

Neatly Trapped

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OFTEN a day or an incident in one's life is remembered above all others, as long as that life lasts.

Thus it is, even now. I cannot see the brilliant beauty of the moonlight upon the snow without a shudder.

My brother Sam and I were hardy backwoods boys, our father being one of the first settlers in Northern Maine, when that country was a wilderness with only the broad Moose-took River for a highway.

We were good shots, almost as soon as we could hold a gun, and early learned to help supply the family with fresh meat by hunting.

If we sometimes ran risks which would make a boy's hair stand on end nowadays, it was thought nothing of then.

Our house was near the river bank, and quite a convenient stopping place for the lumbermen on their way to and from the camps further up the river.

Mr. Pratt, the "head man," always spent the night with us when he happened along, and Sam and I were never weary of hearing his stories of the woods. We were sure it would be better to ride a log, when the water ran bank-high, than to go to the Senate, or even to be President, if there had been a possibility of such a thing.

The result was that we entered a logging camp before I was sixteen years old, and we boys did a man's work that winter, too!

"The timber is playing out here, unless we give it long hauls, which won't pay, so we'll soon go to the upper camp in the course of ten days," said Mr. Pratt, one evening, as the crew were about to turn in. "Frank, how would you and Sam like to take a trip up there and see if things are all right?"

"Of course Sam and I were delighted to go, and said so at once."

We were used to hard work, and plenty of it; but logging is heavy work, even for stout, resolute boys.

The upper camp had not been used that season, and we were expected to put it in good repair.

"You might as well stay long enough to get up a supply of wood to begin with," confirmed Mr. Pratt. "We can spare you now better than we can when we get to the camp. Cook, put up grub enough to last the youngsters four days."

Accordingly we set out before daylight the next morning, with our packs of provision and blankets upon our backs and good steel runners upon our feet. Sam carried a sharp axe and I a gun.

It was ten miles to the upper camp, but we were there long before noon.

"Lucky the thaw came as it did, else we'd had a tramp on snow-shoes," laughed Sam.

"The snow last night didn't hurt the skating a bit," I added.

"What kind of tracks are these?" asked Sam, as we went up the bank, after unstrapping our skates.

The tracks in question were quite large and round, and although slightly covered by the flurry of snow which fell the night before, resembled those of a great cat, except in size.

"The word is near by—that's good," I answered, as a thought of what kind of an animal made those prints in the snow flashed through my mind.

"I know what you're thinking of, Frank," cried Sam, his face a shade paler than usual; and he was no coward, either. "Zeke Smith told me last week that he was going out before they moved to this camp. He said there was an Indian devil up this way—he's heard him."

"A wild cat, likely! Zeke Smith is afraid of his own shadow, Sam. Would you run

because you saw a track in the snow? I thought you had more pluck," I said, banteringly.

"I won't run any sooner than you will. I wouldn't go back to the camp, anyhow, before the time's up, for the men to make game of me. Just you stick as long as I do," he retorted.

"I will," I answered.

And we went up the bank to the camp, where we stowed our provisions away in the little store room, before making a fire in the larger apartment.

The camp was forty feet square, with several small windows, all but one of which had strips of bark tacked across them to protect the glass. It had a roof of long, split shingles, with a wide smoke-hole, at least four feet square, exactly in the centre.

The store room was built behind the camp, of the strongest logs which the builders could find.

It was ten feet wide, and the length of one side of the camp, without window or door, except the one opening into the outer room.

It was usually nearly filled with empty barrels and boxes, left the year before.

The whole place wore a more cheerful look when the fire began to crackle merrily; and before we had finished our dinner, we had forgotten the ominous prints in the snow.

The camp had been well constructed, and we found nothing to repair except a few of the long, split shingles.

"That job's done quick," said Sam, with great satisfaction, as we sat down to supper. "I'd like some fish—and I mean to have them tomorrow."

"We ought to get wood enough in two days, and still have time to skate to the lower camp," I said, thinking of something beside fishing.

"Perhaps we can. Are you afraid to stay here?" he asked, with a sarcasm that touched me.

"I hardly like living alone—ten miles from nowhere," I answered, carelessly. "Let's try a game of checkers, Sam. Here's a box cover that'll make a capital board. I'll fix it, while you whittle out the men."

Sam threw another log upon the fire, and began his task of raking checkers from a straight-grained cedar stick which he found among the wood.

The camp was as light as day; the flames danced cheerily, and the sparks flashed through the smoke-hole, far up toward the starry sky.

I began to check off the board with a charred stick which I drew from the fire.

"This is more fun than it is with all the lumbermen around ready to tease a fellow," said Sam, contentedly. "I wonder if we'll strike a good gum tree tomorrow?"

"It's likely we may," I replied. "It hasn't been worked near here much, and there's some fine spruces along the run. Oh, yes, we'll find gum enough! But the board is ready."

"So are the checkers," laughed Sam, laying the circles and squares of wood upon the board.

So that long-to-be-remembered game began; but we never knew who was likely to beat, for it was never finished.

Just at the time when I had drawn Sam

from his king row for a square light, we heard a shout or cry far away on the wooded hill on the north.

"Who can that be?" I cried, as I sprang up and threw the door wide open. "Some of the men have been sent to help us, and—"

"Shut that door!" sharply ordered Sam, as he slammed it himself, and threw the heavy bar across it. "That's no man's voice—can't you tell that, Frank? It's that Indian devil!"

Then he examined the gun, to make sure that it was ready, and looked to his ammunition, while I stood staring at him dumbly.

Again that yell sounded, nearer than before, and so wild and terrific that there was no longer any doubt in my mind as to the nature of our visitor.

"He's coming fast," said Sam, grimly, as he threw more wood upon the blazing fire. "It is a good thing for us that the camp is a strong one."

The yells came oftener, each one nearer than the last, until an awful screech close by the small square window brought us to our feet.

Sam seized the gun just as a round, cat-like head was outlined against the sky, and two fierce, eager eyes gazed at us through the small opening.

"He never can get in there, but—" Sam hesitated, with a significant look at the great smoke-hole.

The next instant the heavy door shook as the beast threw his strength against it, only to scream with baffled rage at his defeat, for the stout bar was a sure safeguard.

Then all was silent without—such an awful silence—one that brought our hair on end, and drove every drop of blood back to our wildly-throbbing hearts.

Not a sound could be heard, save the occasional snapping of a frosty twig.

"He's given it up," I whispered, hopefully. "Not by a long chalk," responded Sam, decidedly. "Just wait, but don't flatter yourself with that notion."

To add force to his words, a wild yell and a rattling as the split shingles told us that the brute had leaped upon the roof.

Soon his fiery eyes peered at us through the wide smoke-hole, and one great paw was stretched out menacingly.

"I was afraid of it. Throw on more wood, as long as it is too hot for him we're safe, assured Sam, taking careful aim at the creature's breast.

The report of the gun was followed by a scream as full of agony and rage that it made us tremble.

"I hit him—that's certain," cried Sam, rushing to the window, as the animal rolled to the ground.

He was tumbling about before the door, biting at the snow, which was flecked with crimson spots.

Suddenly he stopped and looked at us with an angry snarl, holding up one foot.

"You've broken his paw, Sam. Now he'll leave us in peace," I said.

"Not he," differed Sam. "He'll starve us out if he can. I'll just give him another shot."

But before the gun was loaded again the panther was at the other side of the camp, nor did Sam get a sight at him again in a hurry.

We were in for a siege, and must make four days' rations do for ten, or until the rest of the crew came to liberate us.

Even then human life might be sacrificed if the men were not warned of the danger which awaited them.

"He may leave at daylight," I ventured. And the thought gave us comfort until the day dawned, and he showed no intention of leaving.

He circled around the camp, close to the walls, whining with pain, or yelling with rage, but ever determined to have his revenge for the broken paw.

Although we did not see him, we heard the snow crush under his soft tread, and knew that he was on guard.

"He'll try the roof as soon as it is dark again," said Sam, as the sun sank in the west and the stars began to show in the pale blue sky.

It was moonlight as soon as the sun was gone that night, and so intensely cold that the reports from the frosty, snapping trees sounded like pistol shots.

I shall never forget the glittering beauty of the landscape which met my eyes whenever I glanced from the window.

It might have been midnight when the panther tried the roof again. The fire was burning low, for, regardless of our danger, we were getting rather sleepy, and the reckless use of fuel was beginning to tell upon our stock of wood.

Then we heard him spring upon the low roof of the store room!

"Pile on the small stuff—quick!" shouted Sam.

And a shower of sparks met the brute as he glared at us.

Before Sam could fire he drew back a little, but from that moment the creature was frantic.

He scratched and bit at the split shingles until we expected every moment to see the sky through them, and yelled until the forest for miles echoed and re-echoed with the awful noise.

"There's our last stick of wood," said Sam, desperately. And, looking from the little window, I saw the morning star.

And the last of the benches, of the bunks, CONTINUED ON PAGE SIX

