

A Camp Adventure

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

It was in the latter part of September that Ben Clark and myself started off for the lakes on a fishing excursion—those lakes which form the head waters of the Androscoggin, and of which the Umbagog is most generally known, because it is about the only one of the lot which has a pronounceable name. On our way up, and after we had left the settlements of men behind us, we met Whit. Greeley, and we tried to persuade him to go with us; but he said he had other fish to catch than trout. Whit. was at that time sheriff, and a very excellent officer he made. A revolution in the political wheel has since tipped him over into private life, but I doubt if they will ever find a better man for that post than he. To be sure, he wasn't so large as some men—in fact, he was rather smaller than the average of men—he was smaller in size, if anything, than was that brother of his who got tipped *into* office when he fell *out*. But for all this he was a smart officer; for of all his inches he was every inch a man. He was like one of those old, round Dutch cheeses—“good and strong all through.” Ben used to laugh at him because he was so small and “Dutchy;” but to tell the plain truth Whit. had the most to laugh at, for of all the big, overfed, fat, lazy mortals that I ever fell in with, I think Old Ben was the “beatermost.” However, they were both good fellows, and both particular friends of mine, and Ben had been kind enough to accompany me on the present trip on the express condition that I should find the team, carry all luggage to be carried, and do all the cooking, he reserving the right to ride over all the rough places, to catch fish if he could, and to eat as much as he wanted. If I hadn't loved him for his thousand-and-one good qualities, I wouldn't have borne him as I did.

But to return to the little sheriff: When we asked Whit. what he was doing so far away in that dreary section, he told us he was on very particular business, and then he went on to explain. Two notorious scamps, names Aaron Grow and Jack Walrus, who had been guilty of almost every conceivable crime, had been lately been engaged, in different parts of the country, in robbing, and stealing, and issuing counterfeit money. Whit had gained a pretty clear description of their persons, and was now on their track. He meant to get a little better clue to the course they had taken, and then he would contrive such a way for their capture as might come most convenient. He knew, as did we from what he had before heard, that they were desperate fellows, and he told us that he should be very cautious. He believed that they had taken their course up that way somewhere, being probably bound for Canada, and he was now aiming for a mill-stand, some miles to the eastward of us, where a gang of men were at work, and where he hoped to gain some further information. In a little while he turned his horse off into another path, and Ben and I pursued our way.

It was late in the afternoon when Ben and I reached the lake where we planned to commence fishing, and we were fortunate enough to find an old camp in pretty good order. It was a wigwam affair, quite stoutly built, and mostly thatched with bark. Into this we put our luggage, and after we had rested a while, we made a fire, and I set about cooking some pork and potatoes, while old Ben went off to the lake to catch a few trout. I waited for him almost an hour, and when he came back he was as innocent of trout as when he went. He had a wonderful story to

tell about big fish that he had seen, and little fish that weren't worth seeing; but as I couldn't really believe him, I ate my supper of pork and potatoes without listening to him.

On the following morning, after we had eaten breakfast, and stowed away the few things we were forced to leave in the camp, we shouldered our poles and packs, and started for the nearest lake, where we caught a few very respectable trout; but as they did not bite to our satisfaction, we concluded to try the next lake above. We had found a boat, and in this we set off, and by the middle of the afternoon we were gloriously at work with hook and line. But our sport was destined to be soon interrupted. Ben had just lost a large trout from his hook—it was the eight which he had suffered to escape in the same bungling manner—when the water was suddenly ruffled by a spit of wind, and our boat started off from the fishing ground. In a few moments it grew dark from great clouds which had come up over the mountains, and the wind commenced to blow furiously. Of course we could fish no more; and as we knew that the rain must soon come, we got in our lines and got out our oars, and pulled for the landing near the camp. But we soon found that we had undertaken a task not easily to be accomplished. Our camp happened to be directly in the “wind’s eye,” and as the power of the gale increased, we found that we were not only gaining no headway, but that we were in danger of being swamped.

“We must make the nearest land,” I suggested.

“In course we must,” gasped Ben, who was really frightened. “Just consider. What would my poor Loddy-doddy do if I should be topped over an’ drowned clear ;way up here in the wood!”

But there was no time for considering. To row the boat against such a wind was simply impossible; so we headed for the nearest point of land, which we reached in safety; and just as we had got out, and drawn the boat up on the shore, the rain began to descend in torrents. We were in no immediate danger of being drowned, but our situation was far from being a pleasant one. We were at least five miles from the camp, with no clear path open to us, and were already drenched to the skin. But we started forward, determined to make the best of it. At times we could travel a few rods over a clear space upon the shore of the lake—then we would have to make our way through thick bushes and tangled vines—then over logs and fallen saplings—then through a swampy slough—and so on, from worse to worse. Poor Ben! How he did—talk! He said things I should not dare to write. But, I more than pardoned him, for there was a comicality about his expressions of dissatisfaction and disgust which really entertained me, causing me to overlook a deal of my own discomfort.

We had been an hour and a half on foot; night was closing in upon us thick and black; and yet we had not made over half the distance from our place of landing to the camp. The rain was still falling in torrents, and the fury of the wind was not abated. Bright streams of lightening flashed through the heavens, and the thunder came cracking and roaring from the troubled vault as though the mountain tops were being rent and crushed. By and by we came to a little open space by the lakeside, where we found an enormous hollow log, with the larger end towards the shore, while the other end was elevated upon the sloping bank. This must have been cut down many years before, and had been left just where it fell, its hollow-heartedness rendering it unfit for lumber. The moment Ben saw this log he stopped. A flash of lightening had revealed it to him, and he waited for another flash by which to examine it more thoroughly. It was not yet so dark,

however, but that I could see the form of the log quite plainly, but Ben wished to see more than that. He got down upon his knees and examined the inside, and by the next gleam of lightening he was enabled to see that the hollow was spacious and dry; and, thereupon, he settled down and informed me that he was going no further. At first I would not believe he was in earnest, but he soon convinced me that he was never more so in his life. He was, in fact, completely “blown.” There was no more breath or strength left in him. He said he should crawl up into the log and remain there until the storm had passed over.

“It’s no use,” he said. “I can’t go any further. I’m all gone—I should never reach the camp in the world. Let me get out o’ this alive, and I’ll know better next time. I’ve been to Wild River once; and now I’ve been to the Lakes. Perhaps you’ll catch this old boy in some such scrape again; but I doubt it.”

With this he crawled up into the log, and when I found that he was determined to stay there I turned my face once more towards the camp. Ben offered to make room for me in his retreat, but I didn’t want it. He begged of me to stay with him, but I wouldn’t. I know he felt a little timid at the thought of being left there alone, but I have no doubt that his legs and lungs would have both failed him had he attempted to keep on.

In ten minutes after I had left my fat and weary companion the night had wholly come, and it was only by the occasional flashes of lightening that I was enabled to find my way. However, I kept on, with the water of the lake for my guide, and, at the end of three hours, I gained the camp. I thought not of supper—I did not even think of dry clothes—I only crawled to the further corner of the wigwam, where my bed of boughs was, and threw myself down to rest. The rain was still falling, though not so fast as before, and I thought the wind did not blow so hard. I was just sinking into a doze when I was aroused by the sound of footsteps upon the dead boughs at the entrance of the camp, and my first impression was of Old Ben, I started to a sitting position, and was upon the point of speaking, when the tones of a strange voice fell upon my ear. There were two new-comers, and as I listened I quickly discovered that they were both strangers to me. I settled back upon my elbow without noise, determined to keep quiet, and learn, if possible, what manner of guests these were.

There is no need that I should try to give their conversation, nor that I should repeat such portions thereof as I distinctly remember. Suffice it for me to say that they spoke freely, having not the remotest suspicion that they were overheard, and that I thus gathered all I could wish to know. They were Masters Aaron Grow and Jack Walrus—the two villains of whom my little Dutch Cheese, the sheriff, was in quest. They had been dodging about, knowing that an officer was upon their track, and were only anxious to make their way to Canada. Since the storm had set in they had been hunting for some place of shelter, and had at length fallen upon this camp. They had a supply of whiskey with them, of which they partook quite freely, if I could judge from what I heard. They were pretty well worn with fatigue, and as the liquor began to operate, it made them sleepy, and they resolved to have a nap; but before they resigned themselves to sleep they examined their weapons, of which they seemed to have a goodly number, assuring themselves that their pistols had not got wet enough to injure them, and that the caps were tight upon the nipples—all of which they did by the sense of feeling. After this I heard them crawl up towards the side of the camp, and ere many minutes they were snoring eight lustily.

Now what should I do? I lay back upon my couch to think. I had thought of a great many things, when my own senses gave up to the fatigue that was upon me, and I fell asleep. When I awoke it was from being aroused by a crackling of the boughs at the entrance of the hut, and I started up and rubbed my eyes till they were clear. The storm had passed, the wind had gone down, and the moon was shining brightly. I saw a man standing in the doorway, and the thought flashed upon me that Old Ben had come; but a moment's observation convinced me of my error. There was none of the old boy's huge rotundity, but it was rather diminutive than otherwise. In another moment I knew it. That short, dumpy, Dutch form was not to be mistaken for anything else that I ever saw. It was Whit. Greeley. I started to my feet and hurried towards him.

"Ha—you're here, are ye?" said he, as he saw me.

"Hush," I whispered, seizing him by the arm, and drawing him away from the camp. "How came you here?"

"How came you here?" he repeated, seeming to be puzzled by my manner.

"Yes," said I.

"Why—I came from the last house on my feet. But I'll tell you plainly: I learned, last night, that my two rogues were in the woods somewhere hereabouts, and I tried to get some of the hands at the dam to come up with me, but they were not willing. Then I happened to think of you. I believed I should find you at this camp, and I started for it. I left my horse at the house where you left your wagon, and struck into the footpath through the woods. That was just before the storm came up. When it began to rain I was half way through, but somehow I lost the path. When the darkness came the Lord only knows where I was. I finally found shelter under the matted roots of an overturned tree, and there I lay down and went to sleep. When I woke up I found the moon shining, and by the help of the stars I found the lake, and here I am. Now where's Old Ben?"

"Never mind about Old Ben now," said I. "There's somebody else here you'd like to see?"

And then I told him what had transpired during the night. At first he thought I was trying to fool him; but I led him softly into the hut, and showed him the two men lying there. The whiskey they had drank, added to their fatigue of body, operated as a powerful soporific, and they still slept soundly. Whit. could see by the moonlight that they were the chaps he was after, and he gave utterance to a very strong exclamation of satisfaction. He had his handcuffs with him, and he proposed that we should iron them while they slept. He showed me how the things worked, and I helped him—I took one while he took the other. It was a very simple matter—just close the iron carefully upon one wrist—then left the other over upon the breast—place it by the side of its mate—clap the shackle under it—close it quickly—a sharp click of the spring—and the work was done. The rascals moved, and awoke, but before they could realize what had happened we had relieved them of their weapons, and they were completely powerless. They tried to gain their feet, but we knocked them back; and when we made them understand that we would shoot them if they made us any further trouble, they concluded to remain peaceable. They

swore and growled prodigiously, but we didn't mind that. We only looked to see that they didn't get their irons off.

In half an hour it was daylight, and pretty soon thereafter Old Ben came puffing up from the lake. He was a sad looking spectacle; with his clothes dirty and torn; his hands scratched and sore; his hat gone from his old bald pate; and his face wearing the expression of despair. But when we told him what had happened at the camp, and when he saw the two wretches who, he believed, were sure to be hanged—he brightened up. And then, when I had managed to build a fire, and he found himself before a huge pan of friend trout, he really seemed something like himself.

We ate our breakfast, and then set off upon our return. The prisoners gave us no trouble, for their irons were secure, and there was something in the eye of the sheriff that told them 'twould be very unsafe to tempt him too far. When we reached the place where the horses had been left, we managed to get another team, and thus we got along quite comfortably.

In due time Messrs. Grow and Walrus were brought to trial, and I think they are still at work for the State. Sometimes Old Ben talks about his wonderful adventures at "The Lakes," and when he does, he invariably waxes valiant over the story of how "WE took them two blood thirsty villains and put 'em in irons."

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