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THE BOY SCOUTS WITH THE MOTION PICTURE PLAYERS

By

Robert Shaler

CONTENTS

CHAPTERS

- I. The Haunted Make-Believe "Castle"
- II. Creating a Panic
- III. Taking Possession
- IV. Scouting at Midnight
- V. A Startling Surprise
- VI. Guests at the Camp Fire
- VII. Faced by a Mystery
- VIII. As in the Days of Chivalry
- IX. With the Motion-Picture People
- X. The Assault on the "Castle"
- XI. Imitation and Reality
- XII. When Swords Clashed
- XIII. Well Done, Scouts!
- XIV. Oakvale Gets a Thrill

CHAPTER I

It was about the middle of a fall afternoon, and Friday at that, when five well-grown lads, clad in faded khaki suits that proclaimed them to be Boy Scouts, dropped down upon a moss covered log near a cold spring at which they had just quenched their thirst.

The one who acted as leader, and to whom the others often deferred, answered to the name of Hugh. He was, indeed, Hugh Hardin, assistant scout master; and the others were also full-fledged members of the Oakvale Boy Scout Troop of which so much has been written and told.

Those fortunate readers who are familiar with previous volumes in this series need no introduction to these lively lads.

For the benefit of others who have not up to this time made their acquaintance, it may be said that the boy next to Hugh was Alec Sands; the stout, rosy-cheeked fellow with the beaming face, Billy Worth; the slender one, Arthur Cameron; and the uneasy chap "Monkey" Stallings, so nicknamed on account of his pet hobby for hanging by his toes from the cross-pieces of telegraph poles, or the lofty limbs of forest trees.

It might also be noted further that Hugh was known as a fine all-round scout; Arthur's leading specialty lay in the line of amateur surgery, at which he was wonderfully proficient; Alec gave the leader a pretty good race in nearly every line of scout activity, while Billy,—well, to be frank, Billy's strong points might be set down as an everlasting fund of cheery good-nature, and a remarkable capacity for stowing away "grub."

Apparently the boys were out on some sort of fall hike. Each had burdened himself not only with a pack but a blanket as well, the latter secured, after the usual military habit, across one shoulder.

Each fellow also depended on a stout staff that, in a way, answered for an Alpine stock, should they have to climb any hills. Besides, it was handy as a weapon of defense in case they were attacked by a vicious dog.

"Well, the time limit you set has come, Alec," Hugh was saying after they had stretched themselves along the convenient log.

"Yes," burst out Billy, eagerly, "you promised to tell us all what you confided to Hugh before he agreed to get up this little weekend hike. I'm burning with curiosity to know what's in the wind."

"We've taken a leap in the dark, you see," added Arthur, "because when Hugh said it would be well worth our while we just trusted him. Now, open up, Alec, and relieve our suspense. You said the next time we stopped you'd begin to explain all this dark mystery."

"Me, too," exclaimed the Stallings boy, who was always turning his restless eyes upward, as though seeking some enticing branch where he could exercise his favorite antics.

Alec Sands laughed softly.

"I'm ready to tell my little story, boys," he remarked. "It isn't such a wonderful one, after all, but Hugh agreed with me that it might give some of us an excuse for coming up this way. And my aunt had supplied all the necessary funds covering our railroad fare from Oakvale to the little station where we jumped off the local train—Scarsdale."

"Which aunt, Alec?" demanded Billy, whom it was always difficult to suppress.

"Oh! none of you ever met *this* relative of mine, I guess," considered Alec. "Aunt Susan is a very rich woman, and what you might call eccentric if you wanted to be particularly nice, and not use a harsher word. In fact, her nerves have gone back on her, and every little noise about sets her *wild*. She has taken a notion that the only salvation for her is to find some sort of a quiet country home in which her servants can glide around in felt slippers, with never a rooster's crow to disturb the dead silence."

"Whew! you must mean she's a regular crank, Alec—excuse me for saying it!" exclaimed Billy, wiping his heated brow, for when others were shivering the fat boy perspired.

"Well, forget that part of it," resumed Alec, making a wry face. "Aunt Susan is peculiar, and immensely wealthy, so that money needn't stand in the way of her doing anything she fancies. In some way or other it seems she heard about a queer place away up here in the woods. It is known as Randall's Folly!"

"Why, seems to me I've heard something about that place!" burst out Arthur Cameron, in a surprised

tone. "Isn't it a modern castle built by a man years ago and meant to look like some British place in the days of Queen Elizabeth?"

"Just what it is, Arthur," chuckled Alec, as though highly amused.

"Let's see," pursued the other, uneasily, "there was some sort of story told in connection with the castle—strikes me folks said it was haunted, or something like that."

"Whew! and are we heading for that beautiful spot as fast as we can hike along?" demanded Billy, his eyes round with wonder, perhaps uneasiness.

"My aunt wrote to my mother that she wanted some one to come up here and investigate, so she could have a full description before going any further into the deal for the property. Not that Aunt Susan bothered a bit about the ghost part of it, but she wanted to know whether the building was a ramshackle affair, or part-way decent. In fact, she asked for photographs of the place inside and out, and even requested that, if I could be induced to take the trip, along with some of those wonderfully bright chums of mine of whom she had been hearing such great stories, I was to buy the best camera that fifty dollars could command, and use the balance of the hundred for other expenses. So here we are close to Randall's Folly, with Saturday ahead of us for business, and meaning to go back home Sunday afternoon."

"Which lovely programme must include two nights spent under the roof of a haunted house!" gasped Billy, still wiping his streaming forehead, though he really should have been cooled off by this time.

"For my part," spoke up Arthur Cameron, "nothing would please me better than the chance to say I'd run across a real ghost. I've been reading lots of creepy stories connected with spooks, but they never could get me to believe in such silly things."

"Same here," added the Stallings boy, though his voice sounded a trifle unsteady as Hugh could not help noticing.

"As for me," the scout master remarked, "I considered it a fine chance for a little excitement. I, too, had heard some stories about this gloomy make-believe castle that had been built in the lonely woods by old Judge Randall when he married a young wife, and wanted to carry her away from the rest of the world. They say it's getting to be an interesting ruin by now, though perhaps Alec's aunt might choose to patch the crumbling walls up, if other things suited her."

"Huh! takes all sorts of freaks to make this world," grunted Billy. "The idea of anybody actually wanting to bury themselves away up here, and never see a thing in the way of circus, baseball, winter hockey, Boy Scout rivalries and other good happenings. The old Judge must have been crazy."

"Well, lots of people suspected it when he started to build this castle," said Alec, drily. "They felt dead sure after it happened; for hold your breath now, fellows, because to be honest with you there was a terrible tragedy, and after the poor young wife was buried the judge lived as much as ten years in an asylum. He had become a maniac, you see, from jealousy of his beautiful wife."

"I suppose it's all right, since there are four other fellows along," Billy finally went on to say, "but honest Injun, if I had known all this at the start, I don't believe I would have been so anxious to come. I expect that old toothache of mine would have cropped up and kept me home."

"The walking is good down to the station, Billy," murmured Alec, "and we were told that a freight-train would come along around dark this evening, bound south, which was due to stop at the water-tank"

"That'll be enough for you, Alec," continued the fat boy, with a certain amount of dignity. "You never knew me to show the white feather, and back down, once I put my shoulder to the wheel. If the rest can stand it I ought to be able to do so."

"Good for you, Billy," cried Hugh. "Alec here ought to make you an apology. But since we've rested up, and there's still half a mile to tramp, with the afternoon wearing on, suppose we make a fresh start."

Soon they were trailing along the dimly seen road, which evidently was not used to any great extent by the few scattered farmers in that vicinity. Most of the talk was in connection with the weird mansion toward which they were heading. Alec was coaxed to relate a number of other facts he had managed to pick up regarding its romantic history.

"Look out for signs of a high wall on the left, boys," he finally told them. "It may be almost hidden by vines and scrub trees by now, I was warned. It surrounds the whole place, though here and there it may

be broken down. Few people after dark want to pass this place except in a hurry, and although it's only a mile and a half from the railroad, I don't believe tramps ever think of coming here. You see, most of them know the stories told about Randall's Folly, and they steer clear of the place."

A short time afterwards Hugh's keen eyes made a discovery.

"I think the wall you mentioned lies over yonder where all that wild tangle can be seen," he remarked, whereupon there was a hurried movement in that direction, followed by various exclamations to the effect that the scout master's announcement was indeed true.

"Seems as if the castle must be perched on a high piece of ground, commanding a pretty good view of the country around," observed Arthur, as they sought for a broken place in the crumbling wall so as to gain an entrance to the grounds beyond.

"The story goes that Judge Randall built it that way so he could keep watch, and know if any of his wife's former suitors were heading this way," Alec explained.

"Why, he must have been a regular old Bluebeard!" gurgled Billy.

"He was demented on that one subject," confessed Alec, "and the disease kept getting a stronger grip on him until finally—but hello! here's the hole in the wall we wanted to find, so let's crawl over the broken-down stones and enter."

"Hold on," snapped Hugh just then, "I thought you said, Alec, no one was bold enough to trespass here! If you look down to where I point you'll see part of a footprint in mud, showing that a man must have come across this broken wall not half an hour or so ago!"

CHAPTER II

CREATING A PANIC

When Hugh gave utterance to this really startling announcement, he naturally lowered, his voice. The others came crowding up, and stared at the tell-tale mark. As their scout education had long since passed far beyond the novice range they had no difficulty in seeing that Hugh had stated the truth.

"A whopping big foot made that mark," whispered Billy.

"And see there," added Alec, hastily, also in a low tone, "here's a second one not so big. Two fellows crossed this hole in the wall, and only a short time ago, because the mud is as fresh as it can be."

That caused the scouts to exchange significant looks.

"Anyhow," Billy was heard to whisper to himself, "whoever made those footprints was a live human being, and no spook, that's sure."

The thought evidently did much to relieve his mind, Hugh realized. Alec meanwhile was shaking his head as though not only puzzled but annoyed.

"What do you make of it, Hugh?" he asked, like most of the fellows turning to the scout master when there was a difficult problem to be solved.

"Oh! there might be several explanations," replied the other with a reassuring smile. "First of all, these fellows may be a couple of curious countrymen wanting to take a look around while the sun is still up, being afraid to come here after night sets in."

"Yes, go on, Hugh; what next?"

"Then it might be they are men who have heard about the deserted castle, and wonder if they could pick up anything worth carrying off if they forced an entrance. But there's still another answer to your question, Alec."

"I can guess what you mean, Hugh. My aunt, it may be, isn't the only person with money to burn who's taken a notion to buy Randall's Folly. Is that what you've got on the tip of your tongue, Hugh?"

"Just what I meant to say," he was told. "But no matter, if we find there's a rival in the field, perhaps we might scare him off in some way. That wouldn't be such a hard thing to do, when you've got a haunted house to work with."

"Oh! with my trick of throwing my voice, Hugh," spoke up Monkey Stallings, "I bet you I could play the ghost racket to beat the band. Just give me a try-out and see what I can do, Hugh."

"Well, first of all," remarked the scout master, "we had better climb over the break in the wall here, and find the trail of these two unknown men. After all it may turn out they are simple country jakes wanting to take a peep at the mansion they've heard so many queer stories about."

Accordingly the five scouts hastened to clamber across the gap, a feat requiring little dexterity; though clumsy Billy had to catch his toe among the stones, and come near pitching headlong down, were it not for Hugh quickly throwing out his ready arm.

It required little effort to find the tracks beyond the mass of fallen stones; a mere tyro of a scout could have succeeded in following such a plain trail, and at that hardly half test his ability along that line.

Bending partly over, the boys kept diligently at work pursuing the zigzag line of footprints. Evidently the men had picked out the easiest way to advance. They must have either known where they were going, or else followed a former path that was not overgrown, and partly concealed with rank vegetation.

"Look! there's a glimpse of the castle!" whispered Alec, suddenly.

Through the openings in the copse beyond they could see the gray walls rising up ahead. It was an impressive spectacle. The westering sun shone on the tower that had been made to look like some old-time type English masonry, famous in history, with its portcullis, drawbridge, and surrounding watery ditch known as a "moat."

After silently inspecting the side of the old building thus presented to their gaze for a minute or so, the boys began to show their former restlessness.

"The trail keeps right on, Hugh!" whispered Alec, which was as much as saying that he could see no reason for further delay.

"Listen!" cautioned Arthur.

"Oh! what did you think you heard?" asked Billy, with a gasp.

"It must have been voices somewhere ahead of us," came the answer. "The men are talking it over, most likely."

"Debating whether they've got the nerve to go a step further and enter the haunted castle," chuckled Alec. "Let's move on, and get a squint at the bold trespassers, Hugh."

Accordingly once more the whole party started to move ahead, foot by foot. All the woodcraft they had managed to pick up in previous exploits was brought into play as they crept along softly.

"Stop!" Hugh gave the low order, finally.

"I see them, Hugh," announced Alec, eagerly.

"Show me where," begged Billy, pushing himself forward.

A few seconds later Arthur was heard to say disdainfully:

"Why, it looks to me as if they might be only a pair of Weary Willies, who had wandered up here from tramping the railroad ties. They must have heard about a fine house lying idle here, and have come to camp out for a spell. You can see they've got a chicken dangling by the neck, and some old tomato cans they mean to make coffee in. Whew! but they are a tough looking pair, I tell you."

Alec looked, and sniffed disdainfully.

"Here's where we're up against it good and hard, fellows," he remarked, softly. "The question is, do we want to stand for that couple of greasy hoboes keeping us company while we camp out here in the deserted castle? Everybody say his mind, and majority rules, you know."

"Excuse me, if you please," muttered Arthur, with a shudder. "I'd sooner sleep in a pigpen than alongside such human animals as those unclean hoboies."

"Why," remarked Billy, aghast at the thought, "they might rob us of our blankets; or worse, of our precious grub, which would be what I'd call a calamity without equal."

"We've just got to bounce them, that's plain," said Monkey Stallings. "Hugh, you remember what you the same as promised me?"

"Oh! if you think you can start something that will rid us of the pair," the scout master told him, "go to it right away. If you want us to help, say the word, Monkey."

Already the other was feverishly attacking his pack, which he had tossed upon the ground. He soon found what he was looking for, to judge from the satisfied exclamation that passed his lips.

"Tell us what you've got there, Monkey," urged Alec.

"Yes, that's do," added Billy, anxiously, "because we want to be on our guard. If it throws a scare into those tramps it might work just as bad with some other fellows I know, unless they were warned beforehand. Show your hand, Monkey, please."

"Oh! shucks! it's only a sort of wild-goose call I tried to make from directions I read in a little book," confessed the ingenious one. "It don't seem to imitate a wild honker much, but say, I c'n make the most *unearthly* sounds come out of this hollow bone you ever listened to. Why, it nigh about freezes my own blood when I try the call in the pitch dark. Now watch and see what happens."

"Be careful, Monkey," warned Hugh, as the other prepared to creep away. "Don't let them glimpse you at any time, or there may be serious trouble. They look like an ugly couple of customers. I suppose you mean to try and get around on the other side of them?"

"Sure thing," replied the originator of the scheme, "and if I were you, Hugh, I'd make out to hide your bunch, because, believe me, that pair will come whooping along this way like mad pretty soon."

"Which is what we'll do right away, Monkey, never fear," Hugh told him.

Accordingly the four scouts disposed themselves in such fashion that while they would be hidden from view they could at the same time watch whatever took place, and enjoy the fun, if, by good luck, the scheme arranged for the entertainment of the bold hoboies, turned out successful.

The two ragged wanderers were sitting on the stones bordering the ditch or "moat" that surrounded the make-believe ancient castle. They evidently debated as to the advisability of forcing an entrance to the wonderful mansion, and taking up temporary or permanent quarters there. Perhaps the idea of spending the coming winter under so magnificent a roof, with frequent excursions around the countryside in search of necessary supplies, engrossed their attention.

Some little time passed away. The four boys began to show signs of impatience, believing that Monkey Stallings must surely by now have gained the place he had in mind when he left them.

"There, I saw him wave his hand to us from that slit in the stone wall of the tower!" hissed Alec, presently. "He's managed to find a way to get inside after all, and now the fun's going to begin."

"It's time, too," added Arthur, "because the hoboies have made up their minds to try and break into the house. See, that big chump has picked up a heavy rock, and he acts as if he meant to hurl the same against those stout oaken doors."

Indeed, that was just what happened. The collision, however, only resulted in a loud bang, for it would take many hundreds of like blows to do those stout doors any serious damage. The smaller tramp shook his head dubiously.

"Now they are talking it over again," whispered Alec. "The short one is pointing as if he believes they can find a much easier way to get inside than trying to smash the door down. Hey! Monkey, better get busy or you'll find the pair treading close on your heels."

Hardly had Alec spoken that last low word than a thrilling sound came floating to the ears of the four listening scouts. None of them could ever describe what it was like; indeed, it seemed to possess a character all its own, and somehow caused the "goose-flesh" to creep over their bodies, even though they knew the origin of the uncanny cry.

The two tramps had jumped back at the first outburst. They seemed to be staring wildly toward the "donjon tower," as Alec persisted in calling the round structure at one end of the imitation castle.

Louder and louder grew the racket. Billy laid a trembling hand on Hugh's arm as though seeking comfort from personal contact with the scout master.

Presently the pair of hoboes appeared to have reached the limit of their endurance. One snatched the dead fowl that had possibly been stolen from some farmyard on their way up from the railroad; while the other hastily gathered the rest of their primitive possessions in his trembling hands.

Then, as another fearful burst of strange cries broke forth from the haunted castle, the two men started wildly on the run. Faster and faster grew their pace as Monkey blew more furiously on his home-made "goose-call" with telling effect. As they passed the spot where Hugh and the other three scouts were lying in concealment, the alarmed pair could be heard giving vent to excited remarks, and some strong language as well, though neither of them seemed to possess the nerve to turn his head and look back so as to find out if they were being pursued.

So they went out of sight along the crooked trail they had made in approaching the deserted mansion; though for several minutes afterwards the sound of frequent collisions with trees, and stumbles over hidden vines proclaimed that their panic showed no signs of abating.

CHAPTER III

TAKING POSSESSION

"Don't all laugh at once," cautioned the scout master, knowing that an outburst was imminent.

Understanding what was meant, the boys threw themselves down upon the ground and gave way to merriment that was none the less overpowering because it had to be indulged in "with the soft pedal on," as Arthur artfully expressed it.

While they were still enjoying themselves in this fashion, Monkey Stallings joined them. He had a huge grin on his rather odd-looking, face, showing that he felt fully satisfied with his recent fine work.

"Say, did I do the thing up in good style, boys?" he demanded.

"I should say you did, Monkey!" burst out Billy. "Makes me think of one of Aesop's fables I used to read ever so long ago, about the lion and the donkey out hunting together."

"Suppose you tell us about it then," suggested Arthur, a little wickedly, for he had, in truth, a pretty fair idea concerning its nature.

"Why," proceeded Billy, hastily, "it seems they discovered a flock of goats in a cave, and the donkey suggested that he disguise himself with an old lion skin they found, and go in to scare the goats out, when the lion standing by the exit could kill the game. When he had hee-hawed and kicked up such a rumpus that the poor goats dashed out, to meet their fate at the exit, the donkey finally came along and proudly asked the lion what he thought of his antics. 'Splendid,' said the lion, or something like that, and I guess you'd have frightened me, too, if I hadn't known you were only a donkey!"

Monkey Stallings hardly knew whether that, was intended for a compliment or not, but he laughed because the others did.

"All the same I had the longest pole that knocked down the persimmons," he asserted. "I gave that bunch the biggest scare of their lives. The way is clear for us now, and, thank goodness, we won't have to sleep under the same roof with that greasy pair of rascals, and, after all; that was the end in view."

"Monkey," said Arthur, "you've put us all under heavy obligations by what you did, and for one I'm not going to forget it, or twit you about the funny noises you manage to coax out of that bone goose-call you made. The end justifies the means, is what I say every time. Now, what's next on the programme, Hugh?"

"Well, since we've met the enemy and won the fight," laughed the other, "I should say our best move would be to occupy the abandoned works. Monkey can lead us to where he managed to get into the castle."

"As easy as falling off a log," asserted the other, proudly, as became the principal actor in the late

little "unpleasantness."

"Besides," added Alec, impatiently, "we want to take a few pictures inside and out of the old shebang while the sun still hangs high."

"What's the hurry?" asked Billy, who liked to put off things to a more convenient season whenever he could find half of an excuse; "plenty of time to do all that to-morrow, I should think."

"'Strike while the iron is hot,' has always been my motto," asserted Alec, when, in truth, it was mostly his impatience that hastened his actions. "How do we know what sort of a day to-morrow may turn out to be? Suppose a storm came along, how could I get a good picture of the castle to send my aunt so as to pay for the elegant camera she gave me?"

"Guess you're right there, Alec," admitted Billy, always ready to own up when he felt that the argument was going against him. "Besides, it needs plenty of light to get views inside the house, when the windows are as small and measly as they seem to be here."

"Oh! as for that," declared the other, airily, "leave it to me. I've been smart enough to fetch along an entire outfit for taking flashlight pictures; so you see we can get all we want after night comes."

"You've certainly got a level head on your shoulders, Alec," ventured Arthur, giving the other a slap on the back that was intended for commendation, though it made the recipient jump, for he had not been expecting anything of the sort, and possibly there was that about the air of that haunted mansion which caused all of them to be a bit more nervous than usual.

Monkey Stallings led them around to one side of the rambling building. As they went, they were loud in their expressions of amazement and even delight, for really, it was an impressive sight to the eyes of American lads not accustomed to crumbling ruins of old-time castles, where doughty knights of the Middle Ages may have fought in tournament with lance and sword.

"Wait up a bit, please, fellows!" suddenly exclaimed Alec. "I couldn't find a better view of the castle than right here, with that sun blazing along the walls, the turrets and that magnificent donjon tower. I want every one of you to be in the picture at that, so place yourselves as I tell you."

Alec was something of a photographer, and had many good views in a book at home. He fully expected to do wonderful things with this expensive outfit, since the lens alone cost three times as much as his other camera complete.

When he had snapped off several views he declared himself satisfied.

"In the morning, if the weather holds good," he remarked as he gave them the "high sign" that he was through, and that they need not pose any longer, "I mean to pick up a couple of views from the other side. The morning sun will allow me to do that, you understand. And now, Monkey, where did you climb inside?"

They were soon able to gain the interior after the same manner in which the pilot of the exploring expedition had accomplished it. Monkey's sharp eyes had discovered a small opening that might be called a slit in the solid wall, after the fashion of those to be seen in the dwellings of Moors and Arabs and Turks. It was easy enough for each boy in turn to squeeze himself through that slender gap, though once there arose a serious doubt in Billy's mind as to whether he would not stick fast, and have to be pushed through with a rammer, much to his bodily discomfort.

Two fellows behind assisted his progress, while the others in advance gave him a helping hand, so that finally Billy gained his end, though he could long afterwards be seen ruefully rubbing his elbows and hips as though they had been scraped in the passage.

After that they left their packs in one of the lower apartments, while they roamed all through the wonderful interior. Apparently money had not been spared in the erection of an imitation castle, though Hugh found, in some places where what was supposed to be solid rock, proved to be only wood, skillfully painted to resemble the more lasting material.

"Whew! it has about forty rooms all told, I should say," observed the steaming Billy after they had wearied of wandering about the strange place, and came back to the apartment where their blankets and packs had been deposited.

"Wonder how Aunt Susan will like the blooming old shack?" Alec was heard to say as though some doubt had already commenced to enter his mind.

"You, said, she wanted it quiet, you know, Alec," observed Hugh. "I defy any one to find a place that

fills that bill better than this one. Why, not even the peep of a bird can be heard; it's just a brooding silence that would get on the nerves of most people and make them shout out loud."

"Let's hope it stays that way while we're up here," said Billy, and then noticing that some of the other fellows were smiling broadly he hastened to add: "Oh! it isn't that I really expect anything like a ghost to walk when it comes midnight, you understand, but I don't always sleep as sound as I would like, and I hate to have anything screechy wake me up. So, Monkey, please keep that goose-call of yours in your pocket the rest of the time."

"Perhaps, we had better get ourselves comfortably fixed before night finds us," suggested Hugh. "We can make a blaze in that fireplace and cook supper here as nice as any one would want. It's going to turn out a novel experience for the lot of us."

"You bet it, will," asserted Monkey Stallings stoutly. "I always did think I'd like to spend just one night in a house they said was haunted. To tell you the honest-truth I'm real glad you asked me to come along, Alec, even if there does seem to be a queer feeling running up and down my backbone. I never knew the like before save that time I was dared to walk through the graveyard at midnight, and some fellows tried to scare me with their old sheets. Huh! I had made sure to carry Tige, my bulldog, hid under my coat, and I just let him loose. It makes me sick with laughing even now when I remember how those sillies tore off, with that pup snapping at their legs."

"I'm glad to notice," said Billy, just then, "that we can fasten both doors to this lower room, if we feel like it. You see, they've got bolts that can be shot into the sockets."

"Shucks!" mocked Alec, disdainfully. "What good are locks and bars and bolts when they say a ghost can ooze itself in through a keyhole even? But then don't get an idea in your head, Billy, we're going to be bothered by anything except rats. That's the only kind of spooks you'll find in such a place as this. And after we've had our supper I hope you'll all accompany me while I take some views of the interior, because several of the rooms are going to make dandy pictures."

So supper was cooked after their customary camp style, only in this instance, while the scouts had a roof overhead, and stout stone walls surrounding them, they missed the whispering of the treetops, as well as the star-studded sky.

Afterwards they gladly helped the aspiring photographer while he made good use of his flashlight apparatus. Alec chose certain apartments in which he fancied his wealthy and eccentric aunt would be most interested. He also declared himself satisfied in the end that he had succeeded in getting some views that ought to turn out "gilt-edged."

The mansion was unfurnished, so that they had no chance of finding sleeping quarters or beds of any kind above. Whoever now owned the place had removed all such articles long since, possibly to prevent tramps from finding an inducement to lodge in the deserted and lonely, castle.

However, this was nothing serious to fellows who had camped many a time among the rocks, where they were even debarred from having hemlock browse for a soft mattress.

"We'll try the floor to-night, boys," said Hugh, as he started to spread his blanket out in regulation style. "If it proves to be too hard for us, perhaps we can put in the second night outdoors somewhere. That will depend on the weather, for we have no tent to keep the rain or snow off, you remember."

The others hastened to copy his example, for they were all fairly sleepy. Billy told himself that he would very likely lie awake all nightlong, because he felt sure something strange was *bound* to happen to them. He was shrewd enough to arrange his blanket bed directly in the middle, so that he had a pair of chums on either side of him. If the others noticed this sign of weakness they kindly overlooked it. Perhaps, to tell the truth about it, Monkey Stallings and Arthur Cameron were themselves not entirely free from uneasiness, and deep down in their hearts wished the night well over with.

Hugh happened to awaken some time afterwards, and as the flames lazily lighted up the big room occasionally, he lay there watching them play upon the wall. So he allowed himself to figure what strange scenes these same rooms must have witnessed in those bygone days when the old judge and his young prisoner wife occupied the monstrosity of an imitation feudal castle.

When Hugh was about to turn over and compose himself to sleep, he heard a peculiar sound that caused his heart to beat much more rapidly than its wont. He suddenly sat up and listened again.

CHAPTER IV

SCOUTING AT MIDNIGHT

It was certainly a queer sound that floated to the strained hearing of the boy as he crouched there on the floor of the room amidst the folds of his blanket and listened with might and main.

There followed a brief period of silence and then he felt a thrill, for it came again, a peculiar whimpering that would have given Billy a spasm of fright had he been awake to catch it, instead of calmly sleeping close by.

"What in the mischief can it be?" whispered Hugh to himself as he allowed his hand to grope around for something he wanted, and which he remembered placing conveniently by at the time he prepared his crude bed.

The fire had died down again so that the big apartment on the main floor was almost wrapped in darkness. Still, when tiny tongues of flame played at hide-and-seek about the charred log, they caused all sorts of odd shadows to run athwart the walls.

Hugh gave a grunt of satisfaction when his fingers closed upon the object he sought. It was only about the size of two fingers, and nickel-plated at that. In fact, Hugh had made himself a trifling-present lately of a small vestpocket edition of a flashlight, controlled by a battery, and had thought it worth while to carry it along with him on this expedition, though not saying anything about it to the others, thus far.

"I'm bound to find out what makes that noise, as sure as anything can be," was what the boy was telling himself resolutely, even while he crept out from among the folds of the warm blanket endeared to him by reason of many associations of the past, of which so much has been written in previous volumes.

That was just like Hugh Hardin. A good many boys would possibly have concluded that going wandering about a great imitation castle like Randall's Folly, after midnight, trying to discover the origin of strange sounds, was no business of theirs, and would have cuddled down closer, even drawing their blanket over their heads in order that they might not hear a repetition of the noise.

Hugh was built on a different order. He knew full well that sleep with him was entirely out of the question so long as that chilling whimpering and rustling continued at regular intervals.

Now Hugh was only a boy, it must be remembered, and many a strong man would have declined committing himself in the way the scout master intended doing.

He had listened to all the talk about ghosts carried on by the other fellows, with more or less interest and amusement, for Hugh refused to believe in spook manifestations. At the same time he admitted that his heart was fluttering at a much more rapid gait than customary when he started toward one of the doors of the room, using the little electric torch to light his way.

If any one could have read the thoughts that were surging through the boy's excited mind, they would perhaps have been found to range about in this manner:

"Ghosts, eh? Well, I've always said there never existed any, and perhaps I'll have a chance right now to prove it, one way or the other. A queer kind of a hobgoblin that must be to keep whimpering like a baby, and then fluttering to beat the band. But what in the wide world can it all mean? That's what I reckon on finding out, given half a chance."

He had reached the door by that time. Billy had seen to it that the bolt was shot into its socket before he lay down. More than that, he had even gone to the trouble to fill the keyhole full of crumpled paper, remembering that jibe on the part of one of his chums to the effect that spirits can "ooze like smoke" through even such small apertures.

Hugh had been wise enough to pick up a handy club before starting forth upon his mission of investigation. He did not anticipate finding a chance to make use of it, but when a man insures his house against fire he really does not expect it to be burned down. Hugh wanted to be on the safe side, that was all.

Just at that point the boy, was influenced to turn around and cast the light of his torch upon the forms of his four comrades swathed in their coverings. Not one of them moved, even in the slightest degree,

so that, if Hugh was half contemplating inviting company, he found no encouragement there.

Gritting his teeth, the boy calmly drew back the bolt, softly opened the massive door, slipped boldly through the aperture, and then as deftly closed the door behind him.

Standing there in the great hall he listened intently, meanwhile keeping his light turning this way and that in order to see if anything moved. Perhaps, in the days when Judge Randall lived in his romantic castle, this massive hall had been decorated after the usual custom of feudal times. Hugh could easily imagine shining suits of armor standing grimly in, the corners, like sentries on guard. He had detected marks on the walls betraying the fact that at some time they had borne all manner of relics of long-past age of chivalry, so that the illusion might be complete. But now they stood there bare and cold, and a chilly draught came down from the empty regions above that made the boy shiver.

Then he heard the strange sounds again. They were clearer now than before.

"One thing certain," muttered Hugh, between his set teeth, "whatever makes that noise it comes from up above. And the thing for me to do is to climb the stairs; so here goes."

If he felt any hesitation he did not show it as he made his way to the foot of the broad stairway and commenced mounting, step after step. Always the sounds seemed to grow a little clearer, and this fact told Hugh his scout instinct must be truly leading him directly toward the place from which they issued.

He had reached the second floor, and was pushing steadily onward. Several times he stopped short to listen, nor would he make a move at such intervals unless he had received his clue again. Not once did he manifest any weakness in the line of shrugging his shoulders, and saying that it was none of his business if the night air played pranks by forcing its way through some hole in the wall, with a whine and a gurgle.

When Hugh once set himself a task it was his nature to carry the thing through to the end. He would despise himself if he allowed any weak fear to triumph over his common-sense.

A brief time later he found himself standing near where he knew one of the several turrets stood. He remembered now that while they had investigated more or less of the big building, they were forced to skip several portions, leaving them for the next morning's survey; and doubtless this turret chamber must have been in the list of those unexplored places.

"Whatever it may be," Hugh was telling himself, "the thing making all that noise is in there! I'll listen once more, and then take a peek."

When he again heard the gurgling, the fluttering, and the strange whimpering Hugh had his hand on the door knob. He quickly threw the barrier open and flashed his light into the chamber.

Instantly there was a scurry of wings. Queer glowing balls of yellow connected with obscure, shadowy figures stared at him. The wings winnowed the air, and again he caught that peculiar whinny.

Hugh laughed aloud.

"Why, it's only a family of owls after all," he said, in great relief, "that's taken up quarters here in this turret, where they can go in and out as they please. Yes, and those things that flapped away must have been some ugly bats in the bargain, that haven't gone into winter quarters yet. Well, this is a pretty good sell, I must say. I'm glad I made up my mind to find out what that noise was. Now I guess I can go to sleep again. Ghosts! Well, like as not every ghost that ever was heard of would turn out to be as simple a thing as this, if only some one had the nerve to investigate."

He closed the door to the turret chamber. Let the owls and bats have their quarters if they wanted to. There was plenty of room in that great castle for himself and chums to sleep without ousting, the happy family from their roost.

So Hugh started down the stairs feeling much lighter of heart than when he had so recently climbed upward. The tension and strain had been removed from his boyish heart, and he was ready to confess that things had seemed pretty ticklish at one time, and had required all his resolution to push ahead.

He found the right door, and softly opening it made his way into the big room in which the others were sleeping. While fastening the door again Hugh could hear the regular breathing of Billy, and possibly of the others.

As he incidentally flashed his light on them before turning in he was surprised to see Alec Sands sitting bolt upright and watching him curiously. Hugh held up a warning finger. He did not want Alec to talk out loud and needlessly awaken all of the other fellows. At the same time he knew full well he must

give some sort of explanation for his strange absence.

"I heard it, too, Hugh," whispered Alec, with a half grin. "Woke up and found you gone when I put out my hand to feel your blanket. Then I caught those awful ghoulish sounds somewhere. Wanted to creep after you, but say, I own up I didn't have the nerve to try it. So here I've been sitting, hugging my knees, and listening till I'm shivering as if I had the ague. Now tell me what it is, Hugh, for I just know you've found out."

Hugh chuckled and said:

"Oh! just a family that has squatted down on these premises, and hates to be evicted in case your rich aunt, or anybody else, buys the same!"

"Come off, Hugh; don't try to muddle me all up like that, when I'm dying to know what could make such awful sounds. What kind of a family is it?"

"Owls, with a few big bats thrown in for good measure," explained Hugh. "They've taken up their quarters in one of the turret chambers where slits in the walls allow them to go and come as they please."

"You woke up and heard that gibberish, didn't you, Hugh? And you made up your mind on the spot that you just had to find out what it meant? It's like you to do such a thing! But, Hugh, why didn't you let me in on it? I'd have been glad to keep you company, sure I would."

"I knew that, Alec," apologized the other, yawning as he began to creep under his blanket again, "but all of you seemed to be sound asleep, and I hated to wake anybody up. Besides—well, I just felt like going it alone, you see."

"Of all the nerve, you've got it to beat the band," commented Alec. "I thought I could stand for a good deal, but let me tell you I draw the line at creeping upstairs in this spooky old castle, and investigating such a fierce noise as that. Listen, will you, they're at it again, Hugh? Why, if Billy woke up and heard that he'd throw a fit."

"Then we want to quit talking and not wake him," cautioned the scout master, as he gathered the folds of his covering about him, much as a soldier of olden times might wrap his martial cloak around his body while settling down calmly to sleep on the battlefield.

Alec was chuckling as though something amused him.

"Tell you what," he presently whispered, as a last thought, "if my Aunt Susan is as dead set for silence as she says, those noisy owls are going to vacate their snug quarters up there in a hurry. I honestly believe, Hugh, this lonely old curiosity of a castle is going to please my queer relative a whole lot. The chances are she'll plank down the money to buy Randall's Folly when she gets my report, accompanied by the pictures I'm taking. Well, here goes for another nap, hoping the Owl family will settle down and not disturb us again to-night."

CHAPTER V

A STARTLING SURPRISE

"Hello! Is it safe to come out; and is the coast clear of ghosts?"

That was Billy addressing Hugh on the following morning, the scout master, as well as Alec Sands and Arthur Cameron, being up and around. They looked at Billy poking his head out from amidst the folds of his capacious red-and-black striped blanket, and laughed, for somehow he reminded them of a cautious old tortoise trying to spy out the land before entrusting his flippers beyond the confines of his shell.

"Nothing doing in the ghost line, Billy," Hugh told him, "so you can stretch yourself as much as you please. Hurry up a little! Alec here was just suggesting that as the morning looks so fine we might as well go outside and build a cooking fire under the trees for a change"

Billy thereupon threw the blanket aside and hopped to his feet.

"When you say anything about *eating*," he observed as he started to finish his dressing with feverish haste, "seems like my whole system responds. Alec, I want to tell you the idea isn't half bad either. Dining in this musty old room seems too much as if we were still at home, you know. Nothing like being under the trees when you're taking an outing. I haven't got any gypsy blood in me that I know of, but I do like the big outdoors a heap, better than anything else going—that is, except eating."

Monkey Stallings was by this time also awake and fixing himself to defy the chilly morning atmosphere.

They abandoned the castle, taking their belongings with them. At the time it was looked upon only as a little incident, and no one dreamed that afterwards they would find themselves very thankful for having done this very thing.

Back of the building the trees grew thickly, and it did not take the scouts long to discover a very good location for a temporary camp, where they could build a fire and cook breakfast.

"Another thing," said Alec, "if the weather holds good I'm going to suggest that we hunt a place back there, half a mile, perhaps, away from the castle, to spend the night in. Like Billy here, I don't fancy sleeping under a roof when I can have a chance to camp out under the stars and hear the whispering of the trees."

The others were quick to seize upon the idea.

"It's our only chance to sleep out," said the Stallings boy, "because we've got to make tracks tomorrow afternoon, you remember."

"I should say that Alec ought to be able to take all the pictures he needs of this old rookery this morning," remarked Arthur. "As for me, I've seen all I want of the place. It makes me feel sad, because I can't help thinking of what happened up here so long ago. It was a crazy man's scheme to start with, and then there was the terrible tragedy that happened later on. Ugh! let's climb out right now."

So they built a nice cooking fire, and started to get breakfast. It was while they discussed the morning meal with the eagerness that boys' healthy appetites alone can display, that Billy asked a leading question.

"I forgot to ask if anybody heard a ghost laugh in the night?" he demanded. "Once I happened to wake up, and imagined I could hear somebody laughing away off in the distance; but say, I only pulled my head further under my blanket, and went to sleep again just like an innocent little babe. How about that, Hugh, Alec, and the rest? Was there anything doing?"

This was the time for Alec to tell about the little adventure Hugh had met with. Billy's eyes grew round with wonder and awe as the story proceeded, and seeing this, Alec did his best to keep up the interest at fever heat to the point where Hugh burst into the haunted turret chamber, and made the discovery that it was tenanted by a family of owls, and some bats.

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated Billy, heaving a great sigh of relief, "I honestly began to believe you meant to tell us that turret-tower room was the place where the tragedy happened, and that Hugh had watched it all being repeated over again. Owls, hey? Well, they're an innocent lot when you get acquainted with 'em. All the same, let me tell you I'm glad we expect to sleep outdoors to-night."

"When we get through breakfast, boys," suggested Arthur, greatly interested in what he had just heard, "let's all go up and be introduced to Hugh's pets, if they haven't vamoosed the ranch. I always did like to watch owls stare at you with their big yellow eyes; but you want to keep away, for they've got wicked beaks, and can take a piece of skin off your hand as easy as anything."

Accordingly this programme was carried out. The visit to the turret chamber was not as productive of results as some of the boys might have wished, for most of the owls and bats went scurrying forth through the slits in the wall as soon as the door was opened, despite the garish light of day which they were supposed to dislike. Still, enough were seen to satisfy Billy the story had been no "fake."

Alec said he was disappointed because he could not take a picture of the whole outfit; though not necessarily for the benefit of his rich aunt.

"But the sun seems just about right for the several exposures I want to make of the southeastern side of the castle," he told them, "so let's climb down out of this and get busy."

"I'll tell you what I think," ventured Billy as they were making for outdoors once more. "Like as not that same family of owls has been responsible for a lot of that silly talk about this place being haunted. People imagine all sorts of things, you know, when they don't understand queer sounds."

"Yes," retorted Alec, with a chuckle, "that's so, they do, Billy; and I've known them to pull their heads under blankets. It's all very well for you to talk so bravely when the sun's shining overhead; but everybody knows how different things look and seem at midnight. We'll forgive you this time, Billy, because the rest of us, all but Hugh perhaps, were in something of the same boat, I'm afraid."

The photographic work went on apace, and as Alec had in times past proven his abilities in this line, he was apparently justified in believing that success was going to crown his present efforts.

"I tell you Aunt Susan will be tickled half to death when she gets prints of these pictures," he remarked again and again as he worked, never missing a single object that he considered would lend additional enchantment to the views. "I ought to consider myself mighty lucky to be presented with such a dandy camera as this. I've made sure to fetch my daylight developing tank along with me, because if any of the exposures turn out to be poor ones I'll have another chance to duplicate the same tomorrow morning, even if it is Sunday."

"So far," observed Monkey Stallings, with a chuckle of satisfaction, "there isn't any sign of those two hoboes turning up here again—which pleases me a heap, let me tell you."

"Oh! no danger of them coming back again," Billy assured him. "They got the scare of their lives when you tooted that goose-call. Long before now that brace of tramps has struck the railroad ties, and are making tracks for other regions where they don't have old castles haunted by spooks."

The last picture was finally taken. Alec seemed satisfied with what he had done.

"I've got two rolls of film left," he explained, "which I'm going to hold for an emergency. You never know what may happen when you're taking pictures. Something is apt to come along that you would give a heap to get, and if you're out of films you feel like kicking yourself."

"You've got a long head on your shoulders, Alec," commented Arthur. "I guess you must believe in the old saying that 'an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.'"

"Also," added Billy drily, "that in times of plenty it's wise to lay in a stock against the dry spell that's coming. I've been there myself, and ought to know what it means to go hungry just because you've been careless. That's one reason I always try to put in a spoonful of coffee for every fellow, and then add one for the pot."

That was always the way with Billy; he seemed to view almost every subject as inevitably connected with the one absorbing idea of supply and demand. By this time these good chums of his knew his weakness so well that they generally let such allusions pass unnoticed.

"How would it do for us to root around a bit while we have the time?" ventured Monkey Stallings, who liked to investigate better than anything else, except in an old mansion where the dust of years had settled, and there were uncanny things to be run across.

"If you mean," Hugh told him, "we might move around some, and look for that place where we want to make our camp for the rest of our stay up here, I'd say it was a good idea."

"Of course," supplemented Arthur, "we could move back to the castle late this afternoon if the weather turned out bad, and a storm threatened, which, according to all the known signs, isn't going to be the case."

"Glad to hear you say that, old weather bureau prophet," laughed Alec; for the scout who had just made that bold assertion had long been looked up to as an authority on the subject of changes of the weather, and could reel off a dozen reasons for the prediction he was making, all founded on a good sensible basis.

Accordingly they all started forth, having deposited most of their belongings in a good hiding-place where they would be perfectly safe. Since there had been no attempt to clean up the grounds surrounding the wonderful "castle" after its abandonment, some ten years or so before, of necessity they had gone back to their original, wild condition. Nature always seeks to hide the cruel gashes made by the hands of man, covering the wound with all manner of growth from trailing vines to young saplings, brush and weeds.

Passing through a dense wilderness of this newer growth, the scouts pushed on into the heavier woods. Here they found things much more to their way of looking at it. Indeed, with the stately forest trees rising up all around them, and shutting out that queer building on the point of land overlooking the broad valley beyond, it seemed an ideal spot for making a camp.

They were not long in deciding on where they would stay, and two of the fellows, Alec and Monkey

Stallings, were dispatched back to carry their personal belongings to the new site. Alec was anxious to get to work developing some of the rolls of films he had taken, in the expectation of making good any failures.

By ten o'clock everything had been gathered in the new camp, which was situated not much more than a quarter of a mile away from the deserted mansion. The boys believed they could already call their mission a success; and after Alec had been heard from in connection with his photographic work, this would be set down as a certainty.

"Listen!" called out Monkey Stallings about this time, for he happened to have remarkable hearing. "Seemed to me that was some one talking over yonder."

"Mebbe the tramps have come back after all," exclaimed Billy looking startled. "You know they always say a bad penny is sure to turn up again."

"Better look for some good handy clubs, I say," observed Alec, pouncing on just such a stout stick as he had in his mind's eye when speaking.

"Whoever it is coming," remarked Hugh, uneasily, "we'll soon know the worst, for I can see them through the bushes there. They know we're here in the bargain, because they're making straight for this place."

The scout master had hardly finished saying this when two men dressed in gray uniforms and carrying guns suddenly stepped out of the bushes, one calling aloud:

"Hold up your hands there, every one of you, and don't try to run, or it will be the worse for you. We've tracked you up here, and you're under arrest. Steady now!"

CHAPTER VI

GUESTS AT THE CAMP FIRE

"Do what he says, fellows!" urged Hugh, sensibly, at the same time elevating both hands above his head, in which ludicrous feat he was speedily imitated by his four chums.

The two armed men continued to advance cautiously toward the scouts. At the same time it could be seen that they appeared more or less surprised on account of discovering that it was a parcel of fairly well grown boys whom they were making prisoners.

"Is this a joke?" asked Alec Sands, with a tinge of a sneer in his voice. "If so I want to say it's in pretty bad taste, don't you know."

"You'll find it a serious kind of a joke, young fellow," snarled one of the two men in uniform, who seemed to be huffed over something, perhaps the scratches he had received in plenty where the brambles had scraped his face.

"Perhaps you'll be kind enough to explain what we're being held up this way for?" asked Hugh, as pleasantly as he could, for he realized that these men must represent some sort of authority, and in all probability were laboring under a misapprehension.

"Who are you all, anyway?" demanded the taller of the two men, and Hugh saw that he had better address himself to this person, since he seemed to be the more even-tempered of the pair.

"Our suits ought to tell you that," Alec managed to snap out, not fancying the idea of being forced to keep his hands elevated in such a fashion, just as though he might be a miserable criminal trying to escape from the penitentiary.

"We are Boy Scouts," said Hugh, hastily, seeing the men frown at Alec's impatient remark. "We belong in Oakvale, and have come up here to spend a couple of days camping out. Besides that one of us has been commissioned to take some pictures of an old deserted mansion not far away from here, which his aunt in the city is expecting to buy, if his report turns out favorable. That's the whole story, I give you my word of honor, sir."

The tall man looked straight into Hugh's face. What he saw there seemed to impress him very favorably, for the expression of distrust quickly faded from his own countenance, and a friendly smile began to take its place.

"I reckon we've been and made a mistake this time, Pete," he said, turning to his companion. "These young chaps don't look like they'd have a hand in trying to get a crazy man free, after the law had shut him up in an asylum!"

"What's that you say?" exclaimed Arthur, while Billy's eyes were like small editions of saucers, in so far as being round was concerned.

"We belong at the State Asylum for the Criminal Insane," explained the taller man, whom Hugh now understood must be a guard. "There was a notorious party shut up there, and he managed to escape by the aid of his money and the help of some friends outside. Men are searching the whole country over for signs of him. We got a clue that he might be found up here in this region, and that he was being taken care of in a camp, until such time as he could cross the line into Canada."

"Can we lower our hands now, friend?" asked Hugh, seeing that Billy for one was getting very red in the face with the exertion of stretching upward so long.

"I guess you don't none of you look very dangerous," he was told, "so drop back as you please. We can't take chances, you understand, so we'll ask you to produce proofs that you're what you claim. Then if everything is O.K. p'raps now you might invite a couple of hungry and tired guards to hang around a while until you rustled up a bit of grub, and a cup of hot coffee which would go straight to the spot, for we haven't had a thing to eat since last night."

"Oh! that's really too bad!" exclaimed Billy, immediately sympathizing with any one who knew, the pangs of hunger. "Sure, we'll invite you to stay with us to lunch. Luckily my policy of always providing a little extra will come in handy, for we can fit you out with a pretty fair meal."

Even the shorter guard grinned on hearing this. He seemed to have quite lost the feeling of suspicion he had at first entertained toward Hugh and his chums. In fact, he even stood his repeating rifle up against the tree nearest him, and seemed bent on taking things easy.

Hugh was pleased because the adventure had after all turned out so harmless. He had been a little startled when the demand was first made that they should surrender, and mention made of the startling fact that they must consider themselves under arrest.

Every one busied himself in gathering wood, and making preparations for building a fire, even though, under ordinary conditions the boys might not have started in to cook for some time to come. Billy, however, seemed to consider it always in order to think of such an important subject as "preserving life"; for that was what he was pleased to call eating. No one ever heard a groan or complaint from Billy when the order was given to prepare a meal; if the occurrence happened six times a day he would have shown up smiling and hungry on each and every occasion.

The taller guard became more and more friendly as he watched these preparations going on. He also asked numerous questions concerning Hugh and his chums.

"Now that I think of it," he remarked presently, "it strikes me I read something about a batch of Oakvale scouts that helped the people over in Lawrence when they had that big flood there. Are you some of that lot, boys?"

"Several of us were there, and had great times, I assure you," Hugh modestly replied, nor did he offer to enter into any particulars of what had happened in the imperiled town at the time of their visit, though those boys from Oakvale had certainly earned the medals they proudly wore for saving life at the risk of their own on that special occasion.

"Why, yes," the shorter guard now remarked, "and when I went down home last week in Chester they were talking about how some scouts had helped fight the forest fires over Oakvale way. Mebbe now you chaps had a hand in that game, too?"

For answer Billy thrust out his left hand before the man's eyes.

"See that red scar on the back of my hand?" he asked. "Well, I got that up there fighting the fire on the mountain that was trying to wipe out the home of Mrs. Heffner, a widow."

"Good for you, Billy!" exclaimed the taller guard, for by now they had come to know the scouts by their several names, feeling quite at home in the temporary camp. "I'd like to wager that there must have been some tall doings when *you* got busy with the water pails. I've been on the same line myself,

and know what it means to fight a forest fire with the wind a-blowin' it right along, spite of all you can do to stop it."

"About this crazy man you were speaking about," observed Alec, as though a sudden suspicion might have struck him, "it doesn't happen that his name could be Randall, Judge Anson Randall, does it?"

"Oh! what if it should turn out that way?" gasped Billy, as he comprehended the nature of the idea that must have flashed through the other's mind.

The tall guard, however, shook his head in the negative.

"That isn't his name at all," he told them. "This man did something terrible, and his money hired the best lawyers in the country to defend him. In the end he was called insane, and sent to the asylum. Then his folks tried every way they knew how to get him free. At last a scheme was hatched up so he could make a break for liberty. Well, their plans have succeeded. He's escaped. They're searching for him all over the country up here. But I reckon, because their plans have been laid so carefully, all our efforts to catch the conspirators will be in vain."

"Money talks!" said Alec, laconically.

"Well, it talks pretty loud in a case like this," the man added.

When the meal was ready they all sat around to enjoy it. Billy in particular seemed very much taken with the idea that they had company.

"We've known some queer happenings in our camping out experiences, fellows," he told the others, as they started in to dispose of the immense amount of food the generous fat scout had cooked. "This is the first time, however, we've had for guests a couple of gentlemen guards from the State Asylum for the Criminal Insane. I'm glad to see you are enjoying my little snack, thrown together in so hasty a manner."

"Well, me and my side partner," commented the taller guard, with a wink at his companion, "wouldn't mind if a prisoner managed to break away every day in the week if we could be sure of getting such a fine treat as this, eh, Pete?"

Pete declared that he could truthfully echo that assertion, though his mouth being so full at the time he could hardly more than mumble his sentiments.

The two men did full justice to the meal, and then announced that, much to their everlasting regret, they felt compelled to bid the friendly scouts good-bye, though they would like nothing better than staying over the night with them.

It was hardly full noon when they took their departure, waving a farewell from the edge of the thick brush before plunging into the same. They had another clue that was worth following up, for those who were fortunate enough to recapture the escaped prisoner would be in line to receive some satisfying sort of reward, either in the shape of money, or a betterment in their condition of employment at the asylum.

"Well, they're gone!" remarked Alec, as he busied himself with his development tank, anxious to find out how his films were going to turnout.

Billy heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the soles of his feet.

"To tell the honest truth," he admitted, "I ain't sorry a bit. Those fellows could give me points about how to stow stuff away, and then not half try. Why, they acted as if they were hollow clean down to their shoes. I guess they told the truth when they said they hadn't had a bite of breakfast this morning."

"But, Billy," interposed Arthur, "I thought you loved to see people eat heartily all the time? We've always believed you were the most hospitable fellow going."

"Huh! I used to think the same," grunted Billy, scratching his head, "but then you know there's such a thing as piling on the agony. Those fellows weren't just hungry men—they were cannibals, regular human graveyards, I should say, by the way the stuff disappeared down their throats. If they drop around again to-night I reckon our stock of grub will be lowered so much we'll all of us have to go on half rations the rest of the time we stay here—something I don't look forward to with much joy."

"Don't worry, Billy," Hugh told him. "They said they would be miles away long before night set in. The country is safe, and we're not likely to starve."

Alec interrupted the conversation to call out exultantly:

"Oh! this first roll is coming along dandy, let me tell you! It's going to be the best thing I ever did; and my stars, but that lens does cut fine! It was a lucky day for me when Aunt Susan got track of this old castle up here in the woods, for it's given me a regular jewel of a camera outfit."

Every one felt pleased on hearing this, since it would save Alec the trouble of snapping the pictures over again.

Billy was taking things easy after getting up the midday meal, as he felt he had earned a rest. At the same time the fat scout's mind was busily employed.

"I was just thinking," he finally broke out with, "what a lot of queer things have happened to us since we came up here. I wonder what we'll strike next. We've rubbed up against raiding tramps, mewing owls, ghosts in the night, and guards hunting for an escaped insane criminal. Besides, there are still a few more hours left for a new batch of exciting happenings. I tell you, boys, this little side trip proposed by Alec and engineered by Hugh bids fair to equal anything we've endured in our whole checkered career."

CHAPTER VII

FACED BY A MYSTERY

To tell the truth, Hugh was thinking something along those same lines himself, so that he felt in a mood to quite agree with the enthusiastic Billy.

"Take it all in all," he remarked, reflectively, "we're one of the luckiest lot of scouts that ever wandered down the pike. Most fellows experience a regular rut, and never run up against anything out of the way. But I have to shake myself very time I look back over our calendar, for fear it's only a dream."

"We certainly have had more than our share of things happening to us," admitted Alec, proudly, "but the wheel of the mill will never run again with the water that is past. So I forget the things that are gone, and keep looking hopefully forward to other glorious events that lie waiting for us in the dim future."

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Billy, clapping his hands, "Alec is getting quite poetical these days."

"I only hope," continued the other, with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, for one of Alec's weak spots was a love of flattery, "that our latest venture will turn out just as successful as many others have done before it."

"No reason that I can see why it shouldn't," spoke up Arthur Cameron. "We've run across the lonely castle your aunt is negotiating for, and it seems to fill the bill to a dot."

"Yes," remarked Monkey Stallings, anxious to have a hand in the discussion, "and your pictures, you tell us, are turning out dandies at that. You ought to be as happy as a clam at high tide, as they say, though I never asked one of the bivalves just why he felt that way."

"Oh, I am!" declared Alec; "and I reckon the chances are three to one Aunt Susan is going to enjoy this delightful quiet up here, where not even the squawk of a crow, or the, crow of a squawking rooster can be heard the livelong day. Still, somehow I seem to feel a queer sense of oppression bearing down on me. I hope now it isn't a bad omen of coming trouble, and that, after all, my rich aunt is doomed to lose out in the deal for Castle Randall."

The others laughed at the idea.

"Why, it's a cinch for your side, Alec," said Hugh.

"The owner of this ancient and half-ruined pile of stone and make-believe rocks," Arthur told the doubter, "couldn't find a purchaser in a coon's age. Who would ever want to come away up here to bury themselves from civilization, and in such a silly old rookery as this? Well, it was one chance in a thousand that a nervous wreck like your aunt heard of it."

"Don't worry, Alec, you've got a snap, believe me," chuckled Stallings; and then unable to longer resist a certain alluring limb which he had been eying longingly for some little time, he bolted up the trunk of the overspreading tree, to hang by his toes, and swing daringly to and fro as some of them had seen a yellow-headed, green-bodied poll-parrot do from his perch.

Alec continued his work, and from time to time announced that every roll was indeed turning out superbly. No one had ever seen him quite so happy. The possession of a lens that did better work than anything he had ever known in all his experience was enough in itself to make his boyish heart thrill with joy. And then the singular character of the film subjects added to the sense of satisfaction, for they were sure to enhance the attractiveness of his collection, as well as please Aunt Susan immensely.

It must have been about one o'clock when the boys received their first rude shock. Hugh had just been thinking of giving orders for another walk in the direction of the deserted building about a quarter of a mile away. Alec had finished his work and had the well-developed films hanging to dry, securely fastened to his stout cord with snap clothes-pins, so there was no danger of any unfortunate catastrophe happening to them before they were thoroughly dry.

"Listen, will you?" suddenly exclaimed Monkey Stallings, sitting bolt upright, and raising one hand impressively.

"Oh, my stars! what do you call that?" gurgled Billy. From the manner in which the color deserted his ruddy cheeks one might have imagined he feared they were about to be attacked by a host of savage pirates bent on plunder.

Alec and Arthur could also be seen to stare vacantly at the distance while they strained their ears to listen. As for Hugh himself he found it hard to believe his senses, for the absolute quiet and dead calm brooding all day long over that retired spot in the wilderness had been rudely shattered by a most astonishing noise as of many hoarse voices, making a jumble and roar of sound unlike anything save the confusion of battle.

It rose, it died away again, and then once more swelled to an amazing extent, after which it finally stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Five scouts stared at each other. Billy rubbed his eyes as though he really began to believe he must be asleep, and passing through a vivid dream bordering on the nightmare.

"Hugh! what can it be?" demanded Alec, a bit pale with sudden excitement, for which in truth he could not be at all blamed under the circumstances.

For once the scout master seemed puzzled himself. He shook his head in a way that brought new consternation to the heart of Billy Worth.

"You've got me up against a hard proposition when you ask me that, Alec!" was what Hugh declared.

"Then you can't even give a guess, can you, Hugh?" Billy besought him.

"We all heard the racket, that's sure," muttered Stallings, as though he had possibly begun to suspect he might be a victim of some delusion, and wished to make certain the others were in the same boat as himself.

"And it sounded just like a dozen, yes, three dozen men shouting like anything," Arthur assured him.

"I wonder——" began Billy, starting up eagerly.

"If you've got an idea hurry and tell us what it is!" urged the impatient Alec. "I'll be hanged if I can grapple anything, it's given me such a bad shock."

"Go on, Billy!" added Arthur.

"Why," explained the fat scout, "you see, I was thinking that p'r'aps those tramps we scared off had come back with a big bunch of their kind, meaning to take possession of the castle. Now, you needn't all jump on me and say that's silly, because I happen to know those hoboes often gather in regular armies about this time of year, heading for the cities. Hugh, it isn't such a bad idea, after all, is it?"

"Since none of us seem able to think of any other explanation," the scout master told him, reassuringly, "it will have to stand until we can strike on a better. It seems to me the sooner we hike over that way the quicker we'll learn the real facts."

"True enough, Hugh," assented Alec, readily, while the others showed by their actions that they were perfectly willing to make the start.

Their preparations for leaving their camp were few and simple. What food they had left was thrust up in the crotch of a big tree, so that it might not be carried off by any wandering wild animal, though they had no reason to believe there was anything larger than a 'coon' or a 'possum' around that region. The blankets and a few other things of value were also placed in safety, while Alec again tested the supports of his "clothes line" on which those precious films were strung to dry.

"I hate to leave them," he told the others, mournfully, "but now that they're wet and sticky they can't be packed away. I almost wish I hadn't been in such a hurry to develop them."

He stared at Billy as though almost tempted to beg that worthy to stay behind and protect the films by his presence, which Billy absolutely refused to do, rightly interpreting the look.

"Not on your life, Alec, much as I would like to oblige you!" asserted the fat scout, positively. "I want company when there's all sorts of strange things happening around. You don't catch me sticking to this camp by my lonely. Stay back yourself if somebody has just got to hold the fort. My duty lies in the front rank. History tells that the Worths were always found in the van when danger loomed up. Sorry not to oblige you, Alec, but it's simply impossible. William Worth will sink or swim with his comrades."

As Alec could not think of staying back when the rest were bent on learning the secret of all that terrible clamor of human voices raised in angry shouts and whoops, he took his place alongside Hugh, and they all started forth.

"One thing sure, to begin with," remarked Hugh, after they had left the camp behind them, "we're a unit in saying that racket came from where we happen to know the old castle lies."

"Oh! that's an easy nut to crack!" declared Monkey Stallings. "The sounds came right down the wind, and any one can see it's blowing softly straight from the haunted mansion."

"We might guess that the ghosts were having a hop all by themselves," ventured Billy, "only you know they say spirits never show themselves in the daytime. Anyway, those whoops were more like wild Injuns on the warpath than just spooks."

"Well, as we don't happen to have any Indians left in this region nowadays," added Hugh, drily, "we can put that explanation down as impossible. But we'll know more about it before three minutes more have passed, because, unless I miss my guess, we can glimpse the castle when we strike that rock yonder. I remember taking a look back as we came along, so as to impress distances and direction on my mind, and could see the whole structure looming up."

"Whee! listen again, will you?" exclaimed Billy, aghast.

The strange noise had again broken out. They could hear many husky voices shouting in unison, and, besides, there were other odd sounds such as might be made by a small army of desperate assailants beating wildly against that stout door of the lonely castle.

No wonder the five boys stared at one another, with vacant looks on their several faces. It would have puzzled smarter people than they pretended to be to analyze such a remarkable jumble of noises as their ears now caught.

Hugh would not let them stop for a second. Indeed, if anything, he hurried them along faster than ever, as though fully determined to have the mystery cleared up without further loss of time. If Billy's footsteps were inclined to make him linger behind his mates he bestirred himself to assume a faster gait, for at such a critical moment the fat scout did not wish to find himself left in the lurch.

The horrid din continued as they hurried forward. If anything it grew more and more maddening, causing the boys to shiver with mingled impatience and alarm.

Now they were close on the rock mentioned by Hugh. In another ten seconds they would be able to at least see the walls of the grim castle in the near distance. Billy wondered whether, after all, they might not discover that there was not the slightest sign of a living human being in sight. He was rapidly coming to believe there might be something ghostly about these sounds. Billy was just then in a fit condition to believe anything, no matter how absurd, for his poor heart was fluttering in his manly bosom just as you have doubtless felt the tiny organ of a bird throb when you held the frightened thing in your hand.

They all kept in a bunch, and thus arrived at the rock at the same time. Every scout came to a sudden stop. Their eyes, dilated with amazement, were turned toward the region where those sounds still welled forth, shouts and blows and shrieks making a conglomeration that was simply appalling. So stunned were Hugh and his mates that for a brief time their tongues clove to the roofs of their mouths.

CHAPTER VIII

AS IN THE DAYS OF CHIVALRY

"W-what's it all mean, Hugh?" Billy was gasping, as he stood there with quaking knees, and just stared and stared.

Indeed, for the moment Hugh could not have answered him, he was himself so busily engaged in looking. There was good and sufficient reason for the eyes of every one being glued on the remarkable sight taking place before them, for surely such an amazing spectacle had never before been witnessed in America, nor indeed for some hundreds of years even in the old country.

The castle was no longer given over to the owls and bats and rats. It now seemed to be fairly swarming with moving figures, and such figures! Hugh blinked, and took a second look before he could actually believe his eyes.

Why, there were horses clad in all the panoply of the fourteenth century, on the backs of which sat knights in shining armor, with long lances, and great two-handed swords for their weapons, and waving plumes dangling from their helmets. Men with bare legs and all manner of weird apparel were attacking the castle, using clubs, rocks, and queer arrangements for casting missiles; some of them were climbing short scaling ladders only to be rudely hurled down again by some of the valiant defenders who manned the top of the walls.

The drawbridge had been raised, and the portcullis protected the door, but the gallant assailants had apparently thrown a bridge hastily constructed across the moat, and they were certainly as busy as a hive of bees that had struck a mine of sugar.

It was a wonderful scene, and the five scouts could hardly be blamed for thinking they must be dreaming, everything was so unreal, so like a page torn from history in the times of the Crusaders.

Perhaps one or more of them began to believe that a host of spirits belonging to ancient worthies, long since dead, while passing by had recognized in the make-believe castle such a wonderful copy of something they had known in life that they were tempted to stop and play their parts again with all this gusto and confusion.

If this were the case, however, Hugh quickly disillusioned the rest of the group. His quick eye had found an explanation for all this remarkable happening.

"Well, I declare, who would ever have believed it?" they heard him saying, for again the riot was beginning to die out, men were brushing themselves off, while a few others, less fortunate than their companions, were being pulled out of the moat surrounding the castle, which evidently held some water, for they appeared to be dripping wet, though taking it all in good part.

"What have you guessed, Hugh?" demanded Arthur, knowing from the manner of the scout master that he had apparently solved the mystery.

Hugh was laughing now. The strained look had passed from his young face. It seemed to him like a jump from the sublime to the ridiculous.

"If you fellows will look over to one side to where that man was turning the handle of some sort of box just as if he might be an organ grinder, you'll guess what it all means," Hugh told them, pointing as he spoke.

Cries of wonder and comprehension immediately arose from Alec and Arthur, though even then Billy and Stallings did not seem to fully grasp the facts.

"Motion-picture actors at work!" exclaimed Alec.

"Oh! did you ever hear of such a thing?" gurgled Billy, at the same time beginning to lose the haunted look on his face.

"Sure thing!" added Arthur, grinning now. "That chap is the camera man—what is it they call it, a cinematoscope or something that way. He's been grinding like mad while all that battle on the walls was taking place. And I can see him laughing from here, as if that last scrap pleased him a whole lot."

"Well, if that don't beat everything!" said Monkey Stallings, in mingled awe and delight. "To think of a company finding out about that queer old imitation castle, and coming all the way up here so as to

stage one of their Shakespeare plays around it!"

"And look at all the actors they've gone and fetched along with them, will you?" Billy went on to say. "Why, there must be scores of men and women there, all dressed in fancy costumes. Gee! it must cost *rafts* of money to stage just one of those dramas."

"Oh!" said Hugh; "expense doesn't seem to enter into their calculations when they think they've got something that will go. A thousand people have been used in, one play, I've read, and as much as two hundred thousand dollars spent on it!"

"Say, here's our same old luck come along again, fellows!" declared Arthur, as though it gave him a tremendous amount of satisfaction to realize it. "I've always had a sort of hankering after a chance to learn just how these queer people managed when staging one of their plays, and as sure as you live we're in a fair way to find out now."

"Was there ever anything so strange as our being up here just at the time they came to play their game?" demanded Monkey Stallings. "Why, it begins to look as if they must have engaged the old castle especially to cast their play here, and make it seem the real stuff, don't you think so, Hugh?"

"That's not so very remarkable, after all," ventured Hugh, as all of them continued to stare at the many moving figures, apparently resting for the next stage in the exciting drama that was being reeled off. "I understand that all those big companies have spies out everywhere about the country."

"Spies!" echoed Billy; "and what for, Hugh, when we're not at war with anybody?"

"There's a tremendous amount of competition afloat between the numerous companies," explained the other. "They are looking for all sorts of queer settings for their plays. Houses have to be burned down, bridges blown up, railroad trains ditched, and all manner of stunts pulled off to satisfy the public greed for thrilling spectacles."

Alec gave a plain, unmistakable groan.

"That's it," he said disconsolately, "it's going to spell my finish. I knew that I didn't have that heavy feeling for nothing. There was something in the air that told me my fine dreams were going to be wrecked, sooner or later. Chances are now this big company has gone and stepped in to buy the old castle for a song, and in the course of their reproduction of history they expect to blow the same up, or at least set fire to that part made of wood. It's all off, boys!"

"But you've got your pictures to show for it, Alec," Hugh told him, consolingly, "and your aunt wouldn't think of taking back your camera after you've done so well with it. She can see that it isn't your fault, no matter what happens to the old building now."

Alec gave a cry of triumph.

"Say, that's right, Hugh, and thank you for reminding me I'm carrying that same camera at this very minute. What's to hinder me snapping off a few pictures on my own account of what's going on over there? What do you say to that, Hugh?"

"I should say you'd be foolish not to take the chance," returned the scout leader.

It was surprising to see how Alec forgot his keen disappointment as he commenced to focus his instrument upon the easily seen building, with all those strange costumed figures about the walls.

"The sun is just right for a cracker-jack snap-shot from here," he remarked, as he proceeded to press the bulb, and then carefully change the exposure so that he might not inadvertently take two pictures on the same portion of film; for Alec was exceedingly systematic in most things he did, which was one secret for his wonderful success at photography, a profession that allows no haphazard habits.

"There, I reckon they're staging another picture over yonder, boys!" cried Arthur, as a new bustle was noticed amidst the group of players. "Two of the men appear to have been knocked out in that attack, for there's a chap who looks like he might be a doctor attending to them under that tree. I wonder if they'd care to let me lend a hand at that part of the game? I'm sure I can be of help."

Arthur was never happier than when plying his favorite vocation of amateur surgeon. He had really done some fine work along those lines, and received the approbation of those who were well up in medical practice.

"Whee, if all that scrapping was half-way real!" burst out the admiring Billy; "the only thing I wonder at is how any of those fellows manage to come out of the fight with whole heads or limbs. Some of them

were sent crashing down when that short ladder was hurled back by the defenders on the walls. It looked pretty real stuff from here."

"It is pretty near the genuine thing," said Hugh. "I've often wondered whether they faked those wonderful affairs, but after, what I've seen this day I'm going to believe they're as close to the original as can be. There, you see how the fat man beside the operator is waving his arms. He's got a megaphone, too, and as the scene goes along he bawls through that to tell them to keep on, or change the way they're doing things."

Alec got ready to take another snap-shot when the battle was well on. He was as excited as Hugh had ever seen him, and the other took occasion to warn the photographer to be careful.

"Get a grip on yourself, Alec," he said. "Hold yourself steady, or else you'll be making some fearful blunder, and spoiling the best chance you ever had to get a prize picture. Now they are starting in again, you see!"

Every one of the five scouts was straining his eyesight to the extreme limit in the endeavor not to lose the slightest incident. Never before had such a glorious opportunity come to any of their kind to actually watch how those astonishing scenes of olden times were taken by the motion-picture players; and they did not want to miss any part of it.

Again did the great noise break forth as the valiant assailants commenced their new attack upon the apparently impregnable walls of the ancient castle, so gallantly defended by the occupants.

This small army of players had descended on the region like a flood of seventeen-year locusts. An hour or two before and there had apparently not been a living thing in the neighborhood of the mansion, and now it was the centre of a swarming horde of earnest workers, each trying to earn his salary as best he knew how, both by shouting, and also fighting in yeoman style.

"Oh! why can't we get closer than this, Hugh?" begged Alec, after he had taken another snap at the animated spectacle that would later on thrill many a boyish heart in the way of a picture, and also cause a feeling of envy to arise because a cruel fate had prevented them from participating in the wonderful adventure.

"Nothing to hinder that I can see," he was told. "Fact is, I was going to suggest that same thing myself. So let's get a move on, fellows."

Eagerly they kept pace with Hugh as he started to run toward the castle. It would be a shame not to take full advantage of the golden opportunity offered them to get in close touch with these motion-picture actors who, unaware of the fact that they had a small and select audience in the way of Boy Scouts, were each and every one working like troopers to fulfill their difficult duties.

Alec kept close "tabs" on what was going on ahead presently, possibly fearing that the excited, fat manager, who was dancing up and down, mopping his forehead with a red bandanna with one hand, and waving the megaphone with the other when not shouting through the same, might call the scene off, the boy stopped short, focussed again on the amazing picture, and got another snap-shot at closer range.

In this fashion the runners managed to come close up before there was a sudden cessation to all the tumult of hideous war, and the actors, laughing and evidently enjoying it to the utmost, began to crowd around the stage director as if to learn whether the scene had met with his approval.

CHAPTER IX

WITH THE MOTION-PICTURE PEOPLE

"Where did you boys spring from, I'd like to know?"

It was the perspiring stage manager who asked this question when Hugh and the other four scouts came hurrying up to where he was sitting on a rock, fanning himself with his hat, while the dozens of knights, squires and bowmen were puffing cigarettes, and apparently resting up for the next exciting scene in the wonderfully realistic drama of olden times.

"Well, you see, sir, we happen to belong to a scout troop over in Oakvale," explained Hugh. "We came up here to spend the weekend, and transact some business at the same time. This chap here, Alec Sands, has a peculiar old aunt in the city who is anxious to buy just such a quiet retreat as this place, where she wouldn't hear a sound, for she's got a case of nerves, you see. And one of our objects was to take some pictures of the castle, as well as spy around a bit."

The red-faced stage-director laughed even as he kept on mopping his forehead. Evidently it mattered little to him that the air was quite chilly, for his duties kept him so much on the jump he was sweltering from the perspiration of hard, honest labor.

"Say you so, my young friend?" he exclaimed. "Well, if we leave any part of the old ruin intact when we're through with this series of startling pictures the old lady can doubtless buy it at a small figure."

"Does that mean you'll wreck a big structure like this, sir, just to get a picture of it being blown up?" asked Alec, dismayed.

"Oh, that doesn't cut any figure in the bill!" he was told flippantly. "The public demands the best there is, and money must flow like water in order to keep up with our rivals. We're going to give them something novel this time, you see."

"How, sir?" Monkey Stallings found the courage to ask, his curiosity getting the better of his modesty.

"This new play isn't really a play at all," said the stout man, with a touch of pride in his voice. "It's a stunt of my own we're pulling off to-day. You see, the public sometimes expresses a desire to learn just how these magnificent pictures are done, and we expect to show them the whole thing from beginning to end. They'll see my company starting out in a string of motor cars for this place; watch them getting rigged out in their spic-and-span suits of mail, and old-time stuff; feast their eyes on just such wonderful feats as you have seen pulled off beside these massive walls; and step by step, be taken into our confidence as we progress, until finally the amazing climax arrives. Right now you can hear the machine clicking away, as the operator takes a crack at the players resting between their acts. Perhaps it may please you chaps to know that you'll be seen in the finished production along with the rest of the troupe."

Billy seemed quite awed at the idea. He was observed to slyly pull down his vest, and straighten himself up as though on dress parade. If countless thousands of people were going to gaze upon his person throughout the whole length and breadth of the land, Billy wanted to do his family justice, and not disgrace his bringing up.

Plainly, the stage director seemed to be considerably interested in the scouts. Possibly he may have had a boy or two of his own in his metropolitan home who also wore the khaki, and consequently any fellow who sported such a uniform was of some value in his eyes. Then again, in his hard labors, the coming of Hugh and his four comrades may have seemed like a breath of fresh air, something to temporarily distract him from the routine of his trying business.

At any rate, he seemed disposed to continue the conversation while his people were resting, and making ready for the next act in the drama of publicity.

"Although all this seems very wonderful to you boys," he went on to remark, lighting a cigarette as he spoke, at which he took several puffs and then nervously threw it away again, "it represents only one little event in the bustling activities of my force here, as any regular member of it could tell you."

"I suppose you must have been around some, sir?" ventured Monkey Stallings, at which the red-faced manager looked queerly at him and then chuckled.

"Well, it's a hustling age, you know," he told them. "I've been at this business over four years now, and so far it hasn't quite reduced me to a skeleton in spite of the fierce work. I've taken the leading members of my famous players across the desert in Egypt to the pyramids, explored Spain and the heart of India, traveled across Japan, gone into China, camped in Central American jungles, wandered into the heart of Africa hunting big game, toured away up in Alaska as well as traveled all through the Wild West, and in Mexico among the fighting that's always going on down there. And I've got a few more stunts mapped out that will dwarf everything else that's ever been undertaken. Oh! this is only a little picnic for a motion-picture stage director."

He may have been stretching the truth more or less, but then Hugh saw no reason to disbelieve what he said. The boy realized that in these modern days those who would succeed in the midst of fierce competition must have something very unusual to offer the fickle public in the way of adventure and novel effects. Why, the mere fact of this manager learning about the deserted castle in the lonesome valley, and fetching such an army of players all the way up there to impersonate the genuine characters

of olden days, was proof enough that what he had just been saying might be considered in the line of reason. At all events, there was no ground on which to doubt him.

Billy was casting frequent nervous glances over toward the spot where the operator was still grinding lustily away, seeking to get a good picture of the actors in one of their off-periods, when they were taking things easy after a recent "engagement."

When, by accident, Monkey Stallings chanced to step in the way, Billy hastily moved his position. When a Worth was being immortalized in this fashion far be it for a worthy scion of the race to allow a mere Stallings to crowd him out. When, presently, the grinding ceased, with the operator hurrying across to report his success to the bustling stage director, Billy grinned in conscious triumph, for he felt convinced that he stood out prominently in that picture, so that any one who saw it must notice what a handsome chap one of the Boy Scouts appeared to be on the screen, at least.

The man who was running all this wonderfully complicated affair looked just like a goodnatured, red-faced bank cashier, but Hugh realized that he must have an amazing capacity for detail work, as well as a remarkable faculty for organization.

Now and then he would refer to a sheaf of papers he carried around with him, fastened together with a little arrangement that allowed of their being rapidly turned over from time to time. Doubtless this was his plan of campaign. Hugh would have given something for the privilege of examining the same, but lacked the assurance to ask such a favor of one who was an utter stranger to him, and moreover could not afford to spend much time with a pack of mere boys.

It could be seen that the players expected to be soon called around the managing director for instructions connected with motion pictures were taken. So Hugh pulled at the sleeves of Monkey Stallings, to intimate that they had better fall back.

Arthur had already left them. Hugh hardly needed to take a look around to understand what it was that had drawn the other. Yes, he was over there where the man in a business suit seemed to be bathing the limb of a super who had suffered more or less severely when the ladder on which he was mounted had been roughly dislodged from the walls, throwing all upon it to the ground beneath.

If Arthur were given half a chance he would soon be busily engaged assisting the doctor wrap some linen bandages about that bruised limb. By his eager remarks he would also arouse considerable interest on the part of the company's physician, who probably always accompanied the troupe wherever they traveled, as his services were in frequent demand. Indeed, sometimes he became a very busy man.

"I wonder," Billy was saying, becoming more and more audacious, it seemed, on the principle that give one an inch and he will want an ell—"I wonder now if he'd listen to me if I asked him to let us have a chance to get in the next picture?"

Monkey Stallings laughed harshly at hearing that.

"Well, you are a greeny, Billy, I must say," he declared. "Stop and think for a minute, will you, how silly it would look to see a bunch of Boy Scouts dressed in khaki clothes helping those old-time yeomen tackle the walls of that ancient castle. Why, we'd queer the whole business, that's what!"

"Yes, but didn't you hear him say we'd appear in that last scene?" disputed the eager Billy, loth to give up his ambitious plan to have a leading place in the exposition showing how this famous group of motion-picture players did their perilous work.

"Sure he did," retorted the other, with a shrug of his shoulders as if he pitied Billy's ignorance, "but then you must remember that was intended to show the players resting up between acts, and not at their work. There's a whole lot of difference between the two jobs, let me tell you."

Billy made no reply, but it could be seen that he looked greatly disappointed as he watched the myriad of actors begin to get in position for the opening of the next scene. This might possibly represent the triumphant entry of the assailants into the castle of the enemy, which, in turn, would lead up to the rescue of the lovely heroine just when the villainous knight was about to hurl her into the blazing tower.

The chattering began to die away as the harsh voice of the stage director was heard through his megaphone, giving directions as to how this or that group should carry out their parts. Hugh wondered how many turns it would take before that exacting manager felt like calling it a satisfactory picture. Perhaps they might be forced to repeat the scene many times, simply because some clumsy fellow did something to injure its value.

Alec was busily manipulating his camera, and Hugh chuckled when he found that the other was taking in the entire scene, showing the operator with his instrument, as well as the scouts gathered near by. Billy, too, had made the same discovery, for he was smiling as sweetly as he knew how, and had again assumed that martial attitude which he seemed to consider made him such a striking figure.

Evidently this little expedition was bound to be fruitful with results, and on their return home those who were along would have something to show for their labors. Even if that eccentric relative of Alec's lost the chance to obtain a quiet retreat "far from the madding crowd," as Billy had once described it, their week-end outing promised to be well worth the effort it cost them individually and collectively.

They watched everything that was being done. It was astonishing to see what an amount of stuff the players had fetched along from the city, in order to carry out the battle scene true to the original, as they understood it. Why, even the rude bridge that had been thrown across the moat had been fashioned beforehand, and was carried with them in sections, like one of those ready-built houses Hugh remembered seeing advertised, that "any boy could put together."

The stage director was fuming, and saying a lot of hard things, as though some of the stupid acts of the army of *supers* nearly drove him distracted. By degrees he managed to whip his forces into the shape he wanted before he gave the warning signal that the fun was about to commence.

"Whee!" Billy was saying half to himself as he stared at the bustling scene, "but wouldn't it be great if only we'd been asked to put on some suits like those fellows are wearing, and have a chance to climb up the ladders? I bet you now we'd show them how to break through, no matter what the men on the walls tried to put on us. But shucks! that'd be too big luck; and besides, it could hardly be fair for us boys to steal the thunder of those hard-working actors. There, he's going to give the signal for the mimic war to begin. Everybody take a big breath and sail in! Now, go it, you terriers; the battle's on again!"

CHAPTER X

THE ASSAULT ON THE "CASTLE."

"Yes, there goes the signal!" burst from the excited Alec, as they saw the manager suddenly raise his hand, and fire a revolver three times in quick succession.

Immediately everybody seemed to get busy at once. Most of the battle-scarred veterans, who knew their business so well, started in just about where the last stirring scene had left off. Possibly those who had been "killed" in the former desperate assault had found time to come mysteriously to life again, leaving a dummy in their stead to be ruthlessly trampled on, now assumed new places in the ranks, to make the assailants and defenders look more like a veritable "host."

The scouts held their breath in very awe. What they were looking at was indeed quite enough to make any one do that. Certainly no such remarkable scene had ever before been "set" since those actual days when Crusaders and Saracens met in mortal combat on the plains of the Holy Land, and knights went forth to battle in joust and tournament wearing a fair lady's glove on their helmet as a talisman for luck.

Of course Hugh, as well as most of his young companions, had read some of the romantic works of Sir Walter Scott, and were familiar with his vivid descriptions of just such warlike pictures as they now saw delighted Hugh, indeed, was of the opinion that it might be one of these that the famous players of the motion picture world were now acting, and the name of "Ivanhoe" was uppermost in his mind as he watched the progress of the furious battle.

There were women folks in the castle, too, for occasionally they could be seen frantically spurring their defenders on to renewed exertions. Others may have been playing the part of prisoners, for the boys discovered a white handkerchief waving from a window in one of the turrets, as though to encourage the assailants in their work. Perhaps this was Rebecca in her cell, Hugh thought.

All of this just about suited the imagination of red-blooded boys as proper and right. It had been virtually going on ever since the world began, and would in all probability endure so long as men lived on this planet.

Now and then, when one of the scouts discovered something that particularly interested him, and to

which he wished to draw the attention of his mates, he found it necessary to fairly bawl the fact, so as to be heard above the wild clamor.

As a rule, this appertained to Monkey Stallings and Billy. Hugh was wrapped up in observing all that went on, and it required his undivided attention, just as on the occasion of his visiting a big circus where wonderful events were taking place in three rings at the same time.

Arthur Cameron, on his part, was mentally figuring on how much surgical attention some of these doughty warriors would need after this amazing fracas; and when Arthur had his mind set upon that entrancing subject he might be considered blind to all ordinary matters.

As for Alec, his one idea was to snap off an occasional picture that would show the astonishing thing he and his lucky comrades had run across when the motion-picture players came to make use of the imitation castle on the peak. The only trouble with Alec was a dreadful fear that his supply of film might run out, and then he stood a chance of missing what was likely to prove the best part of the whole proceedings.

Already he had reached Number Ten on his last roll, with but two more to wind up. Oh, what would he not have given for a couple more rolls of a dozen exposures each; just then they would have been worth their weight in silver to the ambitious photographer.

Vague hopes had been playing at leap-tag in the mind of the scout picture-taker. He wondered if there might not be some way in which they could succeed in influencing that hopping stage manager to promise to sell them a duplicate set of the pictures when they were ready for showing to the public. Alec knew that they were rented out, and sometimes sold outright. If Hugh now, with his persuasive tongue, could only exact such a promise from the gentleman in charge, would it not be a splendid achievement to incidentally have the picture included in the programme to be run at the town hall for some local benefit; and then hear the shouts from the boys of Oakvale when they discovered familiar uniforms and faces amidst the actors at rest?

From various remarks which the boys had heard shouted by the stage directors in giving his last directions they understood that this attack was calculated to carry the fort. Already the men who wielded that heavy battering ram made from a convenient log, seemed to be smashing in the stout oaken front door, never built to resist such a desperate assault. It quivered with each blow.

The director was shouting a medley of orders through that wonderful megaphone of his. He seemed to be able to see everything that took place. Hugh compared him to what he had once read about the eminent conductor of orchestra and musical festivals, Theodore Thomas, who when more than a hundred musicians were practicing under his direction, with a fearful outburst of sound and melody, would suddenly stop the proceedings, and scold a certain player whose instrument had "flatted," or come in just an ace behind the regular time.

And every member of that vast company was keeping a wary eye on the director all the time seeming to be working like mad. They were waiting to catch the signal that was to inaugurate the final scene, where those on the walls were to weaken, allowing one after another of the ascending men on the ladders to crawl over the parapet.

The door was really giving way now under the bombardment brought to bear upon it. Indeed, not to be premature those who wielded the battering ram had to slacken their efforts more or less, though pretending to work as furiously as heretofore.

One thing alone seemed lacking, according to the mind of Billy, to make the battle seem the real thing. There were no cannon shots, and even the rattle of muskets and small arms appeared lacking.

Later on, when by chance in a carping, critical mood he mentioned this fact, he was greeted by a roar of derision from Monkey Stallings and Alec, who told him to brush up a little on history. He must remember that in those ancient days gunpowder had not been invented, and that consequently all missiles that passed through the air had to be hurled by machines fashioned after the style of the familiar rubber sling so well known to all boys.

"It's coming soon now, fellows!" shouted the Stallings boy, whose quick eye no doubt noted certain preparations for the final scene, such as a gathering of the assailants on the ladders, now no longer being overthrown, and also clinging to such projections of the stone walls near the escarpment as they could find.

Alec held his hand.

"Only one more picture!" he was groaning, disconsolately, at the same time determined that it should

be the climax of the whole affair, when the castle walls were actually carried by the energetic horde pushing against them.

More wildly than ever waved those frantic appeals for "help" from the narrow window slits in the tower room. The "fair lady" was apparently doing everything in her power to encourage her knight and his followers to renewed efforts in her behalf.

Of course, it was a foregone conclusion that the gallants who were doing the assaulting would be victorious in the end. Motion-picture patrons differ from those who attend the grand opera, since they will not stand to have their drama turn out disagreeably. Right must always triumph over might, regardless of how it actually happens in real life; and the villainous knight was sure to be punished as soon as the heroic leader of the attacking party could force an entrance to the castle, and chase after him to the tower room.

Hugh drew a long breath.

Just as the sagacious Monkey had declared at the top of his voice, the finish was close at hand now. At any second Hugh expected to hear the volley of shots from the stage director's weapon sounding high above the clamor. Indeed, much of the racket had died down, showing that the actors themselves were looking for it, and did not want to do anything to smother the welcome sound that would mean their release from further toil and turmoil, for the moment, at least.

All this while the operator was grinding away assiduously. He knew his duty was to get down everything that happened regardless of what his judgment might be. If certain sections of the film proved objectionable from any cause it would be an easy matter to eliminate that part; whereas nothing new could be supplied without going over the whole scene again at tremendous cost of energy.

It was certainly an education for Hugh. He had never dreamed that such a splendid chance would come his way, allowing him to learn just how motion pictures were made. Truly, the wonderful good luck that had been the portion of himself and comrades for so long a period seemed to still follow their footsteps, as one of the boys had only recently declared.

And just then the shrill voice of Monkey Stallings rang out again, this time with a note of genuine alarm pervading its tones.

"Look, oh, look!" was what he shrieked, excitedly; "that wall is sure going to collapse right down on those men! That's real, not make-believe! Oh, Hugh, can't something be done to warn the poor fel—there, it's coming now!"

And right through it all the imperturbable operator kept grinding away. It was a part of his business to get everything down, real or imitation; and even an accident that imperiled human life might make good "stuff."

CHAPTER XI

IMITATION AND REALITY

Perhaps it was almost mechanically that Alec pressed the bulb of his camera at just the very second when that wall was toppling over. He had a faint recollection afterwards of doing so, though only filled with horror at the moment itself.

There was a sudden cessation to all the clamor as the accident happened. Indeed, the three quick reports from the director's revolver hardly seemed needed to bring a halt to the proceedings. As the door was about burst in, anyway, and some of the men could not longer be restrained from clambering over the top of the walls, it would answer just as well as though things had proceeded in their regular routine.

Immediately afterwards a new kind of noise burst forth. Women shrieked, and men shouted. There were also cries of pain intermingled with the rest, Hugh noticed.

Before the scout master could even give an order he missed one of his companions. Of course, this was Arthur Cameron. The sight of that mass of rock toppling over upon several of the motion-picture actors, and carrying others down amidst a perfect jumble of heaped up stones, acted on Arthur as a red

flag does upon the angry bull in the ring.

Nothing could have kept him back, for his ears would have been deaf even to an order from the leader, whom he delighted to obey. Arthur's surgical instincts were aroused, and he saw the path of duty before him. And Arthur never shirked his duty.

Hugh waited not upon the order of his going, but immediately chased after the other. Monkey Stallings was not far behind him, with Billy tagging along of necessity. As for Alec, he only waited to gather up his beloved camera, even neglecting to turn the last exposure down as a completed roll.

In fact everyone seemed to be trying to converge upon the spot where the wall had collapsed. The manager was pushing his way through the crowd, waving his megaphone, and looking somewhat alarmed, for he felt dismayed at the idea of having so many of his supers being injured more or less seriously. It would mean not only pain and suffering for the poor fellows but a pretty heavy bill of damages to pay by the company.

And yet, such is the force of education which becomes second nature with men, that even in the midst of all this confusion the manager could think to bawl out to the operator not to neglect to get all this in his reel, as it was going to show what actual perils the actors ran in making their pictures.

Another queer thing happened that must be set down. Hugh actually forgot he was only a boy, and had been given no authority over these men. He saw that the first to arrive on the scene acted as though ignorant of the best way to go about rescuing the poor chaps who were partly buried under all that wreckage of the fallen wall.

So what did he do but begin to order them about as though they were slaves. He told a couple of them off to lift a heavy stone from the lower limbs of a man who seemed to be unconscious, and then there came Arthur actually directing them how to raise the wounded super and carry him to where he could be laid under the nearest tree.

Stranger still the men did just as they were bidden. In moments like this the stronger mind dominates the situation, regardless of age or stature. Those supers were in the habit of taking orders, and never stopped to question when told to follow out a line of work, especially when the command came in a tone of authority.

That was the remarkable picture that met the eye of the stage manager when he presently reached the scene. Hugh seemed to be telling the others what to do as if all his life he had been accustomed to the position of chief. No wonder the experienced manager stared at the boy who wore the faded suit of khaki, and even allowed a faint smile to wreath his lips; for did he not have a beloved lad like that at home, and in his heart he felt that perhaps some day, in a time of desperate necessity, his son might likewise rise to an occasion as this young chap was doing.

There was no lack of eager workers, and they seemed to fall in with whatever Hugh told them to do. He pointed this way and that as he directed them to dig in the mass of debris for any unfortunate who might be buried quite out of sight. And not once did it enter into the head of the earnest lad that the machine close by was clicking away merrily through it all, showing everything that was being done in the shadow of a real tragedy. Here was realism for fair!

Already three poor chaps had been either carried off or assisted. There were two of them grunting as though quite badly injured. Arthur, now joined by the regular doctor who accompanied the troupe of actors on their many lengthy trips, was busily engaged, endeavoring to ascertain the extent of the damages. A dozen of the awed actors and actresses surrounded the impromptu field hospital, and upon every face could be seen only the deepest sympathy.

Still, after the worst was known and the last of the injured taken care of, no doubt the task of completing the picture would go on, just as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. These roving players become so accustomed to accepting risks in the pursuit of their calling that a little thing like this cannot be allowed to interfere with the main object of their business for any great length of time.

Other supers would be called upon to take the places of those injured, if there was any necessity for reenforcements, and the work of completing the drama would proceed apace.

By degrees the mass of fallen material was pulled aside, many hands making light work. Half a dozen of the agile players had managed to save themselves, receiving only slight skin abrasions which would hardly keep them from earning their salaries.

There were just four who had been carried or helped to the "hospital" under the tree near by in the grounds of the castle. It was when the pleasing fact had been communicated by one of the workers that

the last victim of the accident was found, with no fatalities to account for, that the stage manager came up to Hugh with outstretched hand.

He had his megaphone slung over his back as a sportsman might his fowling-piece. With that everlasting red bandanna he was mopping his forehead again, and this time it may have been as much anxiety as action that started the perspiration streaming down his rosy face.

"I want to thank you from my heart, son," he told the pleased scout master, as he gripped his hand in a warm clutch. "You have proved yourself a jewel in this emergency. If this is one of the things scouts learn, I'm glad my boy has taken up the subject. I'm proud of you all. I don't see, how we could have done things half as well if you hadn't been on the ground to assist, yes, to take the lead. Once more, I thank you!"

He glanced to where Arthur, with his coat thrown off, was working over one of the victims of the near-tragedy. The sight seemed to affect the stage manager, for he nodded his head violently, and Hugh believed he could see a moisture in his eyes just then.

"I had another boy some years back, I want to tell you," he said, softly. "He was drowned while swimming in the river. His companions succeeded in getting Tad out, but they were utterly ignorant as to how to go to work to restore him to consciousness—and so my boy died. I believe before Heaven that if they had been raised in the knowledge of the things you Boy Scouts learn in these days, my poor wife and I need not have suffered such a cruel loss. When I learned something about the education of a scout, I made up my mind that since I had still one son left to me there would never be a repetition of that calamity. He is now a patrol leader in his troop in Brooklyn, and can swim like a duck. Come, let's go over and see what the worst is going to be."

Hugh gladly accompanied the genial stage manager. His heart burned within him, not with silly pride, but sincere gratification, on account of what he had just heard. The boy's mind was so wrapped up in the glorious possibilities that an aspiring scout ever has at his finger-tips that commendation like this always pleased him. It was Hugh's ambition to have the Oakvale Troop embrace every lad of suitable age in and around his home town. He would not have a single one refused an opportunity to enjoy those privileges and advantages which membership with the scouts assures.

So they joined the circle around the temporary "hospital." The doctor had not allowed the anxious crowd to press in too closely, for he understood the value of plenty of fresh air and working room when engaged in cases of this kind. Besides, most of the picture players knew from former experiences what they must do, and were only eager to be of any possible help.

Even the women, clad in their strange gowns of a bygone age, and wearing astonishing head-dresses and shoes, showed remarkable courage. Their nerves had been steeled by long association with perils of various types, so that they manifested none of the weaknesses people expect to find in connection with the gentler sex. One of the leading actresses was assisting in washing quite an ugly wound that a poor fellow had received in his arm. He seemed to be bearing his suffering like a hero, and acted as though he rather enjoyed having one of the heroines play the part of nurse to a humble understrapper.

Hugh allowed his eyes to fall with pardonable pride upon his chum, Arthur, for he saw that, as usual, the ambitious amateur surgeon was doing fine work, of which no one need be ashamed.

And all of this remarkable happening was being faithfully recorded upon the rapidly shifting thousand feet of film in the hopper of the machine, to later on astonish gaping crowds with a faithful delineation of the perils attending the ordinary life of a motion-picture player.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN SWORDS CLASHED

"I wonder if that winds up the whole show?" asked Billy Worth, a short time later, as Alec and Monkey Stallings joined him, while there was an unusual bustle among the numerous retinue of the hard-working stage manager.

"Not on your life, Billy," observed Alec, "though I'm all in myself so far as taking any more wonderful pictures goes, because I've used my last film, which I consider hard luck. Hugh just told me the worst is

yet to come."

"What! are they going to make out to burn the old castle down? Is that worrying you, Alec?" asked the Stallings boy.

"Sure it is," frankly confessed Alec. "Of course, the fire will be a whole lot of a fake; that is, much smoke, and no real danger to the girl shut up in that high turret room; but, all the same, it's going to do considerable harm to the building, which may queer it for Aunt Susan's purposes."

"Well, what can you say?" demanded Billy. "These people have put up the money to cover any damage they may do, and money talks every time. Here comes Hugh back to tell us what the programme is. He's just left that hustler of a director, and the chances are Hugh knows all about it, because he's made a big hit with the manager."

"Hugh always does make people look up to him, somehow," mused Alec, as though it often puzzled him to know just how the other managed it.

"There, Arthur has joined him, too, and is coming along," Billy went on to say. "He's about finished helping the doctor take care of the wounded yeomen who had the bad luck to be caught when that treacherous old wall caved in."

The scout master, accompanied by Arthur, quickly joined them, to be greeted by a shower of eager questions.

"I can tell you all about it, fellows," said Hugh, making as if to ward off an attack. "Mr. Jefferson, the manager, says he figures on completing his work in the one visit, and has made all necessary preparations. It's a tremendous job to fetch his big company all the way from New York up here. If they make good to-day they expect to go back in the morning, or perhaps to-night, if they can catch the late train. Otherwise they'll have to make another try to-morrow. Personally, I think they'll make good to-day."

"What's the next stunt, Hugh?" asked Alec, his voice more or less betraying the eagerness and concern he felt.

"Oh, from what I can gather," answered the scout master, smilingly, "it runs about like this: The forces headed by the hero knight have carried the outer works of the fortress castle in which the villain has the fair heroine shut up in that turret room. The invaders, having made a breach in the walls and swarmed over in various places, will now pursue the few desperate defenders of the castle through this passage; and that, with many a desperate hand-to-hand fight. Always the knight in armor is seen hewing his way steadily through all opposition, with one object in view. Of course this is to meet the scoundrel, and finish him, which he eventually does after a dreadful sword fight."

"Whew!" gasped Billy, listening with round eyes to the stirring story.

Alec, too, was deeply interested, but his professional instinct caused him to remark:

"They'll have to burn heaps and heaps of flashlight powder to get all those inside effects. Wish they'd let me see just how they manage it, but it would be apt to queer the value of the picture to have, a modern Boy Scout appear in it. If I get a good chance, though, I've a notion to ask Mr. Jefferson."

"You'll never be able to make it, Alec," Hugh told him. "He's the busiest man on earth. He has to be thinking of fifty things at once."

"Go on, Hugh, and tell us the rest," urged Billy, pawing at the sleeve of the other, which action he doubtless meant to be an urgent second to his appeal.

"Every once in a while there will be glimpses shown of Rebecca in her dungeon, looking out of the little opening, and carrying on as if nearly frightened to death, for gusts of smoke will be circling around her, and she is supposed to know that the fire is getting closer all the time."

"Wow, that must make it a thriller for fair!" exclaimed Monkey Stallings, who was known to love exciting stories, though his watchful mother kept a tight rein on his propensity to indulge along those lines, and censored all books he brought into the house before allowing him to devour them.

"Of course," remarked Alec, flippantly. "It goes without saying that eventually knight in shining armor, Ivanhoe, or whoever he may be, gets to the locked door of the turret tower room, bursts his way through, and saves the lovely maiden, like they always do in stories of those olden times. But here's hoping the fire doesn't get out of control, and set in to destroy the best part of this wonderful castle. Such things have been known to happen, I've read."

"Gosh!" ejaculated Billy with more than his accustomed vigor, "you're only thinking of the humbug old castle, Alec, and what chance there would be for your rich aunt to buy the same if half burned down. Guess you forget the poor girl shut up in that lonesome turret room; what d'ye suppose would become of *her* if the fire got beyond control?"

"And not a ladder in sight, either," added Monkey Stallings, dismally, as he swept his eyes around in a nervous way. "As for a fire company, there isn't one closer than Danbury, which is all of ten miles away. Whew! I'm beginning to wish the whole business was over with, boys, and the troupe jogging along back to the town they came from in all those big automobiles."

Hugh made no remark just then, but perhaps this suggestion of possible trouble caused him a little concern. He could be seen looking gravely toward the immense pile of real and imitation stone as though mentally figuring what it might be possible to do in a sudden emergency.

As numerous events in the past had proved, Hugh Hardin was always a great hand for mapping out things beforehand. He believed in the principle of preparing for war in times of peace, so as not to be taken unawares.

"A man insures his home," Hugh often said in explanation of this habit, "when everything seems lovely and safe, not when the fire is raging, and his property going up in flame and smoke."

The stage manager had determined that there was no need of repeating the last wild scene where the castle was taken, and a tottering wall fell unexpectedly in the midst of the furious struggle. Let it stand, he had determined, accident and all. It appeared to be almost perfect "copy," and would show up as a faithful portrayal of the stupendous perils attending the efforts of his company in enacting just one phase of a romantic drama of the days of chivalry.

"I notice that they are meaning to use two machines and a couple or camera men, so as to get all the excitement down pat," ventured Alec, presently, as they stood and watched the hurrying people of the play in their remarkable attire suggestive of those feudal days of old.

"One is to be kept busy outside," explained Hugh, "while the other takes pictures of the fighting going on through the corridors and apartments of the castle, while the knight and his valorous retainers are battling their way closer and closer to the place where the captive 'maiden' is held fast behind the locked door. I got all that stuff straight from Mr. Jefferson, and those are his own words, so don't laugh."

"Huh! it's too serious a business to do much laughing," grunted Billy. "I'm just itching all over to see how it comes out. There, that must have been the signal to start. I can see some of the men beginning to make an awful smoke with the apparatus they're handling. What a good imitation of the real thing it is!"

"Whoopee! listen to the big swords clashing inside the castle, will you?" cried Monkey Stallings. "Say, we're missing great stunts, believe me, in having to stay out here. I've got half a notion——"

However, Monkey did not finish the sentence, whatever rash notion was flitting through his active mind. Possibly he had indulged in a wild dream that for one of his climbing abilities it might prove feasible to reach a window above, and by thrusting his head through the aperture see something of the wonderful things going on in the passages where the crowd was thronging.

It was the fact of Hugh looking meaningfully at him that caused Monkey to stop in the midst of his sentence, for he saw by the expression on the face of the scout master that Hugh would not permit any meddling. The enormous expense and labor attending the taking of that picture must not be wasted through any injudicious act on the part of himself or one of his chums.

As the minutes passed the confusion became almost a riot, so it seemed to Billy. The shouts of the fighting men grew hoarse with constant repetitions, for naturally they had to give vent to their emotions, or else much of their efforts would have lacked in the genuine feeling. How those swords did whack and beat upon each other as slowly but surely the defenders of the castle were being cut down one by one!

It was terribly realistic, too, with the vast volumes of smoke rising up in billows, and here and there what seemed to be a red tongue of fire shooting through the appalling waves of black vapor.

Presently, as the boys understood, matters would reach a climax. This was when the hero knight attained the goal for which he was striving so valiantly.

Then he would be seen attacking the fastened door furiously, while inside and out that ominous

smoke curled in wreaths about him. In the end, just when it seemed as though all would be lost, of course, the knight must batter his way in through the broken door, and the dashing rescue would be complete.

Hugh was beginning to feel nervous, and with a reason. While his chums' were wholly wrapped up in observing the numerous exciting incidents that fell under their observation, and connected with the work of the laboring players, the scout master had made a sudden discovery that worried him.

It was a very small matter, and would never have been noticed by any one whose training had not been that of a scout, accustomed to observing everything happening around him. But small matters may become *deciding* factors.

The wind had shifted all of a sudden, and besides coming from a new quarter was rapidly growing in violence. Hugh knew this from the way the smoke had turned and was now sweeping toward the southeast. This fact, while trifling in itself, might, as he well knew, assume a terrible significance when it was remembered that a dozen industrious supers were playing with fire, and causing it to appear that the whole wing of the castle were enveloped in flames, real or make-believe.

Hugh had eyes for nothing else after making that thrilling discovery. He watched with his nerves on edge, and at the same time began to think within that active brain of his what his plan of campaign must be should the worst that he feared come to pass.

Those hoarse shouts of the combatants, the clang of steel smiting steel, the roar of the manager's voice through his big megaphone, the shrieks of the women connected with the troupe, induced by the real excitement of the occasion—all these sounds fell upon deaf ears as Hugh gripped his chum Arthur by the arm and called his attention to the impending peril, becoming greater with every second.

"The wind, don't you see it's whipped around, and is coming from a new quarter?" was the tenor of what he called in the other's ear. "If that fire gets away from those supers it's going to give them a heap of trouble! Yes, it will chase those fighters out of the passages in a hurry, and I'm afraid it'll even cut off the poor girl who is supposed to be locked in that turret room."

"Hugh, look! look!" ejaculated Arthur, in sudden excitement; "Just as you said, I do believe the fire has got beyond their control already. Listen to the way everybody is whooping it up now. It's real fright that we hear, and no make-believe!"

CHAPTER XIII

WELL DONE, SCOUTS!

Hugh was glad that he had foreseen just such an emergency as the one that now confronted the motion-picture players. It afforded him a chance to get busy without wasting any precious time in laying out plans.

The men who had been inside the building began to come rushing out, some dragging comrades who may have temporarily found themselves unable to walk, owing to the fatigue influenced by their recent terrific efforts, and also the weight of the armor which they were wearing.

Everybody looked alarmed and distressed, and with reason, for it was now seen that the wing where the girl was shut up in that turret room was enveloped in real flames, which, whipped by the rising wind, threatened to consume the whole structure in so far as it consisted of wood made to resemble genuine stone.

The director was again shouting hoarsely through his megaphone, but he was now up against a situation that none of them had foreseen, so that consequently no preparations had been made toward meeting it. Men ran this way and that as though they had temporarily taken leave of their senses. Women could be seen wringing their hands, and shrieking wildly.

Although the outside camera man undoubtedly realized that this was anything but a sham now, he never once ceased grinding away at his machine. Long experience in these lines had convinced him of the great value of a stirring scene like this; and besides, his services were hardly needed in the work of saving the one whose life seemed to be in deadly peril.

"We must do something, and right away at that!" called Hugh. "Come along with me, every one, I've got a scheme that may be made to work."

They followed close at his heels. Evidently it did not enter into the head of the scout master to think of applying for permission from the stage manager before starting to try out his suddenly formed plan. Hugh realized very well that this was an occasion where that energetic gentleman would be at a loss what to tell him. Besides, a wideawake scout, accustomed to doing his own thinking, should be better equipped to manage such an affair as this than a man whose talents ran in quite another direction.

The first thing Hugh sought to get hold of was a long and stout rope which he had noticed lying on the ground near by, together with numerous other things which the company had thought to fetch along with them, having an eye to possible need.

"Lay hold of that ax, Alec!" he told the other, who had managed to leave his beloved camera back of a tree, under the impression that it would hinder him in the execution of the work Hugh had laid out for himself and chums to perform.

Some of the players had by this time begun to notice the little bunch of khaki-clad lads running toward the burning wing of the castle. They commenced to shout out to them, perhaps encouragingly, or it may be intending to warn them not to attempt anything rash.

Little Hugh cared what their cries might mean. He had his plan arranged, and believed it could be carried to success if only speedy action were taken.

"We've got to get to the roof of that tower!" he told the others, as they drew near the fire, and could begin to feel the heat it was beginning to throw out as it crept upward, whipped by the rising wind. "Billy, I want you and Arthur to stay down under the walls and be ready to receive the girl, if we manage to, get things going. Understand that, both of you?"

"All right, if you say so, Hugh!" replied Arthur, though it could be noticed that he looked greatly disappointed because he had not been selected to accompany the rescuing party.

Billy did not make any reply. Perhaps he was, secretly, as well pleased to be assigned to that task, because Billy, being a heavy-weight, never made a success of climbing; and from all appearance there was bound to be more or less of that style of work ahead of those who were chosen to go aloft.

Having thus divided his party, Hugh hurried toward a window of the main building close by. He remembered that it was possible to gain, the roof of the castle—and unless the flames became too menacing—by creeping along this they would be able to reach the top of the turret tower. If no other means were found available for gaining access to the room of the prisoner, Hugh expected to make good use of that axe, and force an entrance through the roof itself, as he had seen the Oakvale volunteer firemen do on more than one occasion.

Billy and Arthur watched their chums climbing hastily through that window. Doubtless their hearts were throbbing with excitement, and deep down those two were hoping and praying that not only would Hugh, Alec and Monkey Stallings be able to come back alive and unharmed, but that they might also accomplish the object that had enlisted their services.

Meanwhile the trio of scouts found themselves groping their way along smoke-filled passages. Hugh made the others keep in close touch with him while this was going on. He did not mean that they should become separated, and something dreadful mar their endeavor to make themselves useful.

Fortunately the fire had not as yet reached the stairway leading upward, so that in a brief space of time the three scouts found themselves in the corridor where so lately a terrific combat had been taking place. They even stumbled over some fragment of imitation steel armor which may have been hurriedly thrown aside at the time the alarm of fire had sounded, causing such a hasty stampede on the part of the motion-picture players.

Apparently, while the retreat of the actors in this near-tragedy had been of a hurried nature, they had seen to it that no one of their number had been left in the corridor to become a victim of the flames. Hugh made sure of this, even as he pushed his way along.

A minute later and the boys were climbing out of a certain window on to the roof. Hugh had taken note of that very circumstance himself when prowling about the remarkable building; in fact, he had even half pulled himself up to see what the roof looked like, though never dreaming at the time he would so soon find need of his knowledge.

Monkey Stallings was, of course, in his element. None of the others could do nearly so well as he

when it came to this sort of thing. Probably Hugh had remembered this circumstance when picking the acrobat out as one of his party, instead of choosing Arthur Cameron.

He sent the Stallings boy on ahead, and gave him to understand that he was expected to assist the others whenever he could. So they managed to gain the roof of the main building, and started in, the direction of the wing that was being fast enveloped in fiercely leaping flames.

When the trio of scouts were discovered by the clusters of appalled actors down below, and many fingers were pointed up at them, cheers began to arise. Undoubtedly those quick-witted players guessed what Hugh had in mind, and as it seemed to be the only possible chance to save the poor girl from her prison room, they one and all wished the courageous lads godspeed in their mission.

Hugh felt considerably relieved when he discovered that it would be possible to gain the other roof from the main structure. There was really no time to lose, however, for the fire seemed to be getting a pretty good headway, and any delay was likely to imperil their chances of success.

They had to get down on their hands and knees and crawl part of the way across. Had they been less agile they never could have made it, and just here it was seen how wisely the scout master had acted when he failed to choose clumsy if willing Billy Worth as one of their number.

Once upon the smaller roof covering the turret tower, Hugh found that it was a matter of impossibility to lower themselves so as to gain the slits of windows in the walls, made more for appearances than for any particular use. And even though they were able to reach one of these he doubted whether any of them could manage to crawl through.

There was nothing for it then but to attack the roof with the ax, which Alec had managed to cling to through all his climbing. Hugh snatched the implement from the hands of his chum, and went at it. The ax bit into the roof with each hearty blow, and Hugh worked like a beaver, knowing that there was constant danger they might be caught by the creeping flames before their object had been accomplished.

Afterwards, when speaking about their experiences up there on that roof, Alec and Monkey Stallings always declared they had never seen any one wield an ax with more telling effect than Hugh did on that wonderful occasion. Those who were below had a fair view of what was going on aloft, whenever the wind carried the smoke aside, as their encouraging cheers testified from time to time.

When Hugh found his muscles beginning to lag, he handed the implement over to Alec, knowing the other must be fairly wild to have a hand in the labor. How the chips did fly and scatter with each and every blow of that descending ax! Alec put every ounce of vim he could muster into each stroke, while if he faltered there was Monkey Stallings opening and shutting his two hands as though eager to take up the good work.

Then came the critical moment when the ax cut through, and a small gap appeared out of which a spiral of smoke began to ooze. Larger grew the hole, and then Alec, dripping with perspiration, fairly gasping for breath, handed the ax over to the third member of the group, after which the work continued furiously.

Finally Hugh stopped Monkey Stallings and made motions that he was about to go through the aperture. The others saw him vanish, and a brief but terrible period of suspense followed. Then through the gap in the roof appeared the head of the young woman who was playing the romantic part of the Jewess, Rebecca. Through all this tragic happening she, must have managed to retain her self-possession in a way that was simply wonderful, for she was now able to do her part toward working up through the hole in the roof, assisted by the two scouts above.

When those below discovered how success had thus far rewarded the efforts of Hugh and his equally quick-witted fellow scouts, the cheer that broke forth could have been heard miles away, so great was their admiration for the work of the three boys.

However, there was still more to be done if they would escape from the trap arranged between the rival elements, the wind and the fire. To return over the same route by which they had come was now impossible, since the fire had cut off escape by that course.

This was a possibility foreseen by Hugh when he concluded to take that long and serviceable rope aloft with him. By this means the girl could first be lowered to the ground at a point where the flames had not yet reached; and afterwards it would be little trouble for, himself and chums to also slide down to safety. Hugh always paid much attention to details.

Accordingly this was what they hastily set about doing. They were fortunate in having to deal with a

plucky little woman. She understood just what was expected of her, and indeed, to see the way she assisted them secure the rope about her body under the arms, and then bade them swing her free, from the parapet of the tower, one might suspect that she had long since practiced for just this sort of thrilling picture.

All went well, and one by one the three scouts came sliding down the rope later on, none of them so much as having an eyelash singed, though the flames roared as if angry at having lost a victim.

"And," Billy was heard to remark when the boys could break away from the excited players, all of whom wanted to squeeze their hands, and say what they thought of the clever work, "Don't forget every minute of the time that camera man was turning his crank like fury. He got it all down pat, too, boys, as maybe we'll see for ourselves one of these fine days."

CHAPTER XIV

OAKVALE GETS A THRILL

"What's the news, Alec?" demanded Billy Worth, some weeks after the events narrated in the foregoing chapters took place.

They were just entering the town hall of Oakvale, where there was about to be given a select entertainment consisting of the most part of educational motion pictures. It was intended for the benefit of the local orphan asylum, so that every seat in the big building was being rapidly filled.

A number of the other members of the scout organization were gathered near by, as a special section of the chairs had been reserved for the troupe, for certain reasons which no one seemed exactly to understand. It was only known that Hugh and Lieutenant Denmead, the regular scout master, had made some arrangement with those who were, responsible for getting up the benefit performance.

"Oh! I had a letter from my Aunt Susan in this afternoon's mail," replied Alec, as he nodded to several acquaintances near by, girls belonging to Oakvale High School.

"About that place up in the country where we spent our last week-end outing, and had such a lively time—eh, Alec?" suggested Billy, with a wide grin.

"Yes, and the meanness of you fellows keeping the whole business to yourselves all this time," commented Blake Merton, severely.

"We just know there was something *remarkable* happened to you up there," spoke up Don Miller, the leader of the Fox Patrol, "but no matter what we hinted, never a word could we get any of you to explain about it. What's it all mean, Hugh?"

"Wait and see," was the mysterious answer that again baffled the curiosity of the eager listeners, some of whom had really begun to hope that Hugh might think it time to remove the seal of absolute secrecy with which the outing had been enveloped so long. "And Alec, suppose you tell us what your aunt said in her letter. You don't look as if it held good news, that's certain."

Alec laughed good-naturedly.

"Oh! she complimented me like everything because of those grand pictures I sent her, and said that the account I gave of the thrilling happenings up there made her satisfied with the little investment she had incurred. I was welcome to the camera, and she also meant to send me another present soon, because she found herself quite interested in scout work. But she couldn't think of putting the deal through for that—er—place. She says after what happened there, it's likely to be a shrine for curious-minded folks for a long time to come, and as she wants absolute quiet, that would not suit her. So you see, just as I expected, that deal's off."

All this strange manner of talk greatly aroused the listeners curiosity. They tried in turn to coax Hugh, Billy, Alec, Arthur or Monkey Stallings to "open up and tell us what it all means, won't you like a good fellow?" but those worthies only looked wise, nodded their heads, and told them to "hold their horses," and in good time they would be treated to a little surprise that would pay them for all their waiting.

The hall soon filled up, with seating space at a premium. It was in a good cause and backed by the Women's League for Town Improvement. The orphans needed a good many things to make them comfortable for the winter, and this was to be one of several methods employed to obtain these articles, which the town did not see fit to supply.

Walter Osborne, Bud Morgan and several of the other scouts had been silently watching Hugh and his immediate chums. Their attention was especially directed toward Billy Worth, who seemed to be so nervous that he could hardly keep his seat.

"It's my opinion," remarked Walter, sagely, "that there's going to be something of a surprise sprung on the rest of us to-night. I've been keeping tabs on Billy, and to see him grin, and look so happy and proud gives the thing away. He just can't keep his face straight, he feels so important."

"But what can it be?" asked Jack Durham. "The whole entertainment to-night is made up of Professor Wakefield with his violin, and three selected moving pictures."

"Yes," added Bud Morgan, referring to a paper he held in his hand, "and one of these is a comic, a second a trip through the island of Ceylon, showing things just as if a fellow was there on the spot, while the third and last seems to be a series of pictures showing just how a company of players go about when engaged in making one of their wonderful films."

"I don't see how Billy can expect to be in touch with any of those things," commented Walter, more puzzled than ever. "We'll just have to wait and see, as Hugh told us. It may be that they've coaxed Hugh to consent to get up there on the platform to-night, and tell all about what happened to them the time they went off to spend the week-end up the country."

"Walter, I wouldn't be surprised if you'd guessed it, after all," said one of the other fellows; and then as a loud clapping of hands announced that the well-known local violinist was about to make his bow to the big audience, the boys stopped exchanging opinions, and settled down to the policy of "watchful waiting" so often spoken of by the occupant of the Executive Chair at Washington.

The educational value of the "Trip through Ceylon" could not be gainsaid, and the humorous film caused much laughter, and boisterous merriment. Finally the announcement was made that they were now about to be treated to a most wonderful series of pictures, showing the details of how one of the best-known companies of moving-picture artists went about their work when engaged in producing a drama of olden days, with an appropriate setting and background.

They were first of all discovered starting forth from their hotel in the city, and taking train for some place in the country, together with much paraphernalia connected with their undertaking, so that it looked very much like an exodus on the part of a whole village of fashionables.

Next the pictures showed them leaving the train, at some country town, where a whole string of capacious cars awaited them, into which they crowded, joking and laughing, and carrying bundles without end.

Then another scene disclosed the company clad in all manner of remarkable garments, all of which might be recognized as having to do with the historical time of the Crusades, when knights in armor attended by their faithful squires were wont to roam the country in search of adventure.

Of course the younger element in the audience watched all this with exceeding interest. They doubtless sensed with that intuition boys always display, that sooner or later there would necessarily come along heaps of fighting, and stirring pictures, when those men in shining armor met in deadly combat.

One by one, the scenes passed in review, and finally there was flashed upon the screen a picture of what seemed to be a veritable olden castle, true to tradition, turreted tower, drawbridge, portcullis, deep moat, apparently unscalable walls, and all.

Just at this interesting juncture, as the music happened to die down temporarily, a boy who had been around some was heard to say aloud, though he had not expected to make himself conspicuous:

"If that isn't the old place called Randall's Folly, I'll eat my hat!"

Walter Osborne gave Bud Morgan a quick dig in the ribs.

"Hey! it's coming, you mark my words if it isn't!" he hissed in the other's ear. "Just look at Billy Worth there, bobbing up and down as if he might be sitting on tacks. And see how he grins, and looks prouder than a turkey gobbler. Something's going to break loose right away, Bud, believe me."

Well, it did.

When presently, after that first onslaught of the gallant followers of the hero knight, the motion-picture players were seen to be "resting up" between acts, and those who had been injured in the fracas were being attended to, a shout arose.

"Hey! what's this I see?" yelled a boy's strident voice. "Right there along with all them knights and ladies there's a Boy Scout helping take care of the fellows knocked out in that scrap. And, say, it's our own Arthur Cameron, would you believe it?"

"And there's Hugh! Yes, and look at our Billy Worth strutting around there as big as life. Oh, you Billy, it takes, you to get in, the limelight every time!"

All sorts of shouts were rising in different parts of the hall as the audience discovered the well-known lads belonging to their own town. Most of them began to understand now why those fellows had persisted in keeping so mute. Evidently they must have known that this wonderful picture was coming in time to be shown at the benefit performance.

Everybody was eagerly waiting to see what followed. When the wall fell there was a series of low exclamations of horror, for they were intelligent enough to realize that this had not been a part of the real programme, and also that the chances were some of the unfortunates must have been severely injured.

Then came the picture revealing how the five scouts sprang forward and assisted in the work of rescuing those caught by the falling rocks; also how Arthur, as might be expected, did his part in taking care of the injured. How proud many of those present felt at seeing the manly way in which Hugh and his comrades rose to the occasion, and did their calling great credit.

A tense stillness followed those loud cheers, for, an announcement had been displayed relating how, owing to a shift of the wind, the fire had spread, causing a sudden evacuation of the forces battling in the passages and rooms of the castle; and also how through some misfortune the lovely heroine was really and truly caught up there in that lonely tower room, hemmed in by the cruel flames.

Then, as the startling scene moved on, the five hundred eager spectators saw Hugh lead his fellow scouts to the rescue—watched three of them vanish through that gaping window, to appear a little later on the roof, followed with strained eyes their furious attack on the roof of the tower, and finally saw them lower the lady in safety to the ground, where Billy and Arthur, and many of the motion-picture players, waited to receive them.

And last but not least, just as the scene closed, the three scouts were discovered sliding swiftly down the rope past the hungry tongues of fire.

The triumph of the scouts was complete. Men shouted, boys shrilled, and women laughed and cried and kissed each other. Never before had such excitement taken possession of an audience in Oakvale. How proud it made them to realize that their local organization was being advertised all over the broad land, yes, even in other foreign lands as well, it might be, so that Oakvale would soon become famous because of its scout troop.

Through it all Hugh seemed to sit unmoved, though he shook hands with the admiring crowds as they came up to offer congratulations, and laughed heartily to see how Billy Worth strutted around, swelled with pride.

"It was a whole lot of fun while it lasted," Hugh was telling a bunch of the fellows, after the show was over. "But when a thing is done with you can't extract much enjoyment out of the memory. What I'm more concerned about right at this, minute is where we are going to find another chance for an outing in the coming Thanksgiving holidays. I'd like some of you to get busy thinking up a scheme, that will just about fill the bill."

That somebody did engineer a plan along lines that promised to take some of the fellows out of the beaten rut for the brief holidays, can be set down as certain, judging from the nature of the title of the succeeding volume of this series, "The Boy Scouts on the Roll of Honor," and which, it is hoped; all who have enjoyed the present story will procure without delay.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS WITH THE MOTION PICTURE PLAYERS ***

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