

The knife was covered with blood, and Ned knew that he had wounded the wild cat. At that moment, too, the rushes sprung into a sudden blaze.

"The danger is past," murmured Ned, fervently. "Ernest! Ernest! wake up!"

He kept the fire going despite the rain, and related what had occurred to his startled companion.

They kept awake the remainder of the night, and were not troubled with any more unpleasant visitors.

Before noon the next day they came to the point where the river had its source.

Here an immense lake, or rather bayou, spread out for miles.

Here the boys devoted an hour to examining the shores of the bayou. At last they found a trace of Ralph Warden's party.

The remains of a camp-fire showed where they had been either the previous evening or the night preceding it.

From here the broken rushes and twigs, and an occasional footstep indicated that the fugitives had gone southerly along the bayou shore.

Yet all that day, the two pursuers did not come up with the objects of their search.

They were about to abandon the quest, when they came across the remains of a second camp-fire.

Here they found one of the guns and some ammunition. Evidently Ralph Warden and his friends had got tired of hunting, and had abandoned one of the weapons as too heavy to carry.

For over an hour a clear trail of the boys showed. But after following it in a circle for some time it diverged through a watery waste.

"The boys have got confused and lost themselves," decided Ned. "We cannot go much farther to-night."

He loaded and fired the gun several times, hoping the reports might reach the ears of the lost boys, but there was no responsive signal.

They found a dry bank near a little branch of the lake, and decided to camp there for the night.

Beyond them lay the bayou with scores of islands, and choked up with trees and rushes. The boys could hardly have penetrated it.

The rain had been falling nearly all day, but stopped after dusk; the moon and stars came out.

"Their trail is covered by the water," said Ned. "And they keep going south, believing they are returning to the camp, I surmise."

They built a fire and took turns at watching, to keep it replenished during the night, and also to look out for any answering glow of their lost comrades' fire in the distance.

The monotony of the hours were unrelieved except by the torments of myriads of insects. About nine the rain began to fall again, first slowly, and then in torrents.

The situation of affairs became so bad that Ned, who was on watch, awoke his companion.

"This deluge will drive us out," he said. "See! the dry spot we crossed here an hour ago is submerged."

Ernest shouldered the gun and Ned slung the knapsack of provisions over his arm. They found a new shelter under some trees, but an hour later the water was over their shoe tops.

The situation, at first cheerless, was becoming serious. Behind them the increasing flood had made a dead level of the way they had come, while, in wading to new spots of shelter, driven from the last one, they were compelled to wade knee-deep in the morass.

They had tried to cross from a place under some large trees to a still safer spot, when Ernest fell into a hole and was nearly drowned.

"We cannot keep floundering around this way," said Ned, in despair, as both, wet through and chilled to the bone, looked gloomily over what seemed now a vast lake dotted here and there with clumps of trees and islands, each moment sinking deeper into the water.

"What can we do, then?"

"Climb the trees and wait for the storm to subside."

They followed the idea at once, and found a comfortable resting-place in the crotch of a tree.

The rain continued to pour down. They had never seen the like. As grey morning dawned it cleared for a time. Far as the eye could reach, except for a few islands as yet unsubmerged, before them and by the track they had come, was a vast watery waste.

Ernest was appalled; Ned, grave and anxious. The latter started from a serious reverie as to the situation, as Ernest cried suddenly:

"Look! Ned. Yonder, through the trees, on the little island!"

"What is it?"

"A fire!"

Both boys peered curiously through the misty dawn in the direction from which a lurid glow emanated.

"It is a fire!" cried Ned, excitedly, "and there are figures around it! Ernest, I guess we have discovered our lost comrades at last."

CHAPTER XXV.

RESCUED.

The little island upon which the fire was visible was not more than two hundred yards distant from the tree in which the rising water had imprisoned Ned and Ernest.

The fire, however, seemed burning in the centre of it, and a view of the same was obscured by intervening trees.

The boys watched the spot in silence for some moments.

"You think it is Ralph and the boys?" inquired Ernest.

"It must be. They are certainly human figures, and they have been cut off from land by the floods just as we are, only more fortunate in securing a dry spot."

"And if the island should be submerged?"

"They must trust to the tree tops as we have done," replied Ned.

"But they have no provisions; they took none from the camp."

"Then we must reach them with some."

Ernest looked curiously at Ned. At that moment, however, the latter began loading the gun.

"I am going to try to arrest their attention," said Ned, and he fired the weapon.

Its echoes sounded harsh and reverberating over the watery solitude. Ned kept his eyes fixed on the island, and a minute later, lighted a piece of paper and waved it aloft.

In the early morning light they saw several forms come to the edge of the distant island.

Ned raised his voice and shouted as loud as he could. The prisoners replied, although no words could be made out.