

## ❁ ❁ The Story Page. ❁ ❁

### The Prairie Boys' Picnic.

BY JUDSON KEMPTON.

Five little boys and one who would object to being called little, now that he was twelve years old, were walking side by side along the grassy road through Arnold's grove. A woman's voice calling had summoned them to dinner, and they came, hurrying from different parts of what seemed to them a beautiful forest.

"Say, boys!" cried the one who joined them last, "aren't we having a great time today! Tell you!"

The others responded so rapidly it was hard to tell just who was talking:

"I s-h-o-u-l-d say so!"

"This is the b-e-s-t picnic!"

"I wonder why we never came here before. It's lots more fun than down the river where we generally go. Do you know, Burt?"

Of course Burt Mackay, being twelve years old while the others were only nine and ten, was supposed to know. And he did.

"Why, Mr. Arnold is very particular about his grove, and he won't often allow boys in here; but our teacher's a relation of his, and she promised we wouldn't set any fires or anything. I heard my father say this timber is worth—I don't know how many thousand dollars. Mr. Arnold set it out himself twenty-five years ago, and he wouldn't feel very nice, I guess, if some fellows were to get in here some time and start a fire and burn it all up."

The woods, or grove, in which Miss Arnold was giving her little friends they composed her Sunday school class—an outing, would not be considered much of a forest by most boys. It was exactly a quarter of a mile square, and, whichever way one looked, the trees all appeared in rows, about four feet apart. With the exception of a few large oaks that stood on a knoll in the middle of the little woods, all the trees had been artificially planted and consisted of spruce and fir. From these fast-growing trees Mr. Arnold had cut the poles and posts used on his large prairie farm, and from this woodlot, the only one for miles around, he had likewise supplied the farmers of a wide section of country. These boys had grown up to the age of nine to twelve without ever having seen any other bit of forest, and only on rare occasions had they ventured here. No wonder this little picnic was a treat to them.

Jimmie Campbell had chased a rabbit to his hole, and when Hal Lebkucker joined him and poked at the hole a few minutes, they discovered that it was a nest, containing at least four little ones. One of these Hal had been fortunate enough to catch, and he spent the rest of the day carefully guarding its escape. Horace Hughes had found an old hornet's nest as big as a tin pail, and, by cutting off the limb to which it was fastened, he secured it, without breaking it, for his museum in the woodshed. Owen Mills and the teacher had gone together, both being bird enthusiasts, and since leaving home had counted twenty-seven different varieties that they had sighted.

Dinner was now the order of the day, and, on a large, flat rock, on the top of the knoll by the big trees, Miss Arnold had spread a cloth and set out a sumptuous lunch. Bread and butter, ham and chicken sandwiches, more pies than boys, biscuits, cakes, preserves—a feast truly, that was in keeping with the great time the boys were having.

A cross-road, not often used and overgrown with grass, ran through the grove close by the flat rock and the big trees.

"Mith Arnol', are dey any bears in dis big woods?" asked Owen Miles' little brother, who had come to the picnic largely because he refused to remain peacefully at home. Hardly had the teacher answered smilingly, "Oh, no, dear!" or the derisive laughter of the big boys ceased, before the baby's eyes bulged out, and he stood erect and pointed toward the grassy road with great excitement.

"O-e-e-e! Look! Look! Dere is a bear, an' dere he is!"

All looked where he pointed, and there, sure enough, was a big black bear coming towards them, but muzzled and led by a chain by a small, dark-looking man. Dinner, for the present, was forgotten. The "baby" and several of the smaller boys were ready to run, but the teacher told them the bear would not hurt them, and Burton, who had been to Chicago twice, said: "Wot's the matter with you kids? Scared of a tame bear! Come on; let's have some fun!"

The little, dark man now stopped with the bear and proceeded to give an entertainment.

"Up, bear!" he cried, and the great, black brute rose on his hind feet, looking to the boys nearly twice as high as the man.

"Dansay, bear!"

"A ling tung tung,  
Ta la loo h ay!"

And, as the keeper sang a high, funny song which Hal imitated afterward in the school-yard as above, the bear, with his forepaws hanging down, began an awkward dance, circling about his musical keeper. The boys shouted. What fun! This was the best of all. Wouldn't the

other boys be envious when they told them of it! Here they were in the woods with a real, live bear!

"Kissay me!" commanded the little man with the black eyes and moustache; and the bear stopped dancing, and laying his great paws on the man's shoulders, he poked his muzzle's mouth against his master's cheek.

"Can he climb a tree?" asked Owen.

The man smiled. "Oui!" he said. "Him lak clam de spruce. Dat mak' he tink he back in de woods by Kebeck, Canadaw."

The Frenchman led the bear to a straight, limbless spruce that was marked for a telegraph pole, and cried, "Ascenday, bear!" In a moment the bear was up so far that the keeper could just reach the end of the chain, which he evidently feared to let go. Indeed, for a few minutes it seemed to the boys he was alarmed lest he should get away, but a few sharp pulls on the ring in the animal's snout brought him to earth again. The Frenchman then fastened the bear to the tree by winding the chain about its base and snapping a clasp into the link, and taking off his cap, he approached the boys for a collection.

"Say, Mister," said Burton, "we're sorry we haven't any pennies out here, but we'd be glad to have you take dinner with us."

The bear keeper was very polite; with many bows to the teacher, who was greatly amused at all the boys had done, and wisely let them enjoy their day in their own fashion, he took off his cap and seated himself among the boys.

He was evidently hungry, and disposed of sandwich after sandwich as if they had been only wafers; but he laughed and talked like any boy, and answered all the questions that poured on him from his inquisitive entertainers: What was his name? How old was the bear? When was he caught? Who caught him? Did they kill the old mother bear? etc., etc.

His name, he said, was Jean Courteau; and he described how, six years ago, he himself had trapped a great she-bear in the forests of Canada, near his home. One of the cubs he succeeded in capturing alive. He had trained it to do tricks, and, when his wife died, he left home to travel with it, to make some money which he wanted very badly. For some reason the boys halted in their questions when the Frenchman told them that. They wanted to know why he was trying to earn "de begg money," but something warned them that there was a secret which he might not wish to tell.

For a minute or two there was silence, during which the bear-keeper seemed to be in a reverie; then, looking up, he smiled and said: "You boys mak' me tink my own leetle Bateese, he jes' so big as dees' boy," and he laid his hand on Burton: "I gif heem good education, me; an' nex' year, if I win de begg money, I sen' heem away de Grande Ligne school. Den, wen he de begg man wit' de moustache, he not be lak me—tramp, tramp, tramp, wit' de bear."

As the boys watched the dark, little man and the black bear start off on their journey again toward town, it may be that they realized a little more than ever before why it was important to go to school and to study hard; and it may be, too, that their sympathies were a little widened as the truth came to them that a person may have a noble ambition no matter how humble, or even funny, his calling may be; but of these thoughts no one spoke.

Instead, while Miss Arnold was gathering up the remains of the feast and putting the dishes in the baskets, the boys were discussing what each would do if a real, wild bear should come rushing through the woods and make for them.

"I'd climb a tree," said Jimmie.

"Aw, climb a tree!" said Hal, sarcastically: "what good would that do you? Couldn't the bear climb, too?"

"Yes," said Jimmie, "but I'd climb that little one that isn't strong enough to hold a bear."

"Yes, an' don't you know what he'd do? He'd just give that little tree a couple of shakes with his paw, an' you'd drop out'n it like a ripe apple right into his mouth!"

"Well, what would you do?" said Jimmie, easily beaten.

"I'd just lay down, an' hold my breath!"

At this Burton laughed, and the other boys whooped.

"Well, I guess I was readin' the other day about a man that did that, and the bear jest came along an' sniffed at him, and thought he was dead, an' went off an' left him be!" said Hal, resentfully.

"What would you do, Burt?" and all looked to Burton with the respect that a small boy has for one a little older.

Burton pointed to the big oak. "I'd climb that tree," he said. "It's too big for the bear to get his paws around, and I don't believe he could climb it."

But you couldn't either," said Hal; "the crochich is nine or ten feet from the ground."

"Web, now," said Burton, "let's play that you're the bear; you go down the road and come back at us, and we'll run."

So the new game was started with a shout. While Hal, as the bear, was gone and was prowling around discovering the boys, Burton took his little woodman's axe, of which he was very proud, and trimmed up a small spruce leaving the branches about six inches long to serve as a

ladder. This he laid up against the crotch of the tree, and when the "bear" came to the bushes, howling like no animal that ever lived, he ran for the big oak and clambered the crotch just as Hal reached the foot of the tree.

"Well, coys, if you have finished that game, I think it is time for us to go."

The voice of authority was heard for the first time that happy day, but it was quickly obeyed, and soon the little party—tired but noisy still—with laughter, singing and shouting, was retreating along the road, through the solemn, stately evergreens. So much engaged were they with the memories of the events of the day, that they did not observe a great, rough, black haired animal that turned off from the road as they approached and bounded away crashing through the dark woods.

They had got out of the grove but a little way when Burton stopped suddenly and clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Boys," he said, "I've forgotten my lunch basket and it has been my little axe in it. I wouldn't care, only for the axe, but I wouldn't lose that. I must go back and get it. Sha'n't I go with you?" said the teacher.

"Oh, no, thank you," said Burton, starting to run: "you all go on, I won't be ten minutes. I'm not afraid of rabbits!" And he had already disappeared in the little woods road.

"Well," said Mrs. Arnold, joining the other boys and moving on towards town, "I suppose there is nothing to hurt him, and it is getting late."

As Burton re-entered the woods alone, they seemed colder and gloomer than they had been when the other boys had been with him. He stopped, and thought of retreating; the trees, to this prairie boy, looked so dark and still. But this was only for a moment. Burton was far from being a coward. He started up a whistling tune, kept down an impulse to run, thrust his hands in his pockets and marched straight ahead, looking up at some crows that were flying across the long, narrow strip of blue sky that stretched above the tree tops. In five minutes he was back to the little knoll with the flat rock and big oaks, and there by the oak with the crotch, in which was still resting his ladder, was his lunch basket with his little axe in it, and some butter, cake and jelly, all carefully wrapped up in paper, as Miss Arnold had fixed it for him.

Picking up the basket and swinging it on his arm, feeling better in his mind, he started again for home, wondering if he could catch up to the boys before they had got to the village. He had gone about a hundred steps when he saw something that sent his heart into his throat and made him feel as weak as water. There in the road before him, and not twenty feet away, was a great black bear, standing still and sniffing with his ugly nose. In a second his heart, which had seemed to stop, began to thump as if it would break out of his chest—for it seemed well up in his throat—and the blood tinged to his very toes and finger tips. In relating it afterward he said he felt as if he was all gristle.

He turned and ran for the big tree.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that the bear was following his example, and what was worse, following him! Like a great dog, the bear lowered his head, made a few bounds, and was at the boy's heels, so close that he could hear the brute's snuffing breath and a low, smacking noise he made with his mouth.

Burt did not yell, but he gave a cry that was half a prayer, and, fairly flying for the big tree which was only a few yards distant, at the same time he dropped his lunch basket, which, up to this moment he had carried unconsciously on his arm.

That was what saved him. The bear turned completely around to go back after the basket. Like a big pig, he rooted the contents out of the basket with his snout. He licked up half a pound of butter as if it had been a drop of cream. He licked a glass of jelly absolutely clean before he passed it by for a couple of pieces of chocolate cake, nicely frosted, which afforded him so much satisfaction that he stuck his nose in the air and shut his little black eyes while he reduced it to pulp and rolled it down his throat.

The greater part of all this Burton had anxiously viewed from his supposedly safe retreat in the crotch of the big oak, into which he had climbed in less than two seconds, throwing his ladder down behind him.

More leisurely now the bear approached the tree. Standing on his hind legs, he stretched up, but was unable to reach the crotch where the first great branch left the main tree trunk. As the huge, black head came up to within a few feet of the boy, Burton observed that there was a ring in the snout, and to the ring was suspended a long, steel chain ending with a clasp. Then the truth, which at first he had not thought of, dawned on the boy; it was the Frenchman's bear. With the thought a part of the fear left him—the paralyzing part—and his wits began to work.

"Dansay, bear!" he cried, but the bear only looked at him the crosser, and, opening his lips, he showed his sharp, ugly teeth. At that sight Burt shrank back several feet out on the great limb of the tree. The bear dropped to the