

***WILLIAM MURRAY
GRAYDON***



***THE CAMP
IN THE SNOW;
OR, BESIEGED
BY DANGER***

William Murray Graydon

The Camp in the Snow; Or, Besieged by Danger

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THE CAMP IN THE SNOW

CHAPTER I.

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A MERCILESS ENEMY.

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“All tickets, please!”

The blue-uniformed conductor, with a lantern under his arm, and his punch in hand, entered the smoking-car of the Boston express.

It was between seven and eight o'clock on the night of the tenth of December. The train was speeding eastward through the wintry landscape of the State of Maine.

Among the passengers in the smoking-car was a well-dressed lad of eighteen, with a ruddy face, and gray eyes in which was a lurking gleam of humor.

Just across the aisle sat a middle-aged man with a clean-shaven, cadaverous face and rusty black clothes. He was reading a small book, and seemed to be absorbed in its pages.

As the conductor drew near, the lad fumbled hurriedly in his pockets. He turned them inside out, one after another. He looked on the floor, on the seat, in the folds of his clothing.

“Your ticket, sir.”

The conductor had been standing by the seat for a full minute.

“I—I must have lost it,” replied the lad. “Just my beastly luck! You know that I had one, for you clipped it twice.”

The conductor stared coldly.

“Find it, or pay your fare,” he answered.

The lad put his hand into the breast pocket of his cape coat. He whipped out a handkerchief, and a bulky pocketbook. The latter flew across the aisle and under the next seat, where it burst open.

The clerical-looking man stooped and picked it up.

“Permit me,” he said, handing it back with a low bow.

“Much obliged,” answered the owner. “Hello! there’s a wad of bills missing. It must have fallen out.”

The clerical-looking man pretended not to hear. He turned toward the window and went on reading. The conductor and the lad peered under the neighboring seats. They saw no trace of the money. The other passengers looked on with interest.

“Lift your feet, sir,” said the conductor, sharply, as he tapped the clerical passenger’s arm.

The man obeyed with an air of injured innocence, and the roll of bank notes was instantly seen.

“Quite an accident,” he protested. “I was not aware that my foot was on the money.”

“Of course not,” sneered the conductor.

“No insults, sir,” replied the other, in a dignified tone. “Here is my card. I am a missionary from the South Seas. My name is Pendergast.”

The conductor waved aside the proffered card.

“I see you are reading Hoyle’s Games,” he remarked, sarcastically. “Is that the text-book you use among your heathen?”

The missionary looked discomfited for an instant.

“I have been perusing this evil work with horror,” he replied. “Some worldly sinner left it on the seat. Perhaps it is yours, sir?”

The conductor reddened with anger, and some of the passengers laughed aloud. The missionary folded his hands with a smile of triumph, and looked out of the window.

Meanwhile the lad had restored the roll of bills to his pocketbook, and in one of the compartments of the latter he found the missing ticket. As the conductor took it he leaned over and said:

“Keep an eye on that rascal yonder. He’s no more a missionary than you or I.”

Then he hurried on to the next car.

A few moments later scattered lights appeared through the frosty windows, and finally the vague outlines of houses and streets.

“Bangor!” shrieked the brakeman.

The announcement created a stir and bustle among the passengers. The train soon rolled into a lofty station. The lad gathered up his traps, hurriedly left the car, pressed through the crowd, and gained the lighted street.

Here he paused for a moment, remembering the conductor’s warning. But he could see nothing of the clerical-looking individual, though he carefully scanned the passers.

“I’ve seen the last of that chap,” he muttered. “Perhaps he was a missionary, after all. Well, I can’t lose any more time here. Thanks to Tom Fordham, I’ve got my bearings pretty straight. I’ll bet Tom wishes he was with me now. I

fancy I can see him grinding away at old Herodotus by lamplight.”

With a smile that showed his white teeth, he strode down the street of Maine’s most thriving port and lumber town. He entered the Penobscot House, a block and a half from the depot.

He gave his luggage to a bellboy, and wrote his name on the register:

“Brick Larkins, New York City.”

The clerk looked at the inscription and smiled.

“Done it again, have I?” exclaimed the lad. “Brick is only a nickname. Shall I write it James?”

“Let it stand,” replied the amused clerk. “Will you have supper, Mr. Larkins?”

“Thanks, but I have dined on the train. Send the traps up to my room, please.”

Brick fastened a button or two of his cape-coat, and strolled out of the hotel.

He did not see the missionary standing across the street. If he had he would probably have failed to recognize him, for Mr. Pendergast now wore a tweed steamer-cap, gold glasses, and a short gray overcoat with the collar turned up.

Brick little dreamed that he was being followed as he pushed steadily across town to the banks of the Penobscot River.

Turning parallel with the river, Brick went on until the lights of the town were some distance behind. By the dim glow of the starlit sky he could see that the beach sloped upward to a pretty steep bluff, and that tall stacks of lumber

lay in all directions. The sullen slapping of the waves drowned his crunching footsteps.

"It's all as Tom described it," he said, half-aloud, as he paused to look about him. "The dug-out ought to be near by, but I can't see a glimmer of light. Hullo! what's that?"

A sharp sound had fallen on his ear, and he wheeled around in time to see a dusky figure within ten feet of him.

"Hold on there," cried a stern voice. "Stop!"

Brick, having started forward, only ran the faster, and in the darkness he collided with a tall stack of lumber. He grabbed the projecting slabs and climbed to the top.

He was now eight or ten feet from the ground, and looking down he saw his pursuer standing directly beneath.

"No use, my lad," whispered the man. "I've got you safe. Pass down that pocketbook."

With a thrill of surprise, Brick recognized the voice.

"This is nice missionary work, Mr. Pendergast," he replied. "I'm willing to donate five dollars to the heathen if you'll be satisfied with that."

"No chaffing, young feller," growled the ruffian. "I'm not in the missionary line now. If I don't get your pocketbook and watch and chain in about ten seconds, I'll fix you."

Brick hesitated, and glanced toward the distant lights of the town. There seemed no chance of saving his money. An idea struck him, and he said, boldly:

"I've got friends at hand. You're making a big mistake to stay here."

"That bluff won't work," was the cool reply. "There's not a soul within half a mile. Fork it over, quick."

Just then the pile of lumber began to tremble and sway, and down it came with a crash.

Brick escaped injury by an agile leap that landed him on his enemy's back. They went to the ground together, and rolled clear of the avalanche of planks and snow.

The lad was almost a match for his wiry antagonist, and by a desperate effort he tore loose and ran. Pendergast overtook him, and snatched the collar of the cape-coat. Brick twisted out of the heavy garment and sped on. He had the pocketbook buttoned safely under his jacket.

Threats rang behind him. A pistol cracked shrilly, and the ball whistled by his head. He dashed on through the gloom, panting hard for breath, and shouting hoarsely for aid. Nearer and nearer came the crunching footsteps of his enemy.

Unluckily a boat lay right in the path. Brick spied it at such close quarters that he had no time to swerve aside. He pitched roughly over the gunwale and fell inside. The next instant Pendergast was kneeling on him, and shaking him with savage anger.

"I'll fix you," he snarled, as he lifted his shining weapon. "I'll pay you for this."

"Don't!" pleaded Brick.

He threw up his hands, and struggled to ward off the threatened blow.

"Take that," cried the ruffian.

Brick felt a stunning pain, and immediately lost consciousness.

CHAPTER II.

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INTO THE WILDERNESS.

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Brick struggled back to his senses amid strange surroundings. He was lying on a soft bearskin in a small, picturesquely-furnished room. A wood fire blazed in one corner, and a lamp swung from the ceiling.

Three of the walls of the apartment were of hard, polished clay, ornamented with groups of guns, fishing rods and paddles. The fourth was of heavy timber, and contained a door and a shuttered window. Deer and bear robes covered the floor. Here rested two canvas canoes, and there lay a light cedar skiff.

Two lads stood by the fire. One, about eighteen, was tall and well knit, with dark hair and a swarthy, honest face. The other was shorter and thicker, and possibly a year younger.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Brick, as he pulled himself to a sitting position.

The strangers hastened to his side.

"How do you feel?" asked the elder lad. "I was just going for a doctor."

"I'll be all right pretty soon," replied Brick. "I've got a thumping headache, though."

"And no wonder, with a bruise like that over your eye. Do you remember what happened?"

"Yes," answered Brick, "up to a certain point. But how did I get here?"

“We heard the racket, and ran out with our guns and a lantern. We saw a man jump from a boat down near the water. We chased him a short distance, and he fired at us twice. We found you lying on the bottom with an ugly bruise on your forehead, and between us we got you up here.”

“You certainly saved my life,” declared Brick, gratefully, “and you saved something else, too. This is what the ruffian was after. You scared him off before he could find it.”

He unbuttoned his jacket, and drew out the pocketbook. Then, in a few words, he related the whole adventure to his new friends.

“I’m lucky to escape with a bruise and the loss of my overcoat,” he concluded. “It would have been ten times worse but for you fellows.”

“Here is your coat,” said the younger lad. “We stumbled over it when we were chasing the rascal. Were there any valuables in it?”

“Only a couple of letters from my father,” replied Brick, as he went through the pockets of the garment. “By Jove! they’re gone, though. The thief will find he’s made a valuable haul.”

Brick spoke in jest. He little dreamed what use would be made of the stolen letters, or what a harvest of trouble he was destined to reap from their loss.

“I’m feeling considerably better now,” he added. “I’m glad of it, for I’ll have to be moving soon. It’s getting late, and—— Hullo! something just struck me. I believe you’re the very chaps I’m looking for. This is a queer go.”

The lads exchanged puzzled glances. Possibly they thought that the blow had deranged Brick’s mind.

“I’ll bet anything your names are Jerry Brenton and Hamp Foster, and this is the dug-out in the bluff,” resumed Brick. “Am I right?”

The boys nodded in open-mouthed wonder.

“I’m Jerry Brenton,” admitted the elder.

“And Hamp Foster is my name,” added his companion, “but I never saw you before.”

“Of course you didn’t,” declared Brick. “Do you fellows remember Tom Fordham, the chap from New York that spent a vacation here two summers ago, and had such jolly times with both of you?”

A light broke on the boys.

“We remember Tom,” they exclaimed, with enthusiasm.

“And did you ever hear him talk of his best chum, Brick Larkins?”

“Often,” replied Hamp. “But you ain’t——”

“Yes, I am, too. I’m Brick Larkins, and I’m awfully glad to meet you fellows. The way I come to be here is this: Tom and I entered Columbia College last fall, and a couple of weeks ago I got into a scrape and was dropped for a term. I wasn’t going to spend the time on a lot of musty books, so I concluded I’d come up to Maine, and go deer hunting. My folks are in Europe, and a lawyer down in New York is my guardian as far as money matters go. I’m my own master in other ways, and I’ve got cash enough to see me through for a while. I understand from Tom that the father of one of you chaps is a guide. I want him to take me into the woods for a few weeks. I’m willing to pay his price, whatever it is.”

“I’m the one,” replied Jerry, soberly; “but my father is laid up with rheumatism, and won’t be able to make any

trips this winter.”

“I’m awfully sorry,” said Brick. “Perhaps I can get another guide. Look here, are you fellows in any trouble? You both look pretty downhearted, if you’ll pardon me for saying so.”

The boys were reluctant to speak, but Brick finally compelled them to admit that they were in serious trouble, and that they had come to the dug-out that evening to have a quiet talk over the matter.

Two months before Hamp’s father had been drowned by the foundering of his lumber barge in a storm. What little money he left was soon spent, and now Hamp had just been thrown out of employment by the closing of the mills in which he worked. Unless he speedily found a new place, his mother and sister would be in actual want.

Jerry was confronted by an equally dismal prospect. He could get no work to do, and money was sorely needed for his sick father. His mother had formerly earned a little by sewing, but her time was now required for the invalid.

Brick pondered the situation for a little while. He could see that the boys were proud, and that it would never do to offer money. At last he hit upon a bright idea.

“Look here,” he said, “I’ll bet you fellows know as much about the woods as regular guides. Tom always said so, anyway. How is it?”

“Hamp and I have been out with my father a good deal,” replied Jerry, modestly. “We’ve been to Moosehead Lake and Chesumcook.”

“And we’re pretty fair shots,” added Hamp. “We’ve been in at the death of more than one bear or deer. If it wasn’t for

our being so young we might get employment as guides. We were talking about that this evening.”

“I wouldn’t want better guides,” declared Brick. “If you fellows will take me into the woods I’ll pay each of you fifteen dollars a week, and stand all expenses. Before we start I’ll pay in advance for three weeks.”

He opened his pocketbook and showed the contents.

“I can easily afford it,” he added. “I have nearly five hundred dollars.”

The boys were dazzled by this munificent offer. It brought tears to their eyes to think of the relief that money would bring to the afflicted ones at home.

“You’re awfully kind,” said Jerry, in a tremulous voice. “I’ll gladly go if my father will let me. And I’m sure he will.”

“I know my mother won’t object,” added Hamp.

“Then it’s as good as settled,” declared Brick. “I can hardly wait till we’re off. I’ve been wanting to see the Maine wilderness for years.”

“Know much about guns or hunting?” asked Jerry.

“Mighty little,” Brick candidly admitted. “I never shot anything bigger than a blackbird in my life. Game don’t run loose in New York.”

“We’ll show you sport enough,” promised Hamp. “Just wait till we strike the deer.”

The three lads fell to chatting with the freedom of old friends, and Brick quite forgot his aching head.

During the next few days all arrangements were made, and Brick provided himself and companions with a lavish outfit.

Brick had reported his adventure to the police, but without success. Mr. Pendergast had doubtless left the town.

The ground was covered with snow to the depth of half a foot on the crisp December afternoon when the young hunters landed at Katahdin Iron Works—the terminus of the Bangor and Katahdin Iron Works Railroad.

They were now more than one hundred and fifty miles from the coast, and very nearly in the center of Maine.

On the following morning they hired a sledge and driver, and were transported thirty miles northward—to the end of a rugged lumber trail. The next day they pushed ahead on foot, trailing two hand sleds, to which were strapped their provisions, guns, and various needed supplies.

By sundown they reached one of the eastern arms of Moosehead Lake, and built a temporary lean-to among the rocks and trees. They were now in the actual wilderness, miles and miles from civilization.

CHAPTER III.

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A DOUBLE PERIL.

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After supper that evening a light snow began to fall, but it ceased at midnight. The increased cold wakened Brick, and while he was searching for an extra blanket he heard a long, wailing cry outside.

The youth was scared almost stupid for a moment. Then he tremblingly lit a lantern, and roused his companions.

The boys peeped through the crevices of the lean-to, but they could see nothing. Twice they heard the dismal sound. It was certainly coming nearer. They seized their guns, and huddled close together.

“What do you suppose it is?” whispered Brick.

“A catamount,” replied Jerry, “or Indian Devil, as some call them.”

“That’s right,” added Hamp. “It’s going to attack us, too.”

“Then be ready to shoot,” warned Jerry. “I’ll give the word when the time comes.”

The brute now seemed to have stopped, though the blood-curdling wail echoed several times on the frosty air.

“I saw a catamount in Central Park once,” whispered Brick. “It was an awful-looking creature.”

Just then the unseen prowler wailed again. The boys peered anxiously at the snowy open space before the lean-to.

“No wonder the brute is bold,” exclaimed Hamp. “There’s nothing left of the fire but a couple of hot embers.”

“We must build it up right away,” declared Jerry. “Come on, you fellows. We’ll stick together.”

“But won’t the catamount jump at us?” asked Brick.

“Not while we have the lantern,” assured Jerry. “All wild animals are afraid of fire.”

The boys ventured out of the lean-to. They timidly advanced to the fireplace, which was in the center of the glade.

“Where’s the wood you brought at bedtime?” asked Jerry. “I don’t see it.”

“I—I forgot all about it,” admitted Hamp. “I was too sleepy to think. I’m awfully sorry.”

“Being sorry won’t help us now,” said Jerry, grimly. “There’s not even a stick.”

There was silence for a moment. The boys expected nothing less than to be pounced upon by the hungry beast.

“I believe the catamount has sneaked off,” declared Hamp. “Give me the lantern, and I’ll get some wood. It’s my fault that we have none.”

“I’ll go with you,” replied Jerry. “There’s a windfall under the roots of that dead pine tree. It’s only half-a-dozen yards from here. Come on.”

The two lads started, taking their guns and the lantern. They crossed the glade, and vanished in the timber.

Brick was left standing by the fireplace. He was afraid to go after his companions, nor did he like to be alone. He rested his gun on a stone, and stooped over the dying embers of the fire, trying vainly to fan them into a blaze. As he rose to his feet he heard a crackling noise, and was horrified to see a great, dusky animal crouching on the edge

of the timber, directly opposite the spot where the boys had disappeared.

The beast's arrival was so unexpected that Brick lost his wits. With a yell he turned and dashed across the glade, and rolled into a copse of bushes.

There he lay, shouting for help at the top of his voice, and expecting to be immediately torn to pieces.

Lusty cries quickly answered him, and trampling footsteps came near. He saw the gleam of the lantern go by, and then a rifle cracked sharply. The next thing he knew Jerry and Hamp were hauling him to his feet.

"Where's the catamount?" he panted. "Did you kill it?"

"Missed," replied Jerry. "I only had a snap shot. The creature bolted into the forest when it saw the lantern. We didn't get here any too soon."

"I thought I was a goner," declared Brick.

His face was pale, and he trembled like a leaf.

Hamp had a great load of wood on his back, and the fire was soon blazing merrily.

The catamount made no sign for ten minutes, and then a wailing cry from far off told that he was retreating.

After waiting a little longer the boys went back to their warm blankets and pine boughs.

They fell asleep very quickly, and it was broad daylight when they got awake. The sun was behind murky gray clouds, and the air was bitterly cold. The snow crunched sharply under foot, and the lake was frozen from shore to shore.

The presence of the catamount in the vicinity decided the boys to hunt a new camping-place.

After breakfasting on bacon and fried potatoes, they packed the sleds and started.

They traveled northward over the ice, following all the bays and indentations of the lake's crooked shore. At noon they stopped for lunch. The cold was something awful.

"It looks as though we were going to have a hard winter," said Jerry when they were on the march again. "It's a good thing that we brought snowshoes, and plenty of extra blankets along."

"I hope we don't see anything more of that catamount," replied Brick. "I suppose there are plenty of them in the woods, though."

"A good many," assented Hamp. "But they don't often trouble hunters. This fellow was extra savage. He must have been hungry."

"They've been known to follow men for days and weeks in bitter weather," said Jerry.

The conversation shifted to another topic, and the boys trudged on for half an hour. Then Brick suddenly gave a sharp cry, and pointed to a spot on the shore, some fifty yards distant.

"I saw the catamount over there," he declared. "It was a big, yellowish-gray animal, and it slipped past that rock into the bushes."

"Sure?" asked Hamp, anxiously.

"Dead sure."

The boys looked and listened. They were about moving on, when a long, thick-set animal stole out of the forest, and crouched by the edge of the ice. It wailed in a mournful

tone, and crept a little nearer. It was as large a catamount as the two Maine lads had ever seen.

“There’s a chance,” exclaimed Jerry. “Come on. We’ll try to get within easy shooting distance of the brute. Three of us can’t well miss.”

The boys abandoned the sled, and advanced toward shore, with loaded rifles. But before they had taken a dozen steps the catamount turned tail, and vanished in the timber.

“No use,” muttered Hamp. “That’s a crafty fellow, and he’s not going to give us any advantage. He’ll stick to us like a leech, though, and some time, when we are off our guard——”

A significant pause ended the sentence.

“What are we going to do about it?” asked Brick. “This knocks all the fun in the head. We won’t dare go to sleep at nights.”

“We’ve got to get rid of the brute,” replied Jerry, “and I think I know how to do it. What do you say to cutting straight across the lake, and making our camp on the other side? I don’t believe the catamount will follow us over miles of open snow and ice.”

This suggestion was warmly approved. They headed due west toward the faintly visible forest on the further shore of the lake, a distance of ten or twelve miles.

To keep off the intense cold they ran along on a dog trot. The sleds trailed easily behind them over the patches of crisp snow and glassy ice.

Two hours later the western shore of Moosehead Lake loomed clearly before the young voyagers. They were not