

Chapman Allen

Tom Fairfield's Hunting Trip: or, Lost in the Wilderness



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CHAPTER I

THE BIG SNOWBALL

“Well, Tom, it sure is a dandy plan!”

“That’s right! A hunting trip to the Adirondacks will just suit me!”

“And we couldn’t have better weather than this, nor a better time than the coming holiday season.”

Three lads, who had made the above remarks, came to a whirling stop on their shining, nickeled skates and gathered in a small ring about the fourth member of the little party, Tom Fairfield by name. Tom listened to what was said, and remarked:

“Well, fellows, I’m glad you like my plan. Now I think – ”

“Like it! I should say we did!” cried the smallest of the three lads grouped about the one in the centre. “Why, it’s the best ever!” and he did a spread eagle on his skates, so full of life did he feel that crisp December day.

“Do you really think we can get any game?” asked Jack Fitch, as he loosed his mackinaw at the throat, for he had warmed himself by a vigorous burst of skating just before the little halt that had ended in the impromptu vote of thanks to Tom.

“Get game? Well, I should say we could!” cried another of the lads.

“What do you know about it, Bert Wilson?” demanded Jack. “Were you ever up there?”

“No, but I’m sure Tom Fairfield wouldn’t ask us up to a hunter’s camp unless he was reasonably sure that we could get some kind of game. I’m not very particular what kind,” Bert went on, “as long as it’s game – a bear, a mountain lion, a lynx – I’m not hard to suit,” he added magnanimously.

“Well, I should say not!” laughed Tom.

“But say!” exclaimed the youngest member of the quartette – George Abbot by name. “Do you really think we can bag a bear? Or a lynx, maybe? Or even a fox? Are there really any big animals up there, Tom? What sort of a gun had I better take? And what about an outfit? Do you think – ”

Tom reached out and gently placed a gloved hand over the mouth of the questioner, thereby cutting off, for the time being, the flow of interrogations.

“Just a moment, Why, if you please,” he said, giving George the nickname his fellow students at Elmwood Hall had fastened on the lad who seemed to be a human question mark.

“Well, I – er – Buu – er – gurg – ”

But that was the nearest semblance to speaking that George could accomplish. His companions laughed at him. He finally made a sign that he would desist if Tom removed the hand-gag, and when this had been done, Jack proposed a little sprint down to one end of the small lake on which they were skating.

“No, we’ve had enough racing to-day,” declared Bert Wilson. “I vote Tom tells us more about this hunters’ camp, and what we expect to do there.”

“All right, I’m agreeable,” Jack said.

“Are they – ?” began Why, but a look from Bert warned him, and he stopped midway in his question. His chums well knew that if George once got started it was hard to stop him.

“Well, there isn’t so much to tell that you fellows don’t know already,” began Tom slowly. “In the first place, there are three hunters’ camps, not one.”

“Three!” exclaimed Jack and Bert, while George looked the questions he dared not ask.

“Yes. You see they belong to a party of gentlemen, a sort of camping club. The camps are about five miles apart, in the wildest part of the Adirondacks.”

“Why – three?” came at last from George. Really he could not keep it back any longer. Tom did not seem to mind.

“Oh, I suppose they wanted to change their hunting ground,” he answered, “and they found it easier to make three camps, or headquarters, than to come all the way back to the first one. And the club is pretty well off, so it didn’t mind the expense.”

“But you don’t mean to say we can use all three of ’em?” cried Jack, incredulously.

“That’s the idea,” Tom said. “We’re just as welcome to use all three camps as one. They’re all about alike, each with a log cabin, nicely fitted up, set in the midst of the big woods.”

“That’s jolly!” cried Bert.

“And aren’t the men themselves going to use them?” George wanted to know. Again he went unrebuked.

“Not this season,” Tom Fairfield explained. “The club is sort of broken up for the time being. Some of the men want to go, but they can’t get enough together to make a party, so they had to give up their annual holiday outing this year.

“A business friend of my father’s belongs to the club, and he mentioned to Dad that there was a chance for someone to use the camps. Dad happened to speak of it to me, and I – well, you can imagine what I did! I jumped at the chance, and now you know almost as much as I do about it.

“I’ll tell you later just where the camps are, and how we are to get to them. We want to get together and have a talk about what we’ll take with us. School closes here day after to-morrow, and then we’ll be free for nearly a month.”

“And won’t we have some ripping old times, though!” cried Jack.

“Well, I should say yes!” chimed in Bert.

“Tell you what let’s do, fellows!” broke in George. “Let’s go up to the top of that hill and have a coast. Some of our lads from Elmwood are there with the bobs, and they’ll give us a ride. I’ve had enough of skating.”

“So have I,” chimed in Jack.

“I’m with you,” agreed Bert, stooping to loosen his skates, an example followed by Tom Fairfield.

“I hope this snowy weather holds,” spoke Jack. “But are you allowed to shoot game when there is tracking snow?”

“I don’t just know all the rules,” said Tom, “but of course we will do what is right. I guess we’ll have plenty of snow in the mountains, and cold weather, too.”

“It’s getting warm here,” observed Bert. “Too warm,” for the variable New Jersey climate had changed from freezing almost to thawing in the night, and the boys were really taking advantage of the last bit of skating they were likely to have in some time.

There were not many besides themselves on the ice of the lake when they started from it, heading for the big hill not far away – a hill whereon the youth of Elmwood Hall, a boarding school near the Jersey state capital, had many jolly times.

When Tom Fairfield and his chums, talking about the camping and hunting trip in prospect, reached the hill, they found it deserted – that is, by all save a few small town boys with their little sleds.

“No coasting to-day,” observed Jack, ruefully.

“No, it’s getting too soft,” added Bert, digging his foot into the snowy surface of the hill. But the small boys did not mind that. With the big lads out of the way, smaller fry had a chance.

George Abbot picked up a handful of snow and rolled it into a ball. As he noticed how well it packed, he exclaimed:

“Say, fellows, another idea!”

“Ha! He’s full of ’em to-day!” laughed Jack.

“Get rid of it, Why,” advised Tom. “Don’t keep ideas in your system.”

“Let’s roll a whopping big snowball,” proposed George, “and send it down hill. It will roll all the way to the bottom, and pick up snow all the way down.”

“It will be some snowball when it gets to the bottom,” observed Tom. “This snow does pack wonderfully well,” he added, testing it.

“Come on!” cried George, and he started to roll the ball. In a few minutes he had one so large that it needed two to shove it about, and as it gathered layer after layer of snow, it accumulated in size until the strength of the four lads was barely sufficient to send it slowly along.

“Now to the top of the hill with it!” cried Tom, and it was placed on the brink. The boys held it at a point where it would not interfere with the small coasters. It was poised on the brink a moment.

“Let her go!” cried Tom.

“There she goes!” echoed Jack Fitch.

They shoved the ball down the slope. On and on it rolled, gaining in momentum and size with every bound.

“Look at it!” cried George. “Say, it sure is going!”

“And it’s getting as big as a house!” excitedly shouted Bert.

“It will roll all the way across the lake,” said Tom, for the frozen body of water was at the foot of the hill, and it did seem as though the snowball had momentum enough to carry it over the ice.

A moment later the ball was at the foot of the hill, and rolling along with increasing speed. And then, so suddenly that the boys were startled with fear, something happened.

Out on the ice drove a horse and a cutter, containing a man. He had left the road and taken a short cut across the ice. And now he was directly in the path of the immense, rolling snowball.

“Stop! Stop!” cried Tom Fairfield. “Look out!”

But it was too late to stop, even if the man in the cutter had heard him.

On rushed the great ball directly toward the horse and vehicle.

CHAPTER II

A SURPRISE

“Say, it’s going to hit him, sure as fate!” cried Tom.

“No help for it,” half-groaned Jack.

“And there will be some smash!” murmured Bert. “Oh, what did you do it for, George?”

“Me do it? Why, say, you fellows had as much to do with it as I did! I didn’t do it all!” and the smaller lad looked indignantly at his companions.

“Come on!” cried Tom, as he started on a run down the snowy side of the hill.

The others followed.

“We can’t do anything!” shouted Jack.

“Of course not,” agreed Bert. “By the time we get there – ”

He did not finish the sentence. All this while the big snowball had been rushing on. The man in the cutter had seen it, but too late. He tried to whip up the horse and get out of the way, but even as Bert spoke the mass of snow struck fairly between the horse and cutter.

In an instant the vehicle was overturned.

The boys, running to the rescue, had a confused vision of a man flying out to one side, head first, toward a snowbank. They also saw the horse rear up on his hind legs, struggle desperately to retain his balance and then, with a fierce leap, break loose from the cutter and run on, free, across the ice.

As the boys hastened on, they saw the man slowly pick himself up out of the snowbank, and gaze wonderingly about him, as if trying to fathom what had happened, whether it had been an earthquake or an avalanche. Indeed, so large was the snowball, and so strong was the force of it, for it had gained speed by the rush down the steep hill, that it really was a small avalanche.

The ball had split into several pieces on hitting the cutter, the shafts of which were broken and splintered, showing how the horse had been able to free himself.

“We’ll have to – to apologize,” murmured Tom, as he and his companions kept on toward the man who was now gazing down disconsolately at the ruin wrought.

“Yes, I guess we will,” agreed Jack. “We – why, Cæsar’s corn-plasters!” he cried. “Look who it is – Professor Skeel!”

“The old tyrant of Elmwood Hall!” murmured Bert. “Who’d have thought it?”

“Now we are in for it,” added Tom, grimly.

“Burton Skeel!” said George in a whisper as he caught sight of the angry-looking man, gazing at his smashed cutter and staring off over the ice in the direction taken by the runaway horse. “Skeel, the man who made so much trouble for Tom Fairfield. And we upset him! Oh – good-night!”

Those of you who have read the first volume of this series, entitled “Tom Fairfield’s Schooldays,” do not need to be introduced to Professor Skeel. The unpopular instructor of Elmwood Hall, where Tom and his chums attended, had been the cause of a rebellion, in which Tom was a sort of leader, and, later, a pacifier. Tom Fairfield, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Brokaw Fairfield, of Briartown, N. J., had made himself popular soon after coming to Elmwood, where he had been sent to board while his parents went to Australia about some property matters.

And now to find that the man upset from his cutter was this same unpopular teacher, Professor Skeel, was enough to give pause to any set of lads.

But Tom Fairfield was no coward. He proved that when the *Silver Star* was wrecked, an account of which you may read of in my second volume, called “Tom Fairfield at Sea,” for the days that followed the foundering of that vessel were trying ones indeed, and the dreary days spent

in an open boat, when Mr. Skeel proved himself not only a coward, but almost a scoundrel, showed Tom fully what sort of a man the professor was.

Tom finally reached Australia, and set out on another voyage in time to rescue his parents from some savages on one of the Pacific islands. So it was such qualities as these, and those developed when Tom had other adventures, set forth in the third book, “Tom Fairfield in Camp,” that made our hero keep on instead of turning back when he found what had happened to Mr. Skeel.

In camp Tom and his chums succeeded in clearing up the mystery of the old mill, though for a time it seemed that they were doomed to failure. But Tom was not one to give up easily, and this, I think, was more fully shown, perhaps, in the volume immediately preceding this, called “Tom Fairfield’s Pluck and Luck.”

True, Tom did have “luck,” but, after all, what is luck but hard work turned to the best advantage? Almost any chap can have luck if he works hard, and takes advantage of every opportunity.

And now, after many weeks of tribulations, Tom found himself at the beginning of the Christmas holidays, and he and his chums had in prospect a very enjoyable time.

But just at the present moment they would have given up part of anticipated pleasures, I believe, not to have had the snowball accident happen.

“It *is* Skeel,” murmured Tom, as though at first he had doubted the evidence of his own eyes.

“Of course it is,” said Jack.

“And we’re in for trouble, or I miss my guess,” added Bert.

“I wonder what in the world he is doing in these parts?” came from George. “You thought you’d seen the last of him, didn’t you, Tom, after the wreck of the *Silver Star*?”

“I certainly did.”

“And yet he bobs up again,” went on George. “What does he want? Is he trying to get back on the faculty of Elmwood Hall?”

No one answered his questions, nor did Tom, or any of the others, rebuke Why for his queries. They had too much else to think about.

“Well, young men, well!” began Professor Skeel in his pompous voice. “Well, are you responsible for this?”

“I – I’m afraid we are,” said Tom. He did not add “sir,” as once he would have done. He had lost the little respect he had for the former teacher, and when a man loses the respect of a manly youth, it is not good for that man.

“Humph! Yes, you certainly have done mischief enough,” went on Mr. Skeel, in snarling tones. “My cutter is broken, I am thrown out, and may have sustained there are no telling what injuries, my horse has run away and may be killed, and you stand there like – like blithering idiots!” he cried, with something of his old, objectionable, schoolroom manner.

“We – we didn’t mean to,” said Tom.

“We just made a big snowball and rolled it down,” George said, determined to take his share of the blame.

“Hum! Yes, so I see – and so I *felt*, young men!” cried the irate man, as he brushed the snow off his garments.

The boys had not yet gotten over the surprise of identifying Professor Skeel. They could not understand it.

“We will do anything we can to make amends,” Tom said, slinging his skates over his shoulder with a jangling of steel. “We will try to catch your horse, and we can get you another cutter. We are –”

Something in Tom’s voice caused the man to look up quickly. As he did so Tom noticed that his right ear appeared as though it had been recently injured. The lower part was torn and hung down below the other lobe.

“Ha! So it’s you, is it!” fairly snarled Mr. Skeel. “It’s you, Tom Fairfield?”

“Yes, Mr. Skeel. And I can only say how sorry I am – ”

“Don’t tell me how sorry you are!” interrupted the former teacher, in a voice filled with passion. “I don’t want to listen to you. I’ve had enough of you. Don’t you dare to address me!

“This was done on purpose. It was a deliberate attempt to injure me, perhaps kill me, for all I know. But I will not submit. I will at once go to town and cause your arrest, Tom Fairfield. The arrest of yourself, and those rascals with you. I’ll have you all arrested.”

George turned pale under his ruddy cheeks. He was not afraid, but he was thinking of the disgrace. But Tom Fairfield was master of the situation.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have anyone arrested if I were you, Mr. Skeel,” he said, in easy tones.

“Yes, I shall, too!” blustered the man. “I’ll have you all arrested! The idea of rolling a snowball on me and almost killing me. I’ll have everyone of you arrested.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t,” Tom said. “You forget that little matter of the forgery, Mr. Skeel. That indictment is still hanging over you, I believe. And if you were to go to the authorities, it might come out, and there would be some other arrests than ours. So if I were you – ”

He did not need to finish. Mr. Skeel turned pale and uttered an exclamation under his breath.

At that moment George created a diversion by crying:

“Here comes your horse back.”

CHAPTER III

THE PLOT

George Abbot was not exactly correct in saying that the runaway horse was *coming* back. The animal was being brought back, and he seemed quiet and docile enough. Perhaps he had lost his fright in the run he had taken after being freed from the cutter.

“Who’s leading the horse?” asked Bert Wilson, while Tom turned to look, after having faced the angry professor until the latter turned aside his head. Well he knew that Tom spoke the truth. A shady transaction, while a member of the Elmwood faculty, had placed Professor Skeel under the ban of the law, and he realized that he could not appeal to it without bringing himself into its clutches.

“That’s Morse Denton with the animal,” said Jack.

“Morse must have caught him before he went very far, or he wouldn’t be back so soon,” spoke Bert, waving his hand toward the former Freshman football captain.

“Does that horse belong there?” Morse called across the ice.

“Yes, bring him over here,” said Tom. “Perhaps we can patch up the shafts and send you on your way again, Professor Skeel,” Tom went on, for he did not hold enmity, and he was willing to let bygones be bygones, if the professor did not push matters too far.

“Um!” was all the answer the former teacher vouchsafed. He was arranging his garments, which had been rather twisted, to say the least, by his sudden exit from the cutter.

“What happened?” asked Morse, when he led the horse up to the little group standing partly on the ice of the lake and partly on the shore, for the accident had happened close to the edge.

“It was a big snowball,” volunteered George. “We rolled it down the hill, and Professor Skeel ran into it.”

“Be correct, young man. Be correct!” growled the former instructor. “The snowball ran into me, but I’ll have satisfaction. I’ll – ”

He caught Tom’s eye on him, and fairly quailed.

“Why, it’s Professor Skeel!” cried Morse. “Where did you – ”

But Tom gave Morse a quick and secret sign to cease questioning, and the newcomer, still holding the captured horse, acquiesced.

“Is the animal hurt?” demanded the former teacher.

“Doesn’t seem to be,” Morse replied. “I saw him coming at a slow canter across the ice, and I had no trouble in stopping him. I guessed it was a runaway and I started him back in just the opposite direction to that he was going. Then I saw you fellows,” he added to his chums.

“I have told Professor Skeel how sorry I am that the accident occurred,” went on Tom, “and I have assured him that we will do all that we can to repair the damage.” He was speaking slowly and with reserve, and choosing his words carefully.

“Repair the damage!” snapped the man.

“The shafts are all that seem to be broken,” proceeded Tom. “I know a farmer near here, and I’m sure he will lend you another pair of shafts for your cutter. The harness is not damaged, the cutter itself is all right, and the horse is not hurt. There is no reason why you should not continue your journey, Professor Skeel.”

“Well, do something then, don’t stand there talking about it!” burst out the irritated man.

Tom did not answer, and his chums rather marveled, for Tom was not the youth to take abuse quietly. But Tom realized that, through no fault of his own, Professor Skeel had been put to serious inconvenience, and it was no more than just that the lads should make good the damage they had unwittingly done.

“Let’s set up the cutter, fellows,” proposed Tom, after a pause, “and then we’ll see about getting another pair of shafts. We can’t use these, that’s certain.” They were splintered beyond repair.

The boys of Elmwood Hall were used to doing things quickly, especially under Tom’s leadership. In a trice the cutter was righted, and the robes and the scattered possessions of Professor Skeel were picked up and put into it. Then while Morse, George and Bert remained to adjust the harness on the now quieted horse, Tom and Jack went to a farmhouse near the lake to borrow a spare pair of shafts.

Tom knew the farmer, of whom he had often hired a team in the summer, and the man readily agreed not only to loan the shafts, but to adjust them to the cutter.

He made a quick and neat job of it, and soon the horse was once more hitched to the righted vehicle.

“There you are, Professor Skeel,” said Tom. “Not quite as good as before, but almost. You can keep on, and once more I wish to tell you how sorry I am that it happened.”

“Um!” sneered Mr. Skeel.

“You may not believe it,” Tom went on. “We did not see you coming until we had started the ball down hill, and then it was too late to stop it. We never thought anyone would cross the lake on the ice at this point, as no one ever does so.”

“I had a right to, didn’t I?” demanded the irate professor.

“A right, certainly,” agreed Tom. “But it is unusual. Teams go down on the lake about a mile farther on, and you would have been perfectly safe there.”

“Humph! I guess I can cross this lake where I please! And the next time you roll a snowball on me, I’ll –”

“I told you,” said Tom, and his voice was cuttingly cool, “that we did not roll the ball on you. It was unintentional, but if you persist in thinking we did it purposely, we can’t help that. Now, is there anything more we can do for you?” and he looked about the snow to make sure all the contents of the cutter had been picked up and returned to it.

The professor did not answer, but busied himself getting into the vehicle, and taking the reins from Morse Denton.

“You can send them spare shafts back any time,” said the farmer who had kindly loaned them.

“We’ll pay for ’em if he doesn’t,” said Jack in a low voice, anxious to preserve peace. “It’s getting off cheap as it is,” he added.

“That’s right,” agreed Bert. “I thought he’d raise no end of a row.”

“So he would have – only for Tom. Tom closed him up in great shape, didn’t he?”

“He sure did.”

Without a word of thanks, Professor Skeel drove off over the ice. He never looked back, but the boys could hear him muttering angrily to himself, probably giving vent to threats he dared not utter aloud.

“I wonder what he is doing in this neighborhood?” ventured Bert.

“It’s certainly a puzzle,” admitted Tom Fairfield. “He’s up to no good, I’ll wager.”

“That’s right,” agreed Jack. “Well, I’m glad he’s gone, anyhow. That sure was some upset!”

“Say, did you notice his ear?” asked George. “It wasn’t that way when he was teaching school here. Looks as if a knife had cut him.”

“Was his ear like that when he was shipwrecked with you, Tom?” asked Bert.

“No. That’s a new injury,” was the answer. “Rather a queer one, too. He might have been in a fight.”

The lads remained standing together, for a little while, gazing at the now fast-disappearing cutter and its surly occupant.

“Well, let’s get back to school,” proposed Jack. “It will soon be grub-time.”

“And Tom can tell us more about that hunting trip,” suggested Bert.

“All right,” agreed our hero, but as he walked along he was puzzling his brain, trying to think what Professor Skeel’s object was in coming back to Elmwood Hall.

Perhaps if Tom could have seen Mr. Skeel a little later, as the cutter drew up at a road-house some miles away – a road-house that did not have a very enviable reputation in the neighborhood – Tom would have wondered still more over his former teacher’s return.

For, as the cutter drew up in the drive, there peered from a window two men, one with a more evil-looking face than the other, which was his only claim to distinction.

“There he comes,” murmured the man with the less-evil countenance.

“Yes, but he’s late,” agreed the other. “Wonder what kept him?”

“He looks mad – too,” commented his companion.

A few moments later Professor Skeel entered the rear room of the road-house. The two men arose from the table at which they had been sitting.

“Well, you kept your word, I see,” muttered Skeel to the man with the evil face. “You’re here, Whalen. And you too, Murker.”

“Yes. We’re here, but you didn’t say what you wanted of us,” spoke the one addressed as Whalen.

“You’ll know soon enough,” was the rejoinder. “We sha’n’t want anything – at least not for a while,” Mr. Skeel went on to the landlord, who had followed him into the room. “You can leave us alone. We’ll ring when we want you. And close the door when you go out,” he added, significantly.

The landlord grunted.

“Well, now, what’s the game?” asked Whalen, when Mr. Skeel had seated himself at the table.

“Revenge! That’s the game!” was the fierce answer, and a fist was banged down on the table. “I want revenge, and I’m going to have it!”

“Who’s the party?” demanded Murker.

“Someone you don’t know, but whom you may soon. Tom Fairfield! I owe him a long score, but I’m going to begin to pay it now. I want you to help me, Whalen.”

“Oh, I’ll help you quick enough,” was the ready answer.

“He was instrumental in having you discharged from Elmwood Hall, wasn’t he?” went on the former instructor.

“That’s what he was.”

“Something about beating one of the smaller boys, was it not?” and Skeel smiled in a suggestive way, as though he rather relished, than otherwise, the plight of Whalen.

“Naw, I only gave the kid a few taps ’cause he threw a snowball at me,” the discharged employee went on, “but that whelp, Fairfield, saw me, and complained to Doc. Meredith. Then I was fired.”

“And you’d like a chance to get even, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s what I would!” was the harsh answer.

“Well, I want to square accounts with him also, and, at the same time, make a little money out of it. I thought you and Murker could help me, and that’s why I asked you to meet me here. I’m a bit late, and that’s some more of Fairfield’s doings. Now to business. This is the game!”

And the three plotters drew their chairs closer together and began to talk in low, mumbling voices.

CHAPTER IV HOLIDAY FUN

"Jolly times to-night, fellows!" exclaimed Jack Fitch as he, with Tom and the other chums, walked along the snowy road on their way back to Elmwood Hall. "No boning to do, and we can slip away with some eats on the side and have a grub-fest."

"That's right," chimed in Bert Wilson. "Maybe you'd better put off telling us about the hunting trip, Tom, until we all get together. Suppose we meet in my room – it's bigger."

"All right," agreed Tom. "Anything suits me as long as you fellows don't grab all the crackers and cheese before I get there."

"We'll save you a share," promised Morse Denton.

"I've got part of a box of oranges my folks sent me," volunteered George Abbot.

"Bring 'em along," advised Jack. "They'll come in handy to throw at the fellows if any of 'em try to break in on us."

"What! Throw my oranges!" cried George. "Say, they're the finest Indian Rivers, and –"

"All right. If they're rivers, we'll let 'em swim instead of throwing 'em," conceded Bert. "Anything to be agreeable."

"Oh, say now!" protested George, who did not always know how, or when, to take a joke.

"It's all right, don't let 'em fuss you," advised Tom in a low voice. "But, fellows, we'd better hustle if we're going to have doings to-night."

"That's right!" chorused the others, and they set off at a rapid pace toward Elmwood Hall, which could be seen in the distance, the red setting sun of the December day lighting up its tower and belfry. The skates of the students jangled and clanked as they hurried on, making a musical sound in the frosty air, for it was getting colder with the approach of night.

"Seasonable weather," murmured Jack. "It'll be a lot colder than this up in the Adirondacks, when we start hunting deer and bear."

"What's all this?" asked Morse, with a sudden show of interest.

"Some of Tom's schemes," answered Jack. "We're going on a hunting trip."

Morse looked to Tom for confirmation.

"That's the idea," Tom said, briefly sketching his plan. "Bert, Jack and George are going with me. Like to have you come along."

"I'd like to, first rate, old man," was the answer, given with a shake of the head, "but the governor has planned a trip to Palm Beach for the whole family, over Christmas, and I have to go along to keep order."

"I'm sorry," voiced Tom, but his words were lost in a gale of laughter from his chums as they sensed the final words of Morse.

"You keep order! You're a fine one for that!"

"The fellow who tied the cow to Merry's back stoop!"

"Yes, and the lad who put the smoke bomb in the furnace room! A fine chap to keep things straight!"

"Oh, well, you don't have to believe me!" said Morse, with an air of injured innocence that ill became him.

"They evidently don't," commented Tom dryly.

"Say, what was the row about just before I came back with that horse?" asked Morse, as though he wanted to change the subject.

“Snowball and old Skeel,” explained Tom briefly. “It was sort of a case of a perfectly irresistible force coming in contact with a perfectly immovable body – but not quite,” and he went more into the details of the accident on the ice.

“Humph! He must have been pretty mad,” commented Morse.

“He was. Threatened arrest and all that. But Tom calmed him down,” said Jack with a chuckle. “I guess Skeel didn’t want to see the police very badly.”

“What gets me, though,” spoke George, in his perpetually questioning voice, “was what Skeel was doing around here.”

“I’d like to know that myself,” voiced Tom. But he was not to know until later, and then to his sorrow.

As the group of lads progressed, they were joined, from time to time, by other students from Elmwood, who had been out enjoying the day either by skating, coasting or sledding, and it was a merry party that approached the gate, or main entrance to the grounds, passing through the quadrangle of main buildings, and scattering to their various dormitories.

The holiday spirit was abroad. It was in the air – everywhere – the glorious spirit of Christmas, the day of which was not far distant. The boys seemed to know that the school discipline would be somewhat relaxed, though they did not take too much advantage of it.

Various engagements were made for surreptitious parties to meet here and there, to enjoy forbidden, and, therefore, all the more delightful, midnight lunches. The lads had been saving part of their allowances for some time, just for this occasion, and some had even arranged to bring away with them, from the refectory, some of their supper that night.

In due time a merry little party had gathered in the room of Bert Wilson in one of the larger and newer dormitories. The boys slid in, one by one, taking reasonable care not to meet with any prowling professor or monitor. But they knew that unless the rules were flagrantly violated, little punishment would be meted out. Each lad who came brought with him a more or less bulky package, until Bert’s room looked like the headquarters of some war, earthquake or flood-relief society, as Tom said.

“And are these the oranges George boasted of?” asked Jack, taking up one and sampling it.

“Aren’t they dandies?” demanded George.

“Whew! Oh, my! Who put orange skins on these lemons?” demanded Jack, making a wry face.

“Lemons?” faltered George, a look of alarm spreading over his expressive countenance.

“Lemons?” cried Tom. “Let me taste. Whew! I should say so,” he added. “They’re as sour as citric acid.”

“And he said they came from Indian River,” mocked Morse.

“Let’s throw ’em out the window,” proposed Joe Rooney.

“And him after them!” added Lew Bentfield.

“No, let’s save them to fire at Merry in chapel in the morning,” was another suggestion.

“I say, you fellows,” began the badgered one, “those oranges – ”

“They’re all right – the boys are only stringing you,” whispered Tom. “Don’t get on your ear.”

The advice came in good time. The arrival of other revelers turned the topic of conversation.

“Oh, here’s Hen Watson. What you got, Hen?”

“A cocoanut cake!” cried someone who looked in the box Hen carried. “Where’d you get that?”

“Bought it – where’d you s’pose?” asked Hen. “Here, keep your fingers out of that!” he cried, as Jack took a sample “punch” out of the top of the pastry.

“I wanted to see if it was real,” was the justifying answer.

“Oh, it’s real all right.”

“Here’s Sam Black. What you got, Sam?”

“Why, he’s all swelled up as though he had the mumps.”

Sam did indeed bulge on every side. He did not speak, but, entering the room, began to unload himself of bottled soda and root beer. From every pocket he took a bottle – two from some – and others from various nooks and corners of his clothes, until the bed was half covered with bottled delight.

“Say, that’s goin’ some!” murmured Jack enviously.

“It sure is,” agreed Tom. “We won’t die of thirst from my olives now,” for Tom had brought a generous supply of those among other things.

Someone leaned against the bed, and the bottles rolled together with many a clatter and clash.

“Easy there!” cautioned Bert. “Do you want to bring the whole building up here? Remember this isn’t the dining-hall. Go easy!”

“I didn’t mean to,” spoke George, the offending one.

Gradually the room filled, until it was a task to move about in it, but this was no detriment at all to the lads. Then in the dim light of a few shaded candles, for they did not want the glimmer of the electrics to disclose the affair to some watching monitor, the feast began.

It was eminently successful, and the viands disappeared as if by magic. The empty bottles were set aside so their accidental fall would not make too much noise.

Gradually jaws began to move more slowly up and down in the process of mastication, and tongues began to wag more freely, though in guarded tones.

“This sure is one great, little Christmas feed!” commented Jack.

“All to the horse-radish,” agreed Tom. “But it’s nothing to what we’ll have when we get up in the Adirondack camp, fellows. I wish you were all coming.”

“So do we!” chorused those who were not going, for various reasons.

“Hark! What’s that?” suddenly cried George. Instantly there was silence.

“Nothing but the wind,” said Tom. “Say, fellows,” he went on, “I have an idea.”

“Chain it!” advised Jack. “They’re rare birds these days.”

“Let’s hear what it is,” suggested Bert. “If it’s any good, we’ll do it.”

CHAPTER V OFF TO CAMP

Tom Fairfield disposed himself comfortably on the bed before replying. There was room there, now, for the food and drink had been disposed of. Tom stretched out, finished a half-consumed sardine sandwich, and went on.

“You know old Efficiency, don’t you?” began Tom, with tantalizing slowness.

“I should say we did!” came in a whispered chorus.

“The prof who’s always lecturing on improving your opportunities, isn’t he?” asked a student who had not been at Elmwood very long.

“That’s the one,” resumed Tom. “You know he claims we all eat and drink too much. He holds that a person should find the minimum amount of food on which he can live, and take no more than that.”

“I’ve had more than my share to-night, all right,” comfortably murmured Jack.

“And Efficiency, as we call him,” went on Tom, “is a hater of feasting of any sort, unless it be a feast of reason. I think he lives on half a cracker and a gill of milk a day, or something like that.”

“Well, what’s the idea?” asked Bert, impatiently.

“This,” answered Tom, calmly. “We will take the remains of our herewith feast, the broken victuals, the things in which they were contained, the empty tins, the depleted bottles, and deposit them on the doorstep of the domicile of Professor Hazeltine, otherwise known as Old Efficiency. When they are seen there it will show to the world that he does not practice what he preaches.”

There was silence for a moment following Tom’s announcement, and then came chuckles and smothered laughter.

“Say, that’s a good one all right!”

“It sure is!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! It takes Tom Fairfield to think ’em out!”

“Easy there!” Bert cautioned them. “You’ll give the whole snap away, if you’re not careful.”

“Well, shall we do it?” asked Tom.

“I should say we will!” declared Jack.

“Then gather up the stuff and come along, a few at a time,” advised the ringleader. “We don’t want to make too much noise.”

A little later dark and silent figures might have been observed stealing across the school campus, carrying various objects. The front stoop of the professor, who was such a stickler for efficiency and the maximum of effect with the minimum of effort, was in the shadow, and soon it was piled high with many things.

Emptied sardine tins, olive bottles which contained only the appetizing odor, pasteboard cartons of crackers or other cakes, ginger-ale bottles with only a few drops of the beverage in the bottom, papers and paper bags, the pasteboard circlets from Charlotte ruses – these and many more things from the forbidden midnight feast were piled on the steps. Then the conspirators stole away, one by one, as they had come.

Tom Fairfield lingered last to make a more artistic arrangement of the empty bottles; then he, too, joined his chums.

“I rather guess that’ll make ’em lie down and close their eyes,” he said, in distinction to the process of “sitting up and taking notice.”

“It sure will,” agreed Jack, with a chuckle.

There were whispered good-nights, pre-holiday greetings and then the students sought their rooms, for there was a limit beyond which they did not want to stretch matters.

In the morning they were sufficiently rewarded for their efforts – if rewarded be the proper word.

Professor Hazeltine, going to his front door to get his early morning paper, saw the array of bottles and debris. At first he could not believe the evidence of his eyesight, but a second look convinced him that he could not be mistaken.

“The shame of it!” he murmured. “The shame of that disgraceful gorging of food. They must be made an example of – no matter who they are. The shame of it! I shall report them! Oh, the waste here represented! The shameful waste of food! I suppose all that is here represented was consumed in a single night. It might have lasted a month. I shall see that they are punished, not only for their disgraceful action in thus littering my stoop, but for gorging themselves like beasts!”

But the professor forgot one thing, namely, that to punish a culprit one must first know who he is, and how to catch him. It was the old application of first get your rabbit, though doubtless the professor would have changed the proverb to some milder form of food.

However, he took up his paper, ordered the servant to remove the debris, and then proceeded to his simple breakfast of a certain bran-like food mingled with milk, a bit of dry toast and a cup of corn-coffee. After which, bristling with as much indignation as he could summon on such cold and clammy food, he went to Dr. Meredith and complained.

The Head smiled tolerantly.

“You must remember that it is the holiday season,” he said. “Boys will be boys.”

“But, Doctor, I do not so much object to the disgraceful exhibition they made of me. I can stand that. No one who knows me, or my principles, would think for a moment that I could consume the amount of food represented there.”

“No, I think you would be held guiltless of that,” agreed the President.

“But it is the fact that the young men – our students – could so demean themselves like beasts as to partake of so much gross food,” went on Professor Hazeltine. “After all my talks, showing the amount of work that can be done, mental and physical, on a simple preparation of whole wheat, to think of them having eaten sardines, smoked beef, canned tongue, potted ham, canned chicken – for I found tins representing all those things on my steps, Dr. Meredith. It was awful!”

“Yes, the boys must have had a bountiful feast,” agreed the President with a sigh.

Was it a sigh of regret that his days for enjoying such forbidden midnight “feeds” were over? For he was human.

“I want those boys punished, not so much for what they did to me as for their own sakes,” demanded Professor Hazeltine. “They must learn that the brain works best on lighter foods, and that to clog the body with gross meat is but to stop the delicate machinery of the – ”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Dr. Meredith, a bit wearily. He had heard all that before. “Well, I suppose the boys did do wrong, and if you will bring me their names, I will speak to them. Bring me their names, Professor Hazeltine.”

But that was easier said than done. Not that “Efficiency” did not make the effort, but it was a hopeless task. Of course none of the boys would “peach,” and no one else knew who had been involved.

Professor Hazeltine came in for some fun, mildly poked at him by other members of the faculty.

“I understand you had quite a banquet over at your house last night,” remarked Professor Wirt.

“It was – disgraceful!” exploded the aggrieved one, and he went on to point out how the human body could live for weeks on a purely cereal diet, with cold water only for drinking purposes.

So the boys had their fun; at least, it was fun for them, and no great harm was done. Nor did Professor Hazeltine discover who were the culprits.

The school was about to close for the long holiday vacation. Already some of the students, living at a distance, had departed. There were the final days, when discipline was more than ever relaxed. Few lectures were given, and fewer attended.

Then came the last day, when farewells echoed over the campus.

“Good-bye! Good-bye!”

“Merry Christmas!”

“Happy New Year!”

“See you after the holidays!”

“Get together now, fellows, a last cheer for old Elmwood Hall! We won’t see her again until next year!”

Tom Fairfield led in the cheering, and then, gathering his particular chums about him, gave a farewell song. Then followed cheers for Dr. Meredith, and someone called:

“Three cheers for Professor Hazeltine! May his digestion never grow worse!”

The cheers were given with a will, ending with a burst of laughter, for the professor in question was observed to be shaking his fist at the students out of his window. He had not forgiven the midnight feast and its ending.

“Well, we’ll soon be on our way,” said Tom to Bert, Jack and George, as they sat together in the railroad train, for they all lived in the same part of New Jersey, and were on their way home.

“What’s the plan?” asked George.

“We’ll all meet at my house,” proposed Tom, “and go to New York City from there. Then we can take the express for the Adirondacks. We go to a small station called Hemlock Junction, and travel the rest of the distance in a sleigh. We’ll go to No. 1 Camp first, and see how we like it. If we can’t get enough game there, we’ll go on to the other camps. As I told you, we’ll have the use of all three. None of the members of the club will be up there this season.”

“But will whoever is in charge let us in?” asked Jack.

“Yes, all arrangements have been made,” Tom said. “There is grub up there, bedclothes, and everything. All we’ll take is our clothes, guns and cameras.”

“Yes, don’t forget the cameras,” urged Bert. “I expect to get some fine snapshots up there.”

“And I hope we get some good gun-shots,” put in Tom. “We’re going on a hunting trip, please remember.”

The time of preparation passed quickly, and a few days later, and shortly after Christmas, the boys found themselves in the Grand Central Station, New York, ready to take the train for camp.

They piled their belongings about them in the parlor car, and then proceeded to talk of the delights ahead of them, delights in which their fellow passengers shared, for they listened with evident pleasure to the conversation of our friends.

CHAPTER VI

DISQUIETING NEWS

Three men sat in the back room of the road-house, talking in whispers, a much-stained table forming the nucleus of the group. Two of the men were of evil faces, one not so much, perhaps, as the other, while the third man's countenance showed some little refinement, though it was overlaid with grossness, and the light in the eyes was baleful.

The men were the same three who foregathered as Tom Fairfield and his chums left the scene of the snowball accident, and it was the same day as that occurrence. It must not be supposed that the men had been there during all the time I have taken to describe the holiday scenes at Elmwood Hall.

But I left the three men there, plotting, and now it is time to return to them, since Tom and his chums are well on their way to the winter camps in the Adirondacks.

"Well, what do you think of that plan?" asked Professor Skeel, for he was one of the three men in the back room.

"It sounds all right," half-growled, rather than spoke, the man called Murker.

"If it can be done," added the other – Whalen.

"Why can't it be done?" demanded the former instructor. "You did your part, didn't you? You found out where they were going, and all that?"

"Oh, yes, I attended to that," was the answer. "But I don't want to get into trouble over this thing, and it sounds to me like trouble. It's a serious business to take –"

"Never mind. You needn't go into details," said Professor Skeel, quickly, stopping his henchman with a warning look, as he glanced toward the door through which the landlord had made his egress.

"But I don't want to be arrested on a charge of –" the other insisted.

"There'll be no danger at all!" broke in the rascally teacher. "I'll do the actual work myself. I'll take all the blame. All I want is your help. I had to have someone get the information for me, and you did that very well, Whalen. No one else could have done it."

"Yes, I guess I pumped him dry enough," was the chuckling comment.

"It's a pity you had to go and get yourself discharged, though," went on Mr. Skeel. "You would be much more useful to me at Elmwood Hall than out of it. But it can't be helped, I suppose."

"I didn't go and *get* myself discharged!" whined he who was called Whalen. "It was that whelp, Tom Fairfield, who was to blame."

The man did not seem to count his own disgraceful conduct at all.

"Well, if Tom Fairfield was to blame, so much the better. We can kill two birds with one stone in his case," chuckled the professor. "Now I think we understand each other. We needn't meet again until we are up – well, we'll say up North. That's indefinite enough in case anyone hears us talking, and I don't altogether like the looks of this landlord here."

"No, he's too nosey," agreed Murker. "Well, if that's settled, I guess we're ready for the next move," and he looked significantly at Mr. Skeel.

"Eh? What's that?" came the query.

"We could use a little money," suggested the evil-faced man.

"Money. Oh, yes. I did promise to bring you some. Well, here it is," and the former instructor divided some bills between his followers and fellow plotters.

"Now I'll leave here alone," he went on. "I don't want to be seen in your company outside."

"Not good enough for you, I reckon," sneered Whalen.

"Well, it might lead to – er – complications," was the retort. "So give me half an hour's start. I'm going to drive back where I hired this cutter, and then take a train. You follow me in two days

and I rather guess Tom Fairfield will wish he'd kept his fingers out of my pie!" cried Mr. Skeel, with a burst of anger.

The three whispered together a few minutes longer, and then the former instructor came out of the road-house alone and drove off.

"What do you think of him?" asked Murker of Whalen.

"Not an awful lot," was the answer. "But he'll pay us well, and it will give me a chance to get square with that Fairfield pup. I owe him something."

"Well, I don't care anything about him, one way or the other," was the rejoinder. "I went into this thing because you asked me to, and to make a bit of money. If I do that, I'm satisfied. Now let's get cigars and slide out of here at once."

And thus the plotters separated.

Meanwhile, Tom and his friends were a merry party. They talked, laughed and joked, now and then casting glances at their pile of baggage, which included gun cases and cameras. For they were to do both kinds of hunting in the mountain camps, and they were particularly interested in camera work, since they were taking up something of nature study in their school course.

The railroad trip was without incident of moment, if we except one little matter. It was when George Abbot mentioned casually the name of Whalen, one of the men employed at Elmwood Hall.

"I wonder why he left so suddenly?" George said, as they were speaking of some happening at school.

"I guess I was to blame for that," Tom explained, as he related the incident of the cruel treatment on the part of Whalen.

"I thought he looked rather sour," went on George.

"Why, were you talking to him lately?" asked Tom, a sudden look of interest on his face.

"Yes, the day before we left the Hall. He met me in town and borrowed a quarter from me. Said he wanted to send a telegram to friends who would give him work. Then he and I got talking, and I happened to mention that we fellows were going camping."

"You did!" exclaimed Tom.

"This Whalen was quite interested," resumed George. "He asked me a lot of questions about the location of the camps, and what route we were going to take."

"Did you tell him?" demanded Tom.

"Why, yes, I told him some things. Any harm?"

"No, I don't know that there was," spoke Tom more slowly and thoughtfully. "But did Whalen say why he wanted to know all that?"

"No, not definitely. He did mention, though, that he might look for a job somewhere up North, and I suppose that was why he asked so many questions."

"Maybe," said Tom, in a low voice. Then he did some hard thinking.

In due time Hemlock Junction was reached. This was the end of the train journey, and the boys piled out with their baggage, their guns and cameras. It was cold and snowing.

"I guess that's our man over there," remarked Tom, indicating a person in a big overcoat with a fur cap and a red scarf around his neck. "Does he look as though his name was Sam Wilson?" asked our hero of his chums.

"Why Sam Wilson?" asked Jack.

"Because that's the name of the man who was to meet us and drive us over to camp," Tom said.

The man, with a smile illuminating his red face, approached.

"Looks to be plenty of room in the pung," remarked Tom.

"What's a pung?" asked George.

“That big sled, sort of two bobs made into one, with only a single set of runners,” explained Tom, indicating the sled to which were hitched four horses, whose every movement jingled a chime of musical bells.

“Be you the Fairfield crowd?” asked the man.

“That’s us,” Tom said. “Are you Sam Wilson?”

“Yes.”

“Then, we are discovered, as the Indians said to Columbus,” Jack murmured, in a low voice.

“Pile in,” invited Sam Wilson, indicating the pung. “I’ll get your traps. Ain’t this fine weather, though?”

“It’s a bit cold,” Bert remarked.

“That’s what a party said that I drove over to your camp the other day,” spoke Sam. “He was from down Jersey way, too. You fellers must be sort of cold-blooded down thar! This chap complained of the cold. But pshaw! This is mild to what we have sometimes. Yes, this feller I drove over kept rubbin’ his ears all the while. One ear was terrible red, and it wasn’t all from the cold either. It had some sort of a scar on it, like it had been chawed by some wild critter. It sure was a funny ear!”

Tom looked at his chums with startled gaze. This was disquieting news indeed.

CHAPTER VII AT CAMP

Seemingly by common consent on the part of Tom's chums, it was left for him to further question Sam Wilson and learn more about the man the caretaker had driven over to the hunting camp. And Tom was not slow to follow up the matter. He had his own suspicions, but he wanted to verify them.

"You say you drove someone over to our camp yesterday?" Tom asked.

"Not yesterday, the day before," was the answer. "And it wasn't exactly to your camp, but near it. Your camp is a private one, you know – that is, it belongs to an association, and I understand you boys are to have full run of all three places."

"Yes, the gentlemen who make up the organization very kindly gave us that privilege," assented Tom.

"Then you're the only ones allowed to use the camps," went on Sam. "I'll see to that, being the official keeper. I'm in charge the year around, and sometimes I am pretty hard put to keep people out that have no business in. So, naturally, I wouldn't drive no stranger over to one of *my* camps – I call 'em mine," he added with a smile, "but of course I'm only the keeper."

"We understand," spoke Tom, and his tone was grave.

"Well, then you understand I wouldn't let anyone in at the camps unless they came introduced, same as you boys did."

"Well, where did you drive this man then – this man with –" began George, but Jack silenced him with a look, nodding as much as to say that it was Tom's privilege to do the questioning.

"I drove this man over to Hounson's place," resumed the camp-keeper, as he saw that all the baggage was piled in the pung. "This man Hounson keeps what he calls a hunters' camp, but shucks! It's nothing more than a sort of hotel in the woods. Some hunters do put up there, but none of the better sort.

"The gentlemen who own the three camps you're going to tried to buy up Hounson's place, as they didn't like him and his crowd around here, but he wouldn't sell. That's where I took this Jersey man who complained of the cold. Kept rubbing his ears, and one of 'em was chawed, just as if some wild critter had him down and chawed him. 'Course I didn't say anything about it, as I thought maybe it might be a tender subject with him. But I left him at Hounson's."

"Did he say what his name was?" asked Tom, but he only asked to gain time to think over what he had heard, for he was sure he knew who the man with the "chawed" ear was.

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