TOM SLADE IN THE NORTH WOODS

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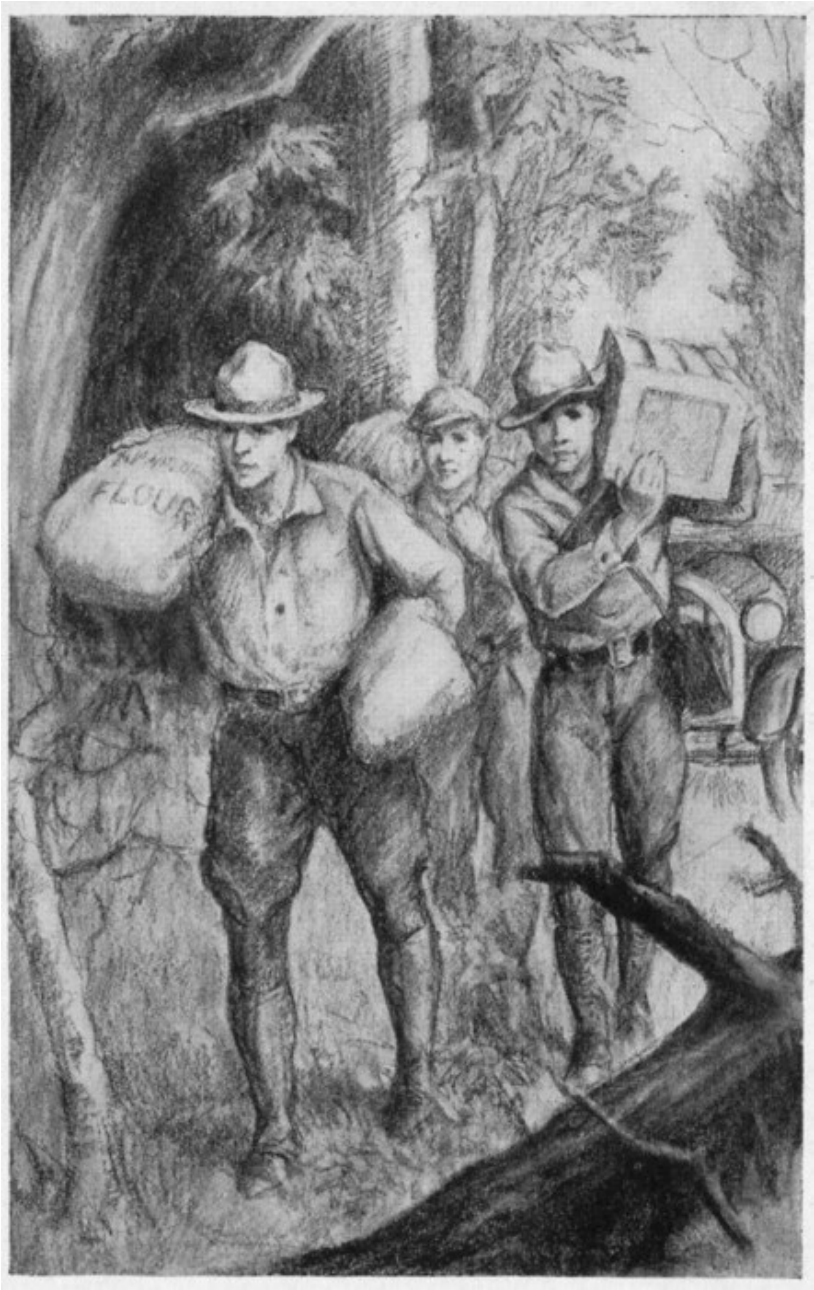

CARRYING PART OF OUR PROVISIONS WE PROCEEDED SINGLE FILE.

TOM SLADE
IN THE NORTH WOODS

BY

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of
THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY
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TOM SLADE IN THE NORTH WOODS

CHAPTER I
PERHAPS YOU HAVE MET BEFORE

One of the surest signs of approaching autumn in this suburban town of ours, is the reappearance in the main thoroughfares of my adventurous young friend Tom Slade after his summer sojourn in the mountains. When I see that familiar form in brown negligee attire careering down Main Street in the outlandish flivver which seems to be a very part of him, I know that Temple Camp has closed for the season, that the schools are again open, and that soon I shall be raking up dried leaves on the front lawn. The return of Tom Slade is just as much a harbinger of autumn as the coming of the first robin is a harbinger of spring.

My first glimpse of that dilapidated Ford always arouses a cheery feeling in my heart and I am not offended at the rather perfunctory wave of the hand with which Tom recognizes and greets me as he hurries by. I know that when he gets around to it he will run up to see me and beguile me with an account of the summer up at the big scout camp of which he is the very spirit.

Sometimes I think that there is no single character in this whole thriving town who would be as much regretted as Tom Slade, if he should go away. There is a breezy kind of picturesqueness about him that sets him apart and makes him a sort of local celebrity. I think I have never in my life seen him wearing a regular suit of clothes. He goes hurrying about town in the winter months quite hatless; he seems always on the go. I have seen a good many boys in this town, who were scouts not so long ago, grow up and become absorbed in the seething business of the growing community. Some of them are grown into ingratiating young fellows in banks, some are in the real estate “game” as they call it; they are all driving around in good cars and exhaling a distressing atmosphere of sophistication.

When I go into the Trust Company and am welcomed patronizingly by young Ellis Berrian I could almost choke him for his self-sufficiency. He used to caddie for me over at the Warrentown course. These white-collared young gentry are cutting a great swath and producing nothing. They buy cars on the installment plan and talk glibly about the rise in values when the new bridge shall span the Hudson.

The first I ever knew of Tom Slade was when he was a hoodlum down in Barrel Alley (since obliterated, praise be) and he got his name in our local newspaper for knocking down a heroic official who was placing the few Slade belongings in the street by way of executing a court order of eviction. Tom,

then fourteen, knocked the official in the gutter—I think it was the gutter.

Then the local scout troop got hold of him and found (as the official had found) that he had an uncanny way of doing what he set his heart on doing. He made a record in scouting. His mother and father both died, and the scouts took him up to camp with them. His heroism up there brought him to the attention of Mr. John Temple, of whom this town may well be proud, and the outcome of the whole business was that Mr. Temple founded Temple Camp up in the Catskills which has grown into one of the biggest scout communities in this country.

When the war cloud broke Tom enlisted, and came back when it was over with a record that made him a celebrity in this young city. He was right then at the parting of the ways. He might have got a job in one of the banks or studied law (so I understand) on Mr. Temple's bounty, and become another hapless member of that group of young ghouls who haunt the court-house and are sometimes driven back on real estate and title searching. It must be confessed Tom would have made a wretched lawyer. But the spirit of adventure was in him, the wind blew in his face, the woods called to him. He went up to Temple Camp and became a sort of assistant there.

I do not know exactly what are his duties, but when I visited Temple Camp a couple of years ago, he seemed to form a kind of link between the management and the scouts. He invited me up there and I hardly laid eyes on him during my whole week's stay. All I can say is that he was always in a hurry, always hatless, and always had a group of scouts following him about. He had what none of the councilors or scoutmasters had, and that was picturesqueness. I think he is the only official up there who has anything bizarre about him. I suppose a big camp like that must have its hero, and he is that.

Temple Camp has a small office in this town, where there is a manager, a bookkeeper, and two or three girls who send out circulars and prospectuses. During the winter months, Tom identifies himself with this prosy department of the romantic scout community in the Catskills, and in the spring he is off again to get the boats in the water and repair the springboard or the observation tower, and fell trees for new cabins, and heaven knows what all. During his season in Bridgeboro I am likely to see him to talk with a dozen times more or less. He stays down at the old County Seat Hotel and comes up here for dinner occasionally. He is always welcome. Sometimes we play chess and I can always beat him at that. We talk into the wee hours.

In our fireside chats this winter we shall have more serious matters to recall than heretofore. The adventures we will discuss will seem like things seen in a dream. And when February gales whistle around the bay window in this cozy library, my little sanctum will seem the more secure and cheery because of our

harrowing recollections of a wind-swept mountain in the north woods, where a wild voice that haunts me even now was drowned in the fury of the gale as it echoed in the ghostly fastnesses of that eery wilderness. We will live over again the chilling terrors of a night when wild eyes stared into mine, and clawing fingers groped toward my throat, and the wind moaned and was never still. Perhaps we may even fancy that we see the poor departed spirit that is said to haunt the neighborhood of Weir Lake over which the towering Hogback casts its brooding shadow; the wandering shade that is ever searching and never finding a living soul in whom to confide the appalling truth about the tragedy of Leatherstocking Camp.

If you would know this story as Tom and I know it, you may come here in imagination to my little sanctum, and welcome you will be. You may fancy that you have tumbled the books and papers from that littered couch before the open fire plunk on to the floor as Tom himself is wont to do. Then you may fancy that you are reclining comfortably among my numerous cushions listening to a winter's tale about the lonely spaces of the North.

CHAPTER II
WHO IS THAT MAN?

It is now midwinter and more than a year has passed since Tom ran up here early in September to see me after his return from Temple Camp. For reasons you are to know about he did not pay me his usual call of greeting this last fall. As I think it over now it seems to me his camp must have closed early that year, for the weather was quite summery and I was sitting on the porch when I saw that dilapidated Ford of his come up the quiet street making a noise like a brass band run amuck. On the side of this gorgeous chariot is printed TEMPLE CAMP, BLACK LAKE, NEW YORK. But Temple Camp has long since repudiated this ramshackle car which completed an honorable career in mountainous and rocky by-roads. It is now Tom's official equipage and will be, I think, till the end of time.

"Tomasso," said I, "I wish you would park that thing around the corner; I'm afraid people will think it belongs to me."

"What's the matter with it?" he called from the curb. "I'm going to turn it upside down and empty the motor out of it this winter and get it ready for the Adirondack trails next spring. All she needs is a new block—and a new body. She's going to do some stepping next summer."

"Yes, yes, explain all that," I said, as he breezed up onto the porch and grabbed my hand. "It's good to see you, Tommy, old boy."

He wore, as usual, a khaki-colored flannel shirt with trousers to match. He never bothers about a scarf and, as he scorns a hat, the breeze (especially when he is driving) plays havoc with his hair. I would say that the most bizarre detail of his attire is a belt which he says is of snakeskin. He got it from old Uncle Jeb Rushmore, the one time scout and guide on the western plains, who is now ending his days as chief scout at the big camp.

"Well, Tom," I said; "What's the good word?"

He sat on the railing unrolling his sleeves, as a trifling concession to social propriety, I suppose. "I've been trying to get up here ever since Saturday," he said, "but we're making a big map of the camp down at the office—it's going to be a peach, 'bout five feet square. They're going to photograph it down and send out copies with the spiel—you know that booklet. By the way, do you want to buy a thousand dollars' worth of stock in a new camp? Up in the Adirondacks? *Leatherstocking*, how's that for a name?"

"It's taken from a character in Cooper's novels, in case you don't happen to know," I commented dryly. And I added, "If I had a thousand dollars to

throw away I'd buy you a new car."

"Well, the name fits pretty pat," Tom said. "Did you ever hear of Harrison McClintick, the leather king? I suppose maybe that's why he named his camp Leatherstocking. He's a war millionaire; he made a fortune in leather during the war."

"Did he make leather stockings?" I asked.

"Listen to what I'm going to tell you," said Tom, ignoring my playfulness. "I've just come from Mr. Temple's——"

"He's the man to see if you want a thousand dollars," I said. "Do you wear your present regalia when you go up to Temple's?"

"Sure, he doesn't care," Tom rattled on. "Listen, I want your advice and I may want some help——"

"Not a thousand dollars," I said. "They're starting a new Golf Club down at Cedarville and I'm interested in that, thank you."

Tom extended his arms on either side of him, bracing his hands against the railing on which he sat. "Listen," he said, "I want to tell you about something that happened this summer—I mean something I heard about. If I can get Mr. Temple interested I'm going to do something big."

"Somehow I can't picture you as a stock and bond salesman, Tom," I said.

"That's just the trouble," he complained. "I wish I was ten years older, then maybe Mr. Temple would listen to me. But you'll listen to me, and he'll listen to you."

"I'd do more for you than listen to you, Tommy, old boy," I said. He was so breezy and enthusiastic, so fresh and wholesome in his unconventional attire, that I could not help letting a little ring of affection sound in my words. "But it would be a terrible blow to me, Tom, if you should get interested in business. To me you have always seemed the very spirit of scouting."

"No, but listen," he continued eagerly. "Up at camp this summer a crew of government surveyors blew in one day; they're connected with the Geologic Survey—nice chaps, all of them. All the scouts fell for them."

"And then?"

"Well, they were there to make a survey of Beaver Chasm up in back of the camp—you know the place."

"You were going to take me there, but you never did," I said. "You were building cabins instead."

"Forget it," said Tom. "They spent a couple of nights with us at campfire; they've been in the Florida Everglades and up in Alaska and down the Mississippi on levee work and gosh knows where all. Well last summer, before they hit Temple Camp neighborhood, they were surveying up in the Adirondacks around Lake Placid. After that they hit it for Ausable Chasm. About ten miles east of the boundary of the Adirondack Park—I know just

about where it is—they got into a pretty punk road that led around north of a mountain. Hogback—ever hear of it? Well, they drove along and all of a sudden the road ended—plunk. Right in the middle of the woods. That's the way it is with a lot of roads up there in the Adirondacks. Well, there was a trail, a sort of continuation of the road. Of course they couldn't drive, but they hiked in about a mile or so and ran right into a camp—*now wait*!"

"I'm all ears," I said.

"They were in one of those rich men's camps—those places are all through the Adirondacks, you know. There was a lake about half a mile across, a fine hunting lodge—big chimney-place and everything. Yes, I've seen it myself! I took a run up there before I came home. The hunting lodge is, oh, maybe, fifty by a hundred, all rough stone. Outbuildings and everything! Regular millionaire's camp!"

"Go on," I said, laughing at his enthusiasm. "Did you meet the millionaire?"

"Nah, he wasn't there; the place is for sale. There were just a couple of game wardens bunking there when the surveyors saw the place. When I was there week before last there wasn't a soul. But I saw a deer—saw two of 'em. So you see it's not much like Times Square. *Oh man alive*, that's some wilderness up there. Why, when I went back to Temple Camp I thought I was on Broadway.

"So I didn't learn anything when I was there, only I saw the place. Oh boy, what a place for trout fishing—regular mountain streams, you know, rocks and everything. Well, now here's what the surveyors told me—I'll give you an idea of the place afterwards."

"Any golf up there?" I coyly ventured.

"There you go with your golf!" he hurried on. "No, there's no golf. But if you want to get your shoes shined or your suit dry cleaned—you old front porch shark—you can go to Plattsburg about twenty miles away, over the mountains."

"Do the buses run often?" I asked.

He ignored my query and hurried on. "Well, now that camp is owned by Harrison McClintick who made *millions* in leather during the war. He made holsters for pistols, and leather belts, and with the odds and ends he made leather buttons, and the strips that couldn't be used for leather buttons or puttee laces, he made into shoelaces. By the time he got through with a leather hide there wasn't enough left to clog up a fountain pen."

"Fancy that," I commented.

"Yes sir; well, to make a long story short, that place, *Leatherstocking Camp*, is for sale, and it can be bought *cheap*. Now wait a minute, I'm going to tell you something—keep still."

“Proceed,” I said with quiet dignity.

“Now what do you say to that place for a scout camp? You’ve heard a lot of talk—Mr. Temple himself started it—about a training camp for scoutmasters. There’s the spot, made to order! What I want you to do is talk to Mr. Temple about it, so as he’ll talk with the local council—maybe the national council.”

I am afraid that I must have looked very practical and sober to poor Tom. I remember laying my open hands finger to finger with the first fingers against my pursed lips as I contemplated him rather dubiously. “Want *me* to speak to Mr. Temple?” I queried ruefully.

“Sure, why not?”

“Hmph,” I mused. “But tell me, Tommy boy, why does Mr. Harrison McClintick, the leather king millionaire, want to sell his romantic camp in the wilderness?”

“Now you’re talking,” said Tom. “Listen——”

“Let’s go indoors and listen,” I said, rising.

“There was a tragedy up there,” Tom said.

“Well!” I commented. And then, happening to glance out toward the street, I said, “Do you know that man standing near your car, Tom?”

“He looks like a hobo,” Tom said.

He did indeed; I think he was the most dubious looking person that I ever beheld. His clothing was in the last stages of wear, and he had a scraggly beard which somehow suggested neglect of shaving rather than a preference for that style of adornment. At the distance from which I saw him, he might have been either young or old. I suppose no man with a beard looks very young. More than once he had glanced furtively toward the porch. However, I had not thought it worth while to interrupt Tom’s eager narrative. But now that we were going indoors I called attention to him.

“He can hardly have designs on your car,” I observed ironically, as we sauntered into the house.

Little did I dream of the part that this loitering stranger was to play in our two lives. I soon forgot him in the appalling story which my young friend proceeded to tell me. Yet already that prowling figure was cast in the drama in which Tom and I were to play our parts. Already the springs of action were moving which were later to produce a thrilling drama at lonely Leatherstocking Camp.

CHAPTER III
A TRAGIC EPISODE

Seated comfortably in my library, Tom at once plunged into what I suppose might be called the human interest side of his story. I must confess I am not greatly interested in leather, nor even in millionaires' camps. Nor was I altogether carried off my feet by Tom's vision of a new camp. But I listened with rapt attention to his account of the tragic incident which had made Leatherstocking Camp a place of bitter memory to its owner.

"The reason why he wants to get rid of it," Tom said, "is because he can't bear the sight of it; he wants to put it out of his life; doesn't ever want to hear of it again. Those game wardens up there told the surveyors all about it. Last year Mr. McClintick and his son and a man who was an old friend—Weston, I think his name was—were up there duck shooting. Well, one morning young McClintick got up early and went out to take a swim in the lake. It happened that Mr. Weston was out early, too, looking for ducks. I guess it was pretty early, and misty. Anyway, Mr. Weston saw a dark object moving through the water out in the middle of the lake. He thought it was a duck and he *aimed his gun and shot at it*."

I drew a quick breath. "It wasn't young McClintick?"

"It was young McClintick."

"Heavens!" I said. "That was terrible."

Tom paused before continuing. I could only shake my head, drawing a long breath and repeating, "Terrible—*terrible*!"

"It was just another of those fatal accidents that happen in the gaming season," Tom said. "Most every year you read of some such thing."

I shook my head; his recital had almost unnerved me. "No, it was *horrible*," I mused aloud. "I never read of another accident just like that—no. I've heard of a man aiming at a deer and shooting a comrade somewhere beyond. But never anything like this. I think the poor man must have gone crazy afterward."

"Well," said Tom, "the story as I heard it from the surveyors was that he did go to pieces. When he shot at the object, suddenly there was a kind of splash and something reached up; he thought it was an arm. Well sir, he wouldn't let himself believe that he had——"

"Awful, *frightful*," I said, shudderingly. "Tom," I added, "I don't know whether I feel sorrier for the man or for the father. How would *you* feel in the man's place?"

Tom shook his head. “The game wardens up there told my friends, the surveyors, that Mr. Weston couldn’t bring himself to go into the lodge and see if young McClintick was there asleep. He knew the old man never went in the lake and that there wasn’t anybody else for miles around. You see there were just three of them there. I understood Mr. Weston was an old friend of Mr. McClintick. He did think that maybe a game warden or a fire-ranger had happened into the neighborhood and gone in the water. All he had to do was to go into the lodge and see if young McClintick was there in his bed. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He just waited around, all gone to pieces, for an hour or so.”

“I would say that must have been the most terrible half hour that ever passed in any human life,” I reflected. “Well, what then?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tom said. “Of course, both he and Mr. McClintick knew the worst before long. It sort of broke up the friendship. Naturally would, don’t you think so? Yet I guess the old man wasn’t—that is, didn’t exactly hold it against him.”

“Just an accident,” I mused. And Tom and I sat silent for a few moments, both musing.

“Just an accident,” he said. “They didn’t succeed in getting the body for several weeks; it was caught in an old seine at the bottom of the lake. I understand the poor old fellow thought the world of his son. He just went down to his place in Long Branch and got through with it somehow. He’s got a big place down there, I understand, and another in Newport. Lives in New York winters; has a mansion there too, I suppose. Poor old gent, they said he cared more about his Leatherstocking Camp than all his other places put together. But he won’t go there now; won’t look at the place; won’t hear about it. Just wants to sell it and he won’t haggle about the price. I suppose fifteen or twenty thousand bucks would buy the whole outfit. Oh, *boy*, that’s some wonderful place! I was telling Mr. Temple all about it. He just patted me on the shoulder and said he’d have to talk with the Scout people about it. I think he was just letting me down easy. *But there’s a chance! There’s the place for a training camp for scoutmasters!* Take it or leave it—*but there’s the spot!* There won’t be another bargain counter chance like that, not till Gabriel blows his horn—*no sir!*”

“Did you talk to Mr. Temple like that?” I queried.

“Yes, and he said, ‘It’s always good to see you, Tommy.’”

“Tom,” I said, “do you know, if I were that man—Weston, was it?—do you know, I think I’d feel worse than if I had murdered. You see a murderer is defective, he doesn’t see straight, his mind isn’t right, he has no imagination, he doesn’t suffer remorse. A man who has deliberately killed doesn’t suffer because he’s abnormal.”

“Highbrow stuff?” Tom commented.

“But a perfectly normal man who takes careful aim and shoots another to death, in a ghastly accident——”

“I know,” Tom said.

“What must be his feelings?” I mused. “I think I would be a complete wreck after that. I think I would be forever haunted by the thought of my ghastly blunder. After all, the most horrible thing may be just a mistake. I wonder how Mr. Weston was affected.” For a few moments I sat musing; I could not think of the possibilities of that deserted camp. I could only think of the tragic occurrence which cast its shadow over it. To go there after poor Mr. McClintick had turned his grief-wrung face from it forever would seem almost like wearing a dead man’s shoes.

Tom aroused me out of my reverie by saying, “Sure, I suppose he was broken—naturally. But what I’m thinking about now is getting hold of that property—just wait till you see it—and starting it as a scout camp. Why Mr. Temple made a speech up at Temple Camp only this summer and said what a wonderful thing it would be to have a sort of training camp for scoutmasters. Goodness knows, a lot of them need it. And now here’s a millionaire’s camp in the wilds of the Adirondacks that can be had almost for the asking——”

“Oh, hardly that, Tommy,” I said. “Besides, it would cost money to put it in shape. You can’t turn a rich man’s hunting lodge into a scout camp overnight, you know. You’d have to build shacks and a dormitory; you’d have either to build or transport boats and canoes there; you’d have to spend a lot of money, in short. According to your account this place is in the wilderness. Mr. Temple is a very rich man, my boy; but he’s also a very shrewd and practical man.”

“Well, talk is cheap,” Tom complained. “But here’s a *chance*.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t talk like that about Mr. Temple,” I said. “Mr. Temple is as good as his word every time, and you know it. For my part—maybe I’m more sentimental than you—I’d have a kind of a queer feeling about the place. Sort of spooky—no?”

“Sure not,” Tom laughed. “Why, two boys have lost their lives at Temple Camp since the place opened up.”

“Well, I guess you’re right at that,” I confessed. “Now I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” I added rather more briskly, for to tell you the truth the story Tom had told affected me so keenly that I found it hard to think of any other phase of the matter. Perhaps that is because I am a writer and am apt to see the dramatic element of a thing to the exclusion of everything else. “I’ll go up and see Mr. Temple; he can’t do more than throw me out. He and I have one thing in common anyway, that’s golf——”

“And scouting.”

“Yes, and scouting. I’ll tell him I think the more scout camps there are, the better. I’ll tell him I think that *his own idea* about a training camp for scoutmasters is a bully idea. And I’ll tell him I believe in you; that I think you know more about the real outdoor stuff than anybody this side of Mars. Of course, I can’t put myself in the position of asking him to start and endow a new camp. But I’ll sound him out, and I think I’m old enough so that he won’t just pat me on the back.”

“You’re young enough,” Tom said with spirit. “All you need is to sleep outdoors in the summer.”

“Thank you, I have a home to sleep in,” I said.

“And if we get this thing started, you’re going to come up there,” he declared.

“And while you’re careering around doing a hundred things at once, I’ll have to wander around the lake and think about the tragedy that made the new camp possible.”

“Oh, try to forget it,” said Tom.

“And there’s another thing,” I said. “What would Temple Camp ever do without you?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t cut out Temple Camp,” he exclaimed. “I’d just take a summer off to get this new camp started.”

I just shook my head. I’d give a good deal to have his fine spirit and energy.

CHAPTER IV
THE NEW VENTURE

I wish not to intrude into this narrative. Of the extraordinary adventures which I am now to record, Tom was unquestionably the hero. But since I am a trustee of the new camp and was present there in the exciting season of its formation, I suppose I am the logical one to group these remarkable incidents into a story. As for Tom, he cannot remain seated long enough to write a letter.

You must bear with me a little time while I tell briefly the somewhat humdrum details incident to the launching of this enterprise. Yet even here was a spice of mystery. I went up that very evening to see our town's most benevolent and distinguished citizen, Mr. John Temple. I know him, as every one in town knows him; perhaps a little better than some, for I have met him on the golf course. He is none of your open-handed story book philanthropists, tossing princely sums here and there, one of those scout angels who rewards the juvenile hero with a thousand dollars for a brave deed. But he is a very rich man, and a vastly generous one. I have always believed that the conspicuous success of Temple Camp is to be ascribed, not only to his liberal endowment of it, but to his wise and painstaking oversight. It is his pet and his pride.

Well, I went up to see him and on my way there a rather singular thing happened. Scarcely had I reached the first corner when I was accosted by a man whom I thought to be the same one that I had noticed loitering (or at least pausing) in front of my house during Tom's call. To this day, I do not know for a certainty whether or not he was the same man. If he was, he must have put on an overcoat in the interval. Notwithstanding his scraggly beard he appeared rather more presentable than the man I had noticed near Tom's car. Yet I thought he was the same man.

Be that as it might, he addressed me by name and asked me if I knew whether the Adirondack camp property, as he called it, had been sold.

"May I ask who you are?" I said with intentional curtness.

As I did not pause he fell in step with me. "No offense," he said. "I heard young Mr. Slade was interested in buying it. I'd like to get a job up that way; my health ain't so good."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be much of a recommendation," I said rather coldly. "And what makes you think that I should know anything about it?"

"I heard it was for sale," he stammered confusedly.

At the corner I paused just long enough to say, "You had better consult those who are interested. The matter is none of my business, and none of

yours. Do you belong here in town?”

The man was obviously embarrassed; he had evidently counted on a better success in chance acquaintanceship. He fell behind me and soon I hit on an explanation of his presumption. I came to the conclusion that he was an aggressive real estate man who was after information about a transaction from which he might squeeze a profit. I thought he might represent interests which would be keen to make a quick purchase of the camp property if a prompt resale were assured.

I did not mention this incident in my talk with Mr. Temple, for I wished not to give him the impression that I was trying to urge him to a quick decision. But I was very glad indeed that he seemed really interested in the property and disposed to act promptly. I had thought of my call as in the nature of a favor to Tom, but had feared it would be unavailing. But I was quite reassured. Tom thinks it was I who did the trick, but frankly, I believe that Mr. Temple had the matter in mind when I called on him.

Well, to make an end of this business phase of the story, Mr. Temple told me he intended to get in touch with his broker at once, and also with the national scout people. Mr. Gerry and Mr. Donaldson, of our local council, went up with Tom and had a look at the property. And later, Mr. Temple himself went with old Uncle Jeb Rushmore, the good old scout of Temple Camp. I kept out of the business until the new camp was actually opened and then I became a trustee.

As soon as the deal had gone through (that was in January) Tom went up to the property with a couple of young men from this town to stay there through the spring and try to get the place in some sort of shape for the summer. One of these young men was the fellow they call Skipper Tim who is steward down at the boat club during the boating season. He was well chosen. The other was Totterson Burke—Tot Burke, they call him. He’s freight agent here in town and used to be in the life saving service along the coast. I may say here that I think Tom Slade’s circle of available friends represents every out-of-the-ordinary and adventurous calling on the face of the earth. They went up in Tom’s flivver, of course, stopping at Temple Camp to get some tools needed in felling trees and building cabins. Here they picked up Piker Pete, who is fire-lookout up on Cloudburst Mountain in back of Temple Camp, and took him along. I understand he is called Piker because he scans the country and not because he is in any sense stingy.

As for myself, I did not go till later, when I went up with Brent Gaylong. That was in the summer. And before that something very startling happened.

CHAPTER V
A NEIGHBOR'S STORY

Once the proposition of the new camp was settled, and Tom and his hardy adventurers had gone to brave the winter in those howling wilds, I forgot all about the enterprise which now seems likely to mean so much to scouting. Tom wrote me twice, mailing his letters at Harkness on the Ausable River, about eight miles east of the camp. He told me that they had a storehouse and two cabins up. His letters breathed a warmth of enthusiasm which I suppose helped to palliate the rigors of the biting winter. I inferred that they were working hard and withal having a good time of it. He wrote that the game wardens made free with his hospitality and were always welcome with their fireside yarns.

I must confess that when I thought of the spot at all it was as the deserted camp of the bereaved leather king; not all the pother about the new enterprise could drive from my memory the vivid picture of the tragic accident which had occurred there. To me, that would always cast a shadow over the place. That fine youth (fond of sport and the great outdoors, as I pictured him, and with a vast fortune to make the path of life easy) shot through the head as he took an early morning swim in the lake! And the bereaved father, to whom the spot was now become a place of sorrowful memory! It seemed almost like taking advantage of his grief to buy the property at a sacrifice figure. But Mr. Temple only laughed at me when I spoke to this effect.

Now toward the end of the winter I did something which I suppose was a trifle presumptuous. This was, I think, a couple of months before I went up to the camp. I have a little place in Cedarville, a slight distance inland from Long Branch which, as you know, is on our New Jersey coast. Here I while away the summer months playing golf. At that time the Cedarville Golf Club was having a campaign for membership, for its exceptionally fine course had begun to attract the attention of golf enthusiasts in other communities.

Well, not to make a long story of it, I was struck by an inspiration. Tom had mentioned that Mr. Harrison McClintick had a place at Long Branch. Here would be a fine name to juggle with in our campaign. Surely he played golf; all millionaires play golf. He must join the Cedarville Club, and lend his name to our intensive drive.

So when I was down at my little place on a week-end I ran over to Long Branch. I only suspected that Mr. McClintick would be there; finding millionaires in their homes is a kind of hunting sport in itself. I was somewhat

crestfallen to learn that Seven Towers, his magnificent place, had been sold. I have seen few houses so palatial. It was a young man on the adjoining estate, a gardener or perhaps superintendent, who told me of the sale of the place. And he told me of other matters which somewhat changed the color of my thoughts.

Leaning against my car with one foot on the running board he chatted quite freely about the McClintick fortune. “Why, as I understand it, he sold out because he couldn’t keep it up,” said he. “He used to have a place in Newport too, but I heard that’s been sold. Easy come and easy go, you know. He made it all in the war.”

“So I heard,” I said. “I happen to know the interests that bought his camp in the Adirondacks. He had a sadder reason for selling that.”

To my astonishment the young man only pursed his lips and looked rather quizzical. “Guess the old gent was glad enough to get the money,” he said.

“He’s had reverses then?”

“That’s what they say,” my informant replied.

“Hard luck,” I mused aloud in a kind of half interest. “To lose his son that way was bad enough——”

“Sure was,” the young fellow agreed. “Rolly, he didn’t amount to much though. It was a terrible thing just the same.”

At this casual observation I experienced almost a shock. Perhaps I have a too ready fancy, but I had pictured young McClintick as a splendid and beloved son cut down by a horrible accident in the bloom of youth.

“So?” I queried. “Why,—what was the matter with him? He certainly had a sad enough end.”

“Come through the fighting on the other side all right, and then got shot,” my chance acquaintance commented. “That’s the way it is,” he added. Then, as if to modify his criticism of the victim, he said, “Oh, I don’t know; Rolly wasn’t so bad, I suppose. They had their place here when we got into the war, only it wasn’t anything like the way you see it now; that whole left wing and both towers were added. Yes, the old man made quite a place of it. He sure knew how to spend it.”

By way of prolonging our casual chat I offered him a cigarette and lighted one myself. And so we both lingered for still a few minutes, he with a foot on the running board, I resting my arms on the steering wheel.

“You connected with this other estate?” I queried.

“Oh yes.”

“What was the matter with young Mr. McClintick?” I ventured.

“Well, I don’t know as there was anything much. I remember once he was in some kind of a raid—gambling place down in Atlantic City, I think it was—and he gave the name of the family’s butler. They came up here after the butler, I remember.” He recalled the incident with a chuckle. “Worked out all

right," he added. "The McClinticks paid the fine and I heard they gave the butler a good fat tip for his wounded feelings. I guess Pete was satisfied. Oh, Rolly wasn't so bad, I suppose; guess he was like a good many millionaires' sons."

"Just a little skittish," I commented.

"Hm, 'bout the size of it. Then there was some trouble when he was drafted for service; I don't know just what it was. Old man tried to get him off on the grounds of his being in war work already—leather. But they didn't put it over. I guess Rolly made out all right enough on the other side. I was over there myself when he was drafted. Let's see, Rolly would have been—he must have been—maybe a little over thirty when he was killed. Funny, huh, how a fellow goes through a war and then comes back and gets bumped off by some fool of a hunter."

"It's a funny world," said I.

CHAPTER VI
THE END OF ONE TRAIL

Well, I reflected as I drove away, I hadn't learned anything so very shocking after all. What surprised me most was that the leather king had lost his fortune. I thought that Tom, when I saw him, would be interested to hear about these things. But long before I saw Tom my tidbits of information were thrown in the shadow by an occurrence which shocked this whole section of the country. Tom and his comrades did not learn of it in their lonely retreat until I found time to write, and even then my letter waited four days in the little post office at Harkness. So out of touch with the outside world were those workers in the new camp!

The letter which I sent to Tom was brief for it enclosed a lengthy clipping from a New York paper that spoke for itself. That same clipping, returned to me by Tom, is before me on my table now, and the sight of that glaring headline recalls the sensation which followed the shocking news contained in the article. I will paste it to my manuscript so that you may read it just as I did, and as Tom and his friends did a little later.

MANUFACTURER FOUND KILLED

MYSTERY SURROUNDS DEATH OF HARRISON MCCLINTICK IN HIS NEW YORK APARTMENT

ROBBERY THOUGHT TO BE MOTIVE
FINGERPRINTS ONLY CLEW

Harrison McClintick, one of the most picturesque figures in the financial world, was found killed in his apartment in the Raleigh Arms on Central Park West early this morning. A maid, entering the living room to turn on the heat at a radiator, discovered the body on the floor. Greatly affrighted, she summoned Mrs. Estelle Trevor, the victim's widowed sister, who has been the mistress of his home since the death of Mrs. McClintick in 1921. It was found that Mr. McClintick had not occupied his room during the night. Physicians later declared that he had been dead some hours. No weapon had been used; he had evidently been strangled. An overturned chair and disordered rugs gave evidence of a struggle.

Mr. McClintick's pockets had been rifled and the contents of a

wallet were strewn about the floor. Two twenty dollar bills and several bills of smaller denomination were found among the papers which had been thrown about the floor. Several of these papers contained finger marks and these markings are the only clew the police have to go upon. Robbery seems the only plausible motive, yet the discovery of the money left on the scene seems to discount this theory. If robbery was the motive, the police say, why did the robber leave this considerable sum? If robbery was not the motive, why did the murderer go through his victim's pockets, leaving a gold watch and chain as well as the bills strewn on the floor?

The Raleigh Arms is a modern, but by no means palatial apartment house. Mr. McClintick's apartment is on the ground floor, and is entered by a door in the foyer to the left of the main entrance. Three windows in the apartment overlook the street, but they are protected by heavy and elaborate grille work. Careful inspection of the premises gave no indication of violent entry and it is thought that the assailant must have rung the apartment bell and been admitted by Mr. McClintick himself sometime during the evening. Neither Mrs. Trevor nor the maid heard or saw any one in the apartment during the evening. Both retired at about ten o'clock. The telephone operator, who sat in the public foyer, does not remember seeing any one approach the apartment entrance during the evening. This young woman was reading a novel and though she heard people passing in and out, paid no attention to them. She went home at about nine-thirty and from that time on, no one was near the public entrance of the building.

HIS SPECTACULAR CAREER

The McClintick millions were a product of the world war. The rise of Harrison McClintick in that period was Napoleonic. He began life at a bench in a shoe factory in New England. Later he went west and worked in a tannery, subsequently becoming foreman, and in time owner. He was a prosperous, moderately wealthy man when the war broke out. Almost as if by magic the McClintick tannery became the center of a group of factories in which were turned out every variety of leather article used by the war department. During their period of intensive production, the McClintick plants fell under the frowning scrutiny of the government and charges of gross profiteering resulted in an investigation which put the leather king on the front page of the public prints.

> McClintick's profits were beyond the dreams of avarice and he spent and gave lavishly. His magnificent Wave Crest Villa at Newport was only one of his bizarre extravagances. His palatial yacht was seized by the government for use in the navy. His estate at Long Branch, New Jersey, was the scene of hospitality out of keeping with the tragic drama from which his princely fortune was drawn. His camp in the Adirondacks with its rubble-stone hunting lodge was a model of a wilderness retreat. It was here that a year or two ago, his only son lost his life in one of those tragic accidents that occur in the hunting season. On a misty morning he was shot while swimming in the lake, the shooter mistaking his bobbing head for a wild duck.
>
> Misfortune fell heavily on the head of McClintick after the war. His wife died in 1921. Already the spectacular fortune was ebbing away. The place at Newport, and later, the place at Long Branch, was given up. His town residence on Riverside Drive was sold and the culminating tragedy of his death occurred in a comparatively unpretentious apartment where he was living in reduced circumstances with his widowed sister and one servant.

So that was the story of Millionaire McClintick. And such was his tragic end. I was shocked by his death, as the heedless public could not have been, for I felt almost as if I had known him. At least I could have added one item to the newspaper report; I could have told the curious that Leatherstocking Camp, the last of his properties, had been sold also, and was at that very time being made over to meet the requirements of a scout camp.

So, you see, two of my mind pictures were smashed. The noble son had been, to say the least, not without his faults. And the quiet camp, harboring only sorrowful memories for a bereaved father, had been sold not so much because of grief as because of pressing need. Well, well, that was quite a little dose for a story-book dreamer like myself.

But, after all, was the whole business any the less sad? Here was this crude, strong man forging his way ahead and making a vast fortune. The "tumult and the shouting died" and his house of cards began to fall about his head. His wife gone. One estate, then another, sold. Perhaps it was to get away from all his trouble just for a little season that he and his party, his son and their friend, went up to their wilderness retreat. Perhaps, after all, the quiet woods beckoned to this shrewd old hustler.

And there, in this remote lakeside camp, his only son was taken from him. What matter why he sold his camp? Poor man, the story was sad enough in any case, thought I. The newspaper had printed a picture of him which showed him

a stolid looking man; a man with indomitable will printed on his hard rugged features. He had an uncompromising jaw. But, I thought, it is just these wilful and triumphant men who suffer keenest when fate shows itself more powerful and relentless than they.

It was about a month after the tragedy, and the newspapers were still full of false alarms about an arrest, when Brent Gaylong and I went up to the camp where Tom and his crew were working with might and main in the heroic hope of getting the place in some sort of shape during the late spring.

CHAPTER VII
INTO THE DEPTHS

At Tom's request I asked Brent Gaylong to go with me and I'm glad I did, for I think he supplied just what was needed in our camp family. Perhaps you know him. He lives with his people here in town and is a very intimate friend of Tom's. People, speaking likingly of Brent, say there is something funny about him. I think I know what it is. He is long and lanky, and wears old-fashioned spectacles and is physically lazy. Hence he always seems funny against the background of strenuous outdoor life; in camp he seems particularly amusing. He is sometimes excruciatingly funny by contrast with Tom's untiring energy and enterprise. He will do anything you want him to do with a whimsical air of resignation. He will climb mountains, hunt for treasure, or trail an animal with an absurdly serious air. The funny thing about Brent is that, owing to Tom, his lot is cast in the theatre of adventure, while he looks for all the world like an old-fashioned schoolmaster. He must be twenty-two or three by now. He's good company.

"You'll go, won't you?" I asked, alluding to Tom's message. "Come and bring your knitting; that's what he told me to tell you. I'm going to drive up as far as Harkness and Tom will meet us there with his flivver."

"Do we have to walk much?" Brent asked.

"Why, as I understand it, Tom can push his flivver up a kind of trail to within a mile or so of the camp. That isn't so bad is it?"

"The flivver?" Brent drawled.

"No, the walk," I said. "You don't have to have a wheel-chair just for a mile or so. Come ahead, Brent; Tom always says when you're along something's sure to happen. You can take some books along, you don't have to work."

"Is that a promise?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

"How long do we linger near to nature's heart?"

"Maybe two or three weeks, maybe all summer," I said.

"I'm not supposed to take an axe or a gun or anything?"

"You can sit indoors all day long and read."

"I'll take my slippers and a bath robe," he said.

We had a delightful motor trip, stopping over at old Ticonderoga and reaching the little mountain village of Harkness late on the second day. Keeseville, in the vicinity of the wonderful Ausable Chasm, is the last place of

any size to be passed before entering that wild region to the west where only foot trails wind in and out among the dense mountains. Along the road from Keeseville to Harkness the glare of the declining sun dazzled my eyes so that I could hardly see to drive. It spread a crimson coverlet over the distant peaks and shimmered a tiny area in a lonely valley; I suppose it was the glinting water of some sequestered lake that we saw. It looked like a patch of gold in the deepening gloom. Then suddenly it was gone.

At Harkness Tom was awaiting us with his flivver. It gladdened my heart to see that outlandish little car piled full of provisions from the village store. I wondered how he would make shift to seat us for the last stage of our journey. The difficulty seemed not greatly to worry him, for he and a companion hurled a big meal bag into the rear seat even as Brent and I stood in rueful contemplation of the miscellaneous freight.

“You can sit right on the bag, Brent,” Tom said, as he hustled about, busy with a hundred matters. “We don’t get over here to the metropolis very often. Charlie, this is old Doctor Gaylong; meet Charlie Rivers, you chaps. I suppose we’ve got to find a place to store your car— Did you get the bacon, Charlie? And the macaroni? How about cocoa? This city trash will probably want cocoa. This is the darndest store,” he explained, turning to me. “You can get anything here. Climb right in, you ducks. I guess we won’t be able to take the grindstone this trip—never mind. We’re going to sharpen our own axes after this, bought a grindstone; unit production, is that what they call it? Here, hang on to this bag of flour, you. I thought you fellows wouldn’t show up till after dark. We were just going to start a game of pinocle with the sheriff. Are you all comfortable?”

“It’s like a bed of roses,” said Brent, as we drove off.

“Tom,” I said——

“You comfortable?” he interrupted.

“Tom,” I said, “I’m glad to see you’re going to keep the old name Leatherstocking Camp. I think it’s a fine romantic name.” I was referring to some rather gay lettering which had replaced the name of Temple Camp on the side of the Ford.

“Yep, that’s Paul’s work,” Tom rattled on.

“Are you Paul?” I asked the youngish man who sat beside him on the front seat.

“Didn’t I tell you this is Charlie?” Tom snapped. “Paul’s our artist, born and brought up in the Black Forest in Germany. Used to camouflage lunch wagons for the Kaiser in the war. We’ve got all kinds up here; happy family circle. We’re all living happily forever after, hey Charlie?”

“And working,” Charlie said.

“Working?” asked Brent.

“Yes, do you want to get out and walk home?” Tom asked.

“Is Tot Burke still with you?” I queried.

“Yep. So is Skipper Tim; you remember him. He’s building boats for the lake just now. Unit production, hey Charlie? You remember Piker Pete, the fire-lookout up near Temple Camp? He’s here too; going to stick all summer. Says he could never go back to the Catskills now, he’d be kept awake by the noise.”

“Speaking of noises,” Brent said, “hasn’t your Ford changed from a baritone to a soprano?”

“You’ll be glad enough to hear any kind of a friendly noise up here,” Tom said.

“How far is it to the drug store?” Brent queried.

“Heaven help me if I should run out of good cigars,” I said.

“You got right, as Paul says,” Tom laughed. “You won’t be bothered by the neighbors’ victrola, I’ll tell you that.”

He was certainly right. As we drove westward along the old, narrow, dirt road the wildness of the region was almost oppressive. I had an odd feeling that instead of our penetrating the winding passes among those clustering mountains, the mountains were slowly, relentlessly closing in about us. At one point, as the little Ford rattled along, it seemed as if the towering heights, now wrapped in the solemn gloom of approaching night, were creeping in on the narrow road from either side and would presently close upon our little tin toy like a pair of vast jaws. Then the heights would slope away as we seemed to dance merrily out of such peril. There was a chill in the air, the gloom and remoteness insinuated themselves into my very being and gave me a feeling which I can only liken to homesickness. Perhaps the early mariners felt so when they sailed out upon unknown seas.

I asked Tom how far the camp was from Harkness and he and Charlie Rivers immediately fell into an argument about whether it was five or seven miles. I later found that no two persons at the camp agreed about the distance. Brent and I walked it once, and he said it was fifty-seven miles. All I know is, it takes about an hour to drive in, and the way is through the wildest region I have ever seen. We passed no human abode, no sign of cultivation. Nothing but mountains, mountains, mountains.

“Pretty tough about old man McClintick, hey?” Tom said as we rattled along. “Talk about the wild places! Why they’ve got more bandits to the square inch down there in New York than they have all through the wild and woolly west. Am I right, Charlie? Seen anything of Mr. Temple lately?” he asked suddenly.

“No, I suppose you hear from him,” I said.

“He sent a check up last month to pay off with. I’ve got an account in

Keeseville. Old McClintick didn't leave much, I read. Well here's where we turn in. Do you know if J. T. is coming up this summer?"

"I think he's going to Europe," I said. "How about Temple Camp, Tommy?"

"Guess they'll have to get along without me *this* summer," he said.

"Is this supposed to be a cross street?" Brent asked.

We had turned into a sort of wagon trail that led into dense woods. The branches of the bordering trees intertwined overhead and it needed only the thick foliage which would come later to make the place a tunnel.

"This is Main Street," said Tom.

For fully a mile, I would say, we drove along this sequestered trail, deeper and deeper into the forest. Twilight shadows played among the trees. The night was coming on apace. At last the indomitable little, Ford stopped short; it could not go another yard. Beyond was only a foot trail.

We gathered into our arms such part of the provisions as we could carry and proceeded single file like a procession of homeward bound Christmas shoppers.

"What do we do next, when this trail stops?" Brent asked. It was laughable to see him walking soberly along, holding a flour bag as a woman holds a baby.

"We're almost there," said Tom.

CHAPTER VIII
SHADOWS

Tom had been right when first he told me of the spot. Surely there is not in the wide world a better site for a camp. Harrison McClintick had chosen well. Embosomed in the dense forest, on the shore of a small lake, was Leatherstocking Camp. There was no clearing; the beautiful rubble-stone lodge with its heavy, low, overhanging roof, was closely hemmed in by trees.

This main building was of a fine solid structure. Tom said the wagon trail had been open all the way in when the lodge was built. It must have cost much money to cart the materials to the spot. The lodge was oblong in shape and at one end was a massive chimney, a rugged marvel of masonry. The whole interior was one spacious living room. But a rustic stair led up to a balcony just under the heavy polished rafters and three small apartments opened onto this.

The furnishings of the former owner seemed all intact. Over the railing of the balcony hung a large bearskin. The walls were of exquisite masonry, the same as outside, and were decorated with the skins of smaller animals. Over the mammoth fireplace, which filled one end of the lodge, was a magnificent moose head with spreading antlers, on one of which (as if it had been tossed there) was a rather gay looking cap, albeit faded and dusty. I could not help wondering if it had belonged to Roland McClintick.

On either side of the fireplace hung guns and pistols and spring traps, and on the high, heavy mantel shelf several wooden decoy ducks sat comfortably in retirement. One of these was painted brown and it was easy to fancy its general resemblance to a human head when seen at a distance in the haze of early morning. I thought it bespoke a fine sentiment in the tough old warrior of commerce that he had taken nothing from his camp, but just the one thing—a sorrowful memory.

The lodge was much the worse for the irreverent usage of Tom and his strenuous crew. They cooked and ate and slept there, and in the evenings, and on rainy days, they played cards there.

They had felled trees enough to build seven cabins, and five of them were completed; they had a real woodland atmosphere about them, a pioneer look, which was lacking in the sumptuous lodge. A landing place of logs had been built at the lake and several rowboats floated ready for use. Tom told me they had carted the planking for these all the way from Keeseville in, or on, his Ford.

“And that’s old Hogback,” he told us, as he and Brent and I strolled out

after supper while the others lingered in the lodge. “Wait till you see it in the daylight. You can climb up it if you want to. Some mountain, huh?”

“I don’t want to,” Brent said.

“See the hermit,” laughed Tom.

“I thought you’d have something like that,” Brent said. “It’s getting so there are no mountains left without hermits; they’re pushing in everywhere. They’re going to cause a lot of congestion if it keeps up.”

“Well, I don’t know about the hermit,” Tom laughed, “but I can promise you there are bears and wildcats up there.”

“Well then we won’t need to go up to find out,” Brent said. “As long as you’re sure.”

“Yes, and rattlesnakes too,” Tom said. “I found the tracks of a pretty big lynx one day. Well, you can see we’ve been working. Guess we better go in and talk to the bunch, hey?”

We went into the lodge where four of the young men were already playing cards at the carved library table which I suppose must always have been used as a dining table. The other fellow, the one they called Rivers, was starting a fire in the big chimney-place. It was a cozy, pleasant scene.

I knew Tim Daggett, of course, and he greeted me cordially. Tot Burke, also of my home town, I knew slightly. Piker Pete, the fire-lookout near Temple Camp, was hardly more than a boy. He returned to his aerial perch in the Catskills after I had been at camp a day or two. Paul Scheffler was a smiling, tow-headed young German who had worked as a farmhand near Ausable Forks; I never knew how Tom got hold of him. There is always a kind of drift toward Tom; odd characters find him somehow. Heinie, as we called Paul, had been in the German army and I believe he had also followed the sea. His home was in his hat.

Charlie Rivers had lately drifted into camp seeking work. He was a bronzed, taciturn man with an inscrutable look. He worked hard and said little. He was well versed in woods lore. His eyes had a quiet keenness about them and seemed always fixed on the distance. When accosted he would pause, listening patiently, with his gaze afar. I never got the impression that he could not look at me, but rather that what I said was not of enough importance to warrant such acknowledgment of my presence. I liked and respected him.

The tired workers did not remain late at their card game and Tom and Brent and I were left alone in the lodge where we sat late before the cheerful blaze. The men slept in another building, only less pretentious than this main structure; there were half a dozen rooms in it, and a large room for provisions. Besides these completely furnished apartments there were, I think, as many as twenty army cots piled in the storage part; they looked to me as if they had never been used.

I understood that the leather king had planned to carry electricity into his wilderness retreat, but Brent and I were glad that he had not done so. When the men adjourned to their own quarters that first night, they carried three railroad lanterns which had lighted their game. Somehow that silent little procession emphasized the solemnity and remoteness of our camp, as it made its way among the trees to the other building. The new cabins loomed momentarily in the dim passing lights. Then we could see only a faint gleam in a distant window to tell that the men had reached their lodging. We paused in the doorway a few moments listening to a dismal wailing somewhere in the lower reaches of the mountain which cast its gloomy shadow over our camp.

"That's a cat," said Brent. "There must be a back fence somewhere around here."

"It's a lynx," Tom said. "We hear it most every night; seems to come from over on that second slope. Charlie Rivers says it's a jaguar, but I don't think so. He's thinking of the Canadian lynx; he used to hang out up there in the Canadian Rockies."

"I say it's a Canadian lynx," I said.

Tom laughed at me. "What do you know about it?"

"Maybe it's the hermit having his singing lesson," Brent suggested.

"I kind of have a feeling that if Charlie Rivers says a thing it must be so," I observed. "I sort of feel that he always knows what he's talking about. I say a jaguar."

"Well," laughed Tom, "we'll have to find out if he stays up there till the hunting season opens."

"Whatever he is, he'll have to come to Bridgeboro if he wants to meet me," Brent said. "I shall withdraw before the hunting season. I think too much of my head."

We put a log on the fire and sat before it, talking late into the night. We discussed the violent end of Mr. McClintick, the progress of the work at camp, the probable time of opening which seemed likely not to be before the following spring. The tragic accident which had occurred on Weir Lake near by seemed not to weigh heavily on Tom's mind; he was too full of plans. Brent sprawled in a big chair, one lanky leg over an arm, the other resting on a box. He always reminded me of an octopus when he sat at ease for he seemed to project in every direction.

"Do you suppose that's young McGinty's cap up there on the moose horns?" he queried idly. "McClintick," I corrected him.

"When was it—last summer?" Brent asked.

"It was a year ago last fall—in the hunting season," Tom said. "The place here was closed up after that till Mr. Temple took it over last fall."

"I thought you told me some game wardens were here when your friends,

the surveyors, passed through," I said.

"Sure they were," Tom said. "But of course, the buildings were locked up. Mr. McClintick's broker gave the keys to Mr. Temple. Why, what's the idea?"

"You mean me?" Brent queried in his funny, lazy way. "I haven't any ideas. It's mighty nice and quiet here, that's sure. Must be kind of slow in the winter—especially on rainy Sundays." His idle gaze wandered about the room which lay in shadow save where the fire blazed. Wriggling silhouettes of the flames played upon the wall in the dim background, giving it a changing uncanny light. Brent gazed about in a kind of half interested, leisurely inspection. "Pretty heavy rafters, huh?" he queried. "What are they—ash?"

"Oak," said Tom.

"Used to be a picture over there, didn't there?" Brent drawled. "You can see a kind of square where the smoke didn't get."

"You don't miss much, do you, Brent?" I laughed.

"I have an inquiring mind," said he in his funny way.

"Well, so you won't lose any sleep over it," Tom laughed, "a painting of Mr. McClintick hung there." I am always amused at the contrast between Tom's briskness and Brent's drawling half interest in everything. "When we got word that he had been murdered we took it down and laid it away in one of the rooms up there," he added, indicating the balcony.

"I didn't think you and your little circle were that sentimental," Brent drawled. "Maybe I should say susceptible. What was it—a picture of the old geezer?"

"The old gentleman, yes," said Tom. "We eat right here, you know, and there he was staring down at us all the time. We didn't just like a murdered man to be staring down at us. Heinie said, 'It remembers me of a ghost aready.'"

Brent lost interest and fell to gazing about again. Our talk drifted into other channels. Even in the lodge we could hear the distant moaning that we had heard before. The fire blazed away and crackled companionably. Even Brent had to drag himself together and withdraw a little from its increasing warmth. As he did so, he stooped to inspect what seemed to me to be but an imperfection in the cement hearth. His scrutiny seemed quite casual; there was always a kind of ludicrous snoopiness about him which I think he sometimes practised to amuse and sometimes to annoy Tom. To this day I remember saying to him, "Well, what is it—a lynx or a jaguar?"

"It's a human footprint," he said.

"I doubt it," said Tom.

"Somebody must have stepped in the cement before it was dry," Brent observed. "His foot went over the edge."

"What's that in the middle?" I asked him, rather amused. For I was only

half convinced, and the matter was of no consequence anyway. “Looks like a scar,” Brent said, feeling of it.

> “And departing leave behind us,
> Footprints in the dry cement

as Longfellow says.”

“The sands of time,” I said.

“Dry cement is better,” Brent countered.

“*Listen!*” said Tom, not in the least interested. “Listen to that, now. That’s a lynx all right. Hear it?”

In an interval between the boisterous cracklings of our blazing log a long wail, spent by the distance, could be heard far off. The wind was rising, making a strong draught in the chimney and rustling the trees outside. A flickering shadow on the dim masonry behind me danced up and disappeared with such suddenness that I was startled as if by some ghostly presence. As I returned my gaze to the merry fire a shadow crossed one of the windows. Startled, I fixed my gaze there, for the moving thing, whatever it was, had not the erratic, jumping quality of the shadows cast by the fire.

“Did you see that?” I asked, my voice instinctively falling to a whisper.

Tom had evidently seen it. Without saying a word he arose, went to the cupboard beside the chimney, took down a lantern and lighted it.

“Maybe it was only a reflection of the blaze at that,” I said.

“Do I have to get up?” Brent asked.

This outline is a crude reproduction of the markings that Brent noticed in the cement of the hearth. Of course it does not show the depressions. If you will imagine the large area as a depression, and the five smaller enclosures as depressions, with all of the outlines less distinct, you will have an idea of the imprint as we saw it.

Lantern in hand, Tom went to the door, and as he opened it a gust of wind rushed in, blowing a lot of papers from the open cupboard, and banging the cupboard door furiously back and forth. Through the window we could see the light of the lantern moving about outside. Suddenly I was moved to join Tom and together we went over to the other building and quietly opened the door. The men were all in their beds asleep. Only Rivers stirred and spoke to us; I would have picked him for one of those men who are not to be surprised even in sleep.

“I thought some one was around,” Tom said.

“Hear that animal?” Rivers asked.

“Yep; well, good-night, Charlie,” said Tom.

CHAPTER IX
THE SIGN OF THE FOUR

We looked all about before returning to the lodge and entered all the completed cabins, but no sign was there of anything amiss. We thought that one tree sheltered a lurking presence, and I saw Tom's hand reach around to his hip pocket as we approached it. But it was only the shadow of a wind-blown branch that we had seen, and it dissolved as we drew nearer. We even went down to the lake, but there was nothing unusual there.

"I think that Weir Lake is a good name for it," I said as we went back. "It's so black and still."

"Oh, that isn't the reason for the name," Tom said. "The old gent named it; it's named after his wife; her maiden name was Weir. It didn't have any name when he blew in here. Right about where we were standing is where Mr. Weston stood when he aimed and shot. Then he came up to the lodge and looked in the room you're going to have, to see if young McClintick was there. Must have been an awful suspense to him, just that little while before he could muster up courage to take a peek and be sure of the truth."

I just shook my head.

"Guess it was only a reflection of the fire you saw," he said. "But it looked kind of funny, didn't it? Moved sideways instead of jumping up and down. I don't suppose any bandits would push in here. It's just as well to be careful."

We found Brent sitting in the middle of one of the long sides of the table; he looked ridiculously like a business man attending to his correspondence. He had lighted another lantern and with his spectacles half-way down his nose was studiously scrutinizing one of the many sheets of paper he had gathered from the floor.

"Did you find him?" he asked casually, never looking up.

"Guess it wasn't anything," I said. "What have you got there?"

"Targets," he answered. "They're very interesting."

I saw then that the sheets of paper were of uniform size, about a foot square. Printed on each was a series of graduated circles with the bull's-eye, so called, in the center. They were the regular practise targets familiar to all. I later found in the cupboard a board like a drawing board containing a screw eye by which to hang it on a tree. These targets had evidently been fastened to the board by thumb tacks.

"You say it was a year ago last fall they were here?" Brent asked, somewhat preoccupied. "And that was the finale, huh? One of these is dated

November two, three of them are dated November three. They all seem to be dated, and when there were several used in a day, they're numbered one, two, three. Here's five of them that were used in one day. When was what's-his-name killed, anyway? The young fellow, I mean."

"Oh, how should I know that?" laughed Tom.

"In November, huh?" Brent said, soberly sorting over the old targets. He seemed to put Tom and me in the position of waiting clerks. He amused me, as he always did, he was so slow and businesslike.

"The hunting season, that's all *I* know," said Tom.

"That would be November. Let's see, here's one—here's two—wait a second, here's another for November thirteen. Those are the last. Maybe November thirteen was the unlucky day, huh?"

"Very likely," I said. "And what of it?"

"He's found something to beat crossword puzzles," Tom laughed. "Come on, what do you say we turn in?"

"What I'd like to know," Brent said calmly preoccupied, "is who the other chap was. I've only heard of three. There were four here in camp at the end. There was the old geezer," (Brent always spoke of people with nonchalant disrespect), "and the young one, and Mr.—what d'you say his name was—Weston? Well, there were four here practising rifle shooting. You can see for yourselves." He held up one of the targets as Tom and I leaned over the table, our interest suddenly caught. "Four shots," said Brent, pointing a lanky finger at one after another of the bullet holes. "Here's another—*four holes*. Here's another—*four holes*. Every blooming one of them has *four holes*. Seems as if they might have been keeping a kind of score. Hmph," he drawled. "What do you make of it? Each one took a crack, then they'd take another target. There's not a single one with three holes, or a single one with five holes. Is there anything about a gun, or is there anything about a man, that would make him shoot just four times? Do they have such things as four-shooters? Were there any guns left around here?"

"Sure, there are a dozen or more," Tom said. "They left everything. Brent, old boy, you've got me guessing. No, I never heard of a four-shooter, as you call it."

"Well then, there were four people here," Brent said. "I don't know if that's the usual way to practise or not——"

"*It is*," interrupted Tom. "Boy, *oh boy*, you've got me guessing! How the dickens did you ever stumble on *that* discovery?"

"When I was a boy scout," said Brent, "I learned that I must never allow papers to be littered about. So I picked these up while you were chasing shadows. Well, I suppose there was no harm in four people being here——"

"Oh no, I heard there were only three," snapped Tom. "That doesn't go at

all; I heard there were only three. Of course, this doesn't really, definitely *prove* anything—these targets—but it's gol blamed funny! It *looks* as if there were four people here that November, doesn't it?... What do *you* say?" he added, addressing me. He seemed to be quite aroused.

"Does it make any difference how many were here?" I asked.

"No, but a mystery is rather nice," drawled Brent.

"I don't understand it at all—I don't," Tom said. "You ask anybody in Harkness, or up at Keeseville, how many were here and they'll tell you three. That's what the surveyors told me. That's what Hick Collison, the game warden, told me. That's what Mr. Temple understood from Mr. McClintick and his broker—that there were only just the three men here, for a little hunt. Why I've heard it a hundred times!"

"Well, I don't suppose these targets really prove anything," I said. "We might have known that Brent would find something to engage his attention up here. Now he can play Young Sleuth, the boy detective, while the rest of us are working."

But Tom would not accept this view, and he refused to take a humorous squint at what seemed to me a matter of no importance.

"I can't understand it at all," he said, as he fell to looking at the targets again. "It's got me."

"I have a suggestion," said Brent.

"Yes, what is it?" Tom snapped.

"Let's retire for the night."

"Second the motion," I laughed.

CHAPTER X
THE WORK PROGRESSES

Brent's discovery (if it was a discovery) did not trouble my slumber. I could understand Tom's reaction to what Brent had shown us. He was familiar with the story of the camp, the reason and circumstances of the sale. Certain things were fixed in his mind. To have any of these details rudely upset jarred and puzzled him. I think he took Brent's casual discovery more seriously than Brent himself did. As for me, I thought it of no importance at all.

You will recall that I mentioned three apartments as opening on a balcony. I slept in one of these; Tom and Brent occupied the other two. I was awakened in the morning by the clatter of dishes and descended to find the oblong table which served so many purposes laid for breakfast while the welcome aroma of coffee permeated the lodge. It was on that day (or perhaps the next) that the young fellow they called Piker Pete left us, but on that first morning after my arrival the whole eight of us breakfasted together. It was fine to see how Tom hobnobbed with the crew, laughing and joking and chatting about the work, without seeming to lose any of his authority. He was, I thought, the ideal boss for just such a job as was being done.

"What do you think of old Doc Gaylong here?" he said. "Looks over some old targets and finds that there were four instead of three people here when young McClintick lost his life. Tell 'em about it, Doc. Four shot holes on each target. He and our fountain pen adventurer here," (that was myself), "are going to hunt for more evidence to-day while the rest of us are out in the woods. They're going to have supper ready for us when we come back. I bet by to-night Doc Gaylong will know who the other fellow was who was here."

"He didn't get no proof by dot," said Heinie. "Dot's no sign yet. Maybe he would each shot four times—why not?"

"It would be more likely to be *three* if they did it that way," I suggested. "It's always three guesses, or three chances, or three shots. Why four?"

"He's right," exclaimed Tom.

"I don't see how a fourth person here two years ago is going to help out with the work now," Charlie Rivers said, never looking up from his plate.

"And that's true too," Tom said cheerily.

Somehow (I may have been doing Rivers an injustice) I felt that what he said was intended as a slur on Brent and me, because we were not of the working force.

"How'd yer know them targets wasn't put on the top shelf only a couple of

days ago?” Rivers drawled. “How’d yer know but what mebbe four of us was target shootin’ afore you come?”

“That’s a good one on you, Doc,” Tom laughed.

“How did you know they were on the top shelf?” Brent drawled, addressing Rivers. “You’re a kind of a detective, too,—huh?”

For just a second I fancied that Rivers was disconcerted. Perhaps he was annoyed at being heckled by this lanky, bespectacled young fellow. It seemed to me as if he had the woodman’s contempt for city drones.

“There you go, Charlie; how about that?” laughed Tom.

“They happen to be dated,” Brent said.

“Well,” Tom laughed, “you two make yourselves at home around here to-day and get a good rest. We’re going to fell trees. To-morrow, if you want to, you can give us a hand. Pretty soon we’re going to take a couple of days off and go down the Ausable and see the Chasm. We’re going to get some fish in a place where they hang out. Charlie will show you birds how to play a trout, won’t you, Charlie?”

“I sure will,” Charlie said. So I knew there was no bad feeling following the little duel of wits.

Left to ourselves that day, Brent and I enjoyed the freedom of the camp. In the daylight I saw how the camp was situated on an area of flat woodland between the somber lake and the great Hogback Mountain. This frowning giant was steep and densely wooded. I longed to ascend it, yet knew full well that I would not attempt the climb.

After luncheon (we had been given the absolute freedom of the larder) we fell to making a casual sort of inspection of the cupboard and its contents in search of evidence which might confirm the rather doubtful evidence of the targets. But we could not find one thing which even remotely suggested the number of persons at the camp in that last fatal autumn. We found many mementoes of the former occupants; indeed, it seemed as if they had taken nothing away. But not all of Brent’s whimsical snooping around revealed a single sign which suggested anything.

We examined the markings in the hearth, which had certainly been made by the front part of a naked human foot before the cement had hardened. But of course this imprint told us nothing. It might have been anybody’s footprint. The fact that it was the print of a *naked foot* was not a matter for remark. A bather about to go to the lake, or returning from it, could have inadvertently made that impress.

“It seems to me that we’re going a long way out of our course hunting for a mystery,” I said. “What difference does it make whether there were three or four persons here just before the place was finally deserted?”

“Not the slightest,” Brent said.

So there was an end of his little deductive triumph in connection with the targets. It seemed bright and observant of him, but it signified nothing. He and I fell into the busy life at camp, helping in our unskilled way, to make the place ready for opening. We painted the new rowboats, and after the men had widened the footpath in to camp, we cleared away the roots and brush so that wagons and Tom's precious Ford could enter. I think I never worked so hard in my life, but I dare say it did me good. It was amusing to see lanky Brent at these strenuous labors.

In this wholesome, arduous work Leatherstocking Camp ceased to have any pathetic associations. We were all too busy to think of the tragedy and it was seldom mentioned. On an early stroll one morning, I paused on the shore of the lake and my thoughts did wander back to the ghastly mistake that to me had cast a shadow over the place. A gauzy cloud hung over the lake and as I gazed out on the misty waters a bobbing object, probably some drifting log, moved in the partial concealment of that hazy curtain. I could not help torturing myself with the appalling thought of how *I* would feel if after an ill-considered shot I saw a human arm raised up out of the water. How long would *I* linger in torturing suspense before going to the room of my young friend to learn the truth?

But, as I said, we were too busy to talk or even think of these things. Even Harrison McClintick was seldom mentioned. We wondered how the authorities in New York were progressing with the case. But we seldom saw a New York paper, and that dreadful crime, like the mishap at camp, was a thing of the past. On the other hand, Leatherstocking Camp was a reality. Soon there were seven cabins up and enough logs hauled for two more. We were waiting for planking from the sawmill in Rogers Gap, so that we could begin work on the "grub" pavilion and the commissary shack which were to be of a less primitive construction. I can say now that I hope never to see another axe as long as I live. I still dream of chinking spruce logs with sphagnum moss and laugh as I recall Brent bringing in this growth in an improvised hod, with which he went wandering about the neighboring forest. He was our hod-carrier, humorous, leisurely, lanky. Sometimes he chipped the logs for binding and he says now that he cannot play cards with any pleasure, because the chips remind him of his "pioneer days" as he calls them.

CHAPTER XI
ALONE

As the days passed I thought less and less about Brent's rather ingenious deduction. For, to be sure, it made no difference how many persons had been at Leatherstocking Camp at the time of the fatal accident. As for Brent, he was always snooping around, adopting the pose of an amateur sleuth, but I think he did not take himself or his discovery too seriously. He seemed amused at the confusion he had caused in poor Tom's mind. "Maybe they used to have the hermit down for week ends," he suggested. But that did not satisfy Tom.

"I think the hermit is like the mock-turtle," I said. "There ain't no such animal."

"Well, it's blamed funny," Tom commented. He and I were strolling around the lake after a strenuous day of log hauling; he seemed never weary. "I always understood that there were only three here—the old gent and his son and the man Weston. Now it looks as if there were four. Did you ever know anybody like Brent for mixing things up? He's uncanny, that's what he is."

"It doesn't seem to be worrying him," I said.

"Well, I'd like to know who the other one was," said Tom. "I asked about it down in Harkness, but nobody seems to know any more about it than we do. It's got me. I don't like anything I can't understand," he went on in his vehement way. "When I get a thing settled in my mind I don't like to have somebody come along like an old spook and set everything endways. There were four people here all right and I'd gol blamed like to know who the other one was and why we never heard anything about him. It was darned funny, that shadow we saw outside the window the night you and Brent came. I can't get it out of my noodle. Hang it all, wherever Brent goes there are mysteries and shadows; they seem to follow him around. And he's so plaguy calm about it all."

"The hod-carrier sleuth," I commented.

"That's him," Tom said. "Well, we've got some realities anyway. My arm is sore from chopping logs. There's no mystery about how we're getting ahead anyway. I'd like to have that mysterious fourth person here now to help. I could use him drilling for end pegs. These cabins are going to stand when the pyramids of Egypt are in the ash heap. Eats pavilion is going to look nice, huh? Heinie says we ought to have more eats-boards, but that's the way it is with Germans, they don't think of anything but eats."

"Heinie's a good worker," I said.

“I’ll say,” enthused Tom. “They’re all good—nice bunch. I can’t make Charlie Rivers out, but he sure gets through with the work.”

“I think he doesn’t like Brent and me,” I said.

“Nonsense!” Tom exploded. “He’s just quiet, that’s all—kind of—what d’yer call it—taciturn?”

“Inscrutable is the word,” I said.

“Well,” he rattled on, “we’re going to have our holiday pretty soon. I hear the fish are so thick in the Ausable River that they have to have traffic regulations over there. I thought we might all close up shop this Friday and drive over through the Ausable Chasm—that’s worth seeing, you know—and then stay over till Monday, fishing. I think we all need a little outing. Brent says this city life is killing him. The way I figure, we’ll be held up here for a few days till the boards come from the sawmill so it’ll be a good time for a little recess. You know Tot Burke is crazy about fishing. Brent says he’d rather we’d bring the Ausable Chasm here and let him look at it, but of course he’ll go. He’ll always do anything anybody wants him to do.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“Sure,” Tom enthused, “the boys want to see the Chasm before they go home and now’s our chance.”

I had not the heart then to tell Tom that the absence of this hustling group would afford me just the opportunity I wanted to be alone at my writing for a day or two. To tell you the truth, I abhor fishing. The fish never bite on my hook. I not only do not catch any fish, but I invariably drive my companions to distraction with my restlessness. I therefore indulged a secret hope that I might excuse myself from this excursion and in the quiet of our lonely retreat finish two magazine articles on which I had been working.

I broke the news gently while we were at supper the night before they started. “If you don’t mind,” I said, “I think I’ll spend a quiet few days here and try to get my writing up to date. I’m not much of a sightseer and I haven’t the patience to fish.”

“Fishing is my ideal sport,” said Brent. “You don’t have to do anything all day; the fish does all the work. You’d better come along and see America first. All work and no play——”

“Sure, come ahead,” said Tom.

“Vot diffrence if ve don’t got no fish?” Heinie said. “Och, anyvays ve do see-sighting mitt Tommy. Ve don’t got nuttings here till it comes der planks yet.”

“I think I’ll stay here and work,” I persisted. “It’s really just what I want, to be alone for a few days. I’ll watch the camp.”

Tom threw up his hands in despair and shook his head ruefully at Tot Burke and Skipper Tim. But I had my way. The next morning they all started

off in Tom’s flivver. It was a chill, bleak, rainy day. Yet I came very near to envying them as they rode away, they were so full of the spirit of their long promised excursion. Brent carried a brief-case and looked funny enough in a little worsted skull-cap which one of the others had offered him. Tom laughed at him and protested against the umbrella which Brent also carried.

“Here!” he laughed, snatching it from him. “Are you afraid of getting wet?”

“It isn’t myself I’m thinking of, it’s the fish,” said Brent.

“I guess I don’t want this either,” said Charlie Rivers, handing me the old coat which lay across his knees.

So there I stood in the drizzling rain holding Brent’s umbrella and Charlie’s coat as the merry little caravan went rattling off along the woods trail. For a few moments the sequestered camp did seem gloomy enough. The great, rugged mountain which towered above the spot looked wild and somber enough in pleasant weather, but in that chill haze it seemed to me almost unearthly in its forbidding aspect. Surely no human being had ever penetrated its black and trailless wilderness. What prowling beasts, I wondered, paced the unknown fastnesses high in its precipitous reaches? Even as I gazed at it and noted how the drenched trees near its rock-ribbed base were all merged in the heavy gloom, I heard that dismal wailing afar off, somewhere on those jungle-covered slopes. Tom said it always came from the depression beyond the second ridge. I don’t know why he thought so; it seemed to me to be the very voice of the whole wild mountain. The lodge seemed cozy indeed as I entered it and threw the coat and umbrella on the table. I went out again and dragged in a couple of good-sized logs so that they might dry in time to keep me company with their crackling blaze throughout the lonely evening.

CHAPTER XII
SIGNS ON THE MOUNTAIN

I must now tell you of an incident which shook me as nothing else in my whole life has ever shaken me, and the meaning of it was not clear to me till long afterward. I suppose that the gloom of that cheerless day affected me. I can hardly describe my feeling more than to say that throughout the long, bleak afternoon, as I sat at work in the lodge, I was harassed by a strange presentiment as of something impending.

I had looked forward to a few days of solitude, but the loneliness of the place was intolerable in the half darkness and that continuous, blowing rain. By mid-afternoon I was in such a state that I blew out the smelly little lamp which had lighted my work in the dim apartment and resigned myself to idleness. I stood at one of the windows gazing out upon the dismal scene. Through the thin, driven rain, the lake looked hazy and there was the odd effect of the water moving toward me. It was not like the surf on a seashore, ever lapping and receding, but a sort of straining of the whole body of water under the impetus of the wind. There occurred to me the whimsical fancy that if the water should succeed in its effort the bed of the lake would be laid bare and I would see, perchance, the object which had enmeshed and held for so many days the body of poor Roland McClintick. I think I never saw a more gloomy sight than Weir Lake on that dreary, haunting afternoon.

The lodge, you will understand, was between the base of the mountain and the lake. I stepped across the room and stood looking out upon the deserted scene of our recent labors. And there I beheld a strange sight which for the moment startled me. It was a trail passing between two of the new cabins. It ran behind the stone bungalow of the old camp (where the boys slept) but beyond this, in the direction of the mountain, I saw no certain trace of it. At one spot where the rugged ascent began I could just make out a faint line perhaps fifty feet in extent. It hovered between visibility and invisibility; I thought it was the trail.

The sight of this hardly tangible and broken line leading, as I thought, up the mountain, astonished me. I had always understood that there was no regular trail up Hogback. Tom is a perfect fiend on such matters; he will find a trail if there is one, but he knew of none up those dense slopes. Many times I had looked from that window, and heaven knows I had never seen the faintest sign of a trail. Nor had any of our group ever mentioned one. In talking of our projected ascent after the prowling creature whose moaning we had heard,

Tom had said that he thought the best way was to hike around the base of the mountain and ascend the easier slopes of the farther side.

I was so curious about what I had seen that despite the weather I went to the cupboard beside the fireplace and took from its hook the great oilskin coat with hat to match, which belonged to Skipper Tim. How many times I had seen him in this storm attire helping canoeists at the boating club home in Bridgeboro! It was then that I noticed (I don't know how I happened to think about them) that the used targets were not in their place upon the shelf. I don't know that the disappearance of these telltale squares of paper aroused any suspicions in my mind. But as I told you before, the gloom and loneliness somehow gave the whole place a certain ghostly unreality, the McClintick tragedy seemed to haunt the bleak scene, and I was strangely unnerved by every sound and by this discovery. I was curious enough to go up into Brent's little room to see if the targets were there. But they were neither in his room nor Tom's and I was puzzled. As I descended the bare stairs my own echoing footsteps startled me and brought home to me a vivid sense of my isolation.

I sallied forth into the storm to examine the trail and follow it a little distance. But I could not find it. Try as I would, I could not find it. I returned indoors and looked again from the window, but could not see it. Then in a sudden gust of wind I saw it even more clearly than before. And I saw, too, that the elusive line upon the mountainside was indeed a visible section of it.

Here was a strange phenomenon. I was reminded of a certain novel toy I had in childhood, a bit of glass which one had only to breathe upon to see a picture which immediately faded out with the dissolving breath. And so it is with trails, the trails of bygone days. Uncle Jeb Rushmore, up at Temple Camp has told me that the route man has trodden in the wilds is never wholly obliterated. The freakish wind, a lucky vantage point, a certain slant of light and the obscure path is revealed in hovering uncertainty, if only for a moment. I have not the scout's eye. I think now that the rushing wind, swaying the long grass, showed me stretches of that faint hidden trail. Perhaps the soaked and glossy condition of the vegetation had something to do with it. All I know is that I saw it, the ghost of a departed trail, and that when my friends returned we could not find it again.

I went out again into the driven rain and the heavy, bending grass clung to my limbs, impeding my progress. It was like trying to walk through seaweed. The rain smote my right cheek leaving my left cheek almost dry; it seemed horizontal. I plodded through this drenching artillery of the elements to the space between two cabins where I had seen the trail from the window. I had thought to surprise it, as it were, in this narrow pass. But there was no sign of a trail there. Why could not my exploring limbs and hands lay bare this elusive marking, so apparent from the lodge? I parted the drenched grass, searching in

vain. In heaven's name, I said aloud, is this desolate wilderness haunted by a spectral trail? I had seen it; where was it?

But there upon the rugged lower reaches of the mountain, between two mighty rocks, I could see, not the trail, but a certain narrow length of gray earth where surely, if there were indeed a trail, it must pass. It would pass between those sentinel rocks for that would be the path of least resistance in the arduous ascent. And it seemed to me that the farthest section of the broken line I had seen from the window was in that direction.

Well, I was in for it now; I was thoroughly soaked, a fine, adventurous resolve was aroused within me, and I would not be baffled and confounded by storm and taunting shadows. I vowed that I would scramble over obstacles and through soaking foliage to those two mammoth rocks which I thought were Nature's rough portals, to the unknown upper reaches of the towering Hogback Mountain.

I don't know what I expected to find there. But if the passage between those rocks were clear surely that would prove that the trail passed through there in its circuitous windings up the mountain. Perhaps at that point I could get a clear sight of it, up or down. And if I could I would have something to say to Tom Slade and Brent Gaylong. I would be a scout and a detective rolled into one. They could no longer call me a fountain pen adventurer.

I shall never as long as I live forget that laborious scramble. What I had called the *lower reaches* of the mountain proved to be a whole range of mountains before I had attained my goal. One looks at a mountain and says, "I would like to climb it." Looking and doing are two such different matters where mountains are concerned. There are cliffs and crevices that one never sees from the land below. And yet in plain fact those two huge rocks were not a fifth part of the way up that mighty jumble of rock and forest. I stumbled and groped and climbed and in places became enmeshed in dripping, tangled undergrowth. No sign of any trail could I find in my difficult progress.

Excepting one sign. At the head of a certain short, precipitous place I saw a long withe tied like a rope around a tree trunk with a long end hanging loose. It was perfectly evident to me that this had been fastened there to assist a climber in scrambling up or down, probably down, this declivity. By holding the loose end one might be saved from falling while groping for a sure foothold below it. It could have been fastened there only by a human being and my discovery of it in that desolate jungle quite startled me. I thought the wood seemed fresh; I pulled with all my strength, but could not break it. I was not a good enough scout to know what kind of wood it was, but I thought it was willow. Yet there were no willow trees thereabouts. I suppose that willow retains its moisture and pliancy a long time, though surely not for years or even months. Whence, then, came this crude device to brace one on that perilous climb?

To search for any sign of a trail in that topsy-turvy thicket was out of the question and I made my way by easier progress now to the great rocks which I have called the portals to the upper reaches of Hogback. Here I could look down upon our camp. How strange it appeared in bird's-eye view! I wondered how it would look from the summit of the mountain. The lake seemed small and the fine, rustic effect of the lodge was even more attractive from my vantage point than it was at closer range. The new buildings stood out clear and detached from the surrounding disorder of our labors. The whole scene was wrapped in mist so that I saw the camp as through a gauze curtain.

Now these rocks were of an odd formation; quite different from their appearance as seen from below. That front view of them, as I might call it, had shown them as two great rocks with a passageway between them. But on closer view, I saw that one rock leaned against the other (save at the entrance) so that the narrow passage was not only between precipitous walls, but was roofed also by the meeting of these walls above. The falling of one rock against the other had made a sort of triangular passage with the converging walls touching the head as one passed through.

Into this narrow pass the storm had not penetrated, and I later found that the crevice between the two rocks was completely overgrown outside. But the narrow pass was dank and mossy and frequented by little lizards that paused, heads upraised, then scooted this way and that. If human-kind had ever used this passage in following a trail, there certainly was no sign of a trail at the time of my inspection. The ground was rocky so that one might pass through the entire length of a dozen yards or so without stepping on earth. But there was one little area of earth, hard but with a thin mossy surface, or rather hardened scum. It was as if moss had started to grow there, but had not developed; a thin, damp crust of vegetation, compact but sensitive to pressure.

Upon this natural film some living being had laid a naked foot, and all the beating fury of the drenching storm, and of other storms for aught I knew, had not obliterated it. What I noticed particularly about it was that running diagonally across the ball of the foot was an irregular mark which identified the footprint with the one I had seen permanently embedded in the concrete of the McClintick lodge on the first night of our arrival at Leatherstocking Camp.

Then suddenly, before my consternation had subsided, I noticed some crude lettering on the rocky wall of the passage. If the letters were intended to form a word their irregular size and positions suggested an erratic, not to say irrational, procedure in the work. Yet large and small and tilted crazily as they were, they were still in proper order to form the appalling word STRANGLE.

I recalled with a shudder that Harrison McClintick had met his tragic end at the hands of an unknown strangler.

CHAPTER XIII
THE STEADY GAZE

I retraced my difficult way down the mountain, scratched, soaking, and utterly weary. The lodge, which had seemed gloomy enough before, was a cheery refuge now. I was all but unnerved by a sense of mystery and of things dark and inexplicable. Some strange, brooding shadow hovered over this camp; the place was uncanny. I aroused myself and ascribed it to the storm, to the rain-swept wilderness. After all, where was there any mystery?

Some one at camp had once inadvertently stepped on the hearth before the concrete was dry. That it was the imprint of a bare foot had no significance. One about to go in the lake, or returning from it, might have carelessly stepped on the new hearth. And might not that same habitue of camp have gone exploring up the mountain. But barefoot? That seemed unlikely. And how about the rustic brace upon the tree? Could that have been there two or three years and retained its freshness and pliancy? And the targets with their telltale bullet holes; four on each target? And their disappearance? Had all these things a relation to each other?

I roused myself to the wholesome conviction that the haunting specter of the tragedy and the demon of the storm were playing pranks with my fancy, and to confirm this sensible thought I stood in the window as the twilight deepened the gloom of the already cheerless scene. The new cabins, the piles of timber, the circular stone enclosure for campfire, were very real and diverted my thoughts from the past to the cheerful future and the new life which would soon throng Leatherstocking Camp. If I attached some tragic meaning to every idle scratching on fence or wall or sidewalk, I should soon be as absurd as my adventurous young friend, Pee-wee Harris, of whom you may have heard. That is what I told myself.

By way of dealing with worth-while realities, I prepared my supper. Tom says I am utterly useless except in wielding a fountain pen. But I think I make very good applesauce and my poached eggs have a beauty of form which I dare not aspire to in the field of literary art. I need not detain you with my reveries before the blazing logs after my lonely supper. I thought of my work and studiously avoided any speculations about the past at Leatherstocking Camp. Nothing really strange or suspicious had occurred there. It was the scene of a tragic accident, that was all. If there had indeed been four persons there instead of three, what of it?

After my last log had burned out the place began to grow cool and I

gathered up my papers and the smelly lamp, and went to my little room on the balcony to write until I should become sleepy. The warmth ascending lingered still in that small apartment. Some strange feeling (I cannot otherwise describe it) caused me to ascend on tiptoe, for I could not bear the echoing sound of my own footfalls on the uncovered stair. I looked into Tom's room and into Brent's, and closed the doors of both. A few dying embers, safely enclosed by a screen, still dimly lighted the hearth and standing on the balcony I could just make out that footprint stamped for all time in the imperishable concrete. There was something weird, I thought, in such perpetuation of a casual footprint, something akin to the preservation of a mummy. He who had carelessly stepped there (young McClintick perhaps) might be dead. But here was this ghostly likeness of a part of him remaining—stamped forever. I would not wish to have in my home such a reminder of a dear, departed one. The cold print of a foot that was no more! And that other duplicate footprint (less clear but still identical) in that haunted pass on the gale-swept mountain! I say *haunted* for what rational human being would scratch in crazy fashion such a word as *strangle* in that wild, lonesome passage. And the trail which had taunted and challenged me with its elusive and changing course. Was it real? Here I was again letting my fancy wander....

It was warm and cheerful in my little room, the streaming rain upon the window only increased the sense of coziness and safety, and I sat me down to finish my article about Stevenson. You will remember that on the first evening of our sojourn in camp, Brent had noticed a space on the wall where a picture had hung. This was a painting of Harrison McClintick, for the leather king had not neglected to have his portrait painted by a well known artist who had certainly succeeded in perpetuating his hard features and dominant look. The eyes in that portrait looked straight at the beholder. And it was for this reason (so I understood) that the boys had taken the picture down after reading the shocking news of Mr. McClintick's death in the newspaper article I had forwarded to Tom. I would not have supposed that any of them (certainly not Tom) would be so susceptible as to be affected by the pictured gaze of a murdered man. Yet perhaps Tom did not greatly care about the portrait anyway.

At all events it had been taken down before my arrival and stood on the floor against the wall of the room I was to occupy. I cannot say that the sight of it distressed me. It meant so little to me that on the top edge of the heavy frame my suitcase rested, and it served also as a shelf for my writing case and used cigarette boxes. I did not like the hard, drawn features of the leather king. The skin seemed to be stretched tight over his face; the forceful mouth seemed almost cruel. The head was massive at the top and narrow at the chin. The gray hair was rather long and disheveled, which just saved the face from utter

coarseness. Seeing only the wide forehead and disordered gray locks one might have fancied the man to have been distinguished and cultured. I suppose the cunning artist had hit upon this picturesque disorder of the whitening hair as the only means of saving his picture from commonplaceness.

If I am to tell you just what happened on that frightful night, I must tell you just how I felt. I have mentioned the strange feeling I had, as of something impending. My adventure of the afternoon had not stilled this vague feeling of something mysterious and dark. The feeling was not clear and had no rational basis, but it was strong enough now to cause me to be troubled by that face in the portrait with eyes gazing directly at me. There was something creepy about it, the steady gaze of this murdered man, and it affected me strangely. The eyes seemed to be accusing me. Even while intent on my work I was disturbed by the feeling that the steady gaze of that painted victim was fixed upon me.

Behind me I could *feel* the door slowly open, its hinges creaking slightly. I arose, stepped out on the balcony and looked down into the large apartment where a few embers still burned. I told myself that these should be extinguished and went down ostensibly for that purpose. The footprint in the hearth showed clear in the adjacent glow; all else was darkness. I told myself that I had made too much of that trifling memorial of some one's carelessness. Then I stepped over to the door of the lodge and made sure that it was locked. This door, too, had an uncanny habit of rattling, and to prevent this I took a paper from a pile on the table, folded it into a sort of little wedge, and stuffed it between the door and the jamb. From the shape and feeling of this paper I knew it was the article about Harrison McClintick's dreadful end, which I had mailed to Tom and which had always lain with other papers under a rusty old axe blade that we used for a paper weight.

I went upstairs again and into the room where my little lamp was burning. Small as it was, it seemed cheerful. Since the door would not stay closed I threw it wide open and resumed my work. Now and again I glanced sideways at the portrait and by way of showing my disdain of the effect it had on me, I lighted a cigarette and tossed the empty box upon the wide frame. But still I turned, now and again, and glanced at that intent face with its disordered gray hair, its resolute mouth, its cold, searching eyes. Was it so that Harrison McClintick had looked at his assailant? At last I could stand it no more; you may call it weakness or silly fancy or what not. I arose and tumbling the odds and ends of my belongings from the frame, I turned that haunting picture to the wall. To give my action a cheerful aspect of comedy, I said, "I don't like people watching me so closely at my work."

Just as I was trimming the lamp to resume my work, I heard a sudden noise outside. It was not very loud and occurred in a gust of wind. I tried to look from the window, but the streaming rain obscured the glass. However, I was

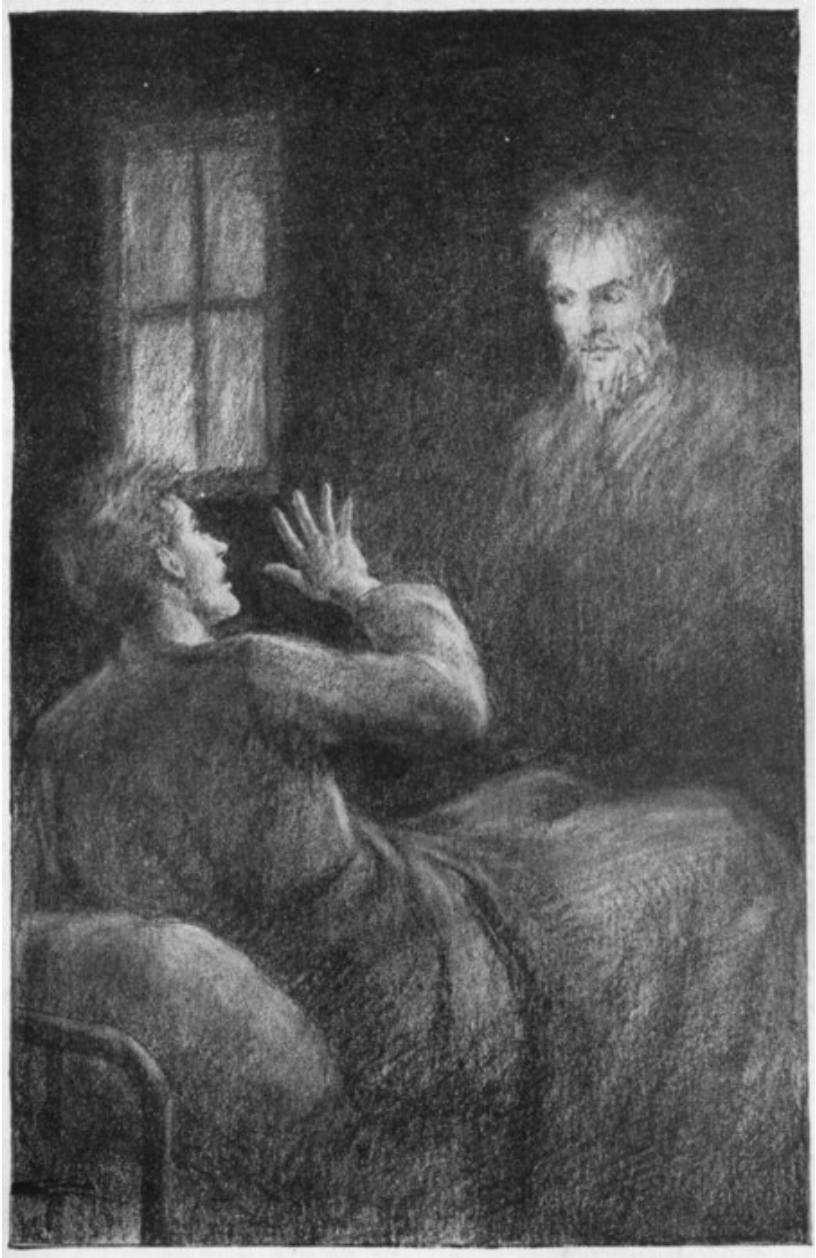
satisfied that a piece of planking leaning against the unfinished cook shelf had blown down. Several of these boards which had been selected for “eats boards” had been left there.

CHAPTER XIV
THE APPARITION

In the glow and satisfaction of at last finishing my article I was stimulated by wholesome, even humorous thoughts. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning and I had completed my work amid a solemn quietude. Laughing at my own expense, I gayly turned the picture about, saying, "now you can stare at me all you want to." I was not to have my mental poise disturbed by an oil-painting. I would not have my friends return to find that picture turned to the wall. I extinguished my light and retired with the agreeable consciousness of having completed one of my tasks and with a drowsiness which assured me peaceful slumber.

I hardly know how to tell you about the events of that night, or indeed whether I should call them events. When I awoke in the morning, I thought I had been dreaming. But I cannot even now, and in the light of subsequent events, fully explain my own harrowing experience. I suppose it is possible for one to dream that he is awake. Whether it is possible for one to be awake and fancy he is dreaming, I do not know. All I know is that in the still, dark hours of that tempestuous night, I saw vividly the face of Harrison McClintick looking down upon me. It was different, yet it was his face and bore his expression.

What I did not understand afterward was that the gray, disordered hair seemed streaming wet. The narrow chin conveyed somewhat a look of emaciation, the long, stern, resolute mouth to be set as if in death. This was McClintick's face, but it was ghastly. The wide forehead and narrowing cheeks gave the head a triangular look, suggesting a skull. The features were drawn, the eyes wild. I thought (if one may be said to think in a dream) that this was the face of Harrison McClintick after he had been killed.



HE STOOD OVER ME AND DID NOT SPEAK—ONLY STARED.

He stood over me and did not speak—only stared. I think I did not stir; I was certainly conscious of a resolve not to stir. I heard wind and rain. Yet goodness knows there had been enough wind and rain that night to penetrate

into a sleeping vision. Soon the face disappeared. I cannot say that I was conscious of the figure withdrawing, but the face withdrew. Still I heard the wind; it seemed to come in steady, surging gusts—regular, like the surf. I heard the driving rain, the same driving rain I had heard all through the long, gloomy day. Then it seemed to be driving around in a circle. Then I knew no more.

When I awoke in the morning, I was certain that I had been dreaming. I felt quite assured that the gloom and loneliness of the place, and my idle thoughts and speculations, had naturally enough insinuated themselves in distorted form into my sleep. There was the portrait without any suggestion of ghostly associations, the eyes gazing at me. They did not disturb me in the broad light of day.

Scarcely had I arisen, however, when I noticed something which utterly staggered me, a rude and clear reality, that struck me like a rifle ball and left me trembling. Beside my cot was a muddy footprint, less nice in form and clearness than the one embedded in the hearth below, *but identical with it*. I blinked my eyes to make sure I was awake. I sat on the side of the couch quite unnerved, scrutinizing that little muddy patch showing an irregular diagonal mark across the ball of the foot. Like the print on the mountain it was the impression of a whole foot. The print on the hearth showed only the front part of a foot. But there was not the slightest doubt that these three prints were impressions of one and the same foot.

When I had regained some degree of composure I looked for other prints, in the room, on the balcony, on the stair. There were none. Particles of dried mud there were, to be sure, but I might have tracked those in myself. I returned and studied the mark, utterly bewildered and greatly distraught. What was the meaning of this? Had I in truth been dreaming? Had I seen that ghostly apparition in half sleep? The apparition I had seen had been that of Harrison McClintick. But Harrison McClintick was dead and could leave no footprint. Unless one accepts the theory of a spectral footprint.

I could not now adopt the comfortable theory that I had been dreaming. Footprints are not left after dreams. I looked at the portrait to make sure that the face I had seen had been that of Harrison McClintick. Weird and distorted and troubled as that face had looked, it had been the face of McClintick. Well, I had no theory. I had always laughed at the supernatural. If I had seen the face and there had been no footprint, I would have assumed that I had seen it in a dream. If there had been a footprint, but no apparition, I would have said that some one had entered my room. There was still the explanation (and it seemed to be the only one) that the vision and the footprint were quite two different things; that while I slept after that harrowing dream some creature of flesh and blood had indeed entered and stood beside my couch.

With this thought I felt that I was on firm ground. I emptied my suitcase and laid it open over the footprint intending to preserve it intact for Tom to see. I even smiled at the recollection that I had once confined a boisterous June-bug in the same way. Then I went downstairs to find out how my nocturnal visitor had entered. The discovery of this fact would put the whole spooky business in the category of reality. All of the windows below were locked by the long iron pins that went through both sashes. The door of the lodge was likewise locked—just as I had left it. I opened the door and the clear, morning breeze saluted me, wafting an exhilarating freshness into my very face. How fragrant is the woods breeze, bearing the pungent odor of the drenched earth and foliage after an interval of storm. I can smell the wetness now, and see the grass and trees as they looked that morning bedecked with a myriad of lingering crystal drops.

I strolled around the lodge where the wounded, rain-laden grass was already beginning to straighten up in the welcome sunshine. I was right about the board blowing down; it lay over a sawhorse where it had fallen, so nicely balanced that it teetered in the morning breeze like a seesaw with invisible, ghostly children upon it. I could laugh at that spooky fancy in the cheery light of morning. “When I know how he got in, whoever he was, I’ll be satisfied,” said I.

But I did not find out how he got in. He did not get in, as far as I could find out. The door and windows had all been locked, and none had been tampered with. There was no ladder about and no sign of any attempt to reach the upper windows by any other means. I even went over to the smaller lodge where the boys slept. It was locked and our two ladders were on the floor inside. Tom said that the rungs of a ladder will turn around with annoying effects if allowed to get wet and then dry out. So we kept them under cover.

I returned to the lodge utterly bewildered. Considering the footprint as wholly apart from my harrowing vision, still here was a profound mystery. If some one had entered, then *how* had he entered. There was just not one way he could have done so without breaking either window or door latch and so leaving the evidence of his way of entry. *The mysterious footprint had been left by some one already in the lodge and still concealed in it.* What other explanation was there?

As I entered the lodge resolved to throw open the cupboard, and then to look into the rooms of my friends, I recalled how I had folded that old newspaper article into a sort of plug to stop the rattling of the door. It must have fallen to the ground when I threw the door open. But search as I would, I could find it nowhere on the adjacent floor of the lodge nor on the ground outside. I threw open the cupboard, and not without some trepidation looked for Tom’s pistol before ascending the stair to the balcony. I could not find it,

so in a spirit of fine abandon I strode up the stairs and threw both doors open.

No one was in either room. The little closed up quarters smelled damp and stuffy from the penetrating moisture of the recent storm.

I went downstairs again and began a still more thorough search for the folded bit of newspaper. It was not to be found. It seemed to have been taken away by some one capable of entering and departing through solid walls. The supposition that Mr. McClintick's shade had indeed stood over me and left a ghostly footprint was the only alternative theory that I could devise.

CHAPTER XV
OUT OF THE PAST

I had made no progress in solving these mysteries when, on the second evening after my startling discovery, Tom and the others returned. The weather was cold for that time of year and I had been writing all day in the lodge with a fire blazing in the chimney-place. I had begun to think of another long evening in that uncanny place when I heard the honking of that familiar horn and presently the voices of the returning party as the rattling little flivver emerged from the forest trail into the clearing. I had often ridiculed that rickety and clanking flivver, but on that evening its every squeak was like music to my ears.

They had a fine catch of fish and a big piece of ice which they had brought from Harkness to keep the welcome delicacy fresh if it should last more than a day or two.

“Do you wish ice to-day?” Brent asked, as he approached the door where I stood waiting like some fond mother ready to welcome a long lost son.

“I almost think it will be cold enough without ice,” I commented, as they entered, stretching themselves and setting down their burdens. “Home again,” I said gladly. “And how is the Ausable Chasm?”

“Ask Brent,” said Tom; “most of his hunting was done there. I don’t think he missed a post card stand.”

“When I go hunting in the wilds, I never come back empty-handed,” said Brent. “I have post cards, booklets, rustic canes, pennants, ash trays, paper weights, Indian moccasins, buckskin pocket-books, pine cushions, and I have been in Smugglers’ Pass in the Chasm where I found a spark plug, left there by one of the hardy old buccaneers, I suppose.”

“He didn’t catch one fish,” said Tom.

“That was because they didn’t bite on my hook,” said Brent.

“Well, I want to hear all about it,” I said. “It’s been pretty lonesome here. I’m half sorry I didn’t go.”

“Your place is in the home,” said Brent.

We made a hearty supper of fresh bass and the most delicious perch I ever tasted. The cheery, bantering voices of the company enlivened me beyond measure. One look at Totterson Burke, in his worn old corduroy suit and all one’s illusions about ghosts were dispelled; he was so very *real*. The very sight of Skipper Tim in flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up was a hearty refutation of every superstitious conjecture. The merest glimpse of Heinie Sheffler eating

his supper was enough to resolve all the perplexities resulting from my weird experience. I felt at last that I was on firm ground, and that phantom apparitions and ghostly footprints could not long withstand this wholesome atmosphere.

Still, I said nothing about my experience until Brent and Tom and I were left alone. And before this (which happened in half an hour or so, for the boys were sleepy and tired) something occurred which rather startled me. I did not give it any connection with my experiences while alone except that every strange occurrence had begun to seem part of a single mystery.

As the four were about to withdraw to their own sleeping quarters, I chanced to notice the shabby old black overcoat, belonging to Charlie Rivers, where it still lay as I had thrown it across an end of the long table. In a way of mock servility, I proffered Brent his umbrella and then said, “Don’t forget your coat, Charlie.” I never felt altogether at ease with Rivers, he did not encourage familiarity, but in a sort of playfully cordial spirit, I held the coat up, saying, “The easiest way to carry it is to wear it.”

Now I must tell you that during the several days of his absence, Rivers had remained unshaved and this fact, I dare say, helped to complete the picture which he presented when he slipped on his coat. I had never before seen him thus clad and unshaved, and instantly there sprang into my mind a very vivid picture of the man who had accosted me in the street on that same day of Tom’s visit to me when he first told me of Leatherstocking Camp. You will recall that on that day a man lingered in the street before my home and that later, while on my way to see Mr. Temple, this same man accosted me, asking if Leatherstocking Camp had been sold, and saying that he would like to get a job there.

Well, seeing Charlie Rivers unshaved and in an overcoat which, like magic, seemed to transfer him from the woods to city streets, I recognized with a shock the same man who had tried to get into conversation with me in Bridgeboro so long ago. The revelation struck me between the eyes. So striking and memorable is the appearance of one when clad in unwonted raiment. Charlie Rivers was a man of the woods; in an overcoat he stood apart. “Good night, Charlie,” I said.

As soon as they had gone, I exclaimed, “Tom, Charlie Rivers is the same man whom we saw while we were sitting on the porch in Bridgeboro; he is the same man who spoke to me later in the street and asked about a job up here.”

“What makes you think that?” he asked.

“I know it,” I said. “All that was needed was to see him unshaved and in an overcoat. Don’t ask me, *I know he’s the same man.*”

“I can’t imagine what he was doing down there,” Tom said.

“All I know is what he said,” I answered. “He wanted to know if the

property here had changed hands and spoke of a job—that's all I know."

Tom just sat on the edge of the table whistling. "That's blamed funny," he commented.

"Are we going to do the dishes to-night?" Brent asked.

"Do you think it would be all right to speak to him about it?" I asked.

"Why not?" Tom said.

"He was glancing at your flivver—remember?"

"Well, there wasn't anything so extraordinary about that," Brent said, as he gathered up the supper dishes. "Many people have paused to inspect it. I will presently announce a new surprise myself. Meanwhile, shall we do the dishes, or leave them till we've returned from the movies?"

"Well," I said, "that's that. Maybe there's nothing so mysterious about it. But I have other matters to tell you about."

"I'll tell you how it is about Rivers," Tom said. "He's always been a kind of a wandering adventurer, as I gather. He might have drifted to Bridgeboro and heard about this camp business and asked you about it."

"Very likely," I acknowledged.

Still, Tom seemed thoughtful as he sat on the uncovered end of the table, whistling and swinging his legs. "When Charlie drifted in here I never asked him much about himself; I was glad enough to get anybody. I understood he came from Canada. You can see yourself how he works."

"And that's that," I said.

"That's that," said Tom. "I don't know anything about Heinie either, if it comes to that."

"I think he is remotely descended from Germans," Brent said. And we all laughed.

"Then there's another thing," I said. "Have you got those targets, Brent?"

"They're on the shelf in the closet," said he.

"They are not," I shot back at him; "they have disappeared."

We all looked at each other, but there was no opportunity for comment. "And now," I said, "I am going to tell you what happened while you were away; you may explain it as you will. I had an experience which almost unnerved me. And I will show you the visual proof of at least part of what I tell you."

"It sounds good," said Brent. "Shall we sit down before the cheerful blaze? That's a good word—*visual*."

Seated before the fire, I told them of my experience as you know it; of my difficult ascent of the mountain, of the footprint, and the word I had seen crazily scratched on the rock. I told them of my supposed dream and of the footprint. Then of my assurance that no one had entered the Lodge. And of the disappearance of the newspaper account of Harrison McClintick's end. "I saw

the face of McClintick, yet it couldn't have been actually the face of McClintick for he is dead," I said. "Yet there was an actual footprint left by some one who must have entered the Lodge. Yet no one entered the Lodge. The targets are gone. The folded newspaper clipping is gone. Now, unless you believe I am crazy, what do you say?... Wait a minute, before you say anything. Let's go upstairs and look at the footprint. And first look at this one in the hearth." We returned downstairs silently. Even Brent's air of levity was noticeably absent as he and I resumed our seats while Tom on his own account went about, inspecting the windows and the door. He returned, shaking his head in utter bewilderment, and flung himself into one of the big easy chairs, while Brent thoughtfully poked the fire.

"This blamed place is haunted," said Tom. "It's a spook camp, that's what it is."

"Well, let's talk things over," Brent drawled, lazily throwing one leg over an arm of his chair and poking the other in the direction of the fire. He removed his old-fashioned spectacles and held them toward the blaze, then cleaned them with his handkerchief and replaced them on his nose. "Let's start on the assumption that you are not crazy."

"Thank you," I said.

"Now before we go any further," he drawled, "let me throw in my little contribution to the mystery. It isn't much, but it's the best I can do. Then we'll see if we can't get a working hypothesis. This camp is better than I thought it would be. I'm really getting interested."

"Yes and you'll get burned if you don't pull your foot away from the fire," said Tom.

"My error," said Brent, leisurely withdrawing his charring shoe, and at the same time taking an envelope from his pocket. "I didn't mention this before the boys, not even to you, Tommy. You remember about the targets; how each one had four bullet holes? And I said there must have been four at camp—at the finish? Clever, I thought. Well, here's a letter in an old battered envelope, postmarked—let's see—last November—yop, November three—and that would be about a year or so after the place here was closed up. Well, the postmaster in Harkness gave this to me when we came through this evening and asked me if we had anybody of this name up here. Peter Northrop. It's addressed to *Peter Northrop, care McClintick's hunting camp, Leatherstocking, New York*. You've got to hand it to Uncle Sam for finding people. This letter has been all over creation—came here from Leatherville, New Jersey. Well, the envelope was all falling to pieces—see? So I dumped the letter out and took a squint at it. I think it shows there were four people here. Funny, huh? Want to read it?"

CHAPTER XVI
SOMEBODY'S SON

I arose and took from him the envelope which he held in his extended hand; he was too lazy to get up and hand it to me. It was very much the worse for its travels, almost in shreds. It was addressed by an illiterate hand and bore several official stampings of *Wrong address* and *Not Found*. But Uncle Sam, that invincible errand boy, had left it at the right place at last, though all too late. It contained a letter written with pencil on a cheap tablet page of lined stationery. To me there is something fine about an old travel-worn letter, bearing the honorable scars of its battles with the world, and bereft of its timeliness, finally reaching its intended destination. Be that as it might, I lifted the folded contents from the envelope without any feeling that I was violating the privacy of personal mail. And holding it down in the light of the fire, I read:

> Coover's falls, N. Dakota.
>
> My dear SON
>
> Now it is so menny months I did not here I must say it looks like you hav forgot yure own mother. I look for the telegraph paper that Mister McClintik sent but can't find so try to think of the address were you are. You no you said you would be back soon this time now it is months and I don't even here. You said it would do you good in the woods just a month but I know you would not stay in the Woods in all this cold. I am spry only for my rumatiz that is so bad in the damp wether. I look for the ducks but Missus Boardman said you decided its silly to send them so far. Now if I knew where Mr. McClintik have his house I would mail this there. You are a bad boy and like your father must be always gadding over the earth but a good boy to so I tell Missus Boardman. I pray God you get this and it finds my boy well. Every day I say you will be here.
>
> love from your MOTHER.

If an old travel-worn envelope has a certain appeal, how much is that appeal heightened by the human touch, the pathos, of such an enclosure! Some poor old woman reaching a trembling hand out into the great world, groping for a lost son! Perhaps the very heart which prompted that all but hopeless inquiry was still. The stout heart that protested its loyalty in the very face of Mrs. Boardman. Perhaps the "rumatiz" had done its work. And still, where was this wandering son who was so much like his father?

"Looks as if there were four people here instead of three all right, doesn't it?" drawled Brent. "In looking over the targets I hit the bull's-eye—as you might say. The old gent, little Rollie, Weston, was it?—and Peter Northrop. It really doesn't make any difference; I don't have to cook for them. One, more or less, is no matter—as long as they're all gone." He considered the fire

musingly. “But it’s kind of interesting when things fit together like that, huh.... Might drop a line to the old lady, huh?”

“Leave that to me, I certainly will,” I said. “There are two things I have to do; speak to Rivers and write to Mrs. Northrop.”

“But how about this mystery?” Tom asked. “So far as the vision, or whatever you call it, is concerned, it was just a dream. Old man McClintick didn’t walk out of his picture, that’s sure.”

“He might have at that,” Brent drawled. “He was always pretty hard to hold back, I guess. Maybe he was dodging the income tax people.... Turn that log over, will you Tommy?”

Ignoring his levity, Tom fixed the fire.

“Pull that nail keg over here, will you, Tommy?” said Brent. “Put it under my feet—fine.” He resettled himself comfortably.

“That part was a dream and we’ll forget it,” said Tom.

“If you had seen it you wouldn’t forget it,” said I.

“But the footprint under the suitcase is real,” said Brent. “Anyway, the suitcase is real; it’s a cheap one, but it’s real.”

“Well, what do you think about it?” I asked, a trifle annoyed. “You sit there talking as if we were discussing the weather. What are we going to do about it? A stranger was in this lodge, that’s absolutely certain.”

“You want me to deduce conclusions?” Brent drawled. “Well then, if nobody entered by the windows, and if the door wasn’t tampered with, there are two theories left. Either your midnight visitor was in the lodge before you retired, or else he had a key to the door. Personally, I prefer the key theory.”

The thought of there being some one in the lodge with me all through that tempestuous evening, somewhat startled me. “I don’t think so,” I said thoughtfully. “There was no one in either of the other rooms when I went to mine.”

“All right then,” said Tom, jumping into the discussion in his impulsive way; “here’s what we’re face to face with. Here’s a footprint in this hearth. There’s another like it up the mountain. There’s some vestige of a trail—if our dreamer didn’t dream that too. Some one entered this lodge with a key, left a footprint upstairs, and went away again taking the folded up newspaper article about Mr. McClintick’s death with him. Now what about it?”

“You forgot the word scratched on the rock up the mountain,” Brent drawled.

“And that too,” said Tom.

“And Peter Northrop,” I added. “Do you suppose it’s possible that these footprints are his? Whoever he was, he was evidently here. He was here in the hunting season; he promised to send ducks to his mother. All right; he knew the bunch here; he would be interested in reading about the old man’s death;

he took the article. Might that fellow, whoever he was, be loitering around here for some reason or other? He might be back here for some purpose. Isn't that so?"

"Why sure," said Tom; "that's what I was coming to."

"How did he know that a little folded up bit of paper sticking in the door jamb, was of any interest?" Brent asked.

"It was taken away, wasn't it?" snapped Tom.

"If he took it, it was because he was looking for it," said Brent.

"All right," snapped Tom, rising and pacing back and forth in his mounting enthusiasm, "that's as may be. But here's the point; we're pretty sure now there were four people here instead of three—Brent has established that."

"You flatter me," said Brent.

"The old man, his son, Weston, and a fellow named Peter Northrop."

"We're not sure of that, but it's a pretty good surmise," said Brent.

"Now then," said Tom, "the old man and his son are eliminated. There were two others. Somebody who has a peculiar interest in this place, and doesn't want it known, has been about here. We don't know anything about Weston, but he's the one who accidentally shot young McClintick, and I shouldn't think *he'd* ever want to see this place again. Northrop hasn't been home since. Do you suppose he could be around here now for some reason or other?"

"It's not impossible," said Brent in his leisurely way. "Why don't you two go up the mountain, exploring?"

"Of course," snapped Tom.

"I'll do something before we do that," I said. And spurred to action by our talk, I stepped over to the table, lighted the lamp, and pulling a sheet of paper out of my portfolio wrote:

Leatherstocking Training Camp,
P. O. address Harkness, Clinton Co.,
New York.

MY DEAR MRS. NORTHROP:

A letter sent by you to your son, and misdirected, has lately been received at this address. The envelope was much damaged and its contents falling out, so the letter was read by those in charge here. It is hoped that by this time your boy has returned to you, or that you know of his whereabouts.

Mr. McClintick and his son, the former owners here, are both dead and camp has changed hands. If you have not yet heard from your boy it might be worth while to write and tell us something of the circumstances of his coming here as it is barely possible that some trace of him may be obtained in that way.

A stranger, unseen by those in charge here, has lately visited the camp secretly. It has occurred to us that this might possibly be your son. We are curious to know if he had a scar on his foot, and if you could inform us as to this, it might possibly identify this as yet unknown visitor.

The management here hopes that you will not count on any further information from

this source, but if it is possible for us to assist you in your search we shall be only too glad to do so.

In answering, please address your envelope the same as the heading of this letter.

I read this intentionally simple missive aloud to Tom and Brent for their approval and Tom signed it as Camp Manager. Brent suggested that we send two copies, one to the mother, the other to the Mrs. Boardman mentioned in her letter. We assumed that Coover's Falls was a small place. But if it chanced to be a town of considerable population perhaps one letter would be received if the other was not. We had no initials to prefix to the name on either letter. Brent suggested that if Peter Northrop's mother had married a second time, her name would not be Northrop.

There is something positively uncanny in the way that Brent thinks of things. He never forgets or neglects anything.

CHAPTER XVII
BAFFLED

We had chopped down a number of trees to open a better wagon trail to camp and the stumps of these stood at intervals along this improved approach. Tom had hit on the idea of using some off-length strips of board for rustic seats along this connecting trail between the camp and the public road. Wherever two wayside stumps were near enough together a board was nailed across them with another board as a rough back. Charlie Rivers was doing this work.

Never at a loss for ideas where camping is concerned, Tom had conceived the notion of naming these seats after scout notables and heroes, and Heinie Sheffler, our artist, was decorating the backs of the seats with such designations as TEMPLE REST, DAN BEARD REST, GOOD TURN REST, and so on.

On the morning after our talk in the lodge, Tom drove into Harkness to mail the letters and I strolled along the wagon trail where Heinie and Charlie were working. I thought the opportunity was good to speak with Rivers. I came upon Heinie first squatted on a box before one of the benches, brush in hand, and presenting a ludicrous spectacle of an artist.

"That's pretty nice lettering you do, Heinie," I said, pausing to watch him.

"Och, I don't got no good light," he complained, intent on his work.

"I don't see how you can hold your brush steady, reaching so far," I observed.

"Dot I got no troubles mitt. On life-boats I could paint names when der oashun iss big mitt wafes all rough. But diss, no. I don't got no good light."

"*Tenderfoot Rest*" I read aloud. "Tom's full of ideas, isn't he?"

"Ideas, yess," said Heinie as he worked: "but efficiency, *not*."

"Oh, I don't know about that," I said, rather resentfully.

"I know about it; diss he didn't got. Nice boy, good scout—sure. But——"

And Heinie shook his head.

"Why, look what he's done here," I said. "He's inspired us all to hustle—even me. Look at the camp—all these cabins. I don't think you ought to speak like that, Heinie. Tom likes you; he says you're a wonder."

"Nice boy, yess," said Heinie, smiling. "But he don't got no efficiency. Look down the trail—Charlie, making benches—*toys*. He can chop down four trees aready, while me unt you chops down one. Look at shingles, how he nail them on. Look at Burke, quartering logs for chinking. In an hour aready Charlie would make such a pile big enuff for all day. Och, dot feller could

work, I would say dot. Sure—but down the trail you find him—see? Making bench toys! He ask Tom for diss job—easy!”

“No, no, Charlie isn’t lazy,” I said.

“Sure not. I wouldn’t deny he got us all beat for work—sure. Dot’s it! Why don’t he got work wot counts mitt getting cabins up? Sure, nice boy, Tom. Laugh, play pinocle, work like ten devils! But for boss—och, he got no efficiency.... Neider I got no good light mitt diss,” he added, intent on his work. Tom’s deficiencies seemed neither to trouble nor prejudice him.

I strolled up the trail toward where Rivers was working. It did seem odd, I reflected, that Tom had set our best worker to this odd job just after the planking had come and the more important labor had been resumed. As for Heinie, his lettering occupied but an hour or so every now and then. But I wondered not only that Tom had set Rivers to this task, but that Rivers (a competent and rapid worker if ever there was one) should have asked for the job.

You will understand that this wagon trail through the woods led to the public road. It was up that way, where the trail reached this public road, that Rivers was working. I did not go straight along the trail, but cut into the woods, for I thought that Brent was gathering sphagnum moss for chinking the storehouse cabin and I wanted to speak with him. He was nowhere to be seen and I went on through the woods, reaching the public road at a point perhaps a hundred yards from the wagon trail. Thus, approaching along the road, I could see Rivers working a few yards from it on the trail. He heard me approaching, and arose suddenly as if startled. I was astonished at this, for I was still some distance from him. He seemed relieved as soon as he had identified me.

“H’lo Charlie,” I greeted. “How’s the work coming on? May I sit down on this bench? Did I startle you?”

“Not many folks come along the road,” he said.

“You’re all by your lonesome up here, huh? I was looking for Brent in the woods.”

He did not pause to entertain me, proceeding with his task as if I were not there. He was the hardest man to talk to I ever knew. It takes two to make a conversation and I could not seduce him into responsiveness. So I made a bold plunge. “Charlie,” I said, “I wonder if I didn’t meet you before I ever came here?”

He paused in his work, looking not at me, but straight ahead of him. “I don’t reckon I did,” he said; “not unless you’re more a man of the woods than I take yer ter be.”

“In Bridgeboro? You don’t remember? How you spoke to me in the street? Last fall—no?”

“Reckon I was in Canada then,” he said. “That’s where Slade lives, huh?

No, I ain’t never been there.”

I paused, baffled. And meanwhile, he resumed his work, ignoring me. I felt, as I always felt when speaking with Rivers, that I had been put at a disadvantage. I had tried to verify a conviction, and had only been reminded that I was not a man of the woods. It was a sneer, ever so skilfully conveyed.

CHAPTER XVIII
SEEING IS BELIEVING

So that was that. I told Tom of my encounter with Rivers and he said, “Well, I suppose that settles it.” Brent was even more brief. “Hmph, funny,” he said.

“Tom,” said I, “did Rivers ask you for that job; I mean working out near the end of the trail?”

“Sure, why?”

“Why—I don’t know,” I answered hesitatingly. “I suppose you’ll say I’m always getting impressions, but it seemed to me as if—well, when I happened along the road it seemed to me as if he was startled. And it occurred—it just occurred to me—that maybe he wanted to be right there.”

“Why?”

“Well,” I hesitated; “maybe so he could sort of be on the lookout. You think not?”

“Nah!”

“All right, then that ends it,” I said.

“What I’m thinking about,” said Tom, “is the trail you saw—or didn’t see. I’d like to get a line on *that*. Either there is one or there isn’t.”

I was rather annoyed at being twice discredited; once by Rivers and once by Tom. “If there was an east wind and rain, I could show it to you readily enough,” I said, rather sharply.

“Sure it wasn’t part of your dream? Remember the face.”

“I am not likely to forget it,” I retorted. “But I’m perfectly willing to leave it out of our reckoning. Let’s say it was a vision. All right, you saw the footprint. Now do you want to go up the mountain and see the other one? And also what’s scratched on the rock? Trail or no trail we can get up that far—I did it. Maybe I’m not a man of the woods, but I did it. As for the spook trail, as you call it, it’s there whether it can be seen now or not.”

“Maybe it caught cold in the rain and can’t come out,” Brent said.

“I’ll find it if it’s there,” Tom said conclusively.

“Atta boy,” said Brent.

“Wait till twilight,” Tom added.

“When the slow declining sun sinks beyond yonder hills,” said Brent. “Sounds like a play, doesn’t it?”

But just the same the twilight did play its part in Tom’s plan. Daggett, Burke and Heinie were out on the lake after their day’s labor. Rivers was down

the wagon trail still working; he seldom observed the regular hours. Thus, unseen by any save Brent and myself, Tom climbed the huge elm which overspread our lodge. It was fifteen minutes or more before he descended.

"You're right," he said conclusively, "there's a trail all right. This is getting interesting."

"Is it up there in the tree?" Brent asked.

"Come ahead," said Tom as he explained volubly. "You know how it is at twilight, the light's the same all over—while it lasts. Get up high somewhere and look down and if there's a trail you'll see it. Why in the war the aviators used to discover trails that had never been seen down below, just little trails made by soldiers going single file—new trails. Twilight's the best time. Or very early morning if there's no mist. This trail runs from—well, between those two cabins, up past those rocks, and on up."

"Do you believe now that I saw that face?" I asked.

"What's this got to do with faces?" he snapped. "Come ahead, follow me."

"To-morrow evening, at twilight, I'll climb up the tree and take a nap up there," said Brent. "Then I'll be able to tell you if your dream was true."

"Well, don't take a nap down here," said Tom. "Come on, let's get away from here before the boys come in."

On he went, pausing now and again to examine the ground or scrutinize some brush or tree that we passed. I could not see any sign of trail. Brent accompanied us with a kind of whimsical submissiveness. Tom was so detached and preoccupied that he did not question him. Here indeed he was at his best, the true scout, and seeing no guiding line beneath our feet, I marveled as he verged to right or left acting, apparently, on the hint of some stone or drooping bough. Once, when we were well upon the mountainside he paused, whistling in preoccupation, as he studied a tree trunk from which he said an obstructing branch had been broken off within a month or two, he thought. "Didn't you notice that the other day?" he asked me. He looked about and found the severed branch in a grassy gully near by. "See?" he concluded triumphantly.

"There is only one Houdini—or was," said Brent.

I am certain that our route was not the same as that I had followed in my haphazard ascent. Yet once or twice I did recognize trifles that I had seen before. Probably in places I had been on the trail. Tom's progress was more purposeful, and he moved from one significant thing to another as one proceeds by means of stepping stones across a stream. I was astonished by his discovery of little signs that seemed sufficient to guide him. At one place he paused in a perfect tangle of underbrush, Brent and I dutifully pausing also while he stooped to inspect a stone which he had discovered by stepping on it. He said it was a trail stone, meaning that it had been much stepped on.

“The only thing this thoroughfare lacks is a name,” said Brent, as he started again, lifting his lanky legs high out of the dense growth. “Be on your watch for a traffic cop, Tommy.”

Soon we came to *my* discovery, the long wisp of pliant wood tied around the tree at the head of the declivity. “Here it is,” I said triumphantly.

“You can see I didn’t dream it. Now that’s there to grab hold of. Am I right?”

Tom was too preoccupied with his inspection of it even to answer me. “Why, it hasn’t been here long, either,” he said; “it’s fresh, look here.” And he pulled a long strip of bark from it. “Look at the color of that—*feel* of it.”

“Well,” said I with a slight touch of disdain. “What did I tell you?”

“That’s a kind of a—let’s see—that’s a—no it isn’t—yes it is,” Tom said. “That’s a colly knot. I haven’t seen one tied like that since I was overseas. Come ahead, let’s go up and look at these rocks.”

“You will find them as represented,” I said with an air of quiet triumph.

“If not, we get our money back,” said Brent.

CHAPTER XIX
GUESSWORK OR ACTION

My star exhibit, the footprint, was as clear as when I had first seen it, and I permitted myself to gloat a little as Tom, and even Brent, gazed at it with riveted astonishment. “And there is the word,” I said, as I indicated each crazy letter of the topsy-turvy printing. “S-T-R-A-N-G-L-E.”

Tom only shook his head, amazed, bewildered. “Three of them,” he said. “Yep, they’re all prints of the same foot. Gosh, I don’t know *what* to think. But one thing is certain. Somebody who was at camp a long while ago has been here lately. That’s *dead sure*.”

“And doesn’t want it known,” said Brent.

“Righto,” Tom agreed.... “Well,” he added, arousing himself to action, “how about this trail? I wonder where it goes from here, anyway? All the way up, do you suppose? What do you say, shall we follow it along?”

“I don’t see how we can do that, it’s getting dark,” I said. “We certainly couldn’t reach the summit to-night even if it can be done at all.”

“Trouble is, I’d rather the boys wouldn’t know anything about this business,” Tom said. “It’s pretty hard to get away without them knowing something about it.” He paused, seeming to consider. “This is a blamed mysterious kind of business if you’re asking *me*,” he mused aloud. “And the only theory *I* have—well somehow that chap Northrop sticks in my mind.” In his obvious bewilderment he turned upon Brent. It was interesting to see how this indomitable scout and pathfinder turned instinctively to his friend about a question not involving scout skill and physical prowess. “What do *you* think about it, Brent? Will you please for once give us a serious answer? What do you think about this business? This spook-ridden camp we’re in. Blame it all, I wish I knew something about that Northrop.”

Brent glanced about in the little rocky shelter as if looking for something to sit on, and it was amusing to note how Tom always reacted to this leisurely habit of his friend. “What do you want, a steamer chair?” he asked.

Brent slowly seated himself on a rock. “Are you sure you’ve told us all you know—all you heard—about this place, Tommy?” he asked.

“Why, sure,” said Tom.

“Well, it’s a puzzle,” said Brent. “Here’s what we actually do know. We know somebody lately passed down through here and left a footprint. We *don’t* know that the same person scratched that word—now wait a minute, Tommy, don’t interrupt. I’m talking about what we *know*. Let’s stand on the ground

——”

“Or sit down,” I playfully suggested.

“All right,” said Brent. “We *know* that a footprint just like this was left in a room in the lodge the other night. And we *know* that these two footprints match another one that was left in the hearth a long time ago. So we *know* that some one who was here a long time ago, has been around here lately. Now that’s what we actually do know, because footprints can mean only one thing. If we want to find out who’s hanging around here, the best thing to do is to hunt for him, or at least watch for him. When we find him, if we do, we’ll find out who he is and why he’s here.”

“There’s one thing more that we know,” I said.

“We don’t know for an absolute certainty that there were four people here,” Brent said. “We have what they call presumptive evidence, that’s all.”

“That isn’t what I mean,” I said. “But we do know——”

“Cut out the dream,” said Tom.

“We do know,” I continued, “that the person who entered the lodge the other night had a key.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Brent said thoughtfully.

I paused before expressing a thought—something less than a thought—that was lurking in the back of my mind. “Do you suppose that this Northrop, whoever he is or was, might have been mixed up in some way with the murder of Mr. McClintick? Whoever returned here the other night had a key. It was some one familiar with the place. He was interested in that article about McClintick’s death—took it away with him. This man Northrop has been missing from his home. McClintick was strangled, and there’s the word scratched up on the rock.”

“Why should he scratch it there?” Brent asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But it’s rather interesting to find that particular word scratched there—right where one of the footprints is.”

“It seems to me,” Brent said, “that whoever scratched that word there wasn’t exactly in his right mind. Nice, intelligent, normal murderers don’t do things like that. Why pick on our missing friend, Peter? How about absent-minded Wes, the young duck-shooter?”

“If you mean Mr. Weston why don’t you say so?” Tom snapped.

“He might have gone crazy at that,” Brent said. “Maybe he—didn’t you say he went to pieces after popping little Rollie?”

“Roland,” said Tom.

“Well, as long as we’re giving guesses,” Brent continued, “Weston was the one who had the best reason to go to pieces. Maybe in that state he fancied the old gent would kill him, so he beat him to it. One guess is as good as another. All we know about Northrop is that he didn’t go home.”

“And that he wasn’t mentioned as being here at all at the time of the accident,” I said.

“That’s one thing I can’t understand,” Tom exclaimed.

“Well,” said Brent, rising, “here we are part way up a mountain playing *guess, guess* and night coming on. The thing to do is find out who’s been around here if we can. Come on, let’s go down home.”

Before descending, Tom examined the land above the rocks and found that the trail, such as it was, continued on up the mountain. As I glanced up there it seemed to me quite incredible that any one could ascend to the summit. Surely, I thought, the trail could not be continuous and must encounter many obstacles. But Tom argued that the footprint at the rocks proved that our mysterious visitor had descended the mountain, since there was no evidence of any one having camped in the little rocky shelter. He was all for action and resolved to follow the trail to the very summit, if that were possible, the next day.

How to do this without the others of our party knowing about it was a question. Tom thought it would seem less significant if he went alone, and his determination to do this was the more easily reached because of the rather poor opinion he held of Brent and me as scouts.

“That’s the only thing to do,” he said, as we made our way back to camp. “There’s no use wasting time in guesswork, and I can’t sit around, or even work, knowing that there’s maybe somebody lurking around the place. Somebody came down that trail or the footprint wouldn’t be there on the mountain, that’s sure. I’m going to find out where the blamed thing leads to.” He seemed full of resolve, restive for action, and rattled on in his hearty, vigorous way as we picked our path down the mountainside.

“I don’t want either of you to go along,” he exclaimed. “It isn’t necessary and the boys will only wonder what we’re up to. I’m going to start out to-morrow at daylight; I always wanted to get to the top of the mountain anyway. Now if anybody asks any questions about me just let them think I went to Harkness on foot; you can sidestep questions all right. Probably that’s what they’ll think anyway, because they know the flivver doesn’t work half the time. When I come down to-morrow afternoon, I may have something to tell you. If somebody came down the mountain I ought to be able to go up. I’ll punch a hole in this blamed mystery and be done with it. The plaguy thing’s getting on my nerves.”

CHAPTER XX
SUSPENSE

Tom had gone when we arose in the morning and there were no questions asked. He often went to Harkness and sometimes to the sawmill at Rogers Gap and was gone all day, so there was nothing remarkable about his absence. I dare say no one even knew that he had not gone in the flivver.

In the light of subsequent happenings how vividly I recall that day! The early morning was cold and the roofs of the cabins covered with frost. But soon the sun dispelled this chilliness and the air was filled with the balmy fragrance of spring. We had a pretty good illustration of the effects of long and heavy rains on the mountain lakes of that region, and I was impressed with Tom's wisdom in not building any cabins too near the shore. Every little gully on our camp land was a running stream, and every depression a miniature pond. There was one place where it was clear that every storm would transform a certain irregular hollow (which we had not even noticed) into a broad and rushing torrent. So Brent and Tim and I spent the day in throwing up a couple of rustic bridges at convenient spots across the course of this occasional outlet.

At suppertime Tom had not returned and Brent and I thought he must have made a discovery. Nothing in particular was said about his absence. We played cards with the boys for a while and then they went to their cabin. Brent and I sat up till midnight, puzzled and a trifle concerned. Still I cannot say that we were greatly worried, Tom was so thoroughly at home in the woods. I did think it possible that he might have got lost in the darkness on that wild mountain. Acting on this thought we hung a lantern in the window and I fixed a sheet of shiny tin (such as is used to lay beneath shingles in certain parts of a roof) behind it so as to throw the glare toward the mountain. "He ought to be able to see that from any part of the slope," I said. Then, comforting ourselves with the thought that this belated beacon would guide him, we went to bed for we were very sleepy.

I must have been dozing when I thought I heard him tiptoeing on the balcony and I slept the better for that assurance that he had returned. But in the morning we found him still absent and we were greatly perplexed. Here was something added to the mystery of that uncanny place. The lantern, still burning in the window, seemed to emphasize the strange non-appearance of our comrade. It was still very early, for Brent had aroused me at dawn, and as he lifted down the lantern with its makeshift reflector, it cast a glow upon the

footprint in the cement hearth. For just a moment this stood out in bold relief in the surrounding gray of early morning.

“What had we better do?” I asked. “For my part, I can’t go to work with Tom absent like this. Should we arouse the boys and tell them? Surely something is wrong; he wouldn’t have stayed up there all night unless something had happened.”

“I don’t like the idea of talking about these matters with the crew,” Brent said. “If Tommy is just lost of course it would be all right, though I suppose they’d wonder why he went up the mountain. Blame it all, it’s hard to know *what* to do. Trouble is, I have a feeling—I just can’t help it—that something is going to come out about this place, that something is going to happen. What kept Tommy away all night with that lantern burning in the window? It would be pretty tough, after all the work that’s been done here, if anything happened to give the place a black eye. People are queer, when you come right down to it. There’s many a good house standing empty because it has the reputation of being haunted.”

His thoughtfulness made me thoughtful also. “Sure enough,” I agreed. “If anything happened to hurt the prospects of this camp it would be a harder blow for poor Tom than any personal mishap that could befall him.... I tell you what let’s do, Brent. Let’s go right now, before any one is about, and drive the flivver out into the road and down a little distance. Then they’ll think that you and Tom and I went to Harkness early; they won’t think twice about it. We can cut up through the woods and get into the mountain trail that way. We’ll be out of sight before they’re out of bed. We can follow the trail up, and if the worst comes to the worst, and we find that something *has* happened, it will be time enough then to tell them. What do you say?”

This seemed to be the best plan and we were soon cutting up through the woods approaching the sheltering rocks from a new point. It was hard to reach them by this route, but they stood out in plain view so we had them to guide us through the dense, trailless thicket. No one was stirring about the camp when we looked down from this romantic spot. A mist lay over the lake and my thoughts recurred, as they so often did (especially in early morning), to the shocking accident which had occurred there.

There was but one little sign of Tom at this spot. On the edge of a certain flat stone was a sort of stained or scraped area which Brent said was where a knife had been sharpened. This supposition was soon confirmed by the blazings on trees above the rocks. Evidently Tom had found no trail beyond this point and had plunged into the thicket, blazing his way as he ascended, so that he might be guided on his return. This made our own progress easy, or at least enabled us to follow his own path on up the mountain.

After about half an hour’s climbing through bramble and thicket and up

minor precipices and rocky ledges, Brent suddenly reached forward laying his hand on my shoulder.

“Shh! *Listen!*” said he.

CHAPTER XXI
DESPAIR

Somewhere not far off was the sound of falling water and ten or fifteen minutes more of difficult progress brought us to a long, narrow cleft crossing our line of travel. Into this tumbled a rushing brook which wriggled down in its boisterous course from high up the mountain. I thought that Tom might have heard this falling water from a long distance and come thither intending to follow the course of the brook. We wondered how he had crossed the cleft, for as far as we could see, it did not seem to narrow in either direction. Brent walked on ahead a little way.

"We might as well see how far this cleft goes," he called.

"You're right," I said. "There might be a turn we can't see from here."

"We can only try. If there's a place one can cross, Tom has found *that place*."

"I dare say," I said, greatly admiring Brent's implicit faith in Tom's judgment.

We walked along then in silence, the stillness being broken only by the occasional crackle of dried twigs underfoot and the now distant sound of the turbulent little brook swishing down the mountain side.

"Bad turn ahead," Brent called to me, "Keep in line!" As usual I had been lagging in the rear, but on hearing this, increased my speed and caught up to him at the turn.

Some distance beyond, the cleft stopped abruptly. Even our own trackless path ahead, narrowed out before our eyes and ended against another towering wall of frowning stone rising out of a deep gully.

"Well this is once we'll stand with our backs to the wall," Brent said, with a mixture of humor and despair.

"It looks that way, certainly," I replied, feeling only the despair and none of the humor.

We were glancing around rather hopelessly for some sign that Tom might have made in his search. So far, there had been no telltale signs of any human being, but here and there we noticed broken down wild growths where some heavy footed night prowler had recently passed.

It must have been well on toward seven o'clock and the sun had not shown any more than a faint line of sickly pinkish hue in the East. The skies too, looked threatening and overcast. Clouds of ashen gray roofed the summit of old Hogback and the ragged outer edges, like some weatherbeaten circus top,

seemed to lap over all the rest of the world.

The silence was rather depressing. The misty chill of that dark morning had gotten into my system. Brent too, I noticed, had become unusually quiet.

“Hadn’t we better find our way back again before this deluge traps us?” I asked.

“I guess so,” Brent replied. He sauntered over toward the indomitable looking wall of stone that shut off our progress in that direction.

“At least we *can* go back,” I called to him and wishing he would give up the idea of trying to cross over the cleft.

I stood there thinking how helpless mere Man really is in the face of Nature. Why even that noisy brook whistling over the stones in the gully was not daunted by that high mountain wall. It was tirelessly finding its way until it finally rushed out and over the jagged rocks and thence down into the foothills, white-foamed and free. My reverie was interrupted by the sound of Brent’s voice.

“See what we have here! Looks like an old Roman bridge, doesn’t it?”

Not being able to see from where I stood, I moved towards Brent and saw that the high wall had one really fine advantage. It had undoubtedly taken ages to form, but there it surely was, a natural narrow bridge of fallen rock. Hardly more than a ledge and too narrow to walk it; one would have to crawl on hands and knees.

Besides, there was a jump of about eight or nine feet on the opposite side before one could skirt the ravine and land safely. Beyond that, we could see the thick woodland declining in the direction of camp. I mentioned this to Brent.

“I know,” he said, “but all this doesn’t give us the slightest idea as to where Tommy’s spent the night and where he is now.”

“I realize that, Brent,” I said. “Still I feel quite confident that Tom is safe and knows what he’s doing. We’ll probably find him at camp when we get there.” Perhaps I felt suddenly buoyed up at the sight of the firm rocks ready to give us safe passage over the gully. I only know that I wanted to get out of the deepening gloom of the mountains as quickly as possible.

“If he’s not there, maybe Rivers will be able to suggest something,” Brent ventured to say.

“He’s probably there,” I said, and feeling that my words had sounded rather half-hearted.

Brent started for the narrow ledge and I followed slowly, so as to keep a safe distance between us. Neither spoke until we were safe on firm ground again.

I laughed nervously as I scooped and brushed the oozy green scum from my clothes. The stuff was thick all along the ledge. Brent did the same. And

we both realized it had been a risky jump across that yawning chasm.

In a self-congratulatory mood for our good fortune, we moved simultaneously toward the edge of the precipice and looked over. Almost instantly Brent gave my arm a painful jerk and drew back.

“Heavens!” he cried, hoarsely. “Look what’s down there!” His head was turned toward mine but his hand was outstretched and I followed the line of his pointed finger.

Down in the gully, lying face downward and partly immersed in the swift mountain brook was the form of a man.

CHAPTER XXII
TOM

"It can't be—I began.

"It must be!" Brent exclaimed, his voice quivering.

"Tom?" I asked, in a voice that sounded not like my own. Brent nodded.

"But how?" I couldn't seem to grasp the meaning of it all. It seemed inconceivable for Tom to come to such an end. "Why, he's too cautious to have made such a ghastly error!" I cried.

I couldn't and I wouldn't believe that *that* was Tom!

"Who else would it be?" Brent's broken tones sounded hopelessly positive, somehow. "He's tried to find his way through here in the early dawn probably. He couldn't have seen what a gap it was!"

"No, of course not!" I agreed, mechanically. "We must hurry back to camp. Get some help. The storm's almost upon us."

"Oh, yes! The storm. I had almost forgotten it," Brent murmured, as though the storm and all else now meant nothing. "We'll get some rope. He can't lie there for long. He's *dead*, of course!"

"*Of course!*"

We ran when we could and walked as fast as the thick brambles permitted. Where it was less thickly wooded, I could get a slight view of the camp through the trees. It looked like a speck of black on the horizon. We still had some distance to go.

The heavens were rumbling angrily and yet we had not sighted a place where we could find foothold enough to make a descent to the slope below us. Fully a half hour had passed and the rain was pelting us in huge drops before we found some jagged indentations running down to the first slope.

With hands and faces scratched and bleeding, our clothing torn and wet we finally reached the lower edge. Whether to follow along the base toward camp or strike out for the table-land was the question uppermost in our minds.

Which way would enable us to get there quickly? Brent took my arm in his and made a flourish with his free hand to the southeast.

"Isn't that a sort of trail there?"

So it was, indeed! Though not much more of a trail than any we had just travelled. It was noticeable, however, that here and there the heavy grass lay tumbled on the earth as though some heavy object had flattened it.

"We can try it," I said, "although it seems a long way 'round."

“I know,” Brent said, “but it’s better to keep in the open. There’s a slight chance one of the boys might see us, there, where they wouldn’t be looking toward the mountain.

“I can signal every once in a while as we go along that we need help. Some one of them, especially Rivers, ought to be able to understand the code. It will save time if they spy us and we can turn right back.”

I shuddered to think of that ghastly sight in the dark ravine. And I shivered in my wet clothes when I thought of the fury of the storm. Even at that moment, it was converting the busy little brook into a frothing whirlpool, dashing unmercifully against that stark, helpless form.

I wouldn’t let my thoughts quell my hopes.

“We won’t give up hope, Brent! Perhaps, he’s there—at the Lodge.”

“Perhaps not,” Brent answered, gloomily.

The wet clinging grass of the foothills, though disagreeable and cold, was a welcome relief from our mountain experiences.

Dejected and despairing we hurried on, Brent stopping now and then to signal some hoped for, unseen observer. There was nothing in our hearts that we could find to say to one another that would better the situation or make it worse—if that could have been possible.

The howling of the wind through the mountains and down across the open country with its tall waving grass seemed to emphasize the dismal solitude. No living thing had crossed our path. Nothing but rain. It seemed eternal.

“There’s a clearing over to the right,” Brent called to me. I glanced casually.

From where we were walking I judged it to be a clearing about one hundred feet in circumference. When the wind blew the grass aside we noticed a slight eminence in the center of the bare looking ground that could not be mistaken for other than what it was. A small rough wooden cross was its marker.

We deliberately walked on. The sight brought to mind more forcibly the tragic puzzle in which our own lives had become involved.

“Now I know,” I said to Brent, “how Weston felt when he went to the Lodge to see if young McClintick was there. And here we’re doing the same thing.”

“We’re almost there,” Brent said, quietly. His voice betrayed a sort of fear that when we did get there, we’d find out the worst.

There wasn’t a sign of anyone about as we neared camp. The men were keeping indoors and out of the storm.

We were standing before the Lodge door!

It seemed as though we had been away from it for years. And no one to welcome us! Not a sound came from within.

Brent and I stared at the door. I felt panicky. The one waiting for the other to open the door and neither one moving.

For a second, I thought it was just an hallucination. But the door did really swing open slowly and a figure in khaki reached out and pulled us in as though we were two powerless puppets.

“For heaven’s sake!” the figure in khaki was exclaiming. “Where have you been? You both look as though you’ve stepped out of Poe! Say something!”

The moment must come to everyone, sometime, when extreme grief or gladness renders the human tongue speechless. That moment had come to Brent and I.

Some seconds passed before I heard a voice sounding very much like my own saying, “Tom!”

CHAPTER XXIII
STRANGE PARTNERS

All that Brent could find to say was, “This is too much for me!” And he went to the fireplace to thaw out.

After we’d slipped into dry clothes and had something hot to drink we demanded an explanation from Tom.

“Why, I got back here right after you left,” he explained. “In fact, I could hear the echo of the flivver from the woods as I got to the Lodge. I thought you fellows had taken a notion to go to Harkness. In fact, I didn’t think about it again until I saw Brent passing the window. I was reading here alone. That’s why I didn’t bother getting up to open the door. Thought you were old enough to do it yourselves.” He laughed heartily.

“Come on, Tomasso!” Brent pleaded. “Give an account of your wanderings. We deserve to hear it after ours.”

“To begin with,” Tom said, “I set straight out, intending to follow up, if I could, the scarred footprint.”

“He sounds like Sherlock Holmes,” said Brent, poking a log into the flames. Tom took no notice of the interruption.

“At first I didn’t fare very well in that direction. Too much undergrowth. But, around noontime, up on the second slope, I discovered some soft moss under a huge tree. And I saw some footprints. Of an animal.

“I got curious and looked on further. No sign of any more. So after a while I went on back to the tree and tore up some weeds just beyond it. Found more footprints of the same animal and followed them on down the slope.

“And along with the animal’s tracks, sometimes a little ahead or just beside them; sometimes a trifle back—was the *scarred footprint!*”

“This is interesting,” I murmured. “Go on.”

“I followed it carefully. Every little way I stopped and examined the ground where it seemed to be soft. I’d find them together most every time—the human, bare footprints that had sunken in the soft ground under the frail weeds and those of the animal.

“Oh, I was pretty much convinced. But I wanted to make sure and when I got through fussing around, it was six o’clock.

“I took enough grub with me so I sat down and finished what I had left from noon. About that time the sun was setting. Somehow, it gave me a hunch to stick around.

“Well, I looked around and found myself a nice perch up in a tree

overlooking the rocks and the camp. It wasn't long after dark that the moon made a feeble effort to come through the clouds. It had quite a ring around it last night, if you remember; still there was enough light for me to see the rocks and a little beyond.

"I waited patiently and was soon rewarded for my pains, with a nervous chill. Our friend, the lynx, was howling gaily on the slope above me. With each howl the echo came nearer and nearer until it almost deafened me. Finally it ceased, and I could hear quite plainly in the stark silence that followed, a crackle of dry twigs and soft footfalls coming toward me."

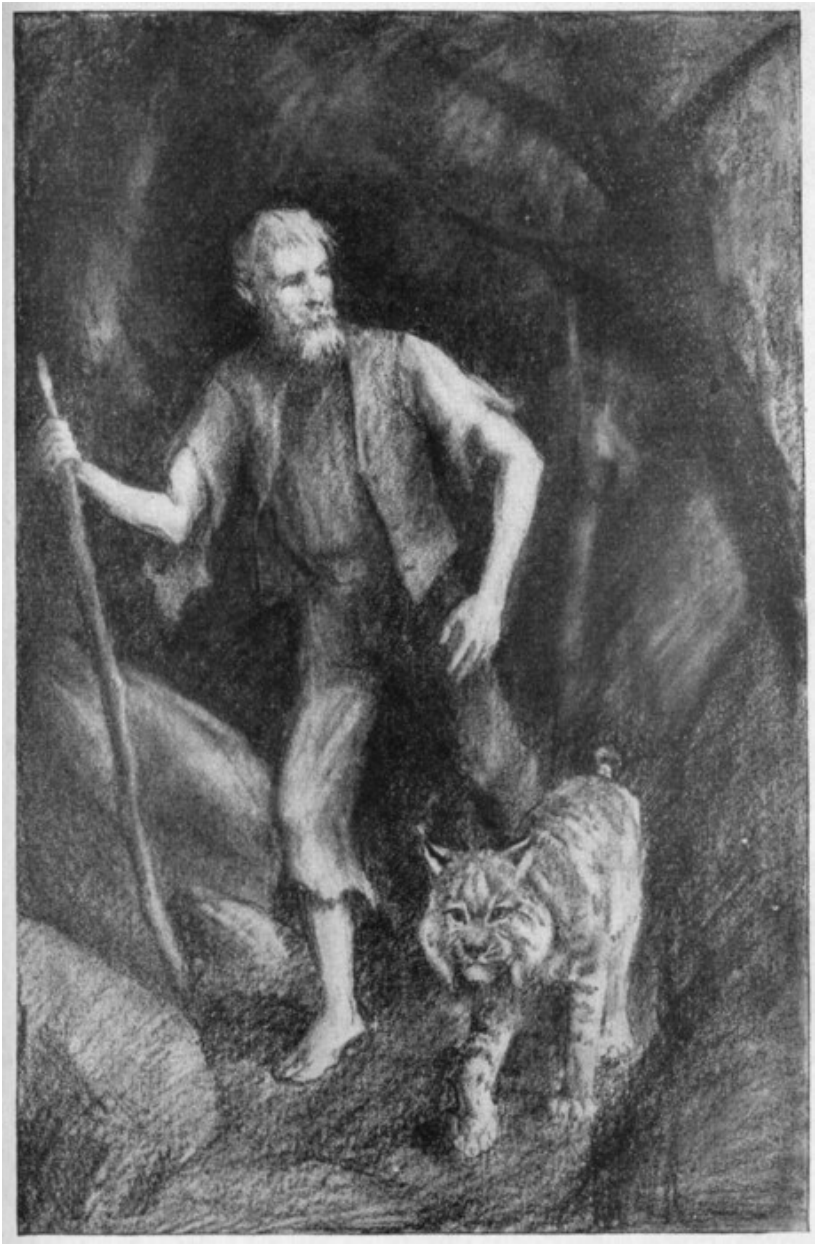
"Whew!" Brent exclaimed.

"I was cramped," Tom went on. "My rigid position was beginning to get on my nerves. I was about to shift a little when I heard the soft whisper of a man's voice right near me. Gosh what a scare!

"I felt I had been sitting there for days, when I heard the voice again, and looking down saw something pass under the tree and on down through the rocks in the direction of the camp."

"What was it?" Brent asked.

"A terribly emaciated looking man. Just like a hermit you read about and have never seen. Long beard and hair; rags for clothes and barefoot. And with him—walking alongside like a pet dog—was *the lynx*! Absolutely!"



WALKING ALONG LIKE A PET DOG—WAS THE LYNX!

“Almost incredible!” I exclaimed.

“I knew you’d hardly believe it,” Tom protested. “But I saw it with my own eyes! And besides, I got down out of the tree after they were well out of

sight and examined the ground with my flashlight. The footprints were there all right. Both man's and beast's."

"What next?" Brent queried.

"I decided that as long as I had seen that much, I might as well wait for the finish. Not that alone, but I was afraid if I started for camp I might meet the queer looking couple on the way. And I didn't relish the thought of that unarmed.

"I stretched myself, took a little stroll around the tree; then resumed my former position and waited for their return. It was difficult to keep my eyes open, but I managed to watch pretty steadily. It was some long night, I can tell you, and I was mighty cold besides. The first sight of dawn was pretty welcome."

"And your friends?" I asked, eagerly.

"You have me there," Tom answered. "They didn't come back."

CHAPTER XXIV
AND “PETERS” DROPS IN

“How do you account for that?” I asked.

“I don’t account for it at all,” Tom answered.

“In other words they just vanished into thin air!” Brent remarked, lightly.

“That must be it,” said Tom, and shook his head wonderingly. “I know positively they didn’t come back.”

“That’s stupid of us, Brent!” I exclaimed, and suddenly remembering. “He must be the man in the gully. They went around the other way, you see. That explains it!”

“Sure,” said Tom, “but I wonder where the lynx went?”

“We saw his tracks on both sides of the cleft,” Brent said.

“Well it’s too stormy to go up there again to-day,” Tom said. “Furthermore, the poor fellow can’t come to any further harm where he is now.”

“Do any of the boys know of our morning excursion?” I asked Tom. No, he hadn’t told them. Neither had they any idea but that Tom had returned safely the previous night from Harkness.

“Would you suggest our telling the boys about what you saw in the gully?” Tom asked Brent.

“No, I wouldn’t,” he said. “As long as they don’t know where we were this morning, I don’t think it would be wise to say anything now. This mystery has to be cleared up first. We don’t know positively whether the body in the gully is that of the hermit or not. It’s bad enough to have to tell when we are sure without circulating any false reports now.”

“But the hermit *didn’t* come back,” Tom repeated, persistently. “And it’s perfectly logical for me to suppose he went back the same way you fellows came this morning. You thought when you saw the body, I had tried to cross before daylight and missed my step. Couldn’t he have done the same thing?”

“I’ll tell you better to-morrow, Tommy,” Brent said in drawling tones. “Meanwhile you better think up a good excuse to give the boys for our absence from camp in the morning. You could say (if you can’t think of anything else) that our fountain pen adventurer here wants to get some material and we have to go help him carry it back.”

“That’s not so bad either,” I said, refusing to take Brent seriously.

At this juncture, our friend Heinie came in and asked Tom if he could use his flivver to go to Harkness. He wanted to buy a few personal necessities and

as long as the rain prevented any work that day, he might as well go and “do some-tings yet,” as he said to Tom.

We gave Tom a significant look remembering that we had hidden the Ford down the road quite a little way. However, Brent rose to the occasion and offered to go down and get the flivver started. “It stalled on Sladey in the middle of the woods,” he explained to Heinie. “I’ll find it and bring it back.” Heinie was satisfied to sit down with us and wait.

“Maybe dere iss noddings you vant in Harkness, yes?” he inquired of Tom and me solicitously.

“Nothing I know of,” Tom answered, for both. “Except that you can take that bunch of mail to the post office and get it off.”

We kept a small mail bag hanging near the door so as to make it convenient to carry to and from Harkness. We devised the bag as a means of keeping it intact and incidentally were preparing for the future when Leatherstocking Training Camp would mean quite something to the postal authorities in Harkness.

“I guess they’re all stamped,” Tom said, handing it to Heinie as he was leaving, “but if there’s been any overlooked, keep track of what you spend.”

An hour or so later, a hearty knock sounded at the door. We all answered in response and a tall, husky looking woodsman stepped in. He introduced himself as “Peters” a state game warden. Tom asked him to sit down.

“Jes’ thought I’d make a little visit fer an hour or so,” he said, genially; then, lighting a foul smelling pipe, he spread his bulky frame in the willow easy chair.

“Going to stay for the night?” Tom asked kindly.

“Lord, no!” he exclaimed. “Hev ter keep on the move this time o’ the year. Been nigh onto a year since I wuz here in these parts. Camp was locked up then—tighter than a game garden’s heart.”

“Well, well,” Tom said, “must have been lonely.”

“Nah, not at all,” he said, seemingly glad of the chance to talk to us. “Plenty excitement a’ right though. ’Nother feller ’n I wuz bunking together here fer two nights. Nary a human soul disturbed us but we hed ’nough frum other directions.”

“How’s that?” I asked, impulsively thinking he might divulge something extraordinary.

“Why,” he went on, “the first night a little imp of a lynx cub kept us awake all through ’till dawn, running around the Lodge and a-makin’ all sorts of divlish noises. We didn’t bother him, but the second night he got ter hollerin’ agin and when I went fer him he made a leap. But I fixed him!”

“Did you kill him?” Tom asked.

“Nah, he wuz too quick fer thet—ter kill him right off. But I shot his front

paw near off ’n enough ter make him bleed ter death. He run up the mountain a-howlin’ like fury.

“The next day my buddy ’n I trailed his bloody tracks up the slope a little ways thinking he cudn’t hev gone far bleedin’ like thet. We thought too, we’d get his pelt. But nary a dead lynx did we find nor a live one neither.”

CHAPTER XXV
A GHOST ON THE WIRE

"What do you think became of him?" Tom queried, rather anxiously I thought.

"I cudn't imagine," Peters replied, "unless he fell into one of them gully places. Anyway we hed ter be on the move 'n didn't hev time ter look."

"I don't suppose you ever met the former owner of this camp, did you?" Brent asked Peters.

"Naw, I never seen nothin' o' the McClinticks'," he replied, as though it was something he sincerely regretted. "I've always been sorry the old man had the Lodge locked up so tight too, fer I mighta been able ter do him a favor—I don't know!" he sighed mournfully.

"Yes?" I queried, "Explain all that!"

"Aw, it mightn't hev amounted ter anything," he said. "But, yet it might. They wuz away frum here 'bout five months at thet time. That wuz after the son wuz killed.

"Now everybuddy in these parts knew thet the old man put the place up fer sale 'roun' February. 'N everybuddy in New York must 'a' known it too fer I heerd as how he had it advertised in all the big papers. So thet means all his best friends knew it anyways.

"Ter make a long story short," he went on, relighting his pipe, "the fust night we wuz here and hed got rid o' the lynx cub fer a spell, my buddy shakes me 'n wakes me up, 'n he sez, 'Sh-shush, listen, c'n yer hear thet telephone ringin' 'r are ye deaf?'

"I gits up 'n sure 'nuff, there wuz a telephone bell a-ringin' like Squaw Harry and it's in the Lodge. It rang fer nigh onto half an hour I guess. But we cudn't git in ter do a thing about it.

"Ez I told yer afore, all Mr. McClintick's friends knew he wuzn't comin' here no more. 'N I told my buddy thet it must 'a been the ghost of the dead son 'n nobody else! Sure as I live!" He said it with finality.

"And what makes you think it was a ghost?" I asked, a trifle impatient with the man's stubborn superstition about small things.

"Wa'al, becuz after we left here 'n got ter Harkness we run inter Minnie Schultz 'n she told us a thing or two about it."

"And pray, who is Miss Minnie Schultz?" Brent asked, with mock gravity. Peters seemed delighted to impart to us his knowledge of the lady.

"She worked fer the 'phone company—night operator, until they let her out

fer listenin' in. Nice girl Minnie is, but my goodness how she does love ter chat with a body."

"I think I understand it now," Brent said, straightening up in his chair. "She knew about the call to the Lodge that night and told you. Is that it?"

"Right you are, young man!" Peters said, admiringly. He seemed to puff his pipe extra hard over this morsel of gossip.

"Between us four gentleman," the fellow continued, "'n I know it won't go no further, Minnie told me as how she wuz the very operator thet handled the call. It wuz from Montreal Central Office 'n she sez thet she told them she wuz positive Mr. McClintick wudn't be at the Lodge.

"She rung and rung 'n no answer came, o' course, 'n she sez she told Montreal so. Then Montreal comes back at her 'n sez that their party wud like to speak ter Minnie herself.

"She sez she heard the man's voice, very excited like, 'n thet he told her she must get McClintick at the Lodge and thet there must be someone there. When she sez there isn't, he sez McClintick alwuz cum ter the Lodge fer thet night on account of it's being his wife's anniversary or something.

"'N Minnie, being the clever girl she is, smells a rat, 'n sez to the man, 'I don't know anything about it,' 'n he screams back at her, 'Well, I ought to know somethin' about it, fer I'm his son!'

"Minnie sez, 'Who?' She's frozen, she gits such a shock, but the feller rings right off and Montreal tells her she should excuse the call."

"What does Miss Minnie think of it?" Tom asked, plainly excited.

"Minnie sez she doesn't want ter think about it at all. She feels sorry fer the McClinticks' troubles, but she sez it cost her her job. It wuz too good fer her to keep, you see, 'n within a week the story wuz all over and so she got the gate."

"How did the folks around here take to the story?" Brent asked, evidently interested.

"Well, ter tell the truth, folks hereabouts don't take much stock in Minnie and they laughed about it. Called it one of her yarns, but I don't. No, siree! Didn't we hear the 'phone ringin' thet night ourselves? It was a ghost, sure as ye live!"

"Or a real live person," I put in.

"It cudn't o' been a live person if he sez he wuz the son!" Peters exclaimed vociferously. "'N another thing, ain't he dead and buried 'bout a mile 'n a half frum here. Thet proves it wuzn't a live person."

The man was so insistent that we had to agree with him out of sheer courtesy, but as for the ghost story, of course we wouldn't give credence to it.

"But wait a minute, Peters," said Brent, with an alertness that quite startled Tom and me. "How is it there's no sign of any 'phone or wires around here now?" Peters grinned as though to say he would win anyhow.

“Oh, they said in Harkness, thet Mr. McClintick hedn’t paid his bill, so they took it out right after we wuz here. ’N shortly after thet, a terrible storm brought down the wires as neat as you ever see so the ’phone people never bothered puttin’ ’em up agin, thinkin’ the Lodge wudn’t be sold fer a spell.” He arose and knocked his pipe against the bricks over the fireplace. Then he leaned forward as if he was about to tell us a secret.

“Minnie told me confidentially thet McClintick owed the ’phone people one hundred dollars and thet the ’phone number at the Lodge here wuz number one hundred too! Now, thet’s what you gentlemen wud call a coincidence, eh?”

CHAPTER XXVI
WHO'S LETTER?

"I wonder what he meant when he said he could have done McClintick a favor by answering the 'phone?" Tom asked Brent, after Peters had left us.

"I guess he felt he had the power to act as medium and relay the ghost's message to Mr. McClintick, had he been able to answer the phone!" Brent teased.

"Seriously though," I said, "leaving the ghost entirely out of this, someone did want to speak to McClintick badly. The telephone company's action regarding their employee authenticates that much."

"Yes," Brent said, "and I believe that Minnie wasn't talking entirely through her hat, either."

"What do you mean, Brent?" Tom asked. "You think it really was the son still *alive?*"

"I do! The very same."

"I'd hardly say that, Brent," I remarked.

"Not only did we see the young fellow's grave, but Peters confirms it to be his also." Brent smiled disdainfully and flicked some ashes across the hearth.

"Granted, my revered friend," he said, in solemn tones. "But the fact that we saw a grave doesn't prove it's the grave of young Rolly. Nor does Peters' confirmation mean a thing. After all he doesn't know any more than we do, and we don't know anything, *yet*."

"In other words," Tom said, with a tinge of sarcasm, "you don't believe anything! Perhaps you could give us a little hint as to the reason for your skepticism, eh?"

"Just what I intended to do, Tommy!" Brent said, cheerily and taking no notice of Tom's impatience. "There's this much about it, the whole thing is beginning to rankle, with so much mystery and no way of solving it. We know there aren't any ghosts and apparitions floating around. But there has been a live ghost walking around here!"

"It's beginning to get on my nerves too!" Tom said, "but what can we do about it? We can't go to the authorities and order them to exhume the body in that grave, can we?"

"Another thing," I interposed, "no one seems to know or has even heard what became of that Weston fellow. There wasn't any mention of him in the papers in connection with Mr. McClintick's death. I wonder if the police know of him?"

“We could find that out easily enough,” Brent answered, “but it would make a mess of this Camp. Put a stigma on it before it’s had a chance to breathe. Don’t you see?”

“You’re right, Brent, you’re right!” Tom exclaimed, nervously. “We’ve got to keep this thing from everyone if we possibly can. We can follow each clue carefully and quietly. First, why we heard there were only three people here at the Lodge, when we have evidence there were really four. Where the targets disappeared to and who took them. How the hermit came to get the key of the Lodge (and I’m sure it was he that visited here). The scarred footprint is evidence enough for that.”

“Take your time, Tommy,” Brent interrupted, “we have the whole evening before us.”

“Then,” Tom went on, “we must start at dawn and get the poor fellow’s body. I’m sure it’s the hermit. We can tell the boys that we just discovered it. Then we’ll take a look at the grave coming back and satisfy our minds on that score.”

“In other words we can look forward to a cheerful day to-morrow,” Brent murmured.

“Now that it’s all settled, I suggest we all go to bed right after supper. Getting up with the birdies two mornings in succession will have me worn to a shadow, unless I make it up to-night.”

I guess we were all pretty willing to follow Brent’s suggestion after our day’s adventures. We were wearied physically as well as mentally and sleep would be a welcome refuge. I, for one, was wishing the supper hour over.

Heinie had not gotten back from Harkness when we sat down to eat and his empty place directly opposite the hearth, with the footprint showing so clear in the light, seemed ominously significant. Even I was becoming affected by the sinister shadow of mystery pervading the Lodge.

I shook myself out of it and tried to make some small talk with Rivers. But of no avail. He seemed more taciturn than ever and answered even Tom in sharp monosyllables. It was probably the weather with him though, I told myself.

We were ready to go to bed. The clock lacked just five minutes of eight when we heard Tom’s flivver rattling up the wagon road. Then it stopped.

“That’s Heinie now!” Tom said, as Brent went up the stairs. But he stopped just before he reached the top, for Heinie had opened the door of the Lodge and walked in.

“I’m sorry to keep you up,” he said to us in an apologetic manner and nodding up to Brent, “but I thought I must tell you so I don’t forget it, yess?”

“Sure, Heinie,” said Tom. “What is it?”

“You know you told me to vatch out vat I spent on der letters. Veil, dere

vass only vun letter vat didn't have postage mit. A beeg fat letter sent to North Dakota. Und der man in der post office told me dere was money in der inside and it needed a register yet. So I got it mit twenty-five cents."

Tom turned to me questioningly. "Did you write again?"

"No," I answered, "I did not!"

"How big was the letter, Heinie?" Tom inquired.

"Och! Like diss," he said, indicating with his large hands a letter of about eight inches in diameter. "Und it pulged out like dere vass vun hundred pages mitt der inside."

"Are you sure that letter was addressed to North Dakota?" Tom asked. Heinie was positive. He even remembered it was Coover's Falls.

"What was the handwriting like?" Brent asked Heinie, coming down the stairs as he spoke.

"Och!" the fellow answered. "Der writing vass der craziest, like somebody mitt shivers. See?"

"I know I'm trying hard to see, Heinie," Tom said, in tones of despair. "But here's your quarter back anyway and many thanks for all your trouble."

"Who else," I said, after Heinie had left, "could have written her, do you think?"

"I feel as though I'll never be able to think again," Tom said, and flung himself wearily into the easy chair. "What do you think, Brent?"

Brent adjusted his spectacles and started to rummage among the papers on the table, saying: "I think I'll look for a time-table and find me a nice cozy train for Bridgeboro. I need the rest!"

CHAPTER XXVII
MYSTERY UPON MYSTERY

We decided to think no more that night about the letter. It was far too deep a problem for us to solve and I suggested letting the matter drop. That is, until we heard from Mrs. Northrop or Mrs. Boardman.

Tom roused Brent and me next day at dawn. A faint gleam of pink had broken through the dull gray horizon and we took heart immediately. At least it would be a clear day.

We started out well supplied in the event of meeting with any further contingencies. In fact, we were beginning to feel like thoroughly seasoned mountain climbers.

The first slope was reached in no time, it seemed, but of course we were giving one another help. Tom then went ahead showing us the footprints he had discovered two days before.

“Are there any new ones, Tommy?” Brent asked.

“Not that I’ve seen yet. That proves then it’s the hermit, in the gully all right. Doesn’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” Brent replied, as adamant as ever.

We fell into a continued silence the rest of the way. Our purpose was gruesome enough and the less we talked, the less we would be reminded of it before-time.

I shall never forget the beauty of that morning. The sun had risen as we reached the cleft and was playing its bright golden shadows in and out among the trees. The glistening dew had transformed the entire mountain into one huge, lacy coverlet, with millions of tiny iridescent bubbles like sparkling jewels dancing upon it. A good omen, I thought, or rather hoped.

The brook was gushing after the heavy rains and as we looked down the water seemed to have risen about eight or more inches. Brent thought it was considerably more than that, and as I have a poor eye for measuring anything I accepted his decision.

On account of jutting rocks and overhanging trees, we were unable to see the brook at the point where the cleft ended. I think we were all equally thankful for that and deliberately wished we could postpone the awful errand.

Taking no chances this time, we crossed the gully in true mountaineer style, protected by the rope which Tom had lassoed to a stump on the farther side.

“I wonder how much rope we’ll need to reach down there,” Tom said

uncoiling it deftly. I knew he hated looking over. So did I.

“Brent could tell you,” I suggested. “He has the mathematical eye.”

“Someone has to do it,” Brent said, with an air of resignation, “so it might as well be I!” He went toward the edge quickly and just as suddenly turned about, facing us again. The color of his face had turned an ashen gray.

“*It’s not there!*” he cried.

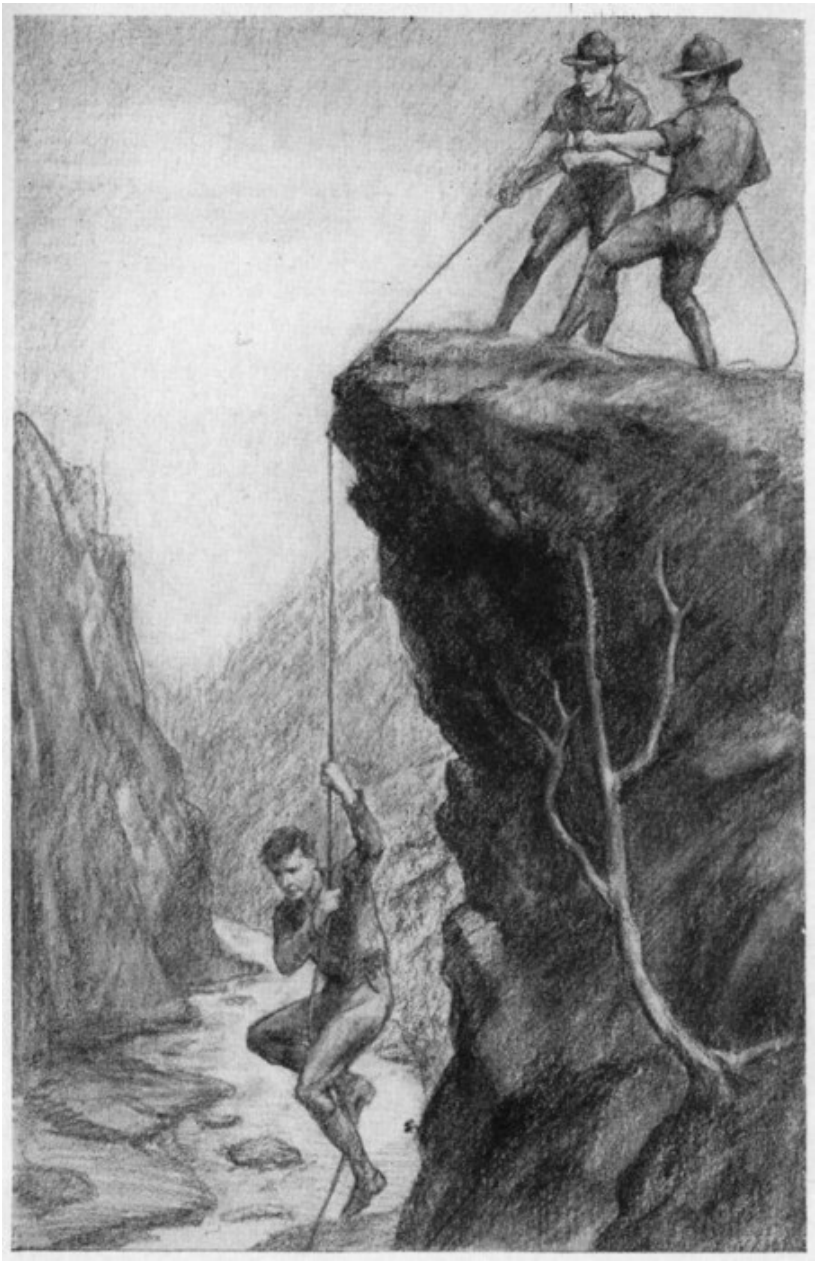
“*Not there?*” Tom echoed. We all looked over together.

True, it was gone!

Only an occasional twitter of young birds sounded from the dim woods. The wild cry of a large bird of prey greeted our ears as it flew over the gully and disappeared through the trees. All was silent then, except for the brook tripping gaily over its rocky bed. As it turned to leave the gully and leap over the rocks and down the mountainside, I fancied it made a moaning sound as if to mock our tragic stricken faces above.

“You can let me down,” Brent said quietly. “I’ll look about.”

I held the rope firmly and Tom helped Brent over the edge and let him down slowly. Pretty soon he shouted up that he was all right. We watched him go back and forth over the rocks and then disappear under a huge boulder.



WE LET HIM DOWN SLOWLY.

He probably hadn’t been out of sight more than sixty seconds, but it seemed like sixty minutes to us waiting for his reappearance. Tom shouted. He answered for us to wait; and then emerged, waving his readiness to come up.

“We’ll never see him again,” Brent said as he clambered over the top.

“Where do you think it’s gone?” Tom asked.

“I guess the water rose just high enough since we were here to carry him away. And there’s a space under that boulder where the water leaves the gully. It’s just wide enough to permit any ordinary-sized man’s body to pass through. It’s safe to say that by now the hermit, or whoever it was, is divided into some hundred pieces. The rocks and the water below the gully wouldn’t even leave a button whole.”

“We’ve been spared that much distress at any rate,” I said, as we proceeded to leave the cleft and gully behind us.

“Yes,” Tom agreed. “I suppose it’s a selfish way to feel, but I think we have enough to do, without taking upon our shoulders the full responsibility of a hermit’s dead body. Fate is kind after all.”

Gloomy people we were that morning. Walking back in the midst of glorious green earth and sunshine, we should have been full of the joy of living. But we were not.

Mystery upon mystery. Tainted death! All had succeeded in wearing down fragile human nerves. We were even getting irritable with one another. Brent had lost his quiet composure and drawling humor. Tom was morose. And I was completely unnerved.

“As long as this funereal spirit is so rampant among us,” Tom said, “we’ll visit the grave. It can’t put us in a much worse humor than we are now.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Brent said, in dull tones.

“I’m beginning to feel that I can stand most anything now.”

There being no wind that morning to blow the tall grass aside, we did not see the clearing until we were almost upon it.

Tom flung the coil of rope to the ground when we reached there. One by one we sat down upon it, crowding close together. We were tired and it was preferable to the damp ground.

I know that Tom and Brent saw it as quickly as I! The place was in an extraordinary condition! The little mound seemed to have sunken and chunks of fresh earth were lying about the clearing. The wooden cross had fallen.

The circumstance that had made that grave necessary was tragic enough. The unfortunate boy, buried in the midst of that vast solitude of sky and mountain, his last resting place in such a deplorable state—it was pathetic indeed.

Tom got up and kicked around the edges of the grave with the toe of his stout shoe. Then he dug his heel in the brown earth; and whistled with surprise.

“Someone has been digging here,” he said. “Within the last few days, too!”

“Digging?” I repeated.

“Yes, digging.” Then, “Brent, had me that shovel!”

We went over to Tom and watched him as he took a few shovelsfull of loose dirt from the left side of the grave. It came away like sand.

“You see?” he said, shoving the sharp spade into the earth. Lifting his foot up on the top edge he rested it heavily there. With the movement, we heard plainly the hollow sound that falling stones and dirt will make when hitting some solid object.

“And did you hear *that?*” Brent almost whispered it.

“Certainly I did,” Tom said, tersely. He moved his foot and tried to pull the shovel out.

He couldn’t get it out. It seemed stuck fast into something, and we each took a turn at it without any success. It wouldn’t budge an inch.

“Wait a minute,” Tom said. He got down on his knees and started scooping up the dirt around the spade by the handful and flung it aside.

In a few moments we saw to our bewilderment that the shovel was wedged tightly in a slight fissure of some wooden obstruction, directly underlying the few layers of earth.

“We might as well uncover this,” said Tom, grimly, and gradually loosened the spade from the wood.

It was hardly five minutes’ work. Brent and I scooping up the dirt with our hands and Tom with the shovel, uncovered what proved to be a rough board.

It was the kind of wood that is generally used for packing boxes. Printed in large letters and written in indelible ink across the board was

TO—MR. HARRISON McCLINTICK,
P. O. ADDRESS—HARKNESS,
CLINTON COUNTY, NEW YORK.

CARE OF
LEATHERSTOCKING CAMP.

Brent stooped and lifted the board gingerly. A stifled cry escaped his lips as he flung it awkwardly from him. For in that act, he had unwittingly laid bare the opening of the grave.

Speech was impossible! We stood transfixed, humbled, on that ground that death had hallowed.

There seemed to be something unholy in letting our curious, mortal eyes peer down into that dark tomb. But on the other hand, ours was a curiosity born of mercy, whereas our unknown predecessor had come to despoil and desecrate what should have been a chamber of eternal peace.

Our eyes were dazzled and blurred from the bright sun. Gradually though, we became accustomed to the darkness and beheld the coffin lying opened, the lid standing against the side of the grave.

It was empty!

CHAPTER XXVIII
THIS IS BRENT'S SUGGESTION

Tom laid the board reverently over it. My head was aching and Brent make a queer gurgling noise in his throat.

We picked up our things and started back to Camp.

"That board," Tom said, listlessly, "is the one that Heinie tried his paints out on. He told me he laid it up against the eats shack, night before last. It was gone in the morning, so I had to hunt him up another board."

"It's all too ghastly to talk of," I said. "I feel I can't stand many more horrifying disclosures."

"We all feel that way," Brent said, "and that's all the more reason why we ought to get at the bottom of this before anything else happens."

"How?" I asked.

"And why not?" Tom put in. "Sometimes it's these deep mysteries that are the simplest ones to solve. We can only try."

"Carry on, my boy," I said, encouragingly. "I'm afraid I can't."

"If you ask me," said Brent, "I think it's the work of that hermit. Also, I think he's a trifle cuckoo."

"I agree with you, Brent," Tom said, "but then, how do you account for the body in the gully?" He was still persistent in his belief that it couldn't possibly be anyone else.

"Tomasso," Brent said, "I account for nothing! Hereafter, I shall believe only that which I see. And I mean to see that soon."

"Explain all that, Brent!" I said.

"The sooner we get into action, the better it will be. We've got to see whether this hermit is dead or alive. He must have had some kind of a bunk up there and we're going to find it, if it's possible."

"What about his pet lynx?" Tom asked.

"Don't worry about that, old man," Brent answered, reassuringly. "We'll take Rivers along and tell him we're going for the express purpose of getting the animal. That job will be for him and I rather think he'll enjoy it immensely. But as for the long-haired one—I've an idea if he is still alive we won't have to hunt him out."

"Why so?" I queried.

"Because, if we get Rivers to watch for the lynx and we see him, I'm sure the hermit will pop along too."

"What of the other fellows?" I asked. "Shall we ask them along?"

“No,” answered Brent, “I don’t think they’d care about it anyhow. Rivers is the only gunman we have.”

“A pretty quiet sort of gunman, though,” I mentioned.

“When do we go?” Tom asked. “I’ve got to go to Harkness and then up the line to-morrow morning. Heinie told me of a good repair man that keeps a garage up that way. His place is about fifteen miles up the state road.”

“Lizzie troubled with her appendix again?” Brent asked.

“No,” said Tom, refusing to let Brent ruffle him. “It’s the engine. Knocks.”

“As usual?” Brent queried.

“As usual,” Tom answered.

“Well then, we better set it for day after to-morrow. Start out around five or so, huh? We can’t hunt that lynx in the daylight you know. He’s trained too well.”

“I know. Six o’clock’s time enough, Brent.”

“Perhaps. Still, I’d like to see the sunset in the mountains and if I remember rightly, I think I’ve picked a beautiful spring moonlight night for our adventure.”

“How do you know it will be moonlight?” Tom queried.

“My almanac tells me so. It’s worth its weight in gold to me. Never fails. Got it when I bought some grippe tablets the beginning of the winter, with a sample box of cough drops thrown in.

It was good to hear Brent talking in this humorous vein once again. We were cheered. Perhaps it was the expectation of bringing the Mystery of our Camp out into the light of day and thus settling it for all time. In fact, I felt quite elated over our proposed moonlight sleuthing.

“After all’s said and done,” Brent remarked, “there’s nothing so exhilarating as Mystery!”

CHAPTER XXIX
RIVERS IS DELIGHTED

The next day, after Tom had gone, Brent and I went out and helped the boys.

It was peacefully devoid of all mystery to hear the chop, chop of the axe ringing in the air and the hum of men's voices about their work.

Even the lake seemed rippling with joy under a cloudless, blue sky. Surely, that morning long ago had never been. Or it was only a hideous dream when that young man's life was so suddenly brought to a close while the thick gray mist hung over the water!

Toward late afternoon, just before we finished, Rivers passed by. I hailed him. He bore the same inscrutable look as always; said nothing and waited for me to speak. His manner seemed to be that of one who was doing us a favor because he had condescended to stop and listen.

"Charlie," I said, as cheerfully as I could, "do you know anything about mountains?"

"Sure do," he answered, resting his arm on the low limb of the tree under which we were standing.

"Know anything about Hogback?" I inquired.

"No. Think I told yer afore, I wuz a stranger here." I felt squelched.

"So you did, Charlie. My mistake. I suppose mountains are a good deal alike though, aren't they?"

"Suppose so."

"The reason I asked is because we'd like you to go up with us. To-morrow night. Tom, Brent and myself. Will you?"

"Guess so." It was hard to tell if he were pleased or not.

"We're going to try and find that pesky lynx, Rivers," Brent said, taking up the threads where I left off.

"Yes!" he said, with quite a faint purr of pleasure at hearing that. I thought he even smiled slightly.

"Like to hunt, eh Charlie?" I felt that at last I had struck the right note.

"Betcha!" He really stirred one foot.

"That's fine. We're going around six. Brent wants to see the sunset in the mountains." I laughed.

"And the moonlight!" Brent added. Rivers grinned again and moved off.

"That chap would make an excellent teacher in a deaf and dumb school." Brent called out to me, some time later. We were washing up for supper.

“You mean Rivers?”

“Yes, he’s almost too patient to be human.”

Just as supper was ready, Tom came in. His face was flushed and his voice sounded eager as he greeted us.

“Knocks all taken out, Tommy?” Brent asked.

“Yeh,” he answered, breathlessly. Then, “Wait’ll you hear what I have to tell you!”

“Fallen heir to a fortune or something?” I queried.

“Naw. Sh-sh! Listen! The boys are coming in. I’ll tell you later.”

We had a cheerful meal that evening. Everyone was pleasantly talkative and the Lodge was so warm we had to open the doors and windows. The odor of pine and approaching summer was in the air that floated about us.

“Charlie’s going to help us kill that lynx,” Brent said to Tom, across the table.

“That’s fine, Charlie,” Tom said. “I guess he means *you’ll* do the killing, if it comes to that.”

“Won’t make *me* mad!” Rivers said. He certainly was pleased.

“What a pleasant supper we had,” I remarked, after the boys had bidden us good-night.

“Yes, didn’t we!” Tom assented.

“In fact,” Brent said, “there was something almost brutally pleasant about the way Rivers spoke of killing that animal. You know, I don’t really mean that he should kill it at all. It’s just a hoax to try and find the hermit.”

“Why did you suggest asking him then?” Tom asked.

“Because,” Brent answered, “if he should get vicious, then it will be all right. But if he doesn’t, why I thought we could stop Rivers at the last minute.”

“Well, I’m afraid you won’t be able to stop him at the last moment at all,” Tom told him.

“Rather him than me,” I said.

“Oh,” said Tom, “a woodsman thinks nothing of that. It’s great sport for him. Why, Brent couldn’t feel as comfortable sitting at the movies.”

“Horrors! Tom! I pray then, hereafter, that I shall be delivered from ever thinking of Rivers when I’m at the movies. The thought would make me decidedly uncomfortable.” Somehow, I liked Brent for saying that!

CHAPTER XXX
THE THREADS UNRAVEL

"What was the dark secret?" I asked Tom, a few moments later.

"It *is* dark too!" Tom answered. "Sit down here, Brent," (he indicated the willow rocker in front of the hearth) "while I tell you something mighty interesting."

"Ah," said Brent, "a bedtime story."

"Nothing of the kind," Tom said. "But I went up to that garage. Mighty nice country fellow has it. Just keeps a helper during the day so the job was handed over to him. There wasn't much the matter with it and the owner said the kid could do it as well as he."

"Didn't I tell you a child could fix your car?" Brent teased.

"Aw, hold on, Brent. This fellow that owns the garage—his name is Joe something or other. It doesn't matter. Well, he took me into his little office while I was waiting. We got talking together.

"He has one of those old-fashioned roll-topped desks. I was sitting in the chair that goes with it and he in another one close by.

"I happened to glance at the desk casually. Saw a newspaper on it. Picked it up like anyone will. Was a New York paper. Opened it up and for a minute or so looked through it while we talked.

"As I went to put it back again, I noticed Mr. McClintick's picture and a small headline beneath. Just a review of the case. No new clues. Police as much in the dark as ever, it said.

"This fellow Joe, saw me looking at it and told me he never saw a picture of McClintick in the paper that he didn't think of one night when he got the fright of his life."

"Another ghost story, Tommy?" Brent asked. "I won't sleep again to-night if it is."

"Wrong again, Brent," Tom replied. "No ghost at all. A real live person!"

"Go on, Tom!" I said.

"Joe is single. He has a little room back of the office we were sitting in, where he sleeps and eats.

"He explained to me that he is a very heavy sleeper. Consequently, he leaves a dim light in the office all night and doesn't lock the doors. He said he never keeps much money around and what he has is always in a safe place."

"That reminds me," Brent interrupted, "of the Scotchman who tied strings around his pennies. And——"

“Joe’s not Scotch,” laughed Tom. “One evening about a year ago in November, he said he was taken with a severe attack of neuralgia. First time he ever had it, so he took some kind of a sedative and he said he felt so drowsy in a little while that he went to bed.

“He said he imagined he had been sleeping for a few hours. Must have been around midnight when he was aroused by the sound of a male voice outside in his office. He listened and heard the ’phone receiver clicking. Then the voice again saying: ‘Yes, that’s right. One hundred! O-n-e-h-u-n-d-r-e-d. Hurry, please!’

“Joe listened and then he sat up in bed and grabbed for his gun. He said he was scared all right. Then the voice fairly yelled, ‘Thank you! Hello! Father? It’s I. I’m safe.’

“Then, ‘O, Father? Can’t you think of some other way?’ Joe said the fellow talked as though he was crying, ‘Don’t communicate with me in Montreal unless you have to.’ Then there was a pause and, ‘Don’t go through with it! Don’t let him urge you! Please! Good-bye Father!’

“That was all. There came sounds of a chair being shoved across the floor and Joe got up and pushed the door open slowly.

“He saw a young man sitting in the desk chair, well dressed; and leaning over looking at his right foot which he was holding out at length.

“Joe went back to the bed and slipped the gun under a pillow and feeling a good deal easier in mind. Then he opened the door quite noisily this time. The young man looked up, startled.

“‘Oh, I beg your pardon!’ he said to Joe. ‘I tried to waken you, but you were sleeping too hard. Had to telephone someone, so took the liberty as long as you leave your doors open. Much obliged and sorry I disturbed you!’ he said, handing Joe a five dollar bill and telling him to keep the change.

“Joe thanked him and as the fellow got up to go he limped. Joe asked him if he had hurt his foot and the chap said yes. Probably sprained it. Seeming to be such a nice fellow Joe made him sit down and told him he’d bandage it. So he got some iodine and gauze and took the shoe and sock off, proceeding to fix it up the best he knew how.

“The chap was awfully pleased and thanked Joe many times over as he helped him out and into his car. Said he hoped they would meet again sometime and drove off.”

“I suppose your friend, Joe, did get quite a scare,” I said to Tom. “Waking up and hearing that strange voice shouting in his office. But why, when he sees McClintick’s picture in the paper—*why*, should it remind him of that particular night?”

“That’s where our turn comes in,” said Tom, with an air of having something up his sleeve.

“Ah, ha!” Brent said, quite tragically. “Where’s the dustpan? We need it for the dirt!”

“You know how much these country people make of small things,” Tom started to explain. “I mean, such as connecting perfectly irrelevant things with the relevant. For instance, one would say that they always remembered the day Johnny Jones fell through the ice and drowned, because it was only the night before that the cat walked over the piano keys and gave the whole household a terrible scare.”

“Country people aren’t alone in those matters,” I said.

“I know it,” said Tom. “But can you see the reason why this Joe is always reminded of that night by McClintick’s picture in the paper?”

“No, Tommy, I can’t!” Brent answered, in an indulgent manner. “I’ve been neglecting my crossword puzzles in the interest of the Scouts and I’m out of practice.”

“Well,” said Tom, “it’s just this: everyone within a radius of fifty miles up here knew of the McClinticks. Even though they never saw them and would probably never see them (and Joe was one of them), they were always interested to hear any gossip concerning them. More so because the McClinticks were so extravagant with their wealth.

“If they arrived at the Lodge on the first day of April at nine o’clock in the morning, it would be passed along from one to the other, until it finally reached Joe about twelve o’clock noon.

“The same with all their public comings and goings. From what Joe said, he always heard things before they were twenty-four hours old.

“Of course, when visitors came or went away from the Lodge, the country people took little notice of them. It was the ‘rich McClinticks’ they were concerned about. I suppose it was because they felt a certain pride in having people of such fabulous wealth for neighbors.

“At any rate, the day when the son was reported killed, the news spread like wild-fire. Joe said as soon as it reached him he felt right off that they wouldn’t hear much more of the McClinticks. He said everyone felt the same way and they regretted it.”

“I’m beginning to see light,” I said.

“You see,” Tom said and moved his chair nearer the fireplace, “what they regretted (Joe included) was the fact that the tragedy brought to a close the ever pleasant round of gossip which wealthy city people furnish with their extravagances.”

“You preach a fine sermon, Tom!” Brent put in.

“Aw, wait a second, Brent,” Tom said breathlessly. “I could tell by Joe’s manner that neither the young man’s midnight visit or Roland McClintick’s death had visibly affected his intelligence enough to connect the two really

relevant incidents. And the murder of the elder McClintick, he discussed without feeling. They meant nothing to him; none of them. Except to make small talk and while away a pleasant hour or so with an amiable customer.

“But his love of small talk has proven a blessing. It’s given us a real clue!”

“How?” I asked, still in the dark.

“Well, you watch me unravel it,” Tom said proudly. “Joe remembers that night a year ago in November because he wasn’t feeling well. The fact that the young man gave him a shock on that same night freshens his memory as to the terrible attack of neuralgia he had. And being human he enjoyed telling about his sufferings.

“In other words he couldn’t tell me about his sufferings that night without telling me about the young man. They fit together because of the fact that he was sleeping so soundly with the sedative he had taken, he didn’t hear the young man calling him. And then the next day he heard about Roland McClintick which of course would serve to give him three things to talk of all happening in a few hours’ time. Consequently, every time he sees Mr. McClintick’s picture it makes him think of the day Roland was killed and his own scare and sufferings the night before.”

“That’s reducing it to its common denominator,” I admitted, “but still I fail to see the clue.”

“You see, if it wasn’t that he loved small talk he wouldn’t have ever thought of remembering in such detail that the night of his sufferings and the other incident was just the night before Roland McClintick was supposed to have lost his life. And that is where our clue comes in.

“His simple country habit of connecting incidents with his own private life enabled him to tell me word for word the ’phone conversation of that young fellow, who mentioned Montreal and asked for the number one hundred. His talk to his father was lucid enough for us to know that the young chap was going away because of something dire about to happen. And he was pleading with his father not to do it. Who else could it be but Roland McClintick that ’phoned from Joe’s garage that night? And yet, the next morning when he was really in Montreal, his father reported him dead.”

“And six months later,” I said, “so Peters told us, he calls from Montreal. Minnie Schultz wasn’t having any idle dream, I guess!”

“Minnie’s my find!” said Brent, mockingly indignant.

“Last, but not least,” Tom concluded, “Joe mentioned to me quite casually that, when he raised the young fellow’s foot up to bandage it, he noticed something unusual about it.”

“What?” I asked, although sensing the answer.

“A long thick scar!” Tom said quietly.

CHAPTER XXXI
AN EVENING OF DEDUCTIONS

Brent and I sat aghast!

“I think,” Brent said, soberly, “that Tom has given us conclusive evidence as to Roland McClintick being alive. That is up until a few nights ago, if we don’t find the hermit.”

“You think then, the hermit and Roland McClintick are one person?” I queried.

“Of course,” Brent said. “The scar proves it in every instance.”

“Still, lots of people have scars on their feet though,” Tom said.

“I suppose they have,” Brent agreed. “But what we want to find out is why Mr. McClintick identified the body that was taken from the lake as his son, when he knew his son to be in Montreal. Someone else was killed in his place and we want to find out why?”

“Could it have been Northrop?” Tom asked wonderingly. “Or Weston?”

“I don’t know,” Brent answered. “But I do know or rather hope, when we hear from Coover’s Falls that it will be something interesting and worth hearing.”

“Then the murdered and the murderer lies between Northrop and Weston?”

“I’m sure of it,” said Brent, “from what Tom has told us of that ’phone conversation. It was deliberate murder and whoever killed that unknown person out on the lake also murdered the elder McClintick. Both murders were committed for some cause, certainly.”

“What of the empty grave?” Tom asked. “Perhaps the murderer has been in fear of discovery and came back to completely destroy the body. In that way one could never find out who the culprit or victim was.” Brent was certainly uncanny in his new role of sleuth, yet his theories did fit together.

“That brings us back to the motive,” he went on. “They say murders are committed almost always for three reasons; money, hate or insanity.” I happened to think when Brent mentioned the three reasons, of my informant at Long Branch, the day I went to hunt up Mr. McClintick. Hadn’t he told me how Seven Towers and the other estate at Newport had been sold? His palatial New York home also? And if I remembered rightly he said he had heard that Mr. McClintick needed the money. I told all this to Tom and Brent.

“Well then,” said Brent, “the motive is clear. He needed the money. And he could get it by reporting that the body they found in the lake to be that of his son.”

We were startled out of our perplexing problems by a wild, moaning cry.

“The lynx!” Tom said. “I bet he misses the hermit.”

“How do you suppose he ever made a pet of that animal?” Brent asked me.

“As this seems to be a night of deductions, I would say that he must have gotten hold of him when he was a cub. I’ll also venture to mention that our friend Peters might not have killed his lynx cub after all. You never can tell.”

Two sharp knocks sounded on the door! Tom went forward quickly and flung it open. Rivers stood there.

“Whew!” Tom said. “You did give us a scare, Charlie. Why didn’t you come in? The door was unlocked.”

“It’s so late, I didn’t think you’d be up. Thought you forgot to put out your light!” Rivers came inside and Tom closed the door.

“Sit down, Rivers,” I said. “We’ve been so interested in our talk, we didn’t realize the hour.”

“Just as soon stand,” he murmured. “Going back to bed right away.” He turned to Tom.

“That pesky lynx woke me. Got up. Looked ’round ’n as I went ter go back ter bed, I could a’ sworn somethin’ passed the winder. Didn’t see nothin’ when I walked over here though. Guess it’s a’right.”

“Sure,” said Tom. “We’ll get that wild bird to-morrow night, eh Charlie?”

“Sure as I live,” he grinned. “Too much of a nuisance ter live,” he said walking toward the door; and said good-night.

“What a charming outlook that fellow has on life?” Brent said, after Tom had locked the door. “Charity to animals hasn’t a place in his scheme of things.”

“Aw,” Tom said, in a defensive tone. “You just don’t understand him, Brent, he’s a woodsman. They’re all that way.”

“Well you’re not,” Brent said, “and I’d say *you* were thoroughly woodsy.”

“No, I’m not! Not the way he is. He’s truly native and I’m just an artificial product. Too chicken-hearted to be a real born scout like Rivers.”

“Well, then, give me your chicken-hearted scouts, Tommy. Artificial products are ofttimes nicer than the real article and in this case I like the real human touch in a mere scout better than the real born scout in a mere human.”

“Very well said, Brent!” I applauded.

Tom turned the lamp down and Brent and I started up the stairs and disappeared within the darkness of our respective rooms.

“Oh, Brent!” Tom called, as he came running up the stairs. “Do you think Charlie really saw anyone just now?”

“It might have been the hermit!” Brent answered tauntingly, “or his ghost!”

“Gosh,” I heard Tom say, as he passed my door, “if your theories aren’t enough to make a fellow’s head whirl!”

“Good-night, Tommy!” Brent said, in his most soothing manner.
“Good-night!”

CHAPTER XXXII
THE LETTER COMES BACK

Tom left for Harkness shortly after breakfast next morning. He didn't expect to be gone long, so Brent and I set about straightening up the Lodge. With our activities and worries of the past few days a good deal of necessary housekeeping had been neglected.

I had just swept the dust out of the front door and turning around noticed Brent dusting up after me. It was hard to conceal my amusement when I beheld his long, lanky form bending down and his hands awkwardly flipping a dust cloth here and there.

"I'll straighten up those papers on the table presently," he said, and adjusted his spectacles after having dusted the bottom rung of the willow rocker. "We might as well leave things as we found them, in the event that we don't get back after to-night!"

"You're certainly consoling, Brent," I said.

"One can never tell," he said, laughing.

"Let's hope," I said, "that everything will be adjusted for the happiness of all those concerned. The Scouts, the Camp and Tom. It's the dream of his life."

"You bet it is," Brent agreed, vehemently. "I know he won't be happy until he sees the clouds lifted off this place and the sun shining through for all time."

Before noon, Tom came bursting in, enthusiastic over something. He was always suggestive of clear, cool piney winds in that mood.

"Here we are fellows!" he called to Brent and me, holding an envelope in mid-air between two weather-brown fingers.

"Who is it from?" Brent asked.

"Coover's Falls, North Dakota," he answered.

"No!" I exclaimed.

"Sure as anything," he said, taking the bulky looking letter out of its envelope and handing it to me.

"You're elected to read it." I unfolded it carefully. There were two letters, one enclosed in the other. The enclosed one I laid aside and started to read aloud the other, which was signed by Mrs. Boardman.

Coovers Falls, S. D.

Leatherstocking Training Camp,
P. O. Address, Harkness, Clinton County,
N. Y.

DEAR SIRS:—

Received your letter. Also Mrs. Northrop brought me over two letters she had got from your camp. She can't see to read anymore so I do all that for her.

I couldn't understand the one letter she got at all (that's the one I've enclosed), so I called in Sam Tibbets, our postmaster and he read it for us.

The reason I'm sending it back to you is because I understood from what you said in your letter that it wasn't likely you knew anything about anyone else in your camp writing to Mrs. Northrop and that they must be doing it behind your back. It came about three days after yours, Mrs. Northrop says, and as I was over at Redlands helping my married daughter who ain't feeling so well, why Mrs. Northrop had to wait till I got back.

Anyhow I guess you must know by now who wrote that last letter and also that young Peter Northrop is dead so we won't have to give you any information that way.

Sam Tibbets said he felt right terrible when he had to read that out to Mrs. Northrop, but we was surprised to see how calm like she heard the whole thing. All she said was she was so old it didn't make much difference and it wouldn't be long anyhow before she'd be with young Peter.

But what I wanted to say was that Mrs. Northrop wants me to tell you to thank whoever sent that last letter about her son (there was no name signed as you'll see) also the reason I sent it back is because you'll probably know the handwriting.

As I said before, she wants you to thank the party and also for the money that came in it. Sam says it was a dangerous thing to do to send a pile of money like that through the mail and only register it for twenty-five cents. I say so too. But it will help Mrs. Northrop right comfortable for the few years she has to live and she's thankful to have it. She was very poor and it is a fortune to her. I wouldn't mind having it myself, but of course not to lose my children to have it.

I guess that's all except Mrs. Northrop said to say young Peter never had a scar on either of his feet that she knew.

Thanking you for your trouble and all,

Yours truly,
(Signed) MRS. KATIE BOARDMAN.

When I had finished, Brent was still standing with the dust cloth in his hand and Tom was sitting on the edge of the table swinging his legs.

"What else?" said Tom, the first to break the silence.

I had taken up the enclosed letter and was trying to decipher that outlandish writing. One could see at a glance it had been written under great stress. It looked like the Chinese alphabet to me so I handed it over to Tom. He scrutinized it carefully.

"Why hand it to me?" said Tom. "This crossword puzzle stuff is right in Brent's line. He'll make it out somehow." Tom took the dust cloth out of Brent's limp hand, shoved him down in the rocker and pulled both over to the window.

"While you're about it, Tom," Brent said, leisurely, "you might get me a clean handkerchief out of the top pocket in my coat, hanging on the rack. I'll have to wipe the dust off my glasses." After Brent had attended to all these preliminaries, he studied the letter through twice. We kept a respectful silence meanwhile, but I'll own I was impatient for him to say something. Finally his sober features broke into a puzzled look, that was half frown and half smile.

“To begin with,” Brent said, “the paper this is written on is the same stuff we had stuck up in the cupboard. Remember the stuff we bought in Harkness that one time and couldn’t use because the weave was so coarse the pen point would catch in it and blur?”

So we had. We’d used it all with the exception of a few sheets and had thrust those carelessly in the cupboard after we had gotten more of a better grade.

“Tom,” Brent said, “take a look in that cupboard and see if the paper’s there.” Tom looked thoroughly and shook his head in a negative manner.

“So much for that, then,” Brent murmured, as though it were serious business. Nevertheless, he looked to be enjoying his present role.

“Scotland Yard would appreciate you, Brent,” I said. “You’ve missed your vocation.”

“I know it,” he said, and went on, “Also, my fountain pen was used in writing this letter. I know its defects so well that I recognized them at once. I know it because it always blots in making punctuation marks. Especially periods.”

“How could he have gotten hold of your pen, for goodness’ sake?” Tom asked.

“I’ve been keeping it on the table standing upright in that little bud vase. It leaks if I don’t.”

“Well, Brent,” I said, “if that’s the case I’ll give you a new one for Christmas next year. Please go on and read that letter!”

“I don’t know that I’d care to part with it now,” Brent answered good-humoredly. “It’s thrown some light on this mystery already.”

“And ink,” Tom remarked.

“Ink then,” Brent came back, “and be thankful for its blessings. Well, here goes——”

“Just a minute, Brent,” I said, “Do you think it possible he could have written the letter here?”

“I think it’s quite possible. He had the key to get in before, didn’t he? Made away with the newspaper clipping; the targets? Furthermore we’ve been mighty careless leaving letters on that table. He’s found Mrs. Northrop’s letter there too, I’d bet my life. How else could he have known her address. And, if he had known it before, he surely would have written her.”

True, I hadn’t seen that letter of Mrs. Northrop’s that she had sent to her son, after the day it came.

Brent had started to read the letter in his hand, so I sat back to listen intently.

Leatherstocking Lodge,

Harkness, N. Y.

DEAR MRS. NORTHROP:—

In a most unusual manner your address has fallen into my hands.

Otherwise, I would have written you before to tell you that your son is dead. It grieves me to write this so bluntly, but I know of no other way.

He has, in fact, been dead now, over a year and a half and the enclosed money really belongs to him. In short, he had every right to claim it, had he lived, and you being the mother deprived of her only son, it goes to you.

At least it will give you the material comforts which your son's death and long absence has probably deprived you of already.

Allow me to say that knowing your son Peter as I did, I can sympathize with you in your grief at this revelation of his death. I know it has blighted my life completely!

Perhaps it will console you a little to know that he lost his life for another, who was absolutely unworthy to breath the air that Peter Northrop did.

And his body, too clean to rest in a tainted grave, has reached the clear waters of which he seemed a very part.

By the time you receive this, let me assure you that he will have found his Paradise and God.

In telling you this and by your leave, dear lady, my own tortured soul will find some peace and be ready to face its maker.

Good-bye!

In the short silence following Brent's reading, I felt that through it all I had seen revealed the naked soul of Roland McClintick.

CHAPTER XXXIII
FACE TO FACE

Veiled though the wording of that letter was, we had understood, where the good, but ignorant, people in Coovers Falls had not. And what a blessing their ignorance was!

"How he must have suffered!" Tom murmured.

Brent sighed. "With all McClintick's ability to make money," he said, "and his supposed strength of will, the son, with his apparent weakness for gambling and draft-dodging, proved the stronger."

"Yes," I said, "he went through the acid test. Do you think he's quite sane, though?"

"You mean, his reference to Northrop no longer being in a tainted grave?"

"Yes."

"I think so. I think it's his conscience working all through the whole thing, even the money. That's probably why he came back to live in the mountains so he could save the money and send it to Mrs. Northrop sometime. I don't think he's crazy though. His lonely existence and deprivations may have affected his mind. But I don't think he's a maniac by far."

"Well, it would be a wonder if he isn't," Tom said. "I wonder where he lives up there?"

"He must have a shack, I guess," Brent answered. "All the hermits in the movies do."

"Well, this isn't a movie," I said, "it's too real, by far."

"At any rate," Brent said, "I guess that Weston chap is the murderer."

"Yes," said Tom, "but try and find him!"

"They say a murderer always comes back, Tom," I reminded.

The rest of the day was spent in apprehension and odd jobs. Just trying to kill time and thought until half past five.

About four o'clock, I was raking up some shavings around one of the newly completed shacks. Brent was gathering them up and burning them. The sun had gone partly under a mischievous gray cloud which at once gave the earth a sickly appearance.

"Brent," I said, looking skyward with squinting eyes, "you might possibly see the sunset in the mountains, but you'll never see the moonlight to-night!"

"Why, what makes you think so?" he asked. I pointed to the sun.

"Just a passing cloud," he said. "Be clear in another minute."

Tom and Rivers ahead, and Brent and myself following, were walking along the first slope at just six o'clock that evening.

The sun was beginning to set and looked like a huge balloon poised on the crest of old Hogback. Violet-colored shadows traced in weird shaped patterns spread across the sky. And from the valley below a purplish mist was rising, completely obliterating our view of the camp. Then the sun sank out of sight.

"Goin' to rain!" Rivers said, as he adjusted his rifle over his shoulder. Tom also had his pistol (which I knew he didn't intend using if he could help it), but Brent and I were unarmed except for a hatchet.

"What makes you think it will rain, Rivers?" Brent asked.

"Sun set too quick!"

"Then we'll have a nice wet night!" Brent said, optimistically. Rivers looked back and grinned. He was going to enjoy the evening's adventure, no matter what the weather.

Up on the second slope, the going was difficult. Tom, of course, was keeping ahead and watching the ground with a keen eye. A few drops of rain touched my cheek lightly, then a zigzag flash of lightning raced across the heavens.

"Let 'er rain," Brent said, defiantly. "See if I care!"

We were pretty well clothed, so it didn't make much difference except that the premature darkness would impede our progress.

"Better gather a little wood, fellows," Tom said. "We may need it if we get stuck up here until morning."

"That's the stuff, Tommy," Brent said. "Always looking out for a rainy day."

It was raining in earnest at about eight o'clock, but we were deep in the forest and the thickly grown trees protected us from the storm. Tom and Rivers were lighting the way with two powerful searchlights. The tracks were still to be seen.

"I wonder if Tom sees the *other* tracks?" I asked Brent, in an undertone.

"I think so," Brent replied.

"The tracks are turning again, boys!" Tom said softly. "I think out of these woods and around the cleft."

"It's jes' prob'ly what the critter'd do," Rivers murmured, "a night like this."

We did emerge from the woods and out by the cleft. The brook below in the light of day seemed to strike a silver chord of happiness within me. Now, in the storm-ridden darkness, it echoed plaintively along the gully.

The swish of the water flowing so rapidly over the rocks gave me the ghostly thought that perhaps it was the phantom feet of Peter Northrop retracing his steps down there and not the swish of the water at all. Tom's

voice jolted me out of my eerie musing.

“Where shall we go from here, Charlie?” he asked.

“No place. We’ll stay. He’ll come sometime to-night, a’right.”

“My feet are cold,” Brent said, soberly. “Couldn’t we make a little fire in through the trees there somewhere?”

“Sure!” Rivers said. “We haint heard him howl yet. That’s time enough to watch.”

The campfire was a welcome sight and put to flight all my morbid thoughts. We were sheltered by the trees some twenty-five feet from the cleft.

For about an hour we sat and chatted pleasantly. Except Rivers. He seemed to have sunken back into his usual silence again, and as I glanced at his face, I thought I detected a look of cunning. One felt, glancing at his face, that he had an air of expectancy about him. As if he had been listening and waiting all through his life for just that moment.

A terrific clap of thunder broke and the mountains seemed to be crashing around us. As it rolled away, we heard that great mournful wail, now becoming so familiar to our ears.

Again it came and again. I suddenly felt terribly chilled. Rivers got up stealthily and in a whispered voice told us that he’d go out and keep under cover of darkness and for us to sit quiet and wait.

Above the whistling of the howling gales, the cry of the animal sounded nearer and nearer. We were rigid. Not a sound came from the darkness outside by the cleft, but we knew Charlie Rivers was watching—and waiting.

It must have been near midnight, I thought.

I was sorry I had come. I wondered if Brent was? And Tom? Why should that animal be killed? He wasn’t hurting anyone by howling at night. I would have gotten up and spoken my mind, if I had thought Rivers wouldn’t have laughed at me.

Then the cries ceased. But the fire hissed and seemed to make a terrific noise, just when I wanted to concentrate my whole mind on listening. Brent made a funny gurgling sound in his throat. What made him do that, I wondered. Tom glared at him.

A hush had fallen over the whole place. For at least five minutes I hadn’t heard a sound or a move anywhere. But I felt a presence of something. Without twitching a muscle, Tom, Brent and I looked first at each other then out into the darkness.

Two eyes like glittering bits of steel, peered intently at us. The rest of the body was enveloped in the night, like a shroud.

It moved slightly, pawing the ground and then settling back on its hind paws. Although the silence was deadly, the animal suddenly swung around. I knew it must be Rivers!

It was too late when I saw it! Rivers' gun was on the ground near the tree where he had been sitting. How he had forgotten it, I don't know. But it was too late for him to get it.

The animal stood halfway between Rivers and ourselves. Tom's hand made a move toward his back pocket, but Charlie had rushed for the lynx!

Before I realized what had happened, the woodsman had his brawny fingers tightly clasped about the animal's throat. In the struggle, he had forced it back nearer the fire and into the light, and it stood erect on its hind paws.

Standing full in the firelight, I was horrified to see the maniacal expression on Rivers' face. His small eyes seemed riveted upon his victim and he held the powerful jaws taut with a sort of fiendish delight.

It wasn't the face of the defenceless man, killing a dangerous animal. It was the face of a dangerous man, killing a defenceless animal. The beast uttered a few stifled gasps and started to sink to the ground.

A screech and then a sort of hysterical laugh sounded shrilly through the trees. We stared with frightened eyes and pounding hearts.

Rivers released the dead animal and stood as if rooted to the spot.

Standing just between the darkness and the firelight, was the hermit! His long, unkempt hair and beard were dripping wet and the few rags that served to cover his poor, thin body were clinging to him.

The wild haunting eyes looked long at the prone beast, then at Rivers and ourselves. He seemed to see all and yet nothing. Then his long white bony fingers reached out toward Rivers. And he laughed—that horrible, terrible laugh. Charlie stepped back.

"So!" the hermit shrieked and moved nearer Rivers, "you don't recognize me, eh, *Weston*?" Rivers flinched and drew himself up.

"It's I, Weston!" he cried, "*I, Roland McClintick!* I see you don't kill with the gun any more! You like strangling best, is that it?" Rivers had moved back toward us. And the hermit laughed, his voice breaking into a sob.

"You won't get away from *me*, Weston! You killed Northrop and my father, and now my pet!" Tears were streaming down his cheeks. His voice was quiet when he spoke again.

"I intend to kill *you*!"

CHAPTER XXXIV
IT CAN’T RAIN FOREVER

The pent-up grief, remorse and a desire to avenge his father’s death, must have given Roland McClintick superhuman strength that night. I don’t know!

With surprising agility for one so frail he really had the advantage over Rivers from the start, for Charlie had been too stunned to resist after the hermit had identified himself.

We were too horrified at Rivers’ cruelty to the lynx to feel moved to help him. Furthermore, McClintick’s accusations filled us with loathing for the man who had lived, walked and talked with us.

There were no more cries. Just the heavy breathing of two men fighting desperately for their lives. I heard a deep moan and then all was quiet.

The hermit stood in our firelight again, exhausted, his body shaking with deep emotion. But on his face was a look of peace. The wild, haunted expression had disappeared!

“He’s gone, fellows!” he said to us quietly. “Too good a death for him!” Then he knelt down at the dead beast’s side and stroked the coat affectionately.

“He was great company to me,” he explained, “strange as it may seem to you. I found him almost dying the first night I came up here. Some beast had shot his paw almost off. I’m glad he’s dead, though, he’d miss me if he lived after me.”

“We’ll bury him for you,” Brent said, and it seemed to please him.

“We’re terribly sorry, McClintick!” Tom said, huskily. “How can we help you?” McClintick looked up, his great eyes emphasized by the sunken cheeks.

“Fellows,” he said, as though it was an effort, “you’re real men, all of you. I’ve seen you at the Lodge. I’ve been stealing in there all this time. I had to live somehow until I found Weston. Now I can go too!” He straightened up for a second, then fell in a faint.

We worked over him and gradually he came to. Then he looked up, a sad, sweet smile. It was pitiful!

“You can help me,” he gasped faintly, “back to *my Lodge*. I’ll show you the way, if you’ll give me a lift.” He stood up between Tom and me, his long, thin arms encircling our shoulders. Then he glanced at the dead lynx as though he knew it was the last look he would take at the one thing left in life to him.

Tom and I had to carry him almost, he was getting so weak, and finally he told us that we had arrived. It wasn’t far from the cleft—just in a little way.

Brent had the searchlight and McClintick nodded toward a huge boulder.

He said we'd have to crawl inside and then we could only sit up.

It proved to be a good-sized cave. The inside had been furnished with a few things from the Lodge, such as pillows and blankets, and odds and ends of things to make a fellow barely comfortable. We laid him down.

"I suffered terribly this winter," he said, seeing us looking around. "Didn't think I'd survive it, but I did. Prayed for strength till Weston came and I could give my money over to poor Mrs. Northrop. Insurance money, it was! Blood money, I called it!

"That's why I took Peter out of *my* grave. The world thinks it's mine and it will be. He was too fine to be buried under a McClintick name. *WE've* been tainted!"

The fellow's eyes seemed to be gazing afar and his thin hands twitched at the blankets we had wrapped around him. Tom, Brent and I exchanged significant glances. Roland McClintick's life was nearly ended!

"Don't let anyone tell you my father thought up that ghastly thing. He was in Weston's power!" he was talking very faintly. "It was on account of some government fraud that Weston got my father, and he wanted blackmail. Father didn't have it.

"Weston knew how Pete had once taken the blame for me in a gambling mess. That's how he conceived the idea. And he threatened to expose father unless he would consent to that means and get my insurance money. It was all the money father could lay his hands on just then.

"I pleaded with father. It wasn't any use. Weston had him and father was weak enough to be afraid. And the morning after I left for Montreal they lured Peter out there. He died for me. I've been almost crazy!"

We tried to soothe him but soon he closed his world-weary eyes!

We stood outside the cave in the dim, wet dawn. The sad affair was ended!

"The debts are all paid," Brent said. "Now Leatherstocking Training Camp can start its career with a clean slate, eh Tommy?"

"Sure thing!" Tom replied.

The rain had stopped, and away in the east a glint of pink light streaked the far horizon. The odor of wet pine filled the air.

Like two vast curtains, the dark heavens parted slowly and the sun, like the true scout smile, came shining through!

FINIS

[The end of *Tom Slade in the North Woods* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]