest Lilly had gone out on the trail of the escaped horses, and found them a short distance from the camp. While the guide was absent, Tad got up and walked out of camp.

"Where are you going?" called the Professor.

"For a little walk," answered Butler.

The boy was absent for nearly an hour. He returned with face wearing a puzzled expression, but he said nothing to his companions about the reason for it. Lilly questioned Tad further about the attack of the wolves.

"They must have been coming towards the hounds, judging from the trail that I found beyond the camp," said Tad.

"They were probably following the bear tracks," suggested Lilly.

"Perhaps," answered Butler reflectively.

"Have you boys fixed up your wounds?" asked the guide.

"Yes, the Professor dressed them. We were merely scratched a little. It doesn't amount to anything. But goodness! I never thought wolves could be so ugly nor so plucky," wondered Tad.

"They would not be in smaller numbers. You know the old saying, 'in unity there is strength,'" smiled Lilly.

"I know it now," answered Tad. "I have had an object lesson. And so have you all. You know, too, that Stacy Brown is not a tenderfoot. I'd like to see anyone show more grit than did he while we were fighting the wolves. It was an experience that would have frightened most anyone."

"Neither of you acted as if you were very badly scared," chuckled Lilly.

"We didn't have time to be," laughed Tad.

"Fully as exciting as fighting wild boar in the Black Forest of Germany," agreed the Professor.

"The wild pigs of the canebrake are as near as I have ever come to hunting boars," said Lilly.

"Are they ugly?" asked Walter.

"Well, I reckon they are kind of fresh now and again," answered the guide.

"The pigs are too small fry for me," declared Stacy pompously. "I want big game or no game at all."

"Chunky is afraid only of the barred owls," chuckled Tad.

"Owls and 'gators," Stacy corrected. "How about those bears? They seem to have given you fellows the slip?"

"Foxy bears," agreed the guide. "But never you mind. We will get them yet. That old she-her we have been after must be a big one, and she is an ugly one, too. There will be a lively time when the hounds bay her out. I hope we are all in at the death."

"So do I," nodded Stacy. "I shouldn't mind a hand-to-hand conflict with an ugly old she-bear. I'd show her what sort of a bear-killer I am, I would."

"I reckon it's time we were going," announced Lilly. "We have a long hike."

The boys were willing, so the party packed up, and, after herding the dogs, started on their return journey to camp, whence they were to start on the second morning after that for the most exciting bear hunt in their experience.

They reached their permanent camp shortly after dark. Ichabod had a warm supper ready for them, and after having eaten, all gathered about the campfire to discuss the incidents of the eventful day.

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT TAD FOUND ON THE TRAIL

"Venison steak and boiled bayou water doesn't go so badly after all," observed Stacy Brown wisely.

"Especially when you have had a hand in getting the steak," laughed Walter.

"That's the idea," agreed Chunky. "We know how we got him, too, don't we, Tad?"

Butler nodded absently. His mind was not on that particular subject at the moment. There was that on his mind which he was trying to solve, in order to get a clear understanding, but reason as he might he was not able to work the problem out to his own satisfaction.

"Mr. Lilly, you don't think for a moment that this man who stole the doe could have been responsible in any way for the attack of the pack on our hounds, do you?" questioned the Professor.

Tad looked up with keen interest reflected on his face.

"I don't see how that would be possible, Professor. Man can't make those whelps do his bidding. At any rate, we shan't be troubled again after what the boys did to them this afternoon. That was a killing worth while. I reckon I'll have something to tell the folks when I get home and so will you. The Major will be interested, too. He said you were a lively bunch, but I reckon he didn't know just how true that was when he said it."

"Yes, the Major was right," observed Stacy airily. "Some of us are all of that."

"Especially Stacy Brown," spoke up Ned.

"Stacy Brown and Tad Butler," corrected the fat boy. "Still, you and the Professor did very well after you got on the job. But we had them pretty well thinned out by the time you arrived. About all there was left to do was to gather up the wounded and bury the dead. Professor, that pistol of yours would stop an elephant. How it did keel those beasts over!" chuckled Stacy at the recollection of Professor Zeppelin's shooting.

"It is my old army pistol. I contend that these new-fangled weapons are no more effective, especially in small arms. There has been some improvement in the long-range guns since my time."

"Since the North 'fit' the South," suggested Lilly with a grin.

"Yes. It is a far cry from the old muzzle-loader to the improved weapon of today. A far cry, indeed."

"Then you think the fellow with whom we had the trouble could have had nothing to do with the attack of the wolves?" questioned Tad.

"Of course not. That might have been possible, but it wasn't."

"Ambiguous, but good sense," muttered Professor Zeppelin.

"Why do you ask?" demanded Lilly.

"I wanted to know. I am a little bothered about some features of the affair," Tad answered.

Lilly regarded the Pony Rider Boy thoughtfully.

"You have something on your mind?"

"Well, yes, I have," admitted Tad.

"Out with it. It doesn't do to hold in too much at a time like the present."

"You know I went out on that trail this afternoon, Mr. Lilly?"

"No, I didn't know it. To which trail do you refer?"

"The bear trail we will call it."

"From the other way?"

"Yes, sir. I went in the opposite direction to that supposed to have been taken by Bruin, and I discovered some things that puzzled me."

"On the trail?" asked the Professor.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you discover?" demanded Lilly eagerly.

"I found the trail of a horse in the first place."

"Going which way?"

"Toward this camp. The horse turned--"

"You don't mean this camp exactly. You mean the place where we made temporary camp this afternoon, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, that is what I mean. The horse, as I was saying, turned about just beyond where we had the fight with the wolves, and took the back trail, or nearly so."

"Hm-m-m!" mused the guide. "That is peculiar. Fresh tracks?"

"Within a few hours of the time I found them, sir."

"What did you make of them?"

"Not much of anything. But that was not all I discovered. I found a dead dog a little way from camp."

"I saw several myself," laughed Ned Rector.

"One of our dogs?" questioned Lilly.

"No, sir, it was not. Furthermore, the dog had a leash, a long one, about his neck. He hadn't been dragged. I found the dog's footprints almost up to the point where his carcass lay."

Bill Lilly was beginning to show signs of excitement.

"Go on. What had happened to the dog?"

"He had been shot and left where he was killed. The wolves or some other animals had torn his flesh some, but not so much that I could not tell what killed him. He was killed by a bullet. I wonder why?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Lilly.

"I have an idea now. It has just occurred to me."

Lilly rose to his full height, tugging at his moustache with both hands, gazing fixedly at Tad Butler.

"It's more work of that miserable whelp. He's done it this time. I see how it was. I should have thought of that before. If my eyes had been as sharp as yours, Master Tad, you wouldn't need to have told me."

"Tell us what you suspect," urged Professor Zeppelin, who was as much puzzled as the rest. Even Stacy was regarding the guide with inquiring eyes. The latter was striding up and down, tugging at his moustache as if he owed it a grudge.

"What I suspect? I don't suspect at all. I know now, thanks to Master Tad's keen scent. What has been done is this. Some whelp, knowing what we were going to do, has hit the bear trail leading a dog. He knew the wolves were in that vicinity, so he rode along the back trail, leading the dog behind him, knowing full well that the wolves would scent it, and, knowing it was a lone dog, would follow it. You see he figured that the pack would sooner or later come up with our hounds. He knew that there would be a battle and he hoped we would lose all our dogs."

"The cold-blooded scoundrel!" exclaimed Ned Rector.

"There! What did I tell you, Tad?" cried Stacy. "I ought to have shot the beast while I had the chance. He played us about as I thought he would. Why, if you had let me have my way, I should have taken his horse away from him and set him adrift. I guess he wouldn't have played any such miserable trick on us. No, sir, he would have all he wanted to do to get out of the woods, let alone dragging a lone dog along the bear trail to call the wolves to our pack. Oh, what a beast!"

"It is well that your revengeful disposition was not allowed free range," answered the Professor rebukingly.

"It is done now. We can't help ourselves," said Tad.

"It isn't done," exclaimed Lilly. "I am not done. I am going after the man who caused the death of half of our hounds. He isn't fit to eat out of the same pan with the dogs. Better would he eat with the wild pigs of the swamp. Master Butler, you have keen eyes and you are sharp as a she-bear with cubs."

Tad smiled at the comparison.

"Tomorrow morning I hit the trail. Do you want to go with me, Butler?"

"I am ready for anything," answered the Pony Rider Boy.

"So am I," piped Chunky.

"One is enough," replied Lilly. "I think the two of us will be able to do the job as it should be done."

"What is it you propose to do?" questioned the Professor.

"Well, we-all reckon to catch the fellow who is bothering us. When a mosquito buzzes around your head, threatening to bite you, you swat him, don't you?"

"Yes, but this is different."

"It's the same thing, except that this mosquito has two legs instead of four. He'll be limping on one before I have finished with him if I get hold of him."

"Surely, you don't intend to shed human blood?" objected Professor Zeppelin.

"I am not saying what I'll do. I am taking the kid with me to kind of hold me back in case I get too mad. Then, as I said, he has the eyes that see things as they are. Tomorrow morning, Master Tad, with the Professor's permission--"

"I will consider the matter," answered the Professor.

"Tomorrow morning," said Tad, grinning and nodding to his companions.

"You folks will make an awful fizzle of it if you don't take me along," declared the fat boy with a slow shake of the head.

CHAPTER XX

MAN-SIGNS IN THE CANEBRAKE

Daylight on the following morning found Bill Lilly and Tad Butler methodically making preparations for their jaunt, which no doubt would lead them many miles from the camp on the Sunflower River. Lilly had not divulged his plans, beyond telling the Professor that he need feel no alarm, as he merely desired to administer a lesson to the man in case they found him.

"Of course, there's more than an even chance that we don't catch the hound. If we do I promise you there won't be any gun-play if it can be avoided. I don't want to get mixed up with anything of that sort and lose my liberty for the rest of the fall until the courts meet in January. No, sir, not for Bill Lilly. You don't have to worry about the boy, either. He knows how to take care of himself better than most of us, and he will be a whole lot of help to me, too."

Professor Zeppelin had given a reluctant consent to Lilly's proposal to take Butler, along with him. They packed just enough food in their saddle bags to carry them through the day, intending to eat their meals in the saddle.

A hasty breakfast was eaten, then after giving his orders that no one should venture away from the camp out of hearing, Lilly and Tad mounted their horses and rode away. The horses started off at the loping run that was now so familiar to the boys, and sight and sound of the two men was soon lost to those in the camp. Lilly had said it was doubtful if they returned before late in the night, and perhaps not until the following morning.

The guide had gained quite a lead on his young companion at the start, but this Butler quickly overcame ere they had proceeded far.

"Where do we go first?" asked Tad.

"We will take up the trail at the point where you fought the wolves yesterday. I wouldn't do this only there is no telling what that fellow will do, seeing he has done so much already. I thought after he had stolen the doe and you found him out, that he would be scared to go any further. I reckon nothing but a dose of lead will scare him. He'll get that if he doesn't watch out."

"If we sight him I guess it will not be necessary to do any shooting," replied Tad.

"You are right about not wanting to. Anybody can pull a trigger, but it isn't everybody that can keep from pulling a trigger under great provocation. It's a good thing that I have someone with me who can keep his head. I confess that I am mad all through. I don't dare to trust myself. Never in all the years I have been riding the canebrake have I been so tamation mad."

"You will get over that after you have slashed through the brake for ten miles or so," answered Tad laughingly. "I shouldn't work myself up were I in your place."

Lilly took the advice of the freckle-faced boy and held himself down. They reached the scene of the battle with the wolves. There was no indication that any of the beasts had returned, but while Lilly was taking a survey of the place Tad Butler had gone west a little way to try to pick up the trail he had discovered on the previous day. The boy got down from his horse the better to examine the trail. Suddenly Tad uttered an exclamation. He had made a further discovery. Securing his horse to a tree, he trotted on a short distance, then halting, stood thinking. Soon, however, he turned in response to a hail from the guide.

"Find it, Tad?"

"Yes, sir; will you come here?"

Lilly rode over to where Tad was standing.

"He has been here again."

"He has?" exclaimed the guide.

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know?"

"These are the same hoofprints as the others. The horse had lost a shoe from the nigh fore foot. This horse also has lost a shoe from the off fore foot. I don't know which way he came, I haven't looked for that, but it is immaterial anyway. What is important is that he has gone in that direction--north, I think it is."

"Right you are. So the moccasin has been back here again, eh?" mused the guide. "Came back to see how well his little scheme worked? Well, I hope he is satisfied."

"Have you any idea where he has gone? Has he any place where he would go to get out of the way?"

"Say, I'll bet he has. I'll bet he is heading for Turtle Bayou," cried Lilly.

"How far is that from here?"

"Ten miles in a straight line. It is farther the way he would be most likely to ride because the roundabout way is the easier way."

"Then had we not better follow his trail?"

"Yes, I reckon we would make better time. Then, if he is coming back, we might meet him. That is what we will do."

The trail at first they found rather blind, the fellow evidently having sought to leave as slight evidence of his presence there as possible, but to Tad the trail was not very difficult to follow, and Tad was keen in work of this sort. He now concentrated all his efforts on the trail, Bill Lilly satisfying himself with taking second place, where he watched the boy with approving glances.

"I will watch the trail and you keep a lookout ahead," suggested Tad, glancing back for a moment.

"Right, my boy. Mine is the easy job."

"Neither one is very hard," smiled Tad.

For some time neither spoke. At one stage of their journey Tad dismounted and began examining the ground. After a few moments of this he nodded and swung into his saddle again.

"Stop here?" asked Lilly.

"Yes, sir. I don't know what he halted for, but he did not stay long."

"You should have been an Indian, Master Tad."

"I have been told that I am one as it is," was the boy's laughing reply.

"In instinct you are. By the way, we ought to be getting near the place we're heading for," announced the guide.

"You tell me when you want to change the plan. We are not making much or any noise, so we should be able to go pretty close to the destination. Of course, you know best."

"I don't," answered the guide with emphasis. "I may know the brake and the game, but as a trailer of man-signs I am not in the same class with you, young man."

It was about three-quarters of an hour later when they came in sight of Turtle Bayou, a lonely channel in the heart of the swamp, rising from the shores of which were ranks of cane that disappeared in the far distance.

"I suppose they are as thick in there as hairs on a dog?" said Tad, pointing to the stream.

"Gators? I should say so. It's alive with them. A man who got in there never would get out alive. You want to look out for moccasins about here, too. They aren't disturbed much hereabouts, so there are a lot of them."

"I don't worry about snakes," answered the freckle-faced boy. "Just now I am looking for something that looks like a man. But, do you know, you haven't told me for whom we are looking."

"I reckon you wouldn't know his name if I did, but if we are lucky enough to meet him, I'll introduce the fellow," answered Lilly with a grim smile. "Do you see that thatched shack over there?" he asked, pointing to what appeared to be a heavy growth of bushes back from the bank on a rise of ground.

"Is that a shack?" asked Tad.

"Yes. It is where our friend puts up when he is in this vicinity. I have several shacks in different parts of the canebrake, but we haven't come across any of them yet, though we shall before we leave the brake."

"In there? Do you think he is at home?"

"We'll find out pretty soon. What would you suggest?"

"I would suggest that we walk right up to the entrance and learn if anyone is at home. I should advise leaving the horses back here, so there will be no trail close to his hut."

"Good idea. We'll do it."

They quickly secreted their horses in the brush, and after looking to their revolvers, the only weapons they carried with them after dismounting, the man and the boy made their way cautiously towards the hut, Bill Lilly leading the way, slightly in advance of Tad. There was no sign of life about the place, so they kept on until they stood in front of the hut.

"Nobody at home," announced the guide.

"So it seems. Shall I take a look about inside?" asked Tad, stepping forward.

"Wait! Don't be in a hurry. I reckon I'll have a look myself."

Tad did not understand Lilly's reason for wanting to do this, but he supposed the guide knew best. Lilly did. He leaped back suddenly, giving a vicious kick with his heavy boot, then jumping on some object with both feet.

"Look out! There may be more of them!"

"What is it?" cried Tad.

"A moccasin! The hound. Don't you see what he has done? He's made a snake-trap here. This bucket standing in the middle of the shack is sure to be tripped over by anyone who didn't know the trick. That would mean trouble for the kicker."

"I saw that bucket. I presume I should have at least pushed it to one side," answered Tad in an awed voice.

"That's the kind of a critter we have trailed down."

"It strikes me we haven't trailed him down. Perhaps he discovered us and has gotten away."

"I don't know about that. I'll let you take a look outside in a minute. The dishes are cold, but that doesn't mean much--he may not have cooked anything."

"The remains of his fire are cold, too," answered Tad. "I felt them when we came in."

"You are a wise head," nodded the guide. "You go out and see what you can pick up on the outside, but watch out for yourself," warned Billy. "There are some things I want to look at in here. Take your time. Don't get far away, that's all."

Tad stepped out, pausing to look about the place. His purpose was to learn if the owner of the shack had ridden away or if he were hiding somewhere in that vicinity. If he had ridden away there must be the trail of the horse with the bare off fore foot.

The Pony Rider Boy circled about, first looking for the place where the horse had been tethered. He found it without great difficulty, for a hoofprint always attracted Tad Butler's attention. Even at home he found himself studying them in the streets, out on the highways, wherever horses traveled. As a result he could read much more than the average good observer from tracks that lay before him. Tad was able even to form some opinion of the man who was riding the horse that had left the tracks.

The ground was considerably trampled at the tethering ground, and the bushes stripped clear of foliage where the horse had been browsing. It was this latter that had attracted the boy's attention first of all, telling him that a horse had been tethered there. From that, it was not a difficult matter to look up the trails. There were several of these. More time was necessary to determine which of them had been made last, but after a little study the Pony Rider Boy picked out the fresh trail.

"He rode out this way, heading southwest, I should call it," muttered the lad. "I wonder where he was heading for? Still, there is no use wondering, for he may have turned due east or due west after going farther into the swamp or the brake. The question is, where is he now, and is he coming back here today?"

The question was answered in a manner wholly unlooked for by Tad Butler. For the moment the lad, caught off his guard, was at a loss what to do. But his quick wit came to his rescue. Tad dropped to all fours and on hands and feet began running over the ground like a monkey, his body well screened by the bushes about him.

CHAPTER XXI

SURPRISES COME FAST

The cause of Tad's alarm had been a slight trembling of the soft ground underfoot, followed by a crunching sound as if something or someone had trod on a rotting stick. The lad knew that either man or beast was near at hand, but he did not have time to satisfy himself which of the two it was. He acted quickly, and, regardless of snakes, wriggled away to a place of greater safety. He reasoned, of course, that if it were the owner of the shack returning, he would ride his horse to its stable first of all.

Crouching down in the bushes the boy waited and listened. By this time he could tell that it was a horse approaching. Taking a long chance the boy half rose from his hiding place and peered out. Not more than six rods from him he saw the fellow who had stolen his doe riding straight towards him.

The Pony Rider Boy quickly drew back and none too soon, for the fellow's eyes caught the faint movement of the bushes at that point. He probably thought this movement had been caused by some lurking animal, for he made no attempt to investigate. He tethered his horse silently, then to Tad's alarm either his own horse or Lilly's uttered a loud whinny.

The boy in the bushes groaned inwardly.

"That gives the whole game away," he muttered. "I am lucky if he doesn't send a shot this way just for luck."

The stranger did nothing of the sort. Instead, he stood stock still. Tad could fairly feel the eyes of the man burn into his hiding place, though he could not see the man at all. There was a slight movement where the stranger's horse was tethered, a scarcely perceptible vibration of the earth under Tad's feet. He listened and learned that the man was walking away.

Butler again took a chance and peered over the tops of the bushes. The fellow was walking toward his shack, and what was more, his revolver was in his hand ready for instant use. The boy hoped that Lilly had been warned by the whinny of the horse and made his escape from the shack. But Lilly had not heard. He was fussing about in the shack, as Tad quickly deduced from the actions of the newcomer.

The boy began crawling towards the shack, making a detour so as not to expose himself to view, and for a moment he lost sight of his man. When he next caught sight of him, the fellow was standing close to the entrance of his shack with revolver leveled at it, or rather at the opening.

In a twinkling Tad Butler's pistol was in his hand, trained on the back of the newcomer. Still, the boy was not excited; he was watching for the move that would indicate the other man's intention to shoot. Butler did not believe he was going to do so. In this he was right.

For fully three minutes the man stood still gazing into the shack. Tad did not know what was going on in there, for he was unable to see into the place from his position, nor did he dare move on until the fellow made his next move. This he did very shortly.

"Hold up your hands!"

The fellow's voice rang out with startling distinctness. It made Tad start. He still had the man covered with his own weapon. The boy saw Bill Lilly appear at the door, but there was neither surprise nor fear on the face of the guide as he faced the revolver in the hands of the newcomer.

"So, it's you, is it, Alligator Pete? I reckoned you'd be along here pretty soon."

"What are you doing in my shack?"

"I reckoned I'd cage a few more moccasins for your menagerie. Put down that gun and I'll talk to you."

Pete laughed. He observed that Lilly's revolver was not in its holster. As a matter of fact, the guide had removed it, keeping it in his hand in case of a surprise, and in looking into Pete's belongings he had had occasion to lay the weapon down. The later interruption came so quickly and unexpectedly that Billy did not think of his revolver until too late to recover it. He knew the man before him. It was Alligator Pete in reality, and Pete was in a white rage.

"I reckon I'll put down the gun when I get ready and not before," answered the "Alligator." "What are you doing in my shack?"

"I'll answer that question by asking you one. What do you mean by interfering with my party?"

"I haven't."

"You have. You stole a doe that one of them shot."

"Oh, I did, eh?" sneered Pete.

"You know you did, but that wasn't all. You laid a false trail over the bear sign hoping to call the wolves. You knew they would attack my dogs. You planned it all, you miserable whelp! You see I know all about it. It's lucky for you that I haven't got my pistol. I'd shoot you where you stand!" Lilly's voice was calm but incisive.

"I reckon I'd have something to say about that; I reckon this gun might go off before yours did. I reckon it may go off as it is."

"No. You are too big a coward to shoot a man face to face. I could jump you now before you could shoot."

"You'd better not try it," warned Pete angrily. "You lie when you say I did those things. You want to get me in a box. You've been trying to get me in a box for the last year."

"You have got yourself in a box, Pete. This time it's a box that you won't get out of so easily as you think. I have the dead wood on you."

"This is the only dead wood that talks here," answered Pete, tapping his revolver significantly. "And it talks loud, too. Now what do you reckon you are doing in my shack?"

"Just what you did in one of mine once, tried to find out something. The difference is that I have found something and you didn't, because there wasn't anything to find."

"And what do you reckon to do now?"

"To make you answer for what you have done," replied Lilly evenly.

"How?"

"That is my business so far. Remember I have some boys in camp who can identify you. Remember you tried to shoot one of them."

"I didn't. I didn't intend to hit him. Don't you think I could hit a man at twenty paces without--"

A broad grin was spreading over the face of Bill Lilly.

"I'm mighty glad you admit it," he said in a sarcastic tone. "It saves a lot of trouble."

Pete's face flushed.

"It don't save you any. Now look here, Bill Lilly, I've got something to say to you. On one condition I'll let you go and say nothing about your going through my shack."

"What's the condition?"

"That you step aside and give me a show at some of those fellows who think they are mighty hunters, but have more money than brains. Another one is that you don't say anything against me when you get back home, and--"

"Those are two conditions. You said you would make only one," jeered Lilly.

"I'll make as many as I want to. Another one is that you get sick and have to go home, leaving the party to me for the rest of the time."

Billy laughed outright.

"You must be crazy, or else you take me for a fool. You ought to know that I'm not quite so daffy as to agree to a thing like that."

"You'll agree or it will be the worse for you. Remember I've got the best of you."

Billy opened his mouth to speak, then discreetly closed it again. He was about to say that Pete was reckoning without a knowledge of the situation, when suddenly the thought of Tad Butler entered the guide's mind. Tad was nowhere in sight. The boy, he believed, was out on the trail, and he did not know how far the boy might have wandered. Lilly did not know what was best to be done in the circumstances. He was unarmed. It was true he might leap on his assailant, but the chances were that Pete would shoot him before he could disarm the man.

"I don't agree to any of your conditions. Now what are you going to do about it?" demanded Lilly, his lips closing into a firm, straight line.

"I am going to--"

Pete did not finish what he was about to say. A sudden and unlooked-for interruption changed the current of his thoughts in a startling manner. With a yell he leaped back, his revolver going off into the air.

In a second Alligator Pete lay rolling and writhing on the ground.

CHAPTER XXII

OUTWITTED BY A BOY

Bill Lilly's attention had been called to a slight movement of the bushes behind where Alligator Pete was standing, but he did not understand the meaning of the disturbance, nor did he look very sharply until something unusual caused him to flash a quick glance in that direction.

A writhing, twisting something rose from behind the bushes, wriggled through the air, headed directly for Pete. The guide suddenly realized that it was a rope, with a great loop at the end of it.

The loop wobbled over Pete's head for a brief instant, then flopped down over his body. Instantly the loop was drawn taut; then came a mighty tug and Pete went down with his arms pinioned to his sides, struggling frantically to free himself from the grip of the rope. Even then he did not understand what had occurred. Perhaps he thought it was a snake that had twisted about him.

In a few seconds, however, he collected his wits. The revolver was still in his hand. Pete began pulling the trigger, trying his best to get a bead on Bill Lilly and put a bullet through him.

"Keep out of range till he gets through shooting!" called the exultant voice of Tad Butler from behind the bushes. "I can hold him. He won't get out of that loop in a hurry."

Lilly took advantage of the opportunity to spring back into the shack, where he snatched up his own weapon, then leaped out.

"Drop that gun, Pete!" commanded the guide sternly, at the same time leveling his own weapon at the man on the ground. "Drop it, I say!"

Pete, after gazing at the determined face of Billy Lilly for a few seconds, let go his grip on the butt of his revolver. Billy stepped over and kicked the weapon out of reach. Next he searched the clothes of the roped man, removing a knife.

"Get up!" he commanded.

Alligator Pete did so, his face red with rage, his eyes menacing.

"Who did that?" he demanded.

"I reckon I did," answered Tad Butler, stepping forward, still keeping the rope taut so that his prisoner should not run away.

"I'll kill you for that!" raged the prisoner.

"Not just now you won't. Later, perhaps. At present you are not in condition to kill anyone. What shall we do with him, Mr. Lilly?"

Pete was staring, still working and tugging at the rope. He had recognized Tad Butler on the instant.

"It isn't a doe this time, Pete," laughed the Pony Rider Boy.

"No, it'll be a dead kid when I get free again."

"I wouldn't make any threats were I in your place. You are in no position to make threats. Shall I remove the rope, Mr. Lilly?"

"Take it off, but look out that he doesn't grab you. If he tries to run away I'll pink him. Remember, Pete, no monkey-shines."

Tad slacked up on the rope, nodding to the prisoner to let it drop, which the man did quickly, Tad not taking chances by getting within reach of the fellow's wiry arms.

With his freedom, Alligator Pete's oozing courage in a measure returned to him, though he was still covered by the guide's revolver. Tad coiled his rope and secured it to his belt, Pete watching the operation with interest. He had never

seen roping in real life. He had not seen this time, but he had felt, which was less interesting than had he been a mere spectator. Lilly was regarding the fellow frowningly.

"I ought to do it, but somehow I can't," he muttered.

"What shall we do with him now we have him?" asked Tad. "I guess we shall have to turn him loose."

"I reckon we won't do anything of the sort, or he will be sure to be up to more mischief. I reckon we better take him with us. He has got to pay for what he has done."

"I haven't done anything. You can't--you don't dare hold me. You let me go!"

"See anything green in my eyes?" demanded Lilly. "We have the goods on you. We have trailed your pony, we have identified your dog, we know the whole story from beginning to end, as I have already told you. I'll tell you what we will do, Master Tad. We will put him on his horse and take him back to camp with us. We can then talk the matter over and decide what we had better do."

Tad was willing, in fact he was rather glad of the opportunity to take Pete back and show him to the boys. Chunky would be pleased to set eyes on the fellow again.

"Get the horse," directed Lilly. "I will hold him here until you are ready."

Tad hurried away. First he brought up their own animals, then went after Pete's mount. Pete's rifle came in for attention, and Tad decided to empty the magazine and put the rifle back in the saddle boot, which he did. Next he examined the horse's feet. There was a shoe missing on the off fore foot. The horse was a wiry, active little animal. The boy looked over him with the eyes of an expert.

"He is a better nag than mine," decided the Pony Rider Boy. "I'll wager he could lope all day without tiring out. I wonder if I could buy him? This animal has one shoe off the off fore foot, as I told you," announced the lad, leading the animal up to the shack. "Always keep your horse well shod and free from hoof or shoe peculiarities if you don't want to be trailed down," advised Butler. "How do you propose to keep Pete?" he asked the guide.

"We shall have to tie him," answered Lilly.

"Suppose I place my rope around him, keeping the free end in my hand and riding behind him? That will leave you free to use a weapon in case he tries to get away."

"Good idea. Get aboard."

Pete lost no time in obeying the latter command, evidently believing that on his horse he would find a better opportunity to get away. Tad winked at the guide as the hunter swung into his saddle. No sooner had Pete felt the touch of the stirrups under his feet than he dug the rowels of his spurs into his horse.

The animal snorted, rising into the air. Then a most unexpected thing occurred. Alligator Pete was jerked from his saddle. He landed heavily on his head in the soft muck.

"Catch the horse!" shouted Tad.

Billy Lilly aroused himself from his stupor caused by the quick action of the Pony Rider Boy, and, running out, captured the white horse, leading it back to the scene. Pete was getting up slowly, rubbing the ooze from his head and face.

Tad had suspected the hunter would make the very move he did. The boy was ready for him and while Pete was getting into his saddle, back half turned to them, Tad was swinging the big loop of his lariat over his own head. The instant he saw what the hunter was up to, the boy sent the rope twisting through the air. It fell neatly over the head of Alligator Pete with the result already known to the reader.

Lilly was grinning broadly when he returned with the hunter's horse.

"That was the slickest thing I ever saw in all my life, boy. Didn't know what you had met up with when you stole the doe from this kid, eh, Pete? Now, do you think you can be good, or do you want some more of the same medicine?"

The prisoner did not reply.

"Leave the rope where it is," directed Butler. "I don't take any more chances with you. You ought to thank me for having roped you. If I had not, the chances are that Mr. Lilly would have shot you."

"I reckon I would have done it," grinned the guide.

At a nod from Tad the guide led up the boy's horse. He then ordered Pete to mount again, after which the guide and the boy leaped into their saddles, with Tad riding close behind the prisoner, Lilly a little to one side. In this order they started for camp. They had not gone far before Butler observed the prisoner's hand resting on the butt of his rifle. This brought a grin to the face of the Pony Rider Boy.

"To save you trouble, Pete, I will say that I drew the shells from the magazine. Your gun is empty. Lilly doesn't know this, so if you try to draw the gun you may get shot."

The prisoner promptly withdrew his hand from the butt of his weapon. For the first time he seemed to realize that he had been outwitted at every turn, and his courage began slipping away from him. Pete's head drooped until his chin was almost to his chest. Tad Butler recognized the sign of surrender. He felt pity for the man, for Tad was tender-hearted and he did not like to see others suffer.

"Hadn't we better let him go, Mr. Lilly?" he asked in a low voice, nodding toward the prisoner.

"No!"

Tad shrugged his shoulders. They continued on in silence for a long time, Tad keeping his eyes on the prisoner, now jogging faster, now slower, to keep the lariat at about the same degree of tautness. Pete felt a gentle pressure about his body all the time. He knew that the other end of the rope was secured to the pommel of his captor's saddle and that any attempt to get away would land him on his back on the ground. This not being a cheerful prospect, Alligator Pete rode on as docile as a whipped cur.

It was just supper time when they rode into the camp on Sunflower River with their prisoner. Stacy Brown was the only one of the party except Ichabod who recognized Alligator Pete.

"Hello!" greeted the fat boy.

The prisoner did not answer.

"I am glad to see you. I owe you something. After you have had your supper I'm going to beat you," announced the fat boy.

"He is pretty well subdued as it is, Chunky," answered Tad soberly. "Don't humiliate him. Can't you see that the fellow is suffering? Never kick a dog after he is down and helpless."

"He isn't a dog. The dogs wouldn't own him as a member of their tribe."

In the meantime, Lilly had ordered the prisoner to get down, after which the guide tied the man to a tree. The boys pressed about Tad to hear the story of the capture. Butler told them briefly what had taken place, without making any special point of his own part in the affair. But if Tad had been modest about it, Lilly was not. He told them plainly that Tad Butler was the cleverest little roper and trailer who ever had come into the Louisiana canebrake, and that if it hadn't been for Tad there might have been all entirely different story to tell.

"What do you propose to do with the man, now that you have him?" asked the Professor after the story had been fully told.

"Keep him till we go back to Jackson. I'll have him locked up, and you had better believe the judge will give him all that's coming to him. Pete won't be hitting the canebrake trail right smart again, I reckon."

Supper was given to the prisoner, then later he was made comfortable for the night. Lilly announced that they would take the trail for bear again in the morning. He said he felt it in his bones that they were going to have the sport for which they had come into the canebrake. He felt that there were bear waiting for them out there. They had enough reserve dogs to take the trail and they might be sure that Alligator Pete would not be on hand to bother the trail.

At a late hour they turned in, Tad Butler not as well satisfied over his achievement as most lads would have been.

It was late in the night when Tad crawled from his tent and crept cautiously towards the spot where Alligator Pete lay sleeping. He reached the prisoner without awakening him, so cautious had been his movements. The first Pete knew of his presence was when Tad shook him lightly by the shoulder.

The "Alligator" started up, but was too good a woodsman to utter a sound.

"It's Butler," whispered the boy. "Have you a family?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Wife and some kids."

"Where are they?"

"Just over the line in Mississippi."

"Do you think, if you were let go, that you could go home to Mississippi and behave yourself?"

"I reckon it wouldn't take me long to get home."

"And you will keep away from Bill Lilly and not try to take revenge on him?"

"I don't want to set eyes on him again."

"It isn't a question of your setting eyes on him, but of his setting eyes on you. If he does, he will shoot you on sight, Pete. Do you promise to get over to your own state and behave yourself?"

"I promise."

Tad without further parley untied the knots that held the prisoner to the tree.

"Your horse is about ten rods down the bank that way. Your rifle is in the boot and you have plenty of shells. I have also put some food in your saddle bag. Now--get!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ICHABOD GETS A BIG SURPRISE

It was about daybreak on the following morning when the sleepy Ichabod stumbled from his bed and wobbled out into the open, rubbing his eyes. He gathered the dry stuff for the campfire, which had gone out, and proceeded to make a smudge which got into his eyes, causing him further distress.

The colored man had fussed about his duties for a full half hour, when taking a pail he started for the river to fetch water which he would boil for the use of the outfit. Reaching the point where the prisoner had been tied to the tree Ichabod halted, rubbing his eyes and scratching his head. He was confident that something was wrong, but in his sleepy condition he was not quite sure for the moment what that something was. The sight of the rope lying at the foot of the tree jogged his memory into sudden activity.

Ichabod uttered a yell. Bill Lilly was outside his tent in a twinkling, followed quickly by the other members of the party, Tad Butler being the last to leave his tent. Tad appeared to be in no great haste.

"What is it, Icha?" shouted Lilly.

"Him--him done gwine away."

"Eh, what?"

"De 'Gator done gwine away, sah."

"Not the prisoner? You don't mean he has escaped?"

"Ya-a-a-a."

The guide covered the ground to the tree in long strides. He halted suddenly upon observing the rope lying where it had been thrown. An ugly expression spread slowly over Bill Lilly's face.

"Has his horse been taken?"

"Yes, the horse is gone too," answered Ned Rector.

"Get ready! We must run him down," shouted Billy.

"What is the use? Why not let him go? He has had his lesson," answered Tad.

"I am of the same opinion," agreed Professor Zeppelin. "We did not come down here to chase criminals, but rather to follow the game trails. We have been in the canebrake for some time, and all we have got has been a small doe. My boys want a bear-hunt, Mr. Lilly, not a manhunt."

Billy reflected, tugging at his moustache. In a measure his reputation was at stake. His party simply must get a bear, or his reputation would suffer.

"You shall have a bear," he answered almost savagely.

Tad grinned, well pleased with the decision. As yet no suspicion attached to him. In good time Butler would tell them about it, but there need be no hurry to stir up trouble. The boy smiled to himself. He was happy in his little secret. He felt that Pete had been punished enough, and was sure that they would not be bothered by him again. Pete had had too great a scare to warrant him in annoying them further.

Lilly had grabbed some cold food, and, taking his hound leader with him, started out on horseback, telling the others that he was going out to see if he could locate a trail. He said he would be back before noon. Instead of being away most of the morning the guide was back in an hour.

"I've located a fresh trail," he announced. "It isn't more than an hour old at best. It's a she-bear and a fine one. We'll get this one or know the reason why. I have done the best I could. You know I can't make 'bear sign' if it isn't there. We frequently have to wait for weeks for a good trail. We are lucky in finding this one, for it might have been a young bear,

and no great sport."

The boys were all excitement on the instant. They began making hurried preparations for the chase, which all felt was going to result in something worth while.

"Master Tad, I want you to ride back towards Turtle Bayou. You know the way. I think she is heading that way. About a mile before you reach the bayou you will find a ridge of cane leading off to the northwest. It is what is known as the Big Cane Ridge. This she-bear has come over from the southern ridge, and, unless I am much mistaken, she is heading for the Big Ridge. She will stop some time this forenoon for food and rest, and if you take the short cut you ought to get to the ridge ahead of her."

"Do I go alone?"

"Yes, you will make better time. We don't want to lose this one. Once she gets on the Big Ridge we shan't get her at all. Now hustle yourself. Lay your course by the compass two points north of northwest and hold it. That will land you at the exact spot I want you to reach. You will have to use your bush-knife all the way. It's a new trail and a hard one, but you will eat it up."

Tad hastily stowed food in the pockets of his saddle, then looked to his weapons, his rope and his other equipment.

"Don't take any chances in case you should come up with the old she, but shoot and shoot to kill."

"And be sure that you don't get lost," added the Professor.

"I shall leave a trail that can be followed, even if I do lose my way," answered Tad, leaping into his saddle. Swinging his hand in parting salute to his companions he rode away, putting his mount to its best loping run.

Thirty minutes later the rest of the party with the hounds were also riding away to pick up the trail. The dogs were tugging at their leashes before they reached the trail.

"They've got the scent already," cried Lilly. "Now look out for a chase. It is going to be a hard run and a fast ride, but you boys are good for it."

"You bet we are!" shouted the Pony Rider Boys.

"I hope we, instead of Tad Butler, get the bear. He has had enough fun," complained Ned Rector.

"We stand the best chance," answered Lilly. "She will lie down to rest, and during that hour we shall get up to her."

The hounds were released soon after that. They were off with yelps of joy, tearing along the trail with the horses of the Pony Riders close behind them.

"This is a real joy ride," howled the fat boy, his face already flecked with blood, his clothing torn, from contact with brush and low-hanging limbs, for he was riding close up behind the guide.

"No, Tad is having that," corrected Ned. "He hasn't anything to hold him back, either. He can go as fast as he wishes without having to consider anyone else."

By this time the voices of the dogs were to be heard faintly in the distance. A short time later they were too far away to be heard at all.

In the meantime Tad Butler was hewing his way through the cypress swamp, through occasional thin ridges of cane, over rough ground, keeping his muscular little mount down to work every second of the time.

Tad did not have much time to think about anything save the work in hand. He did not know that he was rapidly converging on the trail of the she-bear.

About two o'clock in the afternoon the lad first heard the yelping of the hounds. They seemed to be approaching him obliquely, which in fact they were.

Tad pulled up sharply and listened. After a short time he rode about, getting the lay of the land, trying to decide in his own mind just what course the bear would take and where his best vantage point would be for getting a shot at her. There was no sound of the approach of the Pony Riders. He knew that they had been distanced perhaps by some

miles, and that what was done here Tad Butler would be obliged to do on his own account. He now saw the wisdom of Billy Lilly's plan. Billy, too, had given Tad the better end of the chase, which, as Tad believed, had been done with forethought. For this Butler was thankful. He wanted to get a bear.

The lad showed his excitement only in his eyes. Otherwise he was cool and deliberate in all his actions.

Suddenly the yelping of the hounds changed. They were sounding a new note. The yelping had given place to deep baying sounds.

"They've got her!" cried the boy, digging the rowels of his spurs into the sides of his mount. The little animal leaped forward and fairly tore through the brush, with the boy urging her on to renewed efforts regardless of the peril to his own person. Butler knew that baying well. He had heard it before, the first time in the Rocky Mountains, and he knew that there was an animal at bay. He was careful to make as little noise as possible. All at once he burst out into an open space where a strange sight met his gaze.

A huge she-bear was lying on the ground, flat on her back, her paws in the air, as a bear at bay frequently does. She was surrounded by a circle of baying dogs, each trying for an opening to get in a vicious bite.

Tad halted in amazement. He at first thought the beast had been wounded. He saw, however, that she was resting, taking her ease, with her paws in the air, regardless of the savage hounds snapping at her haunches.

"Well, of all the cool nerve I ever heard!" exclaimed the boy.

Now and then a hound, more venturesome than the rest, would dive in for a bite, whereupon, quick as a flash, a heavy paw would swing on the animal, sending it tumbling away yelping with pain. So interested was the Pony Rider Boy that it did not occur to him to shoot. He did not know whether or not Mrs. Bruin had seen or scented him. Then, again, it was not any too safe to try a shot at her with the hounds leaping in and out, dodging here and there. When she got up he would get a better sight and a safer shot.

Tad waited several minutes, the bear still taking her ease. She appeared absolutely without fear of the dogs that were nagging her.

"I'm going to stir her up," declared Tad with sudden resolution. He threw his rifle to his shoulder and sat his horse waiting a favorable opportunity to let drive at the old she-bear.

A faint puff of smoke, a detonating crash, woke the forest echoes. Tad's pony, startled, leaped into the air and to one side. The Pony Rider boy, caught wholly off his guard, disappeared from the saddle in a twinkling, landing on the ground.

The boy toppled over and lay still. He was too dazed for the moment to pull himself together.

In the meantime things were taking place before him. The beast had suddenly lunged to her feet, uttering growls of rage, her little eyes fixed on the cause of her distress, on the prostrate boy, a bullet from whose rifle had shattered the bone of her left shoulder.

Suddenly she lunged toward him, pausing to snap and bite at the hounds that were trying to throw themselves upon her, but whom she warded off with paw, her jaws wide open and dripping.

The big she-bear was ambling toward Tad Butler at great speed.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

Tad felt a sudden sense of impending peril. Bringing the full force of his will to bear on the task, he pulled himself to a sitting posture. Not twenty paces from him he saw the she-bear bearing down upon him with jaws wide apart, and uttering growls of rage.

Tad groped for his rifle, but could not find it. As a matter of fact it had fallen into a clump of bushes beyond him when he fell from the horse. His predicament was a dire one and he knew it.

The boy staggered to his feet, tugging at his revolver. With the seconds he was getting back his strength and his nerve.

"At her! At her!" he shouted to the dogs.

Encouraged by his words three of the hounds leaped on the haunches of the bear. This retarded her forward progress for the moment. She turned, snarling, on her assailants. This gave the dogs in front an opportunity to snap at her legs, which they did, but were put to rout with the sweep of a ferocious paw. The dogs seemed to realize that the duty of protecting the Pony Rider Boy rested wholly on them, for they went at the big she-bear with ferocious growls, their jaws snapping like steel traps. Their efforts seemed to have no effect on the big beast other than to retard her progress a little.

Again she started for Tad with the pack hanging to her heels. Young Butler, revolver in hand, stood calmly awaiting the nearer approach of the bear. When she had reached a point as close to him as he thought prudent, Tad raised his revolver and fired. The bear slackened her pace. She seemed to be surprised. Otherwise there was no indication that the boy's bullet had reached her. Surely she had not been wounded in a vital spot and Tad wondered if there were any vital spots in this animal. He could see that his first shot with the rifle had stirred the rage of the beast. Either he would have to kill her or she would kill him. Butler understood this fully.

It was an inspiring sight to see the freckle-faced boy standing there, bare-headed, revolver aimed at the bear as calmly as if it were an inanimate mark he were shooting at for target practice, with the yelping dogs assailing Mrs. Bruin, she almost neglectful of their presence. Yet at any moment one of the faithful hounds might get in a bite that would turn the tide in their favor.

One did get in an effective bite, but it was after Tad Butler had emptied the contents of his revolver into the bear. She turned with a roar as a chunk of flesh was torn from her flank. Thus encouraged, the dogs attacked with renewed fury, and, regardless of their own safety, threw themselves upon her. For the first time the old she-bear really woke up. She seemed to realize that she must fight and dispose of the dogs before she could go on and finish the freckle-faced boy.

A dog, breathing its last, was flung at the feet of the Pony Rider Boy.

"Oh, that's too bad," mourned the boy. "I've got to help them! But how can I do it? Ah!"

A stick of cane that had been cut off near the base of the stalk he saw standing against a tree not far from him. This gave the lad an idea. He grabbed up the stick, which was about ten feet long, and drawing near to the battling dogs, watched his opportunity. Then he gave the beast a poke with it. This served to distract her attention for the moment, giving the dogs a fresh hold all around.



The Bear Turned on Tad.

Delighted with the success of his ruse, Tad kept on poking, leaping back, dodging, thrusting, harrying the bear, assisting the dogs to get fresh and effective holds. The boy sought to poke the animal in the eye, but she was too wary for this. She managed to chew up the end of the cane pole, tearing it into shreds, and would have jerked it away from Tad entirely had she not been obliged to drop the pole to attend to the dogs that had just bitten her in the side again.

But this battle could not go on indefinitely. The dogs, one by one, were being either wounded or killed outright. Tad's chances for winning were lessening with the moments. He was doing his best to help and save the dogs and they were doing their desperate best to protect him from the she-bear.

"I've got to put a stop to this or she'll kill them all," cried the boy.

The bear seemed to have come to a decision at the same time. With the hounds clinging to her, she ambled for Tad again. The boy stood firm. He held his hunting knife in hand. As the bear reared before him, towering higher than his head, the Pony Rider Boy made a swift jab with the knife. But he was not quick enough. He had got within reach of those powerful paws. One caught him on the left shoulder. Tad was hurled fully a rod from the bear. He thought the blow had broken his shoulder, but he was up instantly and at her again. This time the lad was more cautious. Having once felt the strength of that paw, he had no desire to feel it again. A blow like that one the head or the neck would be likely to finish him, after which the she-bear would have an easy time of disposing of the hounds.

Tad, as soon as he had recovered in a measure from the first blow, began dancing about the beast like a boxer. The dogs were doing much the same. Every one of them was bleeding, their jaws were dripping with the blood of the bear, and their efforts were becoming less and less effective. It appeared to be a matter of but a short time before she would have killed them all.

Suddenly, as Mrs. Bruin's attention was attracted to the rear, Butler leaped forward. He drove the point of his hunting knife fairly into her body. The bear whirled. Tad leaped back, carrying his knife with him.

This last act of his was the final straw that broke down the prudence of the bear. With terrible growls she made straight for him. Tad leaped aside just in time to avoid the sweep of a paw that, had it landed, no doubt would have killed him. Then he sprang forward and drove the knife home.

For the next few minutes it would have been hard to say which was Pony Rider Boy, which dog and which bear. Tad's clothes were nearly stripped from his body, his skin scratched, torn and bleeding. But the boy was still strong and full of fight. On the other hand, Mrs. Bruin was getting weaker from loss of blood. She had depended too much on her strength and skill, but the boy and the wounded dogs had proved too much for her. She was now fighting both, probably with a full knowledge of this, which made her the more dangerous. Tad Butler was wholly on the defensive; he was fighting for his life and he knew it.

The bear suddenly reared on her haunches and staggered towards him. Tad buried the knife in her side, and it stuck. In the brief seconds that he was trying to recover it the great fore-legs closed about him. Strangely enough the she-bear as suddenly released the grip that was closing about Tad, and staggering backwards, collapsed and rolled over on her back with all four feet in the air.

When the bear released him Tad Butler went down in a heap, and lay where he had fallen, pale and motionless. The dogs, now realizing that their prey had fallen, attacked her ferociously, to which she returned only a feeble defense.

Bill Lilly and his party had heard the uproar, and were riding to the scene with all speed. Lilly had heard the report of the rifle when Tad took the first shot, and he knew that Tad Butler was in the thick of the fray. He knew, too, from the continued baying and yelping of the dogs, after the revolver shots, that the boy had not killed the bear. Hearing no further shots the guide was genuinely alarmed, for he read the meaning of these things aright.

When the leader of the party came galloping on the scene his eyes quickly comprehended, and Lilly was off his horse in a twinkling. Giving no heed to the bear, which he saw was nearly dead, he ran to the fallen Pony Rider Boy. The others of his party came tearing in a few moments later. They saw him down on his knees beside Tad Butler.

"Tad's dead!" wailed Stacy Brown.

Lilly shook his head. Professor Zepplin took Butler's pulse and listened to his heart.

"I think he is badly hurt. Can't we get him somewhere where we can treat him?"

"Wait till he comes around," advised Lilly.

It was a full half hour before they succeeded in bringing Tad back to consciousness, during which time his young companions stood about with faces almost as pale as his own. Stacy kept thrusting his hands in his pockets, then withdrawing them, while the others showed their nervousness by frequent shiftings from one foot to the other.

Suddenly Tad opened his eyes, and smiled weakly.

"I--I got her," he whispered, then swooned.

It was fully an hour later that the boy was able to talk. He told them, briefly, while the Professor was making a careful diagnosis of the patient, what had taken place. The Professor found that besides the boy's flesh wounds he had sustained three broken ribs. The ugly she-bear had crushed them in. Lilly immediately began constructing a litter. Tad insisted that he would ride back to camp, but they would not permit it. They forced him to ride to camp on the litter, which was hung between two horses. Never did a boy get better attention than did Tad during that never-to-be-forgotten ride, when every movement gave him agonizing pain. He had insisted that the bear be skinned and the pelt taken along. This consumed some little time, but Lilly did the job as quickly as possible.

Late that night they rode into camp. Tad was in a fever. For three days they watched over him, then the party started for Jackson with their patient, who pluckily protested that he was all right. Tad rode all the way in on the litter. Reaching Jackson, Major Clowney insisted that he be taken to the Clowney home, which was done.

In spite of his suffering, the Pony Rider Boy felt that pleasure was close akin to pain, for his hospitable hosts surrounded him quietly with every thoughtful attention.

"I'm sorry to see you in this fix," remarked Lilly, dropping in on Tad one afternoon.

"You needn't be," smiled the boy. "Really, I believe I'm having the time of my life. What are the other fellows really doing, Mr. Lilly?"

"Nothing much," replied the guide. "That is, Mr. Stacy is doing nothing."

"I might have guessed that," smiled Tad.

"And the others are helping him," finished the guide with a grin.

"And I had to be so unfortunate as to spoil our fine hunting trip in the canebrake," cried Tad reproachfully.

"You didn't spoil anything," Lilly retorted. "I reckon that all the young gentlemen had their fill of the canebrake."

"I don't believe it," declared Tad. "I know I wouldn't have had enough, if it hadn't been for--this."

"Well," assented the guide slowly, "I suppose I could have shown you youngsters quite a bit more if I had had the chance."

"I'll tell you what I wish you would do, Mr. Lilly."

"Well, I'm listening," observed the guide.

"It will take me a little time yet to get in the best of shape," Tad pursued. "I suggest that while I am laid up here you take the fellows back into the brake, and show 'em something they've missed so far."

"That might suit me," Lilly replied. "I wanted to show you people all I could, and I wish it had been more. But I don't believe your fellows will consent to go away and leave you here on the laid-up shelf."

"Nonsense!" protested Tad. "It would make me feel a lot worse to realize that I was a spoil-sport."

Lilly tried out his mission, but with no more success than he had expected. Tad, his face flushing, sent for his companions. But all his arguments failed to induce the Pony Rider Boys to leave him. Tad pleaded, and at last commanded.

"I'm afraid we shall have to go back to the brake whether we like it or not," urged Walter Perkins at last. "If Tad feels that he is hindering sport he'll get worse instead of better."

Ned and Stacy still protested, so Tad went at the matter through his physician, who advised the boys to go on or Tad would surely fret himself into a relapse, and they consented reluctantly.

On the day following, Mr. Lilly and Professor Zeppelin led the other three Pony Rider Boys back into the brake.

Tad felt no regrets after they had left. In the sportsman's phrase he had "filled his own bag," and now he was eager to see the other lads do something to their own credit.

Before very long he was able to sit up and write in his own firm hand to his mother. The receipt of his letter settled all of Mrs. Butler's fears.

Then, at the end of two weeks, the boys returned. Hearing that they were coming along the road Tad Butler, pallid yet clear-eyed and steady, strolled down the road to meet them.

"Wow!" yelled Stacy, pointing to a furry object tied over his pony's back in front of the saddle. It was bear.

"Fine!" grinned Tad. "Do you know who shot it, Chunky?"

"A young man of considerable importance, who just fits into my garments," replied Stacy Brown, throwing out his chest once more. "And I came near having a fearful fight with the critter, too."

It was a small bear, but Brown had really killed it unaided.

Ned, too, rode with a small bear tied to his saddle. Only Walter Perkins returned bootless, but that was to be expected

of Walter, who was an indifferent sportsman. Professor Zeppelin had had no intention of bagging any game.

Two bears, however, did not represent all the fun that had been had on this second trip into the canebrake. All three of the boys were as brown as coffee berries and as "hard as nails." They were in splendid shape.

Just a few days more and the Pony Rider Boys were obliged to bid their hosts and Lilly good-bye. It seemed as though half the inhabitants of the small town turned out to see the departing boys off at the railway station.

"Come back again! Come back again--soon," was the chorus that went up as the train began to move, while the Pony Rider Boys, their heads at the open windows, waved back.

Before leaving they learned through Major Clowney that government agents had arrested Alligator Pete Austen, who had tried to be their guide, and several other men from that section. These men had been part of a band of smugglers, smuggling German goods through Mexico. A fishing smack had been bringing the goods across the Gulf of Mexico. The stuff had been hidden on a remote deep bayou, and from there disposed of for considerable sums of money. The government agents recovered a heavy supply of goods of various sorts that, of course, had come in duty free by way of the secret route. Austen, who was in charge, attended to the work of getting the supplies into the brake where it was cached in steel cribs in the bayou.

For this, he and others of the gang--ten men in all--were convicted and sent to prison. The Pony Rider Boys had smoked them out without realizing that they were doing their country a great service. And now they were on their journey home. Not to remain there for long, however, for the boys had other worlds to conquer, other startling adventures before them. They will be heard from again, in the next volume of this series, which will be published under the title, "THE PONYRIDER BOYS IN ALASKA; Or, The Gold Diggers of Taku Pass." This following volume will be found one of the most fascinating of the entire series, with the Pony Riders in the saddle in new surroundings, undergoing experiences different from anything that they had ever met with.

THE END