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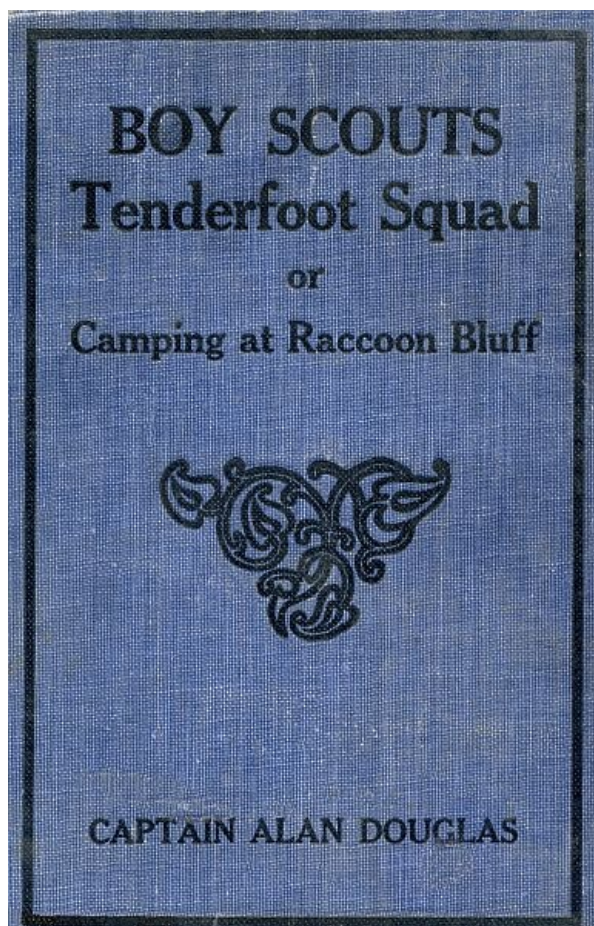
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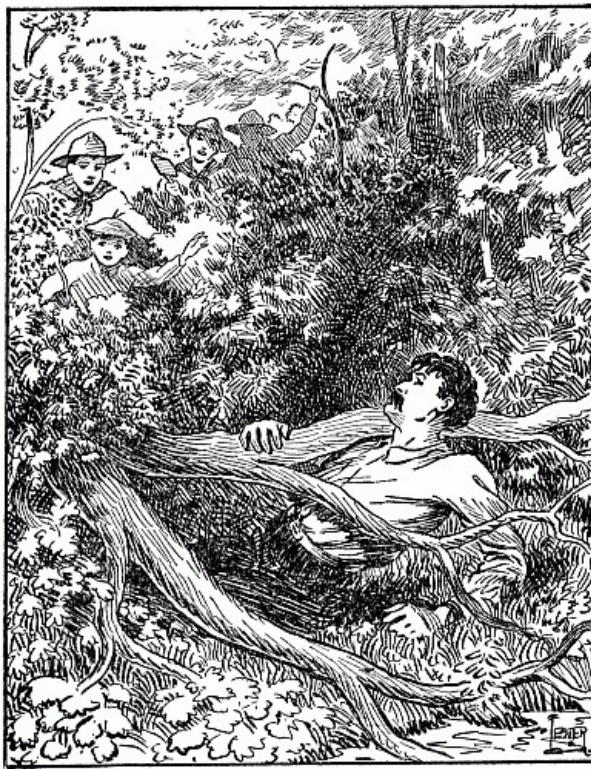
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOY SCOUTS: TENDERFOOT SQUAD; OR,
CAMPING AT RACCOON LODGE ***





The tree had caught Jem Shock fairly in a trap

Tenderfoot Squad; *or,* Camping at Raccoon Lodge

BY
CAPTAIN ALAN DOUGLAS
SCOUT MASTER



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TENDERFOOT SQUAD

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CHAPTER I

SURVEYOR RUFUS AND HIS FRIENDS

"ALL aboard for Raccoon Bluff. Those who can't get aboard take the rail route! Hi! Elmer, squeeze in!"

"On deck, Lil Artha; but do you expect me to climb on top of that mountain of camp duffle, and other luggage you've got piled up, so that your car looks like a tin peddler's outfit?"

"Oh! we've reserved just one crack for you, Elmer. That's right!" sang out the khaki-clad boy at the wheel, "work your way in alongside George Robbins, who's holding down the rear seat with Lil Artha. I've got Alec McGregor beside me here. And after all, worse luck, I had to leave some things behind that I wanted to take the worst kind."

"What's this sticking out—a gun? You ought to know that it's the off season for most kinds of game, Lil Artha," expostulated the latest passenger, as, following directions, he painfully forced his way into the heavily laden car.

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"Yes, I know, and I don't intend to do any great stunts at hunting, Elmer. I only thought it might be good policy to fetch my little reliable Marlin along, because sometimes it's mighty pleasant to know you've got some means of defense handy in case of trouble."

"Hear! hear!" ejaculated the boy answering to the name of George Robbins, and who it may be said in passing—for the reader would soon find it out anyway—was a regular born "Doubting Thomas," who nearly always had to be shown, and seldom believed any statement unless it were backed up with abundant proof. "Sometimes there are other beasts abroad in the wild woods besides the common four-footed kind. I believe now we've all had our experiences with tramps and yeggmen of the Weary Willie species. For one, I'm glad you fetched your gun along, Lil Artha."

Meanwhile the driver had once more started the car, and they were moving along the streets of the home town. Several groups of boys, some of whom also wore the well-known khaki of the scouts, called out to them in greeting, and even waved their hats with a salute. Envious eyes followed the car as it sped along in a cloud of dust; for it was pretty generally known that the lucky five were starting off on a week's camping trip; and those fellows of the Hickory Ridge group of Boy Scouts could anticipate a glorious time ahead for the favored ones.

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While the big old seven-passenger touring car, which the father of Rufus Snodgrass had loaned them for the occasion, is speeding along, doing very good time as long as the road is fair, a few words connected with these lively lads may not come in amiss.

Elmer Chenowith was the leader of the well-known Wolf Patrol, and those boys who have had the good luck to own some of the previous stories in this series do not need to be told that he was a capable and resourceful lad, who through his merits as a first-class scout had received from Headquarters the privilege of acting as assistant scout-master, a rôle only filled by the most efficient in a troop.

"Lil Artha" was really Arthur Stansbury. When he was very young he had been given this nickname, and even after he suddenly shot up like a mushroom, so that he now measured a full head taller than any of his mates, he could not shake off the ridiculous appellation. People always smiled when hearing it for the first time; but then Lil Artha treated the matter as a huge joke, and often joined in the laugh when the subject came up.

George Robbins was a pretty good sort of a chap, only he did worry his chums by his continual fault finding, and that everlasting desire to have everything proved before he could "swallow" it. At one time he had been inclined to be thin, and a rather poor hand at meal times; but of late his folks seldom had to ring the dinner bell twice for George; indeed, as a rule he was keeping an ear to the ground listening for the welcome sound.

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The other two boys were new members of Hickory Ridge Troop, and had not as yet progressed beyond the greenhorn stage. Indeed, it was partly with the hope that various opportunities for teaching the "tenderfoot squad"—as Lil Artha persisted in calling the pair—all sorts of useful knowledge that scouts must sooner or later acquire, that had induced Elmer to give up another partly formed plan and consent to accompany the expedition into the woods.

Rufus Snodgrass was a rather peculiar boy, taken in all. Elmer believed he had never up to that time come in contact with just such an odd fellow. He had been somewhat spoiled by a doting mamma, though Elmer believed he possessed many good qualities about him, if only some revolution could only bring them forward.

In the first place Rufus lacked self-reliance to a remarkable extent. He could not seem to feel confidence in himself when some sudden or alarming emergency arose. On this account he turned out to be somewhat of a failure as a baseball player, for when he saw a high ball driven to his outfield his heart always sank "to his shoes," as he told himself he never could get that fly in the wide world; and lacking confidence he seldom did hang on to it.

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Elmer had faith to believe he could cure Rufus of this grievous fault if only he associated with him in camp for a time. He would show him a score of things such as go to make good scouts, and teach him how to "hit the knot squarely in the centre," when chopping wood, to begin with.

Alec McGregor was a boy who had not been a great while in America. His folks, needless to say, hailed from Scotland, and freckle-faced and red-headed Alec had a delightful little "burr" to his tones when talking. Like so many of his kind he was inclined to be a bit pugnacious, and hot-tempered; still Elmer believed him to be both warm-hearted, and as true as steel. After he had been with the scouts a while, and picked up a few lessons in the broad principles of the craft, the patrol leader fancied that Alec would prove one of the smartest members of the troop.

He had a little sister named Jessie at home, a pretty rosy-cheeked Scotch lassie, who was the pride of his heart. The boy never tired of chanting her praises, and often sang ballads, in which "Sweet Jessie, the Flower of Dumblane," occupied the leading part. And Alec had a robust tenor voice in the bargain, which his mates always liked to hear when seated about the camp fire.

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Now as to their reason for taking this thirty-mile trip, laden down with tent, camp duffle, edibles enough for a regiment, and all sorts of traps in the bargain, so that the car did resemble a moving van, just as Elmer had remarked when it stopped at his gate for him to work his way aboard.

Mr. Snodgrass was a rich man who had latterly taken up his residence in the town. He had come into possession of a large tract of land, partly heavily wooded, and lying up along Raccoon Bluff, a place the boys had often heard of, but none of them ever visited.

Now, it seemed that Rufus had just one great ambition, which was to become a civil engineer when he grew up. His mother had supplied him with all the necessary instruments for the calling of a surveyor, and for several years now Rufus had associated himself at odd times with some people engaged in the business, doing very hard work for a boy of his customary easy habits, simply because his heart was enlisted in the game.

He now believed that he could carry out the lines about a tract of ground as well as the next one; and upon hearing his father say that he distrusted the accuracy of a recent survey that had been given him of the new territory purchased, Rufus became possessed of an idea which he was now engaged in carrying out.

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His folks had readily given their consent that he should get several of his scout chums to accompany him up to Raccoon Ridge, and assist him to re-survey the ground. Indeed, Mr. Snodgrass, who was not blind to the failings of his only son and heir, insisted that he coax Elmer Chenowith to go along, as a necessary preliminary to his loaning the big car and also paying all the expense in the way of provisions.

The real-estate man was a good reader of human nature, and after hearing all the fine things that were being said about the Chenowith boy he took occasion to have a heart-to-heart talk with Elmer, in which he told the patrol leader how much he hoped association with a fellow like him would be worth to Rufus, and actually begged him to consent to be a member of the little company.

So that was the way things stood. Rufus, of course, did not know about this secret understanding between his father and Elmer; had he done so he might have rebelled, for he was exceedingly high-spirited. As it was he felt that all these good fellows were only keeping him company because of their love for outdoor life.

It was that sly rascal, George, who had managed to get possession of the ear of Rufus, and gain his consent to make out the list of edibles they would likely want while away. Which fact accounted for the "young grocery store," as Lil Artha termed it, that was taken along. But then, no healthy boy has ever been known to be dismayed at a superabundance of good things to eat;

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and as Rufus's father did not object to the size of the bill, none of them felt he really ought to say a single word.

They made no attempt to speed, for what did thirty-odd miles amount to when in a car, with an abundance of gasoline to take one through? An hour saw them well on their way. Farmhouses were now becoming "as scarce as hens' teeth," to quote Lil Artha. As they had not started until nearly ten in the morning, owing to various causes, it was now getting well on toward noon.

"What say we pull up at the next farm-house we strike, and get dinner, if the good woman of the place will agree?" asked the driver of the expedition, who had in the beginning laid down the law that no one was going to spend one cent except himself, for his father had insisted on this.

"Suits me, all right," said George, with alacrity. "You see, I had breakfast pretty early this morning, and right now I'm feeling about as empty as Si Hunker's hen-coop was that morning after the gypsies camped near his place."

Some ten minutes afterwards they found a wayside farm-house, and the woman, for a consideration, agreed to cook dinner for the crowd. Elmer on his part took occasion to pick up considerable useful information concerning the region which generally went under the name of Raccoon Bluff, possibly because there chanced to be an unusually large number of those "ring-tailed varmints" so destructive to corn fields, and poultry flocks, making their dens in hollow trees around that vicinity. [19]

Among other things the farmer warned Elmer to keep an eye out for Jem Shock. The oddity of the name impressed the boy, and he asked what there might be about the said Jem to give them any cause for uneasiness.

"Well, Jem has been a thorn in the flesh of folks up in this neck of the woods for nigh ten years now, I guess," was what the tiller of the soil told him. "He c'n work when he wants to, but he'd a heap rather loaf, with a gun over his shoulder. He fishes and hunts out of season. I've seen him spearing trout, and more'n once heard how he was known to be taking meat home in the close season, that couldn't have been sheep or veal. Besides that, he's a quarrelsome man, and a desperate character. I wouldn't trust him out of my sight, for I believe he'd steal from a camp as quick as anything. But I hope you don't have any trouble with Jem."

Elmer hoped so, too. At the same time he found himself wondering whether, after all, some of those country people might not be judging the man harshly. Perhaps Jem Shock might not be such a bad character, on better acquaintance. And Elmer decided that if the opportunity should come to him he would take occasion to know the old poacher at close range, so as to study him well. [20]

Once more they were on the move, and as this farm-house would be the last they expected to run across, all of them were keenly on the lookout for signs of the ridge which would mark their arrival at Raccoon Bluff.

They had possibly gone six or seven miles since eating that glorious farm dinner, when suddenly as they were passing slowly through a piece of woodland where the road was a bit soft and wet, there rang out the nearby report of a rifle, startling them all, and causing George Robbins to involuntarily duck his head, as though his first suspicion was that some one had fired at them.

Then came a crashing in the bushes, and across the road sprang a buck, whose antlers were just reaching their full growth after the late rutting season.

Never had the boys seen a prettier picture than when that buck bounded lightly across the road. Lil Artha mechanically reached out a hand toward his gun, though, of course, he never would have thought of using the same while the law protected the game. Then the frightened animal plunged into the thick copse on the opposite side of the woodland road, and could be heard bounding swiftly away. [21]

CHAPTER II

 [22]

THE GAME POACHER, JEM SHOCK

RUFUS had involuntarily halted the car at the very instant the shot was heard, so that the boys were stationary at the time the deer leaped past them.

"Oh! what a beaut!" exclaimed George Robbins.

"The equal of any Scotch stag I ever saw in the preserves!" echoed Alec, who had stared with eyes that were round with wonder.

"But somebody shot at him, all the same, don't you know, and the close season on in the bargain," Lil Artha hastened to say, indignantly.

"Hush! here he comes!" observed Elmer.

They all heard a hasty trampling sound, as though someone might be hurrying through the bushes close by. It came from exactly the same quarter from which the alarmed buck had appeared.

Then a moving figure caught the gaze of the five scouts. A burly man, roughly dressed, strode into view. He stared at the car and its occupants, as though he considered the boys to be mostly responsible for his recent ill-luck. [23]

"Howdye, mister," sang out Lil Artha, not to be cowed by angry looks; "are we on the right road for Raccoon Bluff, would you mind telling us?"

Suspicion lay in the look which the man was now bending on them. He acted as if he imagined they might be more than they seemed; for a guilty conscience can discover a game warden in every inoffensive traveler, especially when the culprit is suddenly caught in the very act of trying to kill a deer out of season.

"Raccoon Bluff ain't far ahead o' ye, if that's whar ye happen tuh be headin' fur," he told them grumblingly; "but might I arsk what yuh a-doin' away up here in this forsaken kentry?"

"Oh!" Lil Artha told him blithely, "we're off on a little trip, and mean to spend a week or so under canvas around this section. You see, the father of the young fellow at the wheel here, Rufus Snodgrass, of Hickory Ridge, has lately come into possession of some property up this way, and we're going to find out if it's been surveyed right and proper. If you see our smoke some time or other, drop in and have a little chin with us, stranger. We nearly always have the coffeepot on the fire, and the latch-string is out."

Perhaps the man may have understood this sort of a genial invitation, but all the same he gave no indication of being pleased because of it. The look of suspicion could still be noticed about his dark face, and he twisted his rifle about in his hands kind of nervously, as though he wished he could keep it from being seen. [24]

"I reckon I ain't a-goin' tuh bother ye much, strangers," he mumbled. "I got my own business tuh look arter. Yuh see, I'm the assistant game warden o' this region, an' it takes a heap o' trampin' tuh kiver my territory."

With an odd sort of chuckle and grin he nodded his head toward them, and then whirling on his heel vanished amidst the scrub. They soon lost track of his retreating footsteps.

Lil Artha laughed in his peculiar way.

"Huh! smoked the coon out, didn't I? Game warden, did he call himself? Whoo! to think of his colossal nerve! I bet you any warden in the State would give a month's salary to have been here, and caught him in the act of shooting at a deer when the law is on."

"Then he was a braw poacher, was he?" burst from Alec. "Aweel, I can feel for him in a way, because, to tell you the truth, lads, I've snared my hare more than a few times across the big water. But then it's different there, because all the game country is owned by rich dukes and lords, and the poor man hasn't any show; while over here all he has to do is to tramp off into the wild woods for a couple of days, and take his chances. [25]

"Elmer, do you think that could have been Jem Shock?" asked Rufus just then.

The patrol leader showed his surprise, for up to then he did not know that Rufus had ever heard that name; at least, the other had kept his knowledge to himself, for some reason or other.

"I'm pretty sure that's who he is," he told the boy at the wheel; "but how did you know about him and his ways; when the farmer only told Lil Artha and myself?"

Rufus chuckled, and looked wise.

"Oh! I plead guilty," he acknowledged. "I heard stories about Jem Shock before I left home, but I wasn't silly enough to pass them along to the rest of the party, because some of you might have changed your minds, and found an excuse for not coming on the trip."

Lil Artha snorted indignantly.

"Now, don't get mad, Lil Artha," said Rufus, promptly.

"Oh! I'm not riled so much because you kept your knowledge to yourself, Rufus," the tall scout told him; "but on account of you thinking Elmer, George and myself could be shooed off by such a little thing as that. If you looked back at the history of the Wolf Patrol you'd find that the boys belonging to it have all been through a heap of excitement. We've exposed so-called ghosts, had adventures with ugly hobo bands, been in forest fires, fought floods and—well, time wouldn't allow me to enumerate one-half of the things that have befallen us." [26]

"That's enough, Lil Artha," said Elmer, seeking to soothe the long-legged scout, and pour oil on the troubled waters. "Rufus will come to know us better after he's graduated from the tenderfoot class. But suppose we start on again. That incident is closed. We may and we may not see more of Jem Shock. For myself, I'm half hoping I do, because he's something of a character, and opens up a new type for a fellow to study."

"So far as I'm concerned," observed Rufus, scornfully, "I hope we never run across him again."

He looked like a bad egg to me, and his eyes had a wicked stare in them, that I didn't like."

"Oh! that can be easily accounted for," said Elmer, as the car once more commenced to glide along the rough woods-road. "You see, in the first place he had that feeling of guilt that makes a rascal look at all the rest of the world as his enemies. Then again I half imagine Jem thinks the game wardens are back of our coming up to this neck of the woods."

"Game wardens, Elmer!" exclaimed Alec; "how could that be, and what would scouts have to do with the officers of the State?"

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"Well, scouts seem to have a hand in a good many things that are connected with keeping the laws, and making communities live on a higher standard," the patrol leader explained. "I could tell you of dozens of things our troop has been connected with along those lines. And why shouldn't they enter into an arrangement with the head warden to get evidence against some of these guides who kill deer out of season, and hotel proprietors who offer it to their guests as 'mountain sheep'?"

Alec apparently was a bit puzzled to understand all this, and so Lil Artha, leaning forward, took occasion to explain it more fully as they continued on.

They were passing into an even wilder section of country than any thus far encountered. Not a sign of the white man's presence could they see except in some sections where the original timber had been cut away years back, and a second growth now covered the land; with here and there an old forest monarch left to overtop its neighbors like a giant looking down on a pigmy host.

"This just suits me to a fraction," Lil Artha was saying, as they began to ascend what seemed to be another rise of land. "Why, it's as free from the restraints of civilization as that Adirondack region where we went with Toby Jones last winter, to visit his hermit uncle, Caleb, who was living all by himself in the heart of the wilderness. My lands! if only I thought we'd have half as much fun on this trip as we ran across then, I'd be happy as a clam at high tide."

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"Perhaps we will," Elmer told him. "You never can tell what's ahead of you when starting out on one of these trips."

He was thinking at the time of Jem Shock, and wondering whether the poacher might not take it into his head to make things interesting for them during their stay along Raccoon Ridge. Secretly Elmer was almost hoping he *would* see something more of the strange man. He wondered how Jem lived; what his ambition, providing he had any, might be; whether he cared for a single human creature besides himself in all the wide world—these and many more thoughts were gripping Elmer's mind, and he could not shake them off.

Although, of course, he did not know it at the time, still it was fated that the golden opportunity he so eagerly sought was destined to come his way under conditions of a peculiar nature. But of that more anon, since it would be hardly fair to lift the curtain now, and disclose the presence of coming events long before they were due to arrive.

"Don't you think this must be the place they call Raccoon Bluff, Elmer?" asked George just then, as they continued to climb the rise by means of the winding road, so seldom used that Rufus had the greatest difficulty in forcing the car over exposed roots and outcropping rocks.

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"I've been looking around," explained the scout leader, "and according to what that farmer told me, I'm sure this is our destination. We can keep our eyes on the lookout for a suitable camp site right along now. There'll be plenty of time for us to get our tent fixed, and a lot of other things done, before sunset comes."

"Well, we seem to have mounted to the crest of the bluff, if that's what this rough piece of ground turns out to be," said Rufus, with a sigh of relief, for at times he had found it hard work navigating the rough road, and occasionally he almost feared they would have to get out and walk the balance of the way.

A couple of minutes later and Elmer called out to him to stop the car.

"I think I glimpse a dandy place for a camp over yonder!" was what the patrol leader remarked to the others, pointing as he spoke. "And see what a glorious view we'll have all the time we're here."

They faced the west, where the sun was heading toward the horizon, though a good two hours must elapse before he sank from view. Through openings in the dense forest they could obtain fine glimpses of distant parts. It was really as delightful an outlook as any of the scouts had ever gazed upon. Alec McGregor, accustomed to those Scotch mountain views, was loud in his admiration.

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So Rufus brought the car as near the camp site as was possible, and then all of them leaped out. Filled with a burning desire to get things started they proceeded to carry the cargo of the big touring car across the intervening ground.

Lil Artha, George and the leader held a brief discussion as to the exact spot that was most suitable for erecting their waterproof tent, rendered so through a process of tanning that changed its color to correspond with their own khaki-hued garments.

This important detail being finally settled they began work. Alec and Rufus, being tenderfeet, of course had to be told about everything they attempted; but as the spirit of willingness was strong upon them in the beginning, they carried out orders cheerfully enough.

Elmer was looking for that inherent weakness on the part of Rufus to crop out, and sure enough it came to the surface before they had been a full hour on the ground. The tent having been properly set, and a fireplace built after the most approved scout fashion by Lil Artha, with the two new fellows taking accurate notes so they could in turn carry out a similar task, Rufus was set to work chopping firewood, while Alec had been given another job connected with making a drain on the upper side of the tent.

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"That is so the water will run aside, and not flood us out," explained George, who was directing operations in this quarter. "You see, we may have a whopping big storm while we're up here, and again not a drop of rain may fall; but all the same a true scout gets things ready to meet an emergency. That's what our motto 'Be Prepared' stands for. It's a sort of insurance against possible loss by fire. Your house may never burn down; in fact, you don't expect it ever will, but you take out a fire policy all the same, if you're a wise dicky."

"I get what you are telling me, George," admitted the shrewd Scotch lad, "and all the while I'm understanding this scout business better. There's a muckle mair in it that I used to ken, but I like the way it turns out; and I'm o'er glad now I joined the ranks o' the scouts."

Meanwhile Rufus was having his troubles a-plenty. Evidently he was not very well posted as to the best way of handling an ax, though he swung the tool with quite a lusty stroke, Elmer noticed. For some little time he managed to smash a certain amount of wood, but finally he seemed to have run across a section of hard oak that was giving him a lot of trouble.

He stopped several times to wipe his reeking forehead with his big red bandanna. Elmer could see him shake his head as though he felt that he was up against a hard proposition. For some time the scout leader did not interfere. When, however, he saw Rufus throw the ax down petulantly, as though determined to give the job up as a bad bargain, Elmer concluded the moment had come for him to take a hand in the game and pilot the tenderfoot through his initial troubles.

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As a greenhorn in camp, Rufus must be expected to do considerable of the fuel getting; and in order to meet his duties with the least possible friction and trouble, the sooner he learned how to handle an ax properly, the better for his peace of mind. Besides, Elmer did not like to see that "white flag" business. He disliked a quitter above all things; and was grimly determined that before that camp broke up the said Rufus would have learned a lesson or two that would be profitable to him.

CHAPTER III

[33]

"HIT THE KNOT AND HIT IT HARD!"

"How are you coming on, Rufus?" asked Elmer, pleasantly, as he dropped down on the log alongside the perspiring chopper.

Rufus laughed, a little unpleasantly, Elmer thought.

"Oh! I guess I was never cut out for a hewer of firewood, Elmer," he remarked indifferently. "Some fellows may take to that sort of thing, but I incline in the direction of less strenuous employment. I can fiddle with a surveyor's outfit all day long, tramp through the woods and the brush, cut a path, and enjoy it all; but swinging an ax doesn't seem to be my forte."

"Then if I were you, Rufus," the other told him, quietly, "I'd shut my teeth together and make it my forte. I never would let a little thing like that get the better of me. Why, I couldn't sleep easy at night if I did."

Rufus moved a little uneasily at that. He undoubtedly must have guessed that the scout-master meant to reprove him for giving up so soon. Then he shook his head and frowned.

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"Oh! there'll be heaps of other things I *can* tackle around the camp, besides playing wood-chopper, Elmer, that's sure. I've given it a fair trial, and don't seem to get the hang of the old thing. Why, it's lucky, I reckon, I didn't smash my foot. My hands don't seem to tackle the ax properly. Alec may be better suited to it."

"It isn't hard, once you learn," said Elmer.

"Well, I've given it a try, and I'm ready to call it off, though I know you don't like to hear that kind of talk," grumbled Rufus, actually turning redder than ever with confusion as he felt the eyes of the other fastened upon his face.

"That's not the spirit in which a scout who has any respect for himself should act," Elmer told him, slowly and with a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Deep down in your heart, Rufus, you just know that you *can* master such a little job as learning how to handle an ax, if only you keep

persistently at it, and never give up. A scout on being baffled once or twice just sets his teeth together, takes a fresh grip on himself, and says he's going to do that thing, no matter if it means trying sixty-seven times. It's the old maxim of 'Pike's Peak, or Bust,' which the emigrants across the great plains years ago used to paint on their wagon-tops. And generally they got there, too, remember, Rufus."

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Then Elmer got up and took hold of the offending ax.

"Now, if you watch me you'll see just how I swing it, and bring it down in the exact spot I want to strike," he went on to say, after which he made several strokes and the stubborn piece of oak that had resisted all the efforts of Rufus to split it fell into two slabs.

"Well, that was certainly fine," admitted the boy, wonderingly; "but you're an old hand at it, Elmer. I'd never be able to do that sort of work."

"Get that notion out of your head in the beginning, Rufus," he was told, sharply. "There's no reason in the wide world why you shouldn't make a good axman, perhaps even better than any of us. You're strongly built, and can put a heap of muscle in the work. At first you'll strike poorly, until you grow accustomed to landing on a given spot. Practice makes perfect in that particular. And now, there's one great lesson for you in chopping wood, just as there is for every beginner. Take a look at the stick, see which way it will split easiest; and then if there's a nasty knot in it, as there was in the one you tackled, strike the blade of your ax straight into the centre of that knot *again and again*, until you succeed in making it give up the ghost. Hit the knot, Rufus, and hit hard! That ought to be a maxim you'd find ringing in your ears every time you feel tempted to be a quitter!"

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That last word stung, just as Elmer meant it should. Rufus flushed, and jumped to his feet almost half angrily.

"Here, give me that ax again, Elmer," he said between his set teeth; "and pick out for me the toughest old chunk of oak you can find. We'll see if I'm a *quitter*. I'll hit the knot, and hit her hard, to boot; you watch me!"

Elmer hastened to accommodate him. He was secretly congratulating himself on his success so early in the game. It chanced that a second fragment of oak lay near by, and offered a fairly good test, as it, too, had a difficult knot in its heart. He showed Rufus just how to take the right sort of grip on the ax, and several times corrected him when he struck violently. Of course the blows lacked much of the accuracy that long practice gives, and thus considerable energy was wasted; but after he had been working away for five minutes, a lucky stroke caused the thick bit of oak to fall apart. It had been done by keeping up a constant pounding at the centre of resistance, which in this case was that tough knot.

Rufus was perspiring, and short of breath after his exertion, but there was a look of extreme pride on his flushed face, and his eyes kindled also. Indeed, there was good reason for his self-congratulation; he had proven to himself that "where there is a will there is a way"; and possibly for the first time in his life Rufus realized the power that one may command when determined not to give in.

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"Well, I did do it, didn't I, Elmer?" he chuckled, visibly pleased. "And next time I won't be so ready to throw up the sponge. I was a little bit huffed because you spoke the way you did, Elmer, but now I thank you. I wouldn't be surprised but that I'd have caught that big fly last summer instead of muffing it, and losing the game for our side, if only I'd made up my mind I *could* hold it, and must."

"That's the ticket, Rufus," the other told him. "Confidence is half the battle, and the rest is in doing it. But you've chopped enough for a while; better change work and give some other set of muscles a chance to get busy."

"Now, that isn't a bad idea, either, Elmer," Rufus went on to say. "I'd like to take a little turn out of camp before evening comes on, because somehow I seem to have a sneaking notion we'll run across one of the survey lines close by here. You see, they run down from the bluff across that wide stretch of country toward the setting sun; and by pushing along the ridge we ought to find a slashing."

"Well, if you can coax George, here, to go with you, Rufus," the patrol leader remarked, "I've no objections. I can understand how eager you must be to get your location fixed in the start; and I expect you'll sleep easier tonight if you learn that our camp happens to be near one of the survey lines."

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George upon being appealed to readily agreed to go with the greenhorn. He knew why Elmer had made this arrangement; for as Rufus was quite a novice in most things pertaining to woodcraft, the chances were he would get lost the first thing. If given an opportunity, George, as a first-class scout, could begin the education of the tenderfoot thus placed in his charge; and the first lesson would be upon various methods of learning how to make his way through the densest forest when caught without a compass, and unable even to see the sun so as to know east from the west, the north from the south.

So George took great pride in explaining how the moss on the trees would serve as an almost infallible guide, all else failing.

"You see, in this section of country nearly all the big storms come from the southwest," he told Rufus as they walked on. "The moss is almost always on the north side of the trees, veering just a little toward northeast. Notice that fact well, Rufus, and never forget it. Some time it may save you heaps of trouble; I know it has me, and lots of other scouts in the bargain."

Finding that the tenderfoot seemed to show considerable interest, George went on to tell of other facts connected with the important subject.

"Now," he observed, soberly, "you may think I'm going to a lot of trouble telling you all this, Rufus; but if ever you do get lost in the woods, and keep wandering around for hours, and then have to make a lonely camp, and sit up most of the night listening to the owls and foxes and such things, why, you'll understand why it's so important a thing in the education of a scout." [39]

Meanwhile Lil Artha and Alec were trying their hands at the woodpile; for as the elongated scout explained to the Scotch lad, they would have need of considerable fuel during the long evening, as they sat by their fire and talked.

Alec proved to have enough stamina, at least; there was a stubborn streak in his Scotch blood that would never allow him to give up easily. Nevertheless, Lil Artha knew Alec had faults that must be corrected before he could reach that condition of excellence that all true scouts aspire to attain.

He had a hasty temper, like most red-haired, impulsive boys, and was, moreover, a little inclined to be cruel, especially toward dumb animals. Lil Artha, himself, had once been the same sort of a chap, and could readily sympathize with Alec; but at that he meant the other should see the error of his ways, and reform. So the tall member of the Wolf Patrol took it upon himself to be a mentor; and who so well fitted for the task as a boy who had had personal experience? No one can preach temperance so splendidly as the man who, himself, has passed through the fire of unbridled passions, and learned the folly of giving way to them. [40]

Alec was particularly interested in the subject of the reversal of his badge. He had, of course, followed the customary habit of all scouts by fastening this to his coat in the morning in an upside-down position, until he found some opportunity for doing a good deed toward some one, which act allowed him to change its position.

"That was easy enough at home, d'ye mind, Lil Artha," he was saying, as he rested upon his ax, and recovered his breath, "because a fellow would be a gillie if he couldnae find mony a chance to do something for sae sweet a bairn as our little Jessie. But it's going to be a harder task away up here in the wilderness, I trow."

"Oh! I don't know about that, Alec," the other told him, encouragingly. "All you have to do is to keep your eyes about you. There are four chums around, and if at any time, for instance, you took a notion to do my stint of wood-chopping, that ought to entitle you to turn your badge over, because it would be a good deed, you see."

Alec looked queerly at him, and then laughed.

"But it would be depriving you of your necessary exercise, Lil Artha," he hastened to say, "and that I'd hate to do."

"Well, seriously speaking then, Alec, there are endless ways of doing good. You needn't be confined to lending a helping hand to human beings; a boy who takes a stone out of the shoe of a limping mule is just as much a benefactor as the one who helps a poor old woman across a crowded street, or carries her heavy basket part of the way home from market. I've bound up the broken wing of a crow; yes, and I knew a scout who even helped one of those queer little tumble-bugs get his ball up a little rise, after he'd watched him fall back a dozen times, and then claim the right to alter his badge. The rest of the troop laughed at him, but the scout-master hushed them up, and said the boy was right; and that not only had he done a good deed toward one of the humblest of created things, but he had learned a practical lesson in pertinacity and never-give-upitiveness that would be of great value to him all the rest of his life." [41]

"Nae doot, nae doot," muttered the Scotch lad, reflectively, as though Lil Artha's interesting words had found a firm lodgment in his heart. "I can see where it is a verra interesting subject, this scoutcraft, Lil Artha. And ye ken I'm mair than glad now I took up with it."

"And as you get to be more intimate with the little animals of the woods," continued the experienced scout, "you come to like them as brothers. We usually have a pet squirrel ducking about the camp, picking up the crumbs; and birds will come, too, if you're kind to them. All those little things help to make an outing more enjoyable, you'll find, Alec, the deeper you dip into them." [42]

Alec scratched his head as though he found it just a little difficult to understand; he had been raised under such vastly different conditions that it would take some time to change his habits, Lil Artha realized. Still, he liked the tenderfoot very much, and meant to do all he could to make him see things through another pair of spectacles than those he had used in the past.

Already his lessons in handling the ax had borne fruit, and Alec gave promise of soon becoming an expert at the job. His success also gave the greenhorn a new-born ambition to excel in other branches of scout education. Lil Artha did not believe he would have much trouble in posting Alec; getting him to govern his temper, and be kind to everything that had life, would be another

proposition; but constant association with such a fellow as Elmer Chenowith was bound to work a change little short of miraculous, Lil Artha had faith to believe; for he knew personally what the patrol leader was able to accomplish in his quiet, persistent way.

"After you've finished with that log, Alec," he told the other, "we'll start our fire. I want to show you just how to go about that task, because there are a hundred things connected with making a fire that you'll find mighty interesting."

"Ye don't say, Lil Artha? I didna ken that there was more than one way to start a blaze, which was to sticket a match to the paper, and let it go at that." [43]

The tall scout laughed delightedly. Really, he would find great pleasure in showing this greenhorn how many curious ways there were of starting a fire. Lil Artha had made this a sort of fad for some time past; and while several tricks were still beyond his comprehension, he had mastered a number of others; so that he could start into the woods minus a single match, or even a burning sun glass, and make a fire in any one of five different ways.

"Oh! I can see where you've got a whole lot to learn, Alec," he told the other. "I'll promise to show you some interesting things while we're up here in the Raccoon Bluff camp. For instance, I'll make a blaze by rubbing flint and steel together, like the old Indians used to do centuries back on this continent. Then I've a little trick with a couple of sticks and some dry tinder to catch the spark."

"Ye maun show me that, for a certainty!" cried the other, "because I've read of it in Robinson Crusoe, or some ither book of travel and adventure amang the islands of the sea."

"Oh! there are lots of other ways for doing it in the bargain," pursued Lil Artha, now upon his most favored subject. "You'll think it a most fascinating thing, Alec, I promise you. And once you wake up to the fact that a scout can learn a thousand facts, if only he uses his eyes and his head, you'll be more than glad you joined the troop. Why, we live in a world of our own, and the poor ninnies outside don't have one-tenth of the fun that falls to us." [44]

"There come Rufus and George," remarked Alec. "They look unco' pleased, as if they had discovered the slashing they went to look for. I'm a little interested in survey work mysel'. Rufus is clean crazy over it, too, and sometimes his fash is all about theodolites and chains and compasses and the like. They told me he was lazy, but if ye seed him workin' at the business he loved, ye'd know they leed, they leed."

Alec turned back to his work of splitting the log he had attacked. Already he had a wedge well driven into its heart. A few more lusty blows of the ax and he had opened another cleft further along, into which he was able, with Lil Artha's directions, to place a second wedge. After that it was easy to continue lengthening the split until with a doleful crack the log fell apart, having been cleft in twain.

"That will do for now, Alec," said Lil Artha. "You have done splendidly for your first real lesson in wood-chopping, and I can see with half an eye that you bid fair to beat us all at the game, given a little time, and more experience. You've got a great swing, and seem able to hit a space the size of a dime, every time you let fall. That's half of the battle in chopping, to be able to drive true to the mark; because there's energy wasted in false blows." [45]

Alec looked pleased. A little praise judiciously bestowed is always a great accelerator in coaxing reluctant boys to take up their tasks cheerfully; and wise Lil Artha knew it.

Just then Alec happened to catch a glimpse of something moving amidst the branches of the tree over his head. Lil Artha had turned aside, and did not chance to notice what the other was doing, as the Scotch lad, stooping down, snatched up a stout cudgel, and hastily threw it aloft.

His aim must have been excellent, judging from the immediate results. Lil Artha heard him give a satisfied cry, which, however, almost immediately changed to a howl of alarm. Whirling around, the tall scout saw something that might have amused him at another time, for it possessed the elements of comedy rather than tragedy.

Alec in hurling that stick aloft must have succeeded in dislodging some animal from its hold on the limb. The beast in falling had alighted fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the astonished Scotch boy, and given him a severe case of fright. Lil Artha saw that it possessed a long ringed tail, and hence he knew instantly that it was only a harmless raccoon, and not a fierce wildcat, as he had at first feared.

CHAPTER IV

SHOWING THE GREENHORNS

"W^{hoo}! tak' him off, Lil Artha! It's a mad cat, it is, I'm thinkin'!"

The 'coon being presently dislodged, after having only given Alec a few trifling scratches, proceeded to retreat in hot haste. The angry Scotch lad, snatching up another billet of wood, was

about to rush after the frightened animal as though to vent his fury upon it, when Lil Artha barred the way.

"Don't do it, Alec!" he called out, holding up a restraining hand; "let the poor thing trot along. He's more scared than you were, take it from me."

"But he *bit* me, ye ken; and I don't let any fearsome wild beastie do that with impunity, I tell ye!" snapped Alec.

"Well, who's really to blame, Alec?" said Lil Artha, promptly. "That's only a harmless raccoon. He must have his nest in a hollow limb of this tree we're under. Hearing all the talk going on below here, can you blame him for peeking, and trying to pick up a few points about eating, and the like? He was within his rights, and you had no business to knock him down with that chunk of wood. He happened to fall on your shoulders, and commenced scratching and clawing when you jabbed at him so with your hands. He only scratched you a little, and drew the blood. Elmer has the stuff to put on that, and prevent any chance of blood poisoning setting in. But surely you wouldn't kill that inoffensive little runt because he allowed you to knock him out of the tree." [47]

Alec hung his head.

"Aweel, it may be you're right, Lil Artha," he muttered, being conquered by the arguments advanced by the other. "Anyway, it's too late now to chase after him, for the beastie is lang out of sight. Perhaps I was o'er hasty to throw. Next time I'll try to hold my hand."

"It pays not to be too fast while in the woods," he was assured. "If now that had happened to be a bobcat, you'd have been in a nice pickle, let me tell you; and he might have scratched out both your eyes before the rest of us could lift a hand to save you. Better go slow but sure, Alec. And try to look at things once in a while from the standpoint of the woods animal. You'll find it mighty interesting to put yourself in their place, and figure just what you would do."

Again Alec scratched that tousled red head of his. Plainly he was puzzled to exactly grasp what Lil Artha meant; but then, as time passed and he became more accustomed to this strange camp life, now so new to him, the boy would doubtless understand many things that in the beginning looked very mysterious. [48]

When, a short time later, Lil Artha began to initiate him into the mysteries of fire-making, Alec displayed more or less fresh interest. He knew he was going to like that sort of thing first-rate, he told the other; which acknowledgment caused the tall scout to grin with pleasure, since it repaid him tenfold for all the trouble he had taken thus far.

The fire was soon burning cheerily. Somehow it seemed a great source of joy to everyone, especially Elmer, Lil Artha and George. As veteran scouts the crackle of a blaze instantly called up fond memories of numerous former occasions when in the woods, and camping amidst the solitudes they had met with all sorts of interesting and even thrilling adventures, never to be utterly forgotten, even when they had grown to manhood, and gone forth into the world upon their appointed life missions.

Next in order came the preparations for cooking the camp supper. Here Lil Artha had fresh and glorious opportunities to show the tenderfoot squad all sorts of things that it was of prime importance they should early manage to acquire, if they expected to make good scouts. [49]

And when the ham had been nicely browned in the skillet; the potatoes and onions thoroughly cooked; the coffee allowed to settle, after being brought to a boil; and the rudely-built table set with all sorts of good things besides, from cookies, jam, home-made pies, pickles, and such articles as the crafty George had prevailed upon his dupe, Rufus, to include in the bulky stores, it seemed as though there was hardly room to allow their plates a chance to find crevices for lodgment.

By this time the sun had set in a blaze of glory that called forth loud words of sincere admiration from the entire party. Twilight was upon the land as they sat down to enjoy that glorious spread; and both Rufus and Alec vowed they had never in all their lives felt one-half so hungry as right then and there.

That supper would never be forgotten by those tenderfoot scouts. Every fellow once new to the woods can look back to the first meal under such conditions, and remember how wonderfully good everything did taste. The food at home never had such tempting qualities, and his one great fear was that the supply would not be equal to the *enormous* demand.

After supper came the dish washing. That was not quite so fine, especially since Rufus and Alec had fairly gorged themselves. But Elmer knew that it was good to start out right.

"Oh! what's the use bothering with the old dishes tonight?" complained Rufus, spoiled at home by a dotting mother; "I'm feeling too fine to be disturbed. Please don't spoil it all by doing anything disagreeable, Elmer." [50]

His wheedling tone had no effect. The scout-master was determined that these two new recruits must learn that duty always precedes pleasure with a scout. After all work has been finished is the proper time to "loaf," and take things easy.

"We have a rule in camp that is as unbending as that of the Medes and the Persians, Rufus," Elmer went on to say, positively. "That is, the dishes must be cleaned up immediately after

supper, by those who are delegated with the task. I'll be only too glad to show you and Alec how to go about it, in case you haven't had any experience; but the pot of hot water is waiting, and none of us can settle down to an evening's enjoyment until things are cleared away. All of us mean to take our turns at the job, remember, but we thought the new beginners ought to be the ones to start first."

Rufus looked as though inclined to rebel. Just then Alec jumped up, being more ready to give in than the boy who had always had his own way.

"Coom along, Rufus, and we'll wrestle with the pots and pans!" he called out. "Between the baith of us we should be able to manage, I ken. And then for a lang evenin' listenin' to the stories Lil Artha, here, has promised to spin, that will, nae doot, mak' Robert Louie Stevenson's wildest tales tak' a back seat."

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Well, after that Rufus could not hold out. He even grinned sheepishly a bit as he got up from his comfortable position, and followed the Scotch lad and Elmer over to where the dishpan was hung on a convenient nail, together with a supply of towels, and several dish cloths, all seen to by Lil Artha, who knew by long experience how necessary such things are in a well conducted camp.

So by slow degrees Elmer and his mates might make progress in educating the tenderfoot squad along the lines that every well drilled scout has to follow. Of course they would meet with many discouragements, and sometimes feel that the task was beyond their strength, especially in connection with Rufus, who had allowed such a multitude of tares to grow amidst the good seed that would have to be rooted out; but it is astonishing how much persistence and patience will accomplish, and in the end surprising results might reward the laborers in the vineyard.

They sat up late that night and the fire continued to crackle merrily as fresh fuel was applied from time to time. How wonderful it all seemed to Rufus and Alec, experiencing their very first night in camp. The moon had already set, being young, and darkness hung over the scene. Strange sounds, too, welled up out of that gloom to thrill the greenhorns as they listened. Again and again did one of them interrupt the conversation or the story-telling to demand that some fellow tell what manner of queer creature could be making such and such a noise.

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Now it was some night bird giving a hoarse cry; again a distant loon, doubtless out upon some lake, the presence of which they had not even suspected, sent forth a fiendish sound like the laugh of an evil sprite and which chilled the blood in the veins of the tenderfoot scouts; later on they heard tree frogs commence their weird chorus, and were relieved to learn the nature of the noisy sounds, for they half suspected a circle of ravenous wolves might be closing in around the camp.

And so it went on, one thing after another. Perhaps the most singular effect of all was produced by the hooting of a big owl, doubtless squatted in some dead treetop within a few hundred yards of the fire. The two greenhorns really believed some man was calling out and making fun of them. Rufus, on his part, jumped to the conclusion that the poacher, possibly under the influence of liquor, was daring them to come out and have a fight with him, for that tantalizing "who! who!" seemed to breathe defiance and scorn. Alec, too, showed symptoms of "firing up," much to the secret amusement of Lil Artha and George.

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They both quieted down after being told what sort of a big-eyed bird was responsible for the weird noise; though from time to time as the hoots continued to be wafted to them on the night air, the tenderfoot scouts would move uneasily, and exhibit fresh traces of interest bordering on rank incredulity, since it was difficult for them to really believe any feathered creature could indulge in such a mocking monologue.

And later still, after they had crept into their warm blankets, and sought to go to sleep, while the three veterans after a while managed to find forgetfulness in honest slumber, the other pair tossed back and forth, changed their hemlock-filled pillows into new positions, sighed dismally, and put in one of the most trying nights they had ever known.

But then it would not be so bad on the next occasion; and before many nights passed they, too, would be "dead to the world a short time after hitting the hay," as Lil Artha expressed it. Every fellow has to be broken in before he can sleep, when camping out for the first time; the great wilderness around seems peopled with countless unseen, but nevertheless present, creatures, which his lively imagination pictures as seeking to steal a march upon the camp, and either to purloin all their possessions or else eat them alive.

Why, even experienced campers usually have a poor first night of it, until they can again grow accustomed to the difference between their own soft beds within the four walls of home, and this canvas covering, or perhaps only the starry heavens above for a canopy.

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That long night seemed never to reach an end, to Rufus at least; for even after the Scotch lad had passed into slumberland the other squirmed about uneasily, sat up and looked around him many times; and even crept out twice to throw additional fuel on the fire, because he hated to see it getting so dismally dark around, with all those queer sounds welling up in chorus—the said chorus being produced in part, if Rufus only knew it, which he didn't, by katydids, crickets, tree-frogs, and such harmless little creatures.

But even the longest night must come to an end at last. Rufus, having finally fallen into a doze, found himself aroused by some one talking, and opening his eyes discovered to his surprise that

CHAPTER V

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THE SPIRAL OF BLUE SMOKE

ONE thing, at least, pleased Rufus when he crawled forth and stretched himself, giving a yawn at the same time—it promised to be a fine day. To a fellow who expected to do considerable prowling around in the vicinity of Raccoon Bluff this was a matter of material importance; for a heavy rain must have put a damper on his cherished plans.

By the time the latest up had finished dressing the welcome call to breakfast was sounding. Lil Artha performed this sacred rite, and in the customary camp way, wishing to initiate the two tenderfoot chums in all the mysteries that went with the ceremony. Taking the biggest frying-pan they had fetched along, he rattled a lively tattoo upon it with a heavy cooking spoon. And during the course of their stay it may be said in passing that never was there a more eagerly anticipated racket, in the opinion of Rufus and Alec, when their camp appetites developed, than that same summons to the "festive board," as Lil Artha dubbed the rude makeshift table.

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While they enjoyed the fruits of the cook's skill in wrestling with the culinary outfit, and made the bacon and fried eggs vanish in a most remarkably swift fashion, the boys also laid out their plans for the first day.

Of course Rufus was eager to get busy looking up the lines of the survey; and he had already bound Alec to the task of being his helper. The latter did not object in the least, though after a day or two had elapsed, and the fever calmed down somewhat with Rufus, the Scotch lad anticipated having his time more to himself; for he was eager to learn a great many scout secrets which the accommodating lanky Lil Artha had promised to impart to the new fellows.

Elmer, however, had no intention of allowing those two greenhorns free swing for a whole day. The chances were ten to one they would get lost the first thing; and it would be too bad if a good part of their limited stay at Raccoon Bluff was taken up in hunting missing comrades.

"I appoint you, Lil Artha, as supervisor," he went on to say, with a smile; "and your duties today will be to stick to Rufus and Alec like a porous plaster. Don't let one of them get out of your sight for a minute. You can lend a hand as much as you please; and fetch them back to camp at midday, when we'll have lunch, leaving the big meal until the day's work is all done."

Rufus looked as though about to rebel. He was so accustomed to having his own way that it came hard with him to be ordered to do anything. Then he suddenly remembered his scout vow, and that he had solemnly promised to bow to superior authority. Elmer was the "boss," and his word was law while they were away from home; so, making a virtue of necessity, Rufus shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

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"Just as you say, Elmer," he observed, a bit ungraciously, "but I never was lost in all my life."

"That's nothing to boast of, Rufus," remarked Lil Artha. "It only goes to prove how many splendid opportunities you've missed. On my part I was just as proud of my ability to look after myself as you are; and yet I used to get twisted in my bearings a heap until I got the hang of things. I can remember several times when I walked straight away from camp, under the belief that I was heading for it. You see, while I could easily tell which was north and east, I didn't know *which way the camp lay*; because my faculty for observation hadn't yet been developed to any great extent. It'll all come to you by degrees, if you really want to learn."

"Well, what am I to do this morning, Elmer?" asked George.

"That's an easy one," chuckled the leader. "As you're such a stickler for having everything so neat about the camp, George, with things handy to the reach, I'll appoint you camp warden for today. You can fuss around all you please, and by night I expect we'll find that Camp Comfort well deserves its name."

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George looked pleased. His good qualities often more than counterbalanced his poor ones; and being neat is something no scout should ever feel ashamed of.

Elmer did not mention what he meant to do himself. In fact, he had not wholly determined that point, though he fancied that he might take a wide turn around, and see what the country about Raccoon Bluff looked like.

Although Elmer had not said anything about it to the others, the fact is he had made a little discovery that aroused his interest considerably. Just before they sat down to breakfast he had chanced to step over to a point where the best view was to be had, and using a pair of field-glasses which had been brought along, took a casual survey of the country.

In one particular spot he believed he could see a faint column of pale blue smoke climbing straight skyward from amidst the thick growth. Elmer was a pretty good woodsman, and he did not have to be told that such smoke always comes from well seasoned wood, while black smoke

springs from greener stuff.

Some one had a fire over there, that was evident, and knew what sort of fuel to select in the bargain; which fact made it patent that he was educated in the ways of the woods. Elmer's curiosity was excited. He wondered who their neighbor could be. Was it some fishing party, perhaps camped on the shore of the unseen lake on the bosom of which that loon they had heard cry had been swimming at the time?

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Of course there might be numerous answers to the question Elmer was asking himself. Perhaps lumbermen were looking over the property which had lately come into the possession of Mr. Snodgrass, with an idea of making him a proposition for the right to cut off the big timber. Then again, charcoal-burners sometimes worked in the season; or it might be game wardens were abroad, with the idea of catching detested poachers at their work.

Then last of all Elmer thought of Jem Shock, the slippery customer whom no warden had thus far been able to catch red-handed, breaking the game laws; and who, it seemed, had gained an unenviable reputation for boldness as well as knavery, so that his name, bandied about from lip to lip, had gradually become a synonym for everything that was bad, whether the fellow deserved it or not.

Well, they knew that this same Jem lived somewhere in the wilderness, since he seldom appeared in any town; and what more likely than that his camp lay over yonder, where the blue trail of smoke lifted toward the sky?

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Elmer felt an enticing temptation beginning to assail him. It has been said before that he had found himself attracted toward Jem Shock, simply because of a curiosity to know what the *real* man might be like; for Elmer was loath to believe all he heard about any one, knowing how stories are magnified in the telling.

And by the time breakfast was over with, the scout leader had decided that he would take a little stroll, which might, there was no telling, carry him in the direction of the blue column of smoke.

It happened that Rufus was so busy getting ready to start out with his surveying instruments that he had given no thought to looking around. Lil Artha on his part would, of course, take note of the general lay of the land; but with the ridge to serve as a guide he believed he could always make a bee-line back to camp whenever the necessity arose.

All was soon ready, and Alec, laden with the heavier material, called out a cheery goodbye to the two who were being left behind.

"I'm glad this day that I've got on the braw khaki breeks," he was saying, "for if they were woollen ye maun rest assured it would tak all my time picking off the beggars' lice, as ye call these little burrs. We'll be back the noo and expectin' lunch to be served, George, remember, lad."

"Well, stick by Lil Artha then, if you know what's good for you, Scotchy," called out the keeper of the camp. "And I'm glad Elmer made each one of you put a little snack of cheese and crackers in his pocket. If you have the misfortune to get lost that will be the only thing to stand between you and starvation."

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Rufus sniffed in disdain.

"Talk away, George," he told the other, "we all know that you're one of these pessimists, and always seeing the black side of things. Who expects to get lost? Certainly neither of us. And besides, what do we have a guardian angel like Lil Artha along with us for? Not because of his good looks, that's sure."

"Oh! come along, and don't talk so much, Rufus!" the said "guardian angel" called out, though smiling broadly at being so highly complimented.

"Just see Lil Artha feeling of his shoulders, will you?" George jeered. "Now you've gone and spoiled him for any decent sort of work, Rufus; after this he'll be spending most of his time looking for his angel wings to sprout. But goodbye, and good luck, fellows. Look for you about noon, remember."

So they went off, seemingly as happy as boys could well be; for Rufus was about to test his superior knowledge of survey work. Alec saw a chance of having many little talks between whiles with the tall guide, upon whom he was leaning more and more as an exponent of the jolly times to be had in the open; while Lil Artha, himself, was always supremely happy when he could shoulder his Marlin gun, and stalk abroad, no matter whether he meant to do any hunting or not.

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Elmer knew very well that nothing would tempt Lil Artha to fire his gun with the intention of breaking the law. The only reasons he insisted on taking it along were that it might come in handy in case they met a wildcat, always a possibility, of course; and that he loved to feel its familiar touch upon his shoulder, where his khaki coat was well worn from contact with it.

For some little time afterwards Elmer busied himself in fixing certain things of his own. George had already cleaned up the mess of breakfast pans and dishes, so that he could devote himself to other matters. He had already sized things up, and made a list of certain improvements that were calculated to add to the comfort and peace of mind of the campers.

"While we're only going to be up here at Raccoon Bluff for a matter of seven days or so," he had remarked in the hearing of the tenderfoot squad, "that's no reason we ought to let things run along in a slipshod fashion. It's a pleasure to me to have the camp look spic and span to begin with, no matter if it does get littered up somewhat as the days go by."

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That is just the way with scouts, as a rule. No one of them unites all the virtues in his single person; but while owning up to certain faults, at the same time he will be found to possess a number of splendid qualities that add to the comfort and health of his comrades. George could make himself one of the most disagreeable chaps going, when his argumentative and unbelieving mood was upon him; then again, he would suddenly blossom out in another phase, and cause all his chums to bless him as a real public benefactor.

Finally Elmer strode forth from the tent.

"I'm going to take a little turn around, George," he remarked casually, "and see what this part of the country looks like."

"All right, Elmer," the busy one told him, "I can manage alone, I guess, because I've got a heap to do before I'm satisfied with the way things look. No use telling *you* to not get lost; because that'd be next to impossible."

"Nevertheless," the scout-master assured him, "I mean to keep on the alert, for when you're in the woods constant vigilance is the price of safety. I always take observations as I go along; and notice many queer-shaped trees, so that I'll know them again when I see them. I also look back considerably, too, because it pays to notice how things appear from the other side."

"It certainly does," agreed George, very amiably; "I've had that experience myself more than once. Thought I had taken stock of bent-over trees and rock formations, yet on trying to follow the trail back, they all looked vastly different from what they had before. Taught me a lesson I've never forgotten either. Well, so-long, Elmer. I'll expect you when you turn up. I hope though you don't happen to run foul of that ugly poacher chap, Jem Shock. I didn't much fancy the cut of his jib when we met him on the road; and I reckon he'd be a bad one to rile up."

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Elmer only laughed lightly and walked off. He had cut a stout cane, and this was the only kind of weapon he cared to carry along. It would serve him in good stead should he happen to come across a rattlesnake, for this was likely to happen at any time, since they had been warned by the friendly farmer that such venomous reptiles abounded along Raccoon Bluff. And in case a bobcat should turn up, Elmer fancied he could defend himself against attack with that choice staff. Besides, it was not often that a cat was to be met with in broad daylight, since they prefer to do most of their wandering about in search of food after nightfall comes.

He stopped and looked back at the camp. It had a very picturesque appearance just at that time, with the fire casting up a spiral of smoke toward the clear heavens, George bustling around in the capacity of campkeeper; and the whole overhung by those magnificent trees.

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Elmer dearly loved this sort of thing. Something implanted in his nature, coming down possibly from far-back ancestors who used to hunt game for a living, caused the boy to possess an earnest yearning to spend a season every year in the primeval wilderness, close to Nature's heart. It was as near the "call of the wild" as the ordinary boy ever gets, since school duties, as well as home ties, have dominion over him most of the year.

Elmer prepared to enjoy himself to the full. The air was certainly delicious at this time in the morning, though growing rapidly warmer as the sun climbed higher. All outdoors seemed to be rejoicing with him. He could hear the merry voices of insects all around; the croaking of frogs in a nearby marshy spot he passed; and the constant cawing of crows in the treetops, as they prepared to sally forth bent on finding a late breakfast, or possibly teaching their young how to use their wings in short flights around the home nests.

"This is the life!" said Elmer, exultingly, as he walked along with a brisk step, and used his eyes to notice a thousand and one things around him, most of which would of a certainty never be seen at all by an ordinary boy, until his senses had been sharpened, brought about through practical scout activities.

CHAPTER VI

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A LITTLE WOODS MINSTREL

NOTHING seemed to escape the trained eyes of the scout-master, as he walked on through the woods, across open glades, and sometimes crossing ravines where little brooks gurgled along in a happy care-free fashion, after the habit of wandering streamlets in general.

One of the first things that came to his attention was the unusual number of wild bees that seemed to be working in the flowers that dotted some of these open places. This interested Elmer very much; and as he stopped to watch them going in and out of the flowers, busily adding to their stores of sweets or pollen, he was rubbing his chin reflectively while saying to himself:

"It looks as if there might be a hive or so around this region, away up in some hollow tree. I'd like mighty well to spend a morning trying to locate it, and if nothing hinders I'll get one of the boys to help me track these little chaps to their hiding-place. I've done it before, and ought to be able to again, if I haven't forgotten the trick that old woodsman showed me. And I should think Alec, perhaps Rufus in the bargain, would be pleased to see how the thing is done."

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Then as he went on a little further he discovered small tracks, plainly outlined in the hardening mud alongside one of the streams that trickled down toward the lower levels.

"Hello! good morning, Mr. Mink!" said Elmer, as he bent over to examine the tracks which he easily guessed were made by the fur-bearing animal he had mentioned. "Been out late for a stroll, haven't you? Visiting around, perhaps, to see how your relatives are getting on; and dodging in and out of all these holes along the bank. Well, all I can hope is that no bad trapper covets your sleek coat, and lies in wait for you next winter with his sharp-edged steel trap."

Next he discovered another track quite different in design.

"Why, how do you do, Brother Fox?" Elmer chattered, amusing himself by this manner of monologue, just as though the animal might be within sound of his voice. "You were also abroad during the night, I see, and carrying home some sort of game in the bargain, for the little foxes in the den, judging from the scratches alongside your own tracks. Let's see if I can find out what it was you managed to grab."

He followed the trail fully fifty yards before making any discovery. Then the observant boy triumphantly snatched something up from the ground.

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"A fine, fat young partridge, I wager, you caught, old lady," he chuckled, as he twirled the feather between forefinger and thumb, and then stuck it in the band of his campaign hat. "Well, it was a sorry night for the poor bird; but those little foxes just had to have something to devour ever so often. Now, I'd like to find out whether this was a red fox; one of those dandy blacks like we took out of the trap when we were up at Uncle Caleb's woods cabin;^[A] or a gray rascal. I'll see if I can settle that part of it and satisfy my curiosity."

It did not take long for a boy of such wide experience as Elmer to find a clue on which to build his theory. Inside of three minutes he came to a place where the returning four-footed hunter had to pass through close quarters, in pushing under some brush. Elmer knew just where to look, and was speedily laughing as he held up several hairs he had found caught on a thorn.

"As red as any fox that ever crept up on a sleeping partridge, and snatched her from her nest in the thicket!" Elmer declared, also placing the evidence away, for he would want to show it to the tenderfoot squad, when telling the simple story of the wonderful things he had come across while just taking a little ramble through the woods.

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And so it went on. One thing followed another in endless procession. The red-headed woodpecker tapping the rotten top of a tree; the bluejay hunting worms or seeds amidst the dead grass; the chipmunk that switched around to the other side of a stump and then with sharp eyes watched the two-legged intruder on its haunts curiously; the harmless garter-snake that glided from under his foot, though *giving* him a certain thrill as he remembered the stories about these deadly rattlers—all these, and many other things arrested the attention of the boy who long ago had become possessed of the magical key that unlocks the storehouse of knowledge in Nature's own kingdom.

And yet Elmer did not forget to always pay attention to the course he was taking. He placed numerous landmarks down in his memory, so that he would know them again later on. Now it might be an odd freak in the way of a bent-over tree, that had the appearance of a drawn bow, with some unseen giant of the woods standing back of it, drawing the cord taut; then again a cluster of white birches would be impressed on his mind, to be readily recognized again in case the necessity arose.

All this time he was heading in a direct line toward that region where the blue spiral of smoke had been noticed in the still morning air. Elmer, too, fancied, when an hour had passed, that he must by now be drawing well along toward the origin of the smoke column.

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Possibly he may have questioned whether he was exactly wise in thinking of invading the precincts of the camp, that might prove to be the home of the man who possessed the evil reputation.

"But my motives are all right," Elmer told himself, when this arose to annoy him; "and I mean no harm to Jem or his people, if so be he *has* any family, which somehow no one ever bothered to tell me, even if they knew. I guess Jem's been something of a mystery to the people up here. He seems to have no friends, and it may be nobody ever did penetrate to his camp. Well, then, I'll be the pioneer in the game. I'm not afraid of Jem, for all his black looks. I'd just like to get to *know* him, and find out if he's as tough as they say."

And accordingly Elmer, instead of taking warning from his fears and turning back, continued resolutely along the course he had marked out for himself. He would beard the lion in its den, and try to convince this same poacher Jem that he had nothing to fear from a party of boys out on a holiday. Perhaps Elmer may have also had some little scheme in mind whereby they could do more or less good by utilizing some of those superabundant stores which George had cleverly advised Rufus to lay in, under the possibility of their being storm-bound up in the woods, with a

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great need for much provisions. A little present of excellent tea might quite win the heart of Jem's wife, provided he had one; and Elmer had even known of a case where the fragrant odor of coffee had entirely disarmed a woods bully, who had been half inclined to clean out the camp previous to his inhaling that delicious perfume.

Now and then the boy would pause and commence sniffing the air. He knew that he had been walking directly up the wind for quite a while now, and hence more than half expected that he might catch the whiff of hard-wood smoke, telling of the presence of a fire not far distant, and dead ahead.

It was when Elmer was standing still and looking about him that he suddenly heard a sound that sent a peculiar thrill through his whole person. There was nothing so strange about the sound in itself, only the oddity of hearing it under such peculiar conditions.

"Why, upon my soul, I do believe that's a violin being tuned up!" he whispered, straining his ears still more while speaking. "Yes, it is, for I can hear the plain chords now. Perhaps some fiddler who plays at country barn dances is passing through the woods, and has stopped over night at Jem's shack. Why, he seems to have a knack for striking wonderfully fine chords, it seems to me. I'll just push on and see what it means."

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This he accordingly did, and as he began to catch the sound of music more plainly as he kept advancing, Elmer found his curiosity rising to fever heat. Now the notes of the weird music came floating to him on the soft air, more and more distinctly. It seemed to the boy as though the violin fairly sobbed with the spirit of the one whose fingers trailed the bow across those taut strings.

"It's wonderful, that's what!" Elmer was telling himself for the tenth time as he kept on walking, and straining his hearing more and more. "Why, I've heard some pretty fine players, but never anything like that! Whoever can it be! I'd wager a heap that the gift of inherited genius is back of that playing. I can see that he isn't an educated violinist at all; but the notes are meant to express the language of the soul within. Oh, I'm glad now I decided to start out; because I wouldn't have missed this for anything!"

He knew that he was by now close to the spot, for the sounds came very distinctly. As he continued to advance, Elmer kept watching, wondering what manner of person he was going to see. Could some professional violinist have taken a notion to spend his summer up here amidst the solitudes, communing with Nature, so as to secure new inspiration for his work? It would not be improbable, though there was that about the playing to suggest an utter lack of training.

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Now only a screen of bushes seemed to intervene. Once he had crept to the further edge of these and Elmer would be able to see the one who handled that bow so eloquently.

Three minutes later and he found himself looking eagerly out of his leafy screen, to receive a fresh shock. Instead of a man with the looks of a professor, or even a lady performer, he discovered that the party responsible for those sweet chords and sad strains that pierced his heart, was only a flaxen-haired boy not over ten years of age!

He sat there with his slender legs coiled up on a stump, and drew the wonderful notes from his fiddle without any apparent effort, just as though the music was in him, and had to find an outlet somehow. He was barefooted, and dressed shabbily. Yet, despite these evidences of poverty, Elmer could note what seemed to be a distinguished air about the lad that fairly stunned him. He thought at once of Mark Twain's "The Prince and the Pauper." Was this a real prince masquerading in dingy apparel?

He lay there and drank in the wonderful harmony for a full quarter of an hour, hardly daring to move lest his actions frighten the little chap, and cause that flood of music to cease. All the while Elmer was trying to figure out what it could mean. Was this boy Jem Shock's child; and, if so, how in the wide world could the child have come into such an amazing musical inheritance? Who was his mother, and had she sprung from some genius known to the world of melody?

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"No matter what the answer is," Elmer told himself, "that child has genius deeply planted in his soul; and it will be a burning shame if he never has a chance to be educated along the right channel. I'm bound to bring this up before some of the good people at home, and see what can be done. Oh! if only they could hear him as I am doing right now, it would be easy to collect a sum of money to start him on the road to becoming the most famous of American violinists. I never heard such wonderful music in all my life. He mustn't get away from me now."

Elmer said this last because he saw that the boy was apparently about to cease playing. He had tucked his violin away in a much-soiled bag of once green baize, and was climbing down from the stump, as though to depart from the theatre he apparently liked above all other places for his daily concert.

So Elmer stepped forth and swiftly approached. The boy did not hear his footsteps at first, for Elmer knew how to tread softly; but presently he looked around and for a moment the scout leader feared he meant to dart away.

FOOTNOTE:

[A] See "The Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts Storm-Bound."

MAKING A BARGAIN WITH CONRAD

"HOLD on, please, don't go away; I'd like to talk with you, and tell you how much I've enjoyed listening to your playing."

Upon hearing the stranger say these kind words, the boy apparently reconsidered his intention of running off. He drew himself up proudly, and waited. Elmer saw that while he was a very handsome little fellow, there was no trace of weakness about his face; he had just as resolute a chin as Jem Shock himself; and his blue eyes could evidently flash fire if his spirit were aroused.

So Elmer walked forward and joined the other. Standing there barefooted, and with his clothing well worn, though neatly patched, the boy presented a strange appearance, hugging his cherished violin in its faded case close under his arm. Elmer would never forget the picture he had made as he sat there drawing all those remarkable sounds from the wooden case; he would have labeled such a painting simply "Genius," and let people catch the idea according to their bent.

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"You play very sweetly, my boy," he told the other. "I have been listening for a long time. Where did you learn how to handle the bow? Who taught you to make a violin talk, and tell all the things that you have been hearing the birds and the little woods folks saying?"

"My mother showed me how to hold the bow, and the rest I just picked up like, mister," the boy replied.

Elmer was further astonished. He had expected to hear this woods boy speak most ungrammatically; but few lads of his age, who had gone to school for five years or over, could have expressed themselves one-half as well. But then the same mother who had shown him how to grasp the bow must have taken pains to teach him other things that went with the education of a growing boy. His observation had done the rest; for just as Elmer himself was accustomed to doing, this boy had ever heard a thousand voices in the solitudes where he dwelt; and these elements he was weaving into music as he dreamily drew his bow again and again across the responsive strings.

"Do you live near here?" next asked Elmer, who saw that the boy was curiously looking him over, and seemed to be visibly impressed with his khaki suit, as well as his leggings and his campaign hat.

He noticed the glint of suspicion suddenly shoot into the blue eyes.

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"What do you want to know that for?" he asked sharply. "Are you a warden, or a revenue officer?"

Elmer laughed in his customary cheery way that usually proved so catching, and made him so many friends.

"Well, I should say not, my friend," he hastened to assure the other. "This is the regular uniform of the Boy Scouts. Have you ever heard of the scouts, and would you like me to tell you some interesting things about them?"

The boy looked him all over again, and when he saw what a frank and engaging face Elmer had, he seemed to make up his mind that really he ought to have no fear from so friendly a boy.

"Yes, I would, if you didn't mind telling me," he went on to say. "Once, a year or so ago, mother took me to a town to have my teeth looked over—I've got better clothes than these at the cabin, you know—and while we were there I saw a boy dressed like you are. He had a drum, and was beating it ever so hard, making music that nearly killed me, it was so terrible. But I didn't know he was a scout. So I'd like to hear about them, if you don't mind."

Accordingly, Elmer sat down on a convenient log, it being a part of the very same tree the stump of which the boy had utilized as his rostrum, when playing his sad airs to an imaginary audience.

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"Come and sit beside me, please," he went on to say, encouragingly; "and first, before I start talking, I ought to introduce myself. My name is Elmer Chenowith, and I live in the town of Hickory Ridge. Would you mind telling me your name, because, you see, it's rather awkward for two boys to chat without knowing how to speak to each other."

"I'm Conrad!" the boy said simply, as he took the designated seat, and carefully placed his precious violin on the ground beside him.

"Conrad Shock?" continued Elmer, at which the boy shut his teeth hard, and then almost defiantly said:

"Yes, and Jem Shock is my father, too, if you want to know it!"

"That's all right, Conrad," the other told him. "I have heard a lot about Jem, but I don't believe

much of what is told me. Besides, it's none of my business, and I don't mean to meddle with anybody else's affairs. Now I want to be friends with you. I must hear about your gift of playing, because you have got it without a question. After I've told you all about scouts, and what they aim to do in the world, I hope you'll tell me about yourself, Conrad."

"Perhaps I will, Elmer," the other replied, calmly.

So once again the story of scout craft was told in simple language. The boy hung upon every word as though he felt the keenest interest in all he heard. And never could there have been a more zealous narrator than the leader of the Wolf Patrol; for Elmer's heart was wrapped up in his present calling as typified in the khaki, and he fairly fascinated his young auditor by relating how the scouts took upon themselves so many uplifting resolutions; how they learned new things every day by observing, and remembering what they saw and heard; also how the movement was widening in its scope continually until even the Government at Washington had taken notice of its beneficial effect upon the youth of the land, and was at last legislating in behalf of the organization.

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"And now," he said in conclusion, "you understand who and what we are. I have four chums along with me, two of them new beginners whom we call tenderfeet, because they know so little about the great book of Nature, and have so much to learn. We came up here, partly to camp out and enjoy ourselves as scouts always do when they get the chance. Then it happens that the father of one of the boys has bought a big tract of land around Raccoon Bluff, and his son wanted to survey it over, not being satisfied with the original work. We chanced to see your father while we were on the road, and told him this, but I'm afraid he didn't wholly believe us; but, Conrad, I give you my word of honor as a scout that we haven't the least idea of spying on him, or doing him any harm. Do you believe me?"

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The boy looked him in the eye, and doubtless soul spoke to soul in that exchange of looks, for he presently said, slowly but positively:

"Yes, you could never tell a lie if you wanted to, Elmer. And I'm going to tell you that my father has been acting queer ever since he met you boys on the road. I don't know what ails him, but I heard him saying a name over and over again, and looking ever so black."

"What was the name; can you tell me, Conrad?"

"It was a funny one—Snodgrass," the boy replied, and Elmer shivered when he heard him say this, for it came to him like a flash that possibly Jem Shock might have some reason to think of that name with anything but pleasant memories.

"That is the name of the new boy whose father owns this property up here," he admitted; "but he came from some other section of the country, and has only been in our town a few months. Tell me about your mother, for you say she showed you how to hold the bow. Did she used to play the violin herself long ago?"

"Oh! no, it was her father, the celebrated player, Ovid Anderson. He is long since dead, you know. And this was his violin, too, with which he used to charm so many thousands of people. My mother has often told me how they would take him on their shoulders and march up the street shouting that he was the greatest player in all the wide world. And some day I mean to be his equal; I feel it in here," and as the boy said this most solemnly, he placed a hand on his bosom, where his heart beat most tumultuously, and called upon him for deeds worthy of the name his ancestor had made famous.

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For Elmer had himself heard that name of Ovid Anderson. He remembered that the player, long since dead, had been a Swedish violinist of international reputation. How it came that his daughter should ever mate with a man like Jem Shock, and be lost to the world in this wilderness, was a puzzle too much for Elmer to understand.

But he hoped that all in good time he might find the explanation; for now that he had made the acquaintance of Conrad he was more determined than ever to meet that mother, even if in doing so he had to run the gauntlet of Jem Shock's anger.

But Conrad was showing evidences now of a desire to depart. Elmer would have liked to ask to accompany him to his cabin home, but he hesitated. Still he meant to pave the way to a future meeting, and then it might be time to ask to meet the boy's mother.

"Our camp is up on the bluff, where the road runs. You can see the smoke of our fire, and perhaps the tent under the trees, if you look that way. And we'd be glad to have you and your mother, yes, and Jem Shock, too, visit us any time, Conrad, if you felt inclined that way. Do you often come here to play the things that you feel in your soul?"

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"Every morning when it isn't raining, and then the day is very long to me, for I believe I would die if it wasn't for the music," the boy hurriedly replied. "But I want to thank you for saying what you did about my father. I know people all say he is a terribly bad man, that he gets drunk, and beats us; but it's a whole pack of lies, that's what it is. He never drinks a drop. He seems to hold a grudge against the whole world for something that happened a while ago, but he is good to my mother, and he loves me, he says, like the apple of his eye."

"I'm mighty glad to hear that, Conrad, sure I am!" exclaimed Elmer. "Lots of times people are given bad names when they don't deserve them one whit. I made up my mind that I wanted to

know your father, and some day I mean to drop in at your cabin and introduce myself. Yes, and tomorrow I'll be coming over here again as sure as anything, to listen to you play some more. Some day you will get your chance to take lessons from some big professor, who will fit you for taking the place your famous grandfather filled. And perhaps I may be able to start the ball rolling; you wait and see."

Conrad turned white with the wild hope that surged through his ambitious young heart. He wrung Elmer's hand eagerly as he said goodbye. The scout leader watched him going on through the aisles of the forest, and noticed that his course took him directly toward the place where the smoke came from. [83]

Fully satisfied with the adventure of the morning, and filled with a growing ambition to be the one to interest music-loving friends in the wonderful genius of the great Ovid Anderson's grandson, Elmer turned in his tracks, and commenced to head for the camp.

"I never dreamed of such a thing happening to me, when I consented to come up here and help Rufus make his new survey," he was telling himself, as he walked on, never forgetting to note his surroundings, as a true woodsman always must, no matter what his mind may be occupied with. "And wouldn't it be a great thing, though, if we did manage to get that boy's mother to bring him down to town, so the folks who love music could only hear him play. Why, they'd go crazy over him, I'm sure, and the rest would be as easy as falling off a log."

Somehow Elmer failed to pay as much attention to animated nature around him on his return trip as he had when going out; but then that was not to be wondered at. He had really run across a most remarkable thing; and it crowded most other matters out of his mind.

When he reached camp, he found George still "up to his eyes" in work, and enjoying every minute of the morning. The fixing up of camp was such a pleasure to him that for the time being he seemed transformed into a real sociable fellow, quite different from his usual complaining self. [84]

Elmer told him of his adventure, and George was mildly interested. He did not happen to be much of a lover of music himself, and perhaps thought Elmer might be overestimating the ability of a boy player.

"Oh! there are plenty such cropping up from time to time, I reckon," he remarked, scornfully; "but they seldom amount to a row of beans. You thought this little chap was some punkins just because you happened to hear him amidst peculiar surroundings. Now, the chances are when you listen to him in a concert hall you'll be bitterly disappointed in his genius, as you like to call it."

"You're jumping at conclusions too fast, as usual, George," the scout leader told the objector. "In the first place, Conrad will never be heard on the concert stage while he is as green as he is along the lines of musical culture. He will show what is in him to genuine critics, and then if they prove as wild over him as I believe they are bound to be, he'll be put under the charge of the best teacher in New York City, to begin along the proper lines." [85]

As George was so busily employed, and Elmer had nothing else to do, he started getting lunch ready later on. There was an abundance of material to choose from, and it was really a pleasure to make the selection. So presently savory odors began to arise in the vicinity, that, when wafted to the olfactories of the three boys coming wearily back over their morning trail would be sure to hasten their footsteps.

It was easy to see that Rufus had made more or less progress along the lines of carrying out his plans for checking up the previous survey.

"Of course it's a whole lot too soon," he told Elmer, when he came into camp and threw himself down to rest, "to say that the job was pretty much of a bungle; but I'm beginning to believe that same. And before two suns have set I'll have the figures to prove it, too."

"What object do you suppose those civil engineers could have had in rushing it all through, and doing a rotten job in the bargain?" demanded George. "Could it be possible there was some crooked work back of the survey, and that they took a money bribe to falsify the figures? In other words, has your respected dad been stung when buying some square miles of ground up here along Raccoon Bluff?"

"Oh! I'm hardly prepared to go as far as that," said Rufus, hastily. "I'd be more inclined to believe that the men who came up here just slouched at their work and failed to do what they should. They made a slash three-quarters of the way back in one place, we found, and then probably guessed the rest. It's going to turn out a bad piece of work, and they'll hear from my dad, you can wager. The Snodgrass pluck and vim won't stand for such monkey shines one minute, as any person who knows my father can tell you." [86]

Elmer suddenly remembered how the lad with the flaxen hair had said that his father, Jem Shock, seemed to cherish a singular antipathy toward some one by the name of Snodgrass; and that ever since meeting them on the road, he had kept repeating it to himself, and frowning as though furious. He wondered again whether that rich father of Rufus could at some time in the past have wronged the same Jem in a real estate deal. It would be very unfortunate if such proved to be the case; and might spoil some of the plans he, Elmer, had been building up, connected with the wonderful boy musician.

Later on, while they were discussing the lunch, he started in and told Lil Artha, Rufus and Alec

what he had run across. All of them were greatly interested; but the scout-master, for reasons of his own, failed to mention that the man who was called a "poacher," and who had somehow gained the name of a bad man, seemed to hold hard feelings against a Snodgrass.

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Rufus was loud in his desire to help the "cause" along.

"If ever you can coax these woods people to let the boy come to town, Elmer," he went on to say loftily, though also with considerable feeling, "I'll promise to interest my folks in him. And my father thinks a lot of anybody who has musical talent. I know he took a heap of pleasure in helping to send one young lady to Europe to complete her voice culture; she's now singing in opera, and thinks she owes considerable of her dazzling success to what he did for her. She's often been at our house when we lived nearer New York."

"That sounds good to me, Rufus," Elmer told him; "and if the opening comes I may call on you to redeem your promise."

At the same time, Elmer wondered whether it might not be the irony of fate if the same man who had helped "down" the father, were to stretch out a helping hand to the son. He also figured that Jem Shock would indignantly refuse to accept any aid from that source. But then the whole thing was wrapped in mystery; and Elmer, like a wise boy, decided that it would be foolish to try to figure things out until he had a better grip on the conditions.

After lunch, the surveying party, considerably refreshed by their meal, and the hour of loafing about the camp, went off again to take up the work where they had dropped it. George, too, had found some other things which he might as well do while his hand was in; and so Elmer had to cast around him for some means of passing the long afternoon away.

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CHAPTER VIII

[89]

A PERIL THAT LAY IN WAIT

IT was an hour and more after the surveying party had trooped forth, bearing their paraphernalia for a good afternoon's work, when Elmer happened to remember something. He was himself getting ready to take another tramp, though in a different direction than his morning stroll took him.

"Seems to me, George," he remarked, casually, "I've heard you say you liked honey pretty well?"

George stopped fretting over what he was doing, and licked his lips at the mere mention of the word "honey."

"Finest stuff that ever was made; that is, when you get the real article, and none of that sugar-water imitation some bee-keepers put on the market nowadays, which tastes as insipid as mucilage. Yum! yum! makes my mouth water when I think of all the good times I used to have when we kept bees. But father had the misfortune to upset a hive, and got so badly stung that he bundled the lot off at a bargain price to an old farmer. But what makes you speak of it now, Elmer? Just to tantalize me, because that was one of the things I had Rufus put on his list and he forgot to get, worse luck."

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"Oh! I only wanted to say that perhaps we may find a chance while we're up here to lay in a store of luscious honey, if we have half-way good luck, George."

"Does that farmer keep bees, and do you mean some of us can take a run back to his place to buy a bucket of comb?" asked George, eagerly.

"Better than that," chuckled Elmer. "I've noticed a great many wild bees working in the flowers, and I think I can track them to their woods hive. Once we find where they hold out, it won't be hard to chop the tree down, and take our fill of the newest stores."

"A splendid idea, Elmer, I give you my word if it isn't!" cried the other, looking greatly pleased. "It certainly takes you to think up fine things. And when you start to follow the honey-makers home, please let me go along. I've always wanted to see how that dodge is worked."

"We'll all be on deck," the scout-master assured him; "for above everything else I want the tenderfoot squad to learn a practical lesson on how easy it is for an experienced woodsman to find his bread and butter and sweets by using his brains instead of hard cash. But we'll lay our plans tonight while we sit around the fire."

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"Off for another tramp now, are you, Elmer?" George continued, as he saw the other pick up his handy stick again.

"Well, yes; I don't like to waste such a glorious day; and there's really nothing for me to do around camp, since you've taken the run of things in your hands."

"Going off to see that wonderful child fiddler again. I suppose, Elmer?"

"You guessed wrong that time, George, because I've laid out to follow after our civil engineering party, and see how Rufus is getting on with his work. He certainly is in love with it; and his father will be unwise if he doesn't encourage the boy in every way possible. I tell you, a host of fellows have made failures of their lives because their parents insisted on their taking up some profession they hated."

"Just so, Elmer," chirped George, "a case of round pegs in square holes, so to speak. And when I get to the point of choosing what I want to be as a man, I hope my folks won't force me to go contrary to my liking."

Knowing George's stubborn qualities, Elmer could easily guess that the Robbins tribe would have a pretty hard task of it bending *him* to their will. However, he did not say this, not wishing to either offend George or arouse his argumentative powers, but started forth on his tramp.

"Course you'll just keep an eye on their trail, won't you, Elmer?" the camp-guardian called out after him. [92]

"It would be silly to try any other way, George," he was told.

So Elmer went on. The tracks left by the three surveyors could hardly have been overlooked, even by the veriest greenhorn at trailing, for they had none of them made the least attempt to hide their footprints. So Elmer had an easy task of it, and indeed could employ his extra time in observing many things around him.

He saw the mother rabbit start out of the bunch of grass where doubtless her offspring lay hidden, and with halting steps act as though badly injured. Elmer laughed, and clapped his hands as though in keen appreciation for her cleverness.

"The same old trick birds and small animals always play when they want to lure a trespasser away from their nest," he told himself; "by endangering themselves in the desire to save their young. She coaxes me to rush after her, so as to wean me away from her brood. If I started she'd go off a little farther, and then stop once more to coax me on again. I've seen a hen partridge do the same thing, fluttering along the ground as if with a broken wing. Now just for fun let's see if I'm not right."

He had carefully noted the exact spot where the mother rabbit first appeared, and stepping over that way parted the tall grass. Instantly there was a hurried scurrying, as a number of small but nimble half-grown rabbits darted this way and that, as if greatly frightened. [93]

"Don't kill yourselves trying to escape, little bunnies," said Elmer, greatly amused; "because I wouldn't harm a single hair of your pretty bodies. But I tell you the thousand-and-one lessons that a fellow can learn from Nature's big book ought to be enough to make every boy want to become a scout, and take up the study of outdoor life. There's something fresh and new every day one lives."

By then the devoted mother rabbit had vanished, doubtless filled with consternation over the dispersal of her brood, which she would have to call together in some fashion of her own. So Elmer walked on, observing many other interesting things as he proceeded, for his eyes were ever on the alert when he went into the woods and cruised on the waters.

He guessed that he must be gradually drawing up on his three chums, for occasionally he caught the sound of a halloo, as though there might be an exchange of signals between Rufus and his stakeman, who went on ahead to assist him. Lil Artha probably prowled along near by, seeing things for himself, and with not a great deal of interest in the prosaic operations of the surveyors.

Suddenly Elmer heard loud excited voices. He believed he caught the voice of Lil Artha saying, "Steady, Rufus, don't move on your life—steady, boy!" [94]

Then came a loud report. Elmer knew that it was the discharge of the lanky scout's gun. He was already plunging forward as fast as he could go when this sound came to his startled ears. The others were close by, for he could now hear their excited voices.

A minute later, and Elmer, still on the full run, burst through a thicket, and discovered the three boys. Lil Artha had his gun half raised to his shoulder, as if doubtful whether the newcomer would prove to be a friend or an enemy; and with true scout preparedness not meaning to be taken off his guard. But on sighting Elmer, of course he lowered his weapon.

Rufus was standing there, looking as "white as a ghost," and trembling as if he had the ague. Alec grasped his small ax, and seemed quite ready to use the same. Something twisted and squirmed upon the ground, and as Elmer looked, his horrified gaze made out an enormous rattlesnake that seemed to have part of its head shot away. The chilling sound of its rattles was what Elmer had thought to be the "chill" of a buzzing locust upon some neighboring tree.

In another moment Elmer was alongside Rufus.

"Don't tell me the thing struck you, Rufus?" he ejaculated, himself pale with apprehension. [95]

"It's all right, Elmer," said Lil Artha, soothingly. "Nobody hurt the least mite, I give you my word. But if Rufus hadn't had the good sense to stand still when I called out, I really believe the critter would have struck at him. And it was close enough to make a hit, too."

"I don't deserve any credit, fellows, indeed I don't!" said Rufus, truthfully. "I was so scared that

I seemed frozen stiff. Why, I couldn't have moved hand or foot for all the money in the world. Guess that's what they mean when they say a rattler charms people."

"It may be so," Lil Artha went on to say, "but I've known one to get birds to flutter within reach, just as if there was something magical in the whirr of that buzz rattle at the end of its tail. After all, I guess it was lucky that I *did* conclude to fetch my gun along this afternoon. The boys were laughing at me in the morning for lugging it when I didn't mean to fire a shot at any game. But say, a measly rattler hasn't any close season; he's a fit object for business, summer or fall."

"You made a cracking fine shot, Lil Artha," commented Elmer, after stepping closer to observe the result of the other's quick aim.

"Oh! middling, middling, partner," chuckled the tall scout, modestly; "I oughtn't to be proud of it; but then I own up I was some rattled for fear Rufus would move, and make the snake shoot forward with that poised flat head of his. But I stopped his fun all right, which ought to be enough for me."

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"But how d'ye suppose I missed the fearsome de-il?" asked Alec, wonderingly.

"Oh! I happened to step aside while getting my bearings for that last sight," explained the trembling Rufus, "and must have drawn too near where the viper was coiled up for defense. First thing I knew was hearing what I took to be the whirr of a locust. Then I looked down and saw it! After that I seemed to turn to ice. I heard Lil Artha coming, and afterwards he said something. When he fired I nearly fell over, thinking I had been shot. Oh! I'll never forget my sensations; and after this I'm going to keep on the lookout all the time for snakes."

"It pays to be on the watch," assented Elmer. "The fellow who keeps his eyes about him in the woods is doubly armed. We must drag it back with us, and show George. He said he didn't believe there was any truth in that farmer's story about rattlesnakes up here. We'll have to show him."

"But, Elmer, supposing it had given me a crack, would I have had to die? Is there any remedy for a rattlesnake's poison?" asked Rufus.

"Oh! we'd have pulled you through all right, depend on it, Rufus," said Lil Artha, taking it upon himself to answer the question. "I'd have sucked the wound in the first place, making sure that I had no scratch or abrasion about my mouth so that I couldn't be infected by the poison that I ejected. Then Elmer here, who is a pretty good surgeon when it comes right down to brass tacks, would have cut into the wound, and afterwards, when it had bled freely, he'd apply some stuff he always carries with him to neutralize the poison. Some people give whiskey, and perhaps it does help; but science and medicine have found a better remedy."

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"Then why are there so many fatal cases of snake bites?" asked Rufus, determined to find out all he could on the subject.

"Well, most of them are neglected too long," Elmer told him. "The person who has been struck may be alone at the time; or if he has companions, they become panic-stricken, and only think of hurrying the poor chap to the nearest doctor as fast as they can. That's nearly always the worst thing they could do, for in the time it takes, the deadly poison has had a chance to circulate through the blood, and all the doctors going couldn't save the patient."

"That's where first aid to the injured comes in with the scouts," said Lil Artha, proudly. "All boys who wear the khaki are instructed how to act in order to save human life by prompt measures, whether it is in case of near-drowning, snake bite, injury by cutting an artery with an ax, swallowing some poisonous toadstool in place of delicious mushrooms, and a dozen other things too numerous to mention. You'll learn all about it in good time, Rufus."

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"I mean to, Lil Artha, depend on it," the other assured him earnestly. "I give you my solemn word here and now that I'll begin right away. I never want to be taken unawares again, so that I feel as helpless as a kitten. I'm going to be aimed and equipped with the book of knowledge. I can see that it pays compound interest for all your time and trouble."

"Now I'm delighted to hear you say that, Rufus," Lil Artha told him; "and I promise to instruct you at the first opportunity; Alec, too, if he is so minded."

"I am verra curious about it, and ye can count on me being a listener whenever ye begin the lessons. Aye! it would hae been peetiful if Rufus had been struck. I'd hae sucked his wound with ye, Lil Artha, or done anything else ye asked."

Rufus laid a hand on the Scotch boy's shoulder fondly.

"I'm sure you would, Sandy," he went on to say, for sometimes he used that name in speaking to his comrade, though always with affection. "But after that fright I guess I'm done working for today. Let's go back to camp."

No one raised any objections, so they prepared to return. Lil Artha managed to fasten a strong cord to the tail of the rattlesnake, which Alec said he would drag after him. The long-legged scout had already shown the two tenderfeet the cruel looking curved fangs in the partly shattered head, as well as the sickly, green-hued poison that could be pressed from the sack by using a stick on a certain part of the said head. They had been greatly impressed, and likewise shocked to realize what a narrow escape both of them had had from near-death.

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All the way back the talk was of the hidden perils that lie in wait for unsuspecting passersby in the woods. This ranged from wildcats to rattlesnakes and adders and scorpions. Lil Artha seemed to be a "walking encyclopedia" of knowledge along these lines; part of this he had picked up through personal experience, and the rest came through extensive reading, or hearing others tell about it. A scout may find scores of ways for learning useful things, if only he cares to bother about doing it.

Later on they approached the camp.

George, who had managed to get through with his numerous odd jobs and was resting, seemed surprised, to have them come back so soon.

"Huh! guess you got tired of the job quicker'n you expected, Rufus!" he called out lazily from his seat on the soft moss under a tree. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, they say. But what in the dickens is that you're dragging along after you, Alec? Great Scott! a rattler!"

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George scrambled to his feet, filled with excitement. His eyes stared at the four-foot reptile, which still showed signs of life; and Lil Artha had assured Alec its tail would continue to jerk until sundown, even though its head be cut clean off.

"I hope it didn't strike any of you fellows?" George went on to add with a vein of fright in his voice.

The story was quickly told, and the convinced George had to measure the reptile with his tape line, finding it only an inch or two short of four feet.

"As big a rattler as I ever saw," Elmer told them. "They have them five feet long down in Florida, I understand, those diamond-back fellows; but as I haven't been there I can't say anything about it. For a Northern snake this one is certainly a whopper."

"Lil Artha has promised to get the rattle for me," remarked Alec. "Rufus had the first choice, but man, he said he'd never sleep easy nights if he had it hangin' on the wall of his room at home, thinking about his narrow escape. But it's a verra curious thing to me, and I don't care a bawbee about the sound. It wasn't *my* ox that was gored, ye ken."

George was acting now in something of a mysterious manner. Elmer noticed this and was looking at the camp-keeper out of the tail of his eye, as though trying to guess what was in the wind. He felt certain that George had a secret of some kind or other, which he was holding back, just for the satisfaction it gave him.

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Lil Artha was an observing chap, as we happen to know; and before long he too noticed the same thing. This, however, was after he had seen Elmer observing George closely, with a line across his forehead that told of a puzzled mind.

The tall scout was not the one to bother himself about trying to solve a thing when there was a short cut to the answer. He believed that the best way to get at the meat in a cocoanut was to smash the shell.

"Here, what's brewing with you, George?" he suddenly demanded, facing the other.

George grinned, and then hastened to say:

"What makes you ask that, Lil Artha?"

"Because I know right well you've got something of a surprise up your sleeve, and you're aching to spring it on us. What have you been doing since we left camp? Now don't you squirm, and try to keep us in the dark. Own up, George, and tell us."

So George, seeing there was no escape, apparently, determined to let the "cat out of the bag."

CHAPTER IX

[102]

THE STRANGE MESSAGE JEM LEFT

"WELL, we've had a visitor in camp since you fellows all went away!" George confessed.

Of course every one was interested. Lil Artha seemed to immediately jump to the conclusion that the guest must have been a four-footed one.

"Bet you now, it was a measly wildcat," he hastened to exclaim. "It's too bad a fellow with a gun can't be in two places at the same time. I was needed out with the tenderfoot squad; and seems like I could have been made useful here at home. Did the varmint get away with any of our grub, George?"

The camp defender grinned as though amused.

"Go a bit slow, Lil Artha, can't you?" he complained, petulantly. "Don't rush as if you knew it all. Nobody said the visitor was going on four feet, did they? Why, it happened to be a biped, a

man!"

"Then it was Jem Shock!" ventured Elmer, quickly, as though he had half guessed the answer before then.

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"Just who it was," agreed George, nodding his head in the affirmative, and looking very important.

"What did he want?" demanded Lil Artha.

"Hold your horses!" continued Elmer; "don't keep jumping at conclusions so fast. In the first place, remember that we invited Jem to drop in on us any time he was near our camp. The invitation didn't seem to give him much joy, but later on he may have concluded to make a call. Now tell us what he said, and how he looked, George."

"Oh! he carried that gun of his just as we saw him before," the other explained. "And he certainly looked pretty savage, in the bargain."

"Savage?" echoed Rufus, "why should he act that way? Possibly because my father owns about all this property up here. Perhaps Jem believes he may be dispossessed of his cabin. I've heard that squatters always do get to thinking they own the land they build on, as if possession gave them a quit claim deed."

"Well," continued George, steadily, and keeping his eye fixed on Rufus, "to tell the honest truth, he seemed most of all interested about *you*, Rufus."

"Oh! is that so?" sneered the other; "well, that's just about in line with what I was telling you. He knows the name of Snodgrass, apparently."

"I guessed he did from the way he acted after I'd told him about your father," George went on to say.

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"Now, what could you have to say about my dad?" snapped the touchy Rufus.

"Well, Jem asked me first of all if one of the boys in camp was a Snodgrass, and of course I told him yes," George explained. "Then he asked me if I knew what your father's first name was. I told him I had heard it, but just then, somehow, it seemed to have slipped my memory. At that he up and asked me if it was Hiram."

Rufus gave a little cry at hearing this.

"It might be this man knew my father once on a time, or they may have had some business deal together; though that's hardly likely, because Jem Shock, poacher and farm laborer, would hardly be the one *my* father would be friendly with."

"I don't know anything about that," said George, swiftly; "but when I told him I remembered, on his mentioning it, that Hiram was your father's name, he gritted those big white teeth of his like everything, and his eyes certainly looked wicked enough to give a fellow a shiver."

"But didn't he say anything to explain why he had come to the camp?" asked Lil Artha, deeply interested in the story.

"He asked no favor, neither would he sit down and have a cup of coffee when I offered to make him one," George went on; "but he asked me to give you a message which he wanted you to carry to your father when you went home. He said: 'Tell that Snodgrass boy to say to his father that Jem Shock never will forgive the rank treachery that handed him over to a gang of sharpers in the land speculating business. And tell Hiram Snodgrass, too,' he went on, 'that he ought to thank his stars his son wasn't treated by Jem Shock as he deserved. Only for the prayers of a good woman in his cabin, and the influence of a sweet child, Jem Shock'd be tempted to do something wicked to wipe out the debt he owed your father.'"

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Rufus went white on hearing this. Then the color surged back to his cheeks and his eyes sparkled like twin fires.

"It's all wrong, I'm sure it must be!" he cried, angrily. "I know my father better than most people do, and I'm as certain as I breathe that he wouldn't deliberately betray anybody who trusted in his word. There must be some terrible mistake about it, don't you see, fellows? I'll bring you face to face with my dad when I'm telling him about this, and you'll hear for yourselves what he says. But nothing can shake my confidence in his integrity; I've seen it tested too many times to doubt him now, just because this poacher fellow dares accuse him of wrong doing."

It sounded very fine, this defense on the part of a loyal son, and Elmer could only admire Rufus for showing himself so faithful. At the same time, he knew real-estate dealers often have a peculiar code of morals, and frequently do things that others may not exactly approve of, salving their own consciences in some way. Elmer was a little afraid that Hiram Snodgrass might have been tempted to turn a client over to some combination of operators, some of whom were not just as scrupulous as an honest man would like to have them in his dealings.

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"Was that all he said, George?" asked Lil Artha, out of pity for Rufus, who appeared to be suffering acutely from mental pain.

"Yes, and after delivering the message, he whirled around and walked away with the grand air

of a lord of the realm," George explained. "Somehow, poacher that he may be, because he believes like a good many persons that wild game isn't the property of the State, there's something about Jem Shock that tells me he isn't a common dickey. He hates all human kind because his nature has been soured by some wrong he's endured, that's all."

"Well, I'm going to find out what it all means, and as soon as I get the chance," Rufus asserted, between his set teeth. "If it was a mistake, it shall be righted. I tell you my father is too big a man to play mean toward anybody. But while we're up here nothing can be done. I wish I had a chance to ask this fellow what it's all about, so I could get the hang of things."

"H'm! if I were you, Rufus," suggested wise George, "I'd go slow about showing myself to Jem Shock. He hates the sound of your name, and if you gave him half an excuse, why he might forget his good resolutions, and hurt you, with the idea of revenging himself on your dad. How about that, Elmer; is my logic sound?" [107]

"Yes, there's no use taking unnecessary risks," admitted the scout-master, "and common prudence demands that Rufus should keep away from Jem. Later on, if he does find that a terrible mistake has been made, it would be easy to come back up here and square things up with the poacher. But it certainly pleases me to know that the home influence is working on Jem's revengeful mind. If the mother is anything like that splendid little clear-eyed chap I don't wonder at it, either."

Secretly, Elmer was more determined than ever to try and make the personal acquaintance of Conrad's mother, the daughter of that once famous Swedish violinist whose bow had thrilled countless thousands, and drawn genuine tears from their eyes.

The subject was by common consent dropped then and there, though, of course, it would remain to agitate the mind of Rufus long afterwards. Indeed, the boy seemed to be unusually quiet during the balance of that afternoon, and even while they sat around the crackling camp-fire after supper had been disposed of.

Elmer could guess the reason why. The tenderfoot had, in the first place, been under a most severe strain when he experienced that peril with the deadly snake. It would have an effect upon his nervous system for some little time; and possibly he might even awaken from sleep occasionally with a half-suppressed cry of horror, as though in his dreams he again saw that horrid reptile with its great coils, its flat square head drawn back for striking, and its tail elevated so that the monotonous danger signal at the tip could continue to buzz angrily. [108]

Then again the boy had taken that accusation on the part of the poacher quite to heart. It could be easily seen that he had a great affection for his father, even though it was his fond mother who had always given in to his whims, and come near utterly spoiling Rufus by her favors.

"It galls him to have heard any one accuse his father of being a trickster," was what Elmer told himself, as he noticed the soberness of Rufus, while the others in the circle about the fire chattered away, and seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely.

He had not changed his own plans a particle on account of hearing about the visit paid to the camp by Jem Shock. If anything, his resolution was stronger than ever to see more of Conrad, and perhaps meet his mother.

All of them were pretty tired, and, of course, as the tenderfoot pair had secured so little sleep on the first night, it was likely they would soon be "dead to the world" after letting their heads fall on their crude pillows. These were made out of a slip filled with sweet hemlock browse stripped by hand fresh from the tree, and fragrant as could be, with the incense of the woods. This bosky odor in itself is said to be conducive to sound slumber; at least all who spend their vacations close to Nature's heart so affirm, and they should know. [109]

The night passed without any sort of alarm. Indeed, Alec and Rufus, once they got to sleep, knew next to nothing up to the time Lil Artha aroused them by beating on his frying-pan gong, as "the first call to breakfast."

They were glad to see that again the weather favored them, since there were all the signs of a pleasant day ahead. Elmer, however, warned the new recruits not to be too optimistic, because after the warmth of the last few days, it was likely that some sort of storm might develop.

It was arranged that George should change places with Lil Artha on this day, and accompany the two surveyors as a guard. The tall scout insisted on his carrying the gun along with him.

"Of course you won't need it to shoot any deer you happen to scare up, George," the owner went on to tell him, "but, as we saw yesterday, there may crop up conditions that make the having of a shooting-iron mighty handy. You may not need a gun at all, but if you do you want it right there." [110]

Lil Artha possibly had something in mind which he wanted to do while left behind. He kept his own counsel, however, and Elmer, knowing that the tall scout was to be thoroughly trusted, did not ask questions.

So along about nine in the morning, when he thought it likely he would be apt to find Conrad seated in his favorite nook and playing some of his dreamy airs, all of them creations of his own brain, Elmer started forth. Lil Artha of course could easily surmise from the direction he took that

he meant to look the boy up again, but immersed in his own affairs, he said nothing, only waved a cheery goodbye after the other.

So Elmer strode along, and this time he paid a little less attention to the many interesting things that cropped up on this side or that, for his thoughts were mostly concerned with Conrad, and his quaint thrilling music, which he yearned to hear again.

CHAPTER X

[111]

A CABIN IN THE CLEARING

As the scout-master found himself drawing near the spot where he had had his former interesting meeting with little Conrad, he listened with eagerness to catch the first faint notes from the quavering strings of the wonderful violin that had once been in the possession of Ovid Anderson.

"I'm no judge of such instruments myself," Elmer had told his chums when speaking of the matter, "but I expect that violin must be a valuable piece of polished wood. It certainly had an extra sweet singing tone to me, and seemed to just *talk* as the boy drew his bow over the strings. I wouldn't be surprised now if it turned out to be a Stradivarius or a Cremona, which I understand represent the finest makes of violins known to the profession."

When George seemed inclined to scoff at the idea, since such an instrument was likely to be worth thousands of dollars, and would have been sold long ago to get common necessities, Elmer had also told him that perhaps the daughter of the famous player would have parted with her soul before allowing that remembrance of her father leave her house.

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Then Elmer caught the first faint sound of music. It thrilled him as he continued to hurry forward, and the sounds became stronger. Yes, and sure enough, there was lacking now some of that sadness he had detected in the playing of Conrad on the preceding day. Doubtless hope filled the aspiring heart of the lad. His talk with his mother may have given him new zeal, and the rainbow of promise was arching his heaven even then as he played, and waited for his new friend to appear.

"That sounds more like it," Elmer told himself, "and shows what a creature of circumstances a genius must always be. Even this child makes the music he finds in his own soul. But it's sweeter by far than what he played yesterday, for there is the breath of hope and promise in every note."

He soon came in sight of the familiar stump, and found the lad curled up there as before, with his violin tucked under his chin; just as though he might be to the manner born, while his deft right hand wielded the bow so tenderly that the daintiest sort of sound came forth at his command.

But he was watching at the same time, and no sooner did Elmer appear than the playing abruptly ceased, while the boy came running to meet him. Elmer then felt sorry that he had not remained in concealment a while longer, so that he might have enjoyed more of that crude but appealing music.

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"Oh! I'm glad to see you again, Elmer!" exclaimed the boy, as he held out his hand, which the other did not attempt to squeeze too roughly, for he remembered that those little digits had to retain their sensitiveness to a remarkable degree in order to coax persuasive notes to come forth.

"But before we do any talking," said Elmer, "you must let me hear you play again. I notice that you are in a more joyous mood today, for it shows in your music. Please sit on your stump again, Conrad, and humor me for a while. Afterwards we can have a nice long chat; and I'm meaning to ask a great favor of you later."

The boy's eyes flashed with genuine pleasure. It was evidently a treat for him to have an audience besides the squirrels and rabbits, with perhaps a curious old red fox that, prowling around in search of a dinner, may have stopped to investigate the origin of those queer squeaks and twirls, and those sobbing notes, so like a hen partridge clucking to her brood.

For possibly ten minutes or so he played with scarcely any intermission. Elmer thought he could never tire of drinking in the sweet combinations of sounds which that deft little hand tempted from the five strings of the violin. It seemed as though the spirit of the old virtuoso must haunt the sacred instrument, and give forth some of his choicest chords through the medium of his descendant, heir to his undoubted genius.

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And it also seemed as though the lad's power to delineate the sounds that appealed to him from the woods and waters was unlimited, for he seldom repeated as he went on, making up astonishing strain after strain.

Elmer was more than satisfied now his first impression had not been wrong. He felt doubly convinced that all this lad needed to develop into one of the greatest players the world had ever known was the directing hand of a master, who could guide him past the rocks on which his young talent might be wrecked if not taken in time.

"Now, that is enough for today," said Conrad, suddenly allowing his hand holding the bow to drop; "I never try to play when something inside tells me to stop. And I'm eager to tell you something good. My mother wants to meet you, Elmer."

This intelligence caused the scout-master to smile with pleasure.

"Why," he exclaimed eagerly, "do you know, that was the favor I meant when I said I wanted to ask you something. I have been wishing I could meet the mother of my new little friend; for I am sure she must be a remarkable woman."

"So she is," stoutly asserted Conrad, faithful little soul; "and the best mother there ever could be. All I know she has taught me, for, you see, she used to be a school teacher once, after grandfather died, and the money was lost."

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"You told her about me, then?" asked Elmer.

"Why, of course; I tell her everything that happens to me!" Conrad declared, simply. "I couldn't have a secret from my mother, could I? And you ought to have seen how her eyes sparkled when she heard what you said about seeing I had a chance to learn the many things I ought to know about using a violin properly. Why, Elmer, I guess it must have been the wish of her heart, that some one would come along and say that; because she took me in her arms and hugged me, yes, and she cried some, too, I know she did, for I felt hot tears on my cheek; but then it must have been because she was so happy, for she laughed ever so hard right afterwards."

Elmer himself was deeply affected. He could picture that loving mother, possessed of the knowledge that the fires of genius burned in the soul of her child, and each night praying that in due time the opportunity might come for that to be developed into a glorious flame; and how overcome she might be on realizing that the one great wish of her whole life seemed about to be realized.

They talked on for quite a long while. Conrad with a child's natural curiosity asked many questions about the outside world, of which he had seen so little of recent years, since his father seemed to want to get away from all mankind. Elmer told him many things that excited his interest. Then finally he mentioned the fact that time was passing, and before a great while he would have to think of returning to his chums at the camp.

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"I'd like very much to meet your good mother before I go back, Conrad," he suggested, at which the lad seized his hand and began to lead him off.

"So you shall," he remarked, briskly, "and I know she's waiting for me to fetch you over, because she told me to be sure and do so. You'll like my mother, Elmer, I know you will."

Elmer could understand why a mother should be anxious to meet one who had made such a vast promise to her boy, and which might mean so much in shaping his destiny.

"She wants to size me up," he told himself, with a satisfied smile, as he walked along at the side of the chattering boy; "she wants to see if I look like a vain boaster, or one she could trust. Well, I hope I don't disappoint her, that's all."

Any one who knew Elmer Chenowith well could have assured that anxious mother she could place the most implicit trust in a boy built after his type; his word was as good as his bond any day in his home town; and that is where they know a boy best of all.

Pretty soon they sighted a cabin through the trees. Smoke was coming from the chimney, made of slabs, and hard mud that had gained the consistency of cement by the drying process. Elmer smiled when he saw that it was of the same blue consistency as the thin column that had caught his attention on the preceding morning, and caused him to stroll that way later on. Yes, and he could catch the incense of burning hickory, than which there cannot be anything more delicious in the nostrils of a real fire-worshipper such as Elmer.

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Their coming must have been noticed, for quickly a form appeared in the open doorway. It was that of a small woman, evidently Conrad's mother, for the boy quickly waved his violin toward her, and called out joyously:

"Here he is, mother; I've brought Elmer home with me to meet you, just as I promised I would!"

She greeted the scout warmly, and asked him inside where it was cool, out of the sun. Elmer felt rather than saw her eyes fixed eagerly on his face. Apparently Conrad's mother must have been more than satisfied with what she saw there, for she looked very contented, and even happy.

They were soon chatting as though the best of friends. Elmer told her about his home, and how he felt positive there were several well-to-do people in the town, lovers of good music, who would, if only they could hear Conrad play, be delighted to make up a generous purse and see that the grandson of so famous a man as Ovid Anderson was placed under the proper teacher in New York.

He also told about the father of one of his comrades having sent a girl abroad to have her voice cultivated, and how after she came to sing in opera, and turned out to be a great star, she had insisted on returning every cent he had expended on her, so that he might pass it along to some

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other poor girl or boy who had the gift of music, without the opportunity to accomplish results through lack of means.

Elmer was too wise to mention that name of Snodgrass when telling this; he feared that it might be too much like flaunting a red flag before a bull; for if Mrs. Shock shared Jem's antipathy for the Snodgrass clan, she would likely decline to let Conrad profit by such generosity.

It was plain to be seen that what he said interested her greatly. She told him more or less of her hopes and fears concerning the prodigy over whose future such clouds of uncertainty hung. Elmer sympathized with her, too, and quite won her heart by his manner; but then that was not an unusual thing with the scout leader, who by Nature had been gifted with a winning way that gained him hosts of loyal friends.

A little to the boy's surprise, too, she even ventured to speak of herself. Naturally she must have guessed that his curiosity would be aroused on finding the daughter of a famous man mated with one whom people deigned to look down on, and even shun, though, for that matter, Jem Shock wanted none of their society.

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"They do not know him as Conrad and I do," she went on, hastily, after introducing the subject of her own accord. "I first met him away up in the mountains. After my father died, and the property was taken from me through an error in his will, I taught school for some years to gain a living. Then, one fall when I was in the Adirondacks, it chanced that a dreadful forest fire swept down from every side. I was caught in the midst of it, and I had given up all hope of surviving; when *he* came and took me up in his arms. Somehow I seemed to feel that all would be well. Oh! how strong he was, and how he braved every sort of peril in order to carry me safely through. It was then and there that my heart went out to him. And afterwards we were married. He has always been the same to me, tender and kind; though latterly his life has been soured through the treachery of one whom he trusted."

She stopped there, sighed, and looked sad. Elmer would have liked very much to know how they came to be there near Raccoon Bluff, which, by a strange twist of Fate, had recently come into the possession of the very man against whom Jem Shock believed he had such a grievance. It was too delicate a subject, however, for him to attempt to handle; she must tell him, if at all, through her own volition, Elmer concluded.

But somehow it did him good to hear such fine things said of the rough Jem; for it coincided with his belief that one cannot always tell from the exterior what may be within the shell. If only now Rufus could discover that it had all been a grievous mistake, and that his father would give anything to make amends for the unfortunate past, how delightful things would be.

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So Elmer, as he continued to talk with the little lady—for she was that in every sense, although her dress may have been of the cheapest material, and there was a painful lack of many comforts in her modest cabin home—came to know her as well as if he had met her long before. Glimpses of her life, her hopes and fears were constantly passing before his mental observation; and he was more than glad now that he had taken that notion to walk in the direction of the blue smoke wreaths eddying upward in the lazy morning air several miles distant.

Conrad had put his beloved violin carefully away. It could be seen that his whole heart was tied up in that precious instrument. Elmer, remembering the dispute he had had with unbelieving George, asked about the violin, and whether it was really the former possession of the lad's famous grandfather.

"Yes, that is true," she told him, sighing again. "He used it all of his last years of playing. It shared some of his most wonderful triumphs, and he loved it as the apple of his eye. It is a genuine Stradivarius instrument. I could have sold it for thousands of dollars, since it had once been his means of fascinating untold myriads of music lovers; but that would have killed me. It is all I have left to remember him by; and besides, something told me when Conrad came that he was destined to inherit the talent."

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Just then Elmer saw the boy spring down from his seat close beside his mother. At the same time he heard the sound of a heavy footfall, and guessed what that meant. Jem Shock was coming home. How would he greet one of the boys from the camp where that son of the man he had such cause for hating held forth? Elmer stood up. If he felt the least tremor in the region of his heart, he certainly gave no sign of this, for his face was wreathed in one of his most genial smiles as he waited for the poacher to appear.

Then a form darkened the open doorway, and with a shout Conrad rushed forward, to be gathered up in the arms of Jem Shock, and held tight to his breast. And seeing this Elmer somehow could not doubt but that it was all bound to come out right in the end, no matter what clouds might drift across the sky meanwhile.

CHAPTER XI

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WHEN THE STORM BROKE

WHEN Jem Shock discovered that he and his wife and boy were not alone in the cabin his manner instantly changed. Elmer saw the heavy brow knit, as though in sudden suspicion. He remembered that this man distrusted all his fellows, and that he had even defied the majesty of the law with regard to shooting wild game out of season, as well as catching fish by methods called illegal.

His manner of life would make him scan with suspicious eyes any stranger who came to his isolated cabin home, and who might just as well as not be some clever game warden, bent on securing evidence that would convict him.

"This is Elmer, and he is the good friend who promised to see that I got a chance to play my violin the proper way," said Conrad, with a dignity that would well have become a grown man.

As he spoke, he took the young scout-master by the hand and led him a pace or two forward. Elmer tried to be most cordial. He wanted to win the good will of this man, for many reasons. First, there was Conrad, and his possible brilliant future, if his amazing genius could be placed under the fostering care of a master. Then there was Elmer's belief that Jem had been badly treated by the whims of Fortune, and possibly the greed of some man; he needed a friend if ever any one did.

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So Elmer held out his hand as he advanced. He also smiled warmly, as if to chase away that look of distrust he could see gathering on Jem's strong face.

"We have met before, Jem, on the road, while our party was on the way up here," he went on to say in as cordial a tone as he could muster. "You remember I said then I hoped to see something more of you, and invited you to stop in and have a cup of coffee with us, in case you happened to be passing our camp. And now that I have made the acquaintance of Conrad and your good wife, I hope we can be friends, Jem."

The man still continued to frown. Under his heavy eyebrows he was looking keenly at the speaker. Elmer's manner was surely enough to disarm suspicion; and doubtless he would have quite won the man over then and there only for one thing. This was the presence of a boy in the party bearing that unfortunate name of Snodgrass; and which seemed to represent everything that was evil, in the estimation of the poacher.

So Jem did not make the first move to take the extended hand. If he had suspected the other to be ready to suddenly snap a pair of handcuffs on his wrists, he could not have held more aloof.

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"I'm not making friends with anybody these days," he managed to mutter, "leastways when they are so thick with the son of the man who sold me out and left me high and dry on the bank."

"But the rest of us never heard of you before, Jem; and even Rufus says it must be some terrible mistake, because his father would never do such a mean trick, even if he is a real-estate operator. But, Jem, I want to be friends with you just because of Conrad here. It would be a burning shame if he didn't get his chance to prove that his grandfather's talent is running in his blood. I am sure that I'll be able to interest some really good people, all of them lovers of the best music, in Conrad; and that arrangements can be made to put him under the charge of a leading teacher, who will see that he has a chance to thrill the world, when he grows older."

The man's face lighted up for just a brief interval. Perhaps he had dreamed of some day seeing Conrad the centre of a madly applauding throng of well-dressed people, who would be ready to crown the lad as the greatest genius of the decade. Then the old doubts returned again, and he scowled darkly.

"We may be poor," he said bitterly, "which isn't my fault, but my misfortune; yet we're not paupers; and even to see my boy snatch the prize he deserves I wouldn't beg money from any living man or woman. I'll die before I accept *charity*. If I had my just dues there would be plenty of money to fix Conrad out; as it is he must wait, and take his chance."

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"But, Jem, this wouldn't be charity," Elmer insisted, earnestly. "It could be done on strictly business principles, a bargain being made in black and white, so that a record of the expense might be kept; and after Conrad began to earn big money, he could gradually return the loan to those kind friends who had been so deeply interested in his fortunes. Don't shut him out from his only chance, Jem, just because one man may have injured you. There are other kinds of people in this world, kind-hearted people who are always looking for an opportunity to help struggling genius. Oh! please don't decide in a hurry. Think it over, talk it over with your wife here before you turn the offer down; because it is given in good faith, Jem."

Mrs. Shock listened, and her eyes grew moist. She apparently did not think it wise to interfere while a stranger was present, but Elmer believed her influence was bound to be thrown in favor of the proposition. Therefore he did not quite despair, though the poacher continued to shake his head, and keep his teeth firmly clenched, after the manner of a stubborn man who has made up his mind, and against whom all power cannot prevail.

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You see, Elmer, young though he may have been, was somewhat of a philosopher. He knew that gentle influence may sometimes accomplish much more than the most sturdy strength. He had never forgotten the moral of that old story about the traveler who was trudging along a country road, when the two rival elements, the Sun and the Wind, entered into a heated argument as to which might be the more powerful, and determined to test their assertions upon the devoted head of the pilgrim. So the wind blew harder and harder, but only had the effect of

making the traveler draw his cloak tighter about him. Then the sun has his turn, and began to warm up to his task, until the almost baked man was glad to throw off his cloak, which result gave the victory to the heavenly orb.

And so perhaps the gentle but persuasive influence of Conrad's mother might in the end prevail against the wild gusts of the man's anger. Elmer at least would continue to hug that hope to his heart.

He saw that his continued presence would do no further good. It were perhaps better that he took himself off, and allowed the seed he had sown to germinate. Time can often work wonders, and the look Mrs. Shock gave him somehow further aroused his confidence that all might yet be well.

So he said he would be going, and the last he saw of them Conrad was waving his hand in farewell, while his mother nodded her head significantly. As for Jem, he continued to stand there looking glum, as though a riot of thoughts might be holding high carnival in his brain, the old suspicion and hatred for mankind engaged in a desperate conflict with newly awakened hopes. [127]

Elmer made his way back to camp, and arrived long before noon came, so that he had plenty of time to rest and think over the situation. He wondered whether he had succeeded in making any progress by his morning's expedition. He had met Jem, for one thing, and told him how much he was interested in Conrad's playing. Yes, Elmer concluded that the game he meant to play had been advanced more or less since the coming of another day.

The surveyors came trooping into camp along about noon, heated and tired. Rufus was apparently getting quite enough of that hard work, for the time being. Besides, he admitted that he had gone sufficiently far by then to make sure that the previous survey had been a failure, and that the job would have to be done over again in order to get the right lines.

Elmer was not sorry to hear him say that, and for several reasons. First of all, he wanted the tenderfeet to have further opportunities for picking up more or less useful knowledge of woodcraft, while in camp; and this could not be done if most of their time was spent in using those instruments, and worrying about backing new lines through the thickets and swamps that beset their course. [128]

Then again Elmer did not like the looks of the weather. It was beginning to act suspiciously, as though a big storm might be brewing. The sun still shone up there in the sky, and both Rufus and Alec only thought it insufferably hot; but to one more experienced in such things, there was a deeper meaning in the heavy atmosphere, the strange silence on the part of birds and smaller animals, and the peculiar bank of clouds that lay low along the distant southwestern horizon.

Lil Artha sensed danger, too, for he spoke of it as they were eating lunch.

"Perhaps, Elmer," was the way he put it, "we'd be sensible if we took an extra reef or two in our sail this afternoon, while we have the chance. An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure, I always did believe; and scouts are taught that it's wise in time of peace to prepare for war."

"Hey! what's all this talk mean?" demanded the bewildered Rufus. "To hear you, Lil Artha, a fellow would think we had something terrible hanging over our heads. It must be you're prognosticating a *storm*, but I don't see what makes you think that, when the sun never shone brighter. Do the birds carry the secret, and have you fellows found a way to understand their lingo?"

"Well, in a way that's correct, too, Rufus," chuckled the lanky scout. "When you get on familiar terms with everything that lives in the woods, you can tell a heap. It does seem that insects, birds and animals are given instinct in place of reasoning powers. So the squirrel knows when it promises to be a severe winter, and he lays in an extra big store of nuts. And in the same way something warns these little creatures when a storm is coming, although human beings see no sign. Well, from the change that's taken place all around us we scouts can give a good guess that these same birds and insects are making ready for trouble; and it's bound to come from that quarter yonder, where you can see a bank of dark clouds hugging the horizon." [129]

"But, Lil Artha," protested Alec, strenuously, "I noticed yon bank o' clouds mair nor two hours back, and I gie ye my word it hasn't moved a wee bit in a' that time."

"Oh! that's often the way a storm comes along," the other assured him, in a positive fashion, as though he had no doubt concerning the accuracy of his prediction. "Clouds will lie low for half a day, and then suddenly with a shift of the wind spread out over the whole heavens like magic. I promise you that before two hours have gone by you'll be stopping your ears with your fingers so's to shut out the crash of thunder."

Of course, as both Elmer and George seemed to agree with what Lil Artha said—and it was really wonderful to have "Doubting George" let an opportunity to object pass him by, the greenhorns had to believe what they heard. [130]

When lunch had been disposed of, Elmer gave orders that set the whole five working to improve the security of the camp. Extra pegs were driven deep down so as to hold the tent more firmly; and some bits of strong rope were also brought into play with this same end in view.

Rufus could not restrain his amusement, and finally burst out with:

"Well, from the way you're carrying on, fellows, it must be you expect a regular old hurricane to break loose in this region. I guess it would take a whole lot of wind to tear that tent loose from its moorings now. Besides, we're sheltered somewhat by those trees over yonder."

"Wait and see, that's all," warned Lil Artha, not one whit abashed. "You've never been caught in a big storm, and so you can't know how the wind tears at a tent as if it had a special spite against the canvas. I've seen more'n one tent carried away like a big balloon, and lodged far up in a tree. This is only following out the scout rule of preparedness. It's better to err on the side of safety, Rufus; just remember that as you pass along the road. It's no sign of timidity to get ready for trouble; the wisest of business men always insure their property, and when the storm comes they weather it, where the more reckless go to the wall."

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"That's sound logic, Lil Artha," commented Elmer, smiling to hear the other give such splendid advice; for, as a rule, the lengthy scout was a bit inclined toward that same recklessness himself.

In many other ways did they prepare for the coming storm, particularly in seeing that a small stock of wood was placed so that it might be kept dry; since they might be glad of a fire later on. Their stock of provisions, too, had to be provided for; and Rufus also covered the old car with a tarpaulin which he had fetched along for that purpose.

During the last half hour of work even the most skeptical found himself forced to admit that there was no longer any doubt about the approach of bad weather. As the dark bank of clouds advanced up the heavens the birds again made their appearance, and flew wildly about, uttering warning cries that impressed Rufus visibly.

Then they began to hear distant muttering of heavy thunder that was soon causing a distinctly felt vibration of the earth under their feet. The wind had entirely ceased, and there seemed to be an ominous calm upon Nature. Rufus and Alec had an apprehensive expression on their faces as they waited for further developments.

"Don't you think it might be safer over among the trees than here, Elmer?" asked Rufus at one time, after the thunder had temporarily died away.

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"Not on your life!" burst out Lil Artha, taking it on himself to answer. "If the gale gets half as severe as I expect, you'll hear trees crashing down like toothpicks. It'd be all your life was worth to be caught in the woods then. An experienced hand might manage to escape, but often the best of them get caught under a falling tree and killed outright. That's one reason why we built our camp away from all trees but this dwarf one that isn't apt to go down, and serves as a sort of wind-break, you see. But listen, everybody!"

A distant but terrifying sound stole to their ears. The lack of a movement in the atmosphere had prevented them from catching it sooner.

"Is that the storm coming?" asked Rufus, trying to keep his voice steady, though there was a distinct quaver to it, despite his efforts.

"Yes, that's the wind, and back of it is the first burst of rain," advised Elmer. "It will be on us in a jiffy now, so we'd better get inside, and lace the opening up. We faced the tent to the north purposely, you see, because we knew that any storm at this time of year was likely to jump out of the southwest."

Hardly had they made the flap secure when the gale broke upon them.

CHAPTER XII

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SCOTCH BLOOD

AMONG other things, Lil Artha had seen to it that a pot of coffee was made ready just before he scattered the fire, and put out the last ember. This would keep warm for a long time, and they could manage to make out a supper with some of the things that would not need cooking.

With a rush and a roar the storm burst upon them. Wildly did the stout tent sway as the wind broke against it. Rufus understood speedily enough why the scout comrades who had had experience went to so much extra pains to fasten it so securely. There were lots of times when, despite all the precautions, he feared the canvas could never hold out against that terrible wind that made playthings of forest monarchs, and seemed capable of sweeping everything from its path.

Never, so long as they lived, would the two tenderfoot scouts forget that night; it would always be marked with a white stone in their minds, such were the tortures they endured. Often Rufus would half squirm to his knees, his face turned pale with apprehension, as he clutched the sleeve of Elmer or Lil Artha's coat, in deadly fear that the worst was about to happen.

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The rain descended in torrents, and the lightning flashed in a way to fairly cause them to shut

their blinded eyes; while terrific bursts of thunder rocked the ground and made them think a salvo from the heaviest guns known to modern warfare was being fired.

So the time dragged wearily along, hour after hour. No one dreamed of trying to snatch a wink of sleep while this din was going on. They sat there, glad to know that, thanks to the admirable way in which the heavy canvas had been waterproofed, and the addition of a fly over the tent, they were able to keep the rain out. Of course a small amount did seep under certain portions of the tent, despite all their precautions, and the drain that had been dug above to carry the flood off; but they were able to keep pretty dry, all things considered.

With the storm came a cool air that chilled them to the bone. They had a couple of lanterns, one of which was kept lighted all the time, and this enabled them to see what was going on. Lil Artha set a good example, after night came on, by wrapping his warm blanket about his shoulders, as he sat there Indian fashion. Rufus was indeed glad to copy this example, and found it well worth while for the additional comfort he secured thereby; and in the end all of them did the same thing. [135]

Every now and then they heard awe-inspiring sounds that Lil Artha told the tenderfeet were produced by falling trees. Each crash gave Rufus cause for a fresh shiver; he could not help thinking of what he had proposed concerning their being likely to find more safety if they took up their station under the forest growth. He was glad now in every atom of his being that those more experienced scouts had frowned down upon such a silly proposition.

Along about midnight, however, Elmer discovered positive signs that the worst was over. His announcement brought a feeling of relief to Rufus and Alec; indeed, even Lil Artha was heard to give expression to his gratitude. George, however, grumbled, as was his habit of old.

"Tough luck, that's what I call it, fellows," he went on, as though wholly disgusted with the freaks of the weather. "Why couldn't this old storm have held off till we got back home again? What business did it have coming down on us right in the midst of our camping? Why, we haven't begun to enjoy ourselves much yet; it's been all work so far; and now everything's going to be soaking wet, the mud'll bother us, and like as not a second rain'll follow the first. Things pretty nearly always do happen in threes, you notice."

"Oh! well, we're all alive, George, for one thing," Lil Artha told the grumbler. "And we've still got heaps and heaps of good stuff to eat along. Things might have been a whole lot worse than this, let me tell you." [136]

"Huh! I can't just see that," continued the other, though in a fainter tone, as if really half ashamed of his complaining manner; which had become second nature with George, so that he often spoke in that way without thinking how badly it sounded.

"If only this terrible storm will stop, all would be forgiven," said Rufus. "We may get a few winks of sleep yet before dawn comes. And I guess the ground will dry up pretty well by noon. Besides, I'm done creeping through the woods and among the thickets, trying to follow those slashes made by the fake surveyors. We can lie around camp here, until it's fit to go abroad."

"Spoken like a true scout, Rufus," Elmer told him, encouragingly. "That's what a fellow ought to learn the first thing after he dons the khaki—that things are never so bad but what they might be worse. George here never did learn his lesson in the right way, more's the pity. If you keep on, Rufus, you'll be a better specimen of a true scout than George is today, with all his experience."

George did not say anything, but Elmer hoped the seed might have fallen on fallow ground, so that it would take root and grow; for there were times when, like most of the other fellows in the Hickory Ridge Troop, he did get mightily tired of hearing the remarks of a natural-born "croaker," as Lil Artha called the other. [137]

But Elmer was right when he said the backbone of the storm had been broken. Inside of another half hour even Rufus was fain to admit that the thunder had lost considerable of its fierceness, while even the flashes of lightning came less frequently, nor were they so vivid as before.

"The rain has stopped, fellows!" announced Lil Artha, as he sidled along over to one side of the tent, and cautiously began to undo the securely fastened flap; after which he thrust his head out so as to take an observation.

When he drew back again the others eagerly awaited his report.

"Why, the clouds are breaking, and I even saw a star right overhead," announced the tall member of the little party, enthusiastically; "which proves that the end of the concert is close by. That last thunder-clap was some distance away. Guess we may be getting a little snooze inside of another half hour. For one I'm going to hunt out a dry place and make ready."

There was considerable of a scurry on the part of everybody, with this end in view. Rufus was heard to wish most ardently that he had still another blanket to huddle under, for that night air, after the violent battle of the elements, seemed to be very chilly and piercing, since they could not enjoy the luxury of a fire. [138]

Nevertheless, in spite of all this, when another hour had crept along all of the boys were sound asleep. No longer did the harsh voice of the thunder disturb them; and the fitful glow of lightning

came from far off. The lantern had been extinguished, for they might need what small allowance of kerosene they had fetched along with them; and therefore darkness reigned within the sheltering tent.

They had some hours of sleep before morning found them stirring. There was more or less disinclination to be the first out, but Lil Artha proved to be the martyr and presently the crackle of a fire tempted Rufus and Alec forth; while even that sly old fox, George, opened one eye, and began to sniff the air, as though he fancied he had gotten the first whiff of sweet bacon frying in the pan.

Elmer had been close upon the heels of Lil Artha, of course, and between the two of them some of the ravages of the storm in the camp had been repaired long before the rest put in an appearance.

A warm and bountiful breakfast seemed to put new animation in them all. Even that born grumbler, George, admitted the sun did shine "fairly well," and that coffee, bacon and flapjacks with syrup, all served lavishly as regarded quantity, made life worth living again.

"I don't believe I was ever so hungry as this morning," Rufus candidly declared, as he gulped down his third cup of coffee, and eyed the last flapjack as if tempted to gorge himself, though already as full as prudence dictated. [139]

"That's because so far in life you've lived on Easy Street," Lil Artha told him, "and never have known what it meant to miss a single meal. Some of us have gone a day without a bite, and we know how it goes on an empty stomach. I warrant you right now some woods animals are feeling that way too, because they couldn't get around last night as usual."

It was strange that this casual remark on the part of Lil Artha should be fully confirmed before a great while had passed, and in a most convincing fashion.

Alec chanced to be the one fated to bring the thing about. None of them meant to wander away from camp until noon had come, and the warm sun had had a chance to dry things out; but being a little restless, and, moreover, inspired with a desire to ascertain if any of those ill-fated trees had fallen close to the camp, he picked up a heavy walking stick and stepped out.

"Be sure you don't go farther than you can hear Lil Artha chopping with the ax," cautioned Elmer, seeing him about to take a stroll; "and if you fail to catch any sound, or need help, just give a whoop. We'll answer right away."

"Hoot, mon," said the Scotch lad, a bit sarcastically, "d'ye ken I've cut me eye-teeth the while as a scout? I'm observing all about me, and I find it mair interesting than I ever believed could be possible. I'm o'er glad now I made up my mind to join the troop. Now I'll gang awa' and be verra careful. And if some fearsome beastie jumps up in front o' me ye'll hear me shout at the tap o' my voice." [140]

He went away, still laughing, as though he thought it a good joke. Lil Artha continued to ply his ax industriously, meaning to lay by a good store of firewood while at the job; though Elmer warned him that task should really fall to the greenhorns, since neither of them seemed to be much of a cook, and it was only fair the various duties about the camp should be impartially shared alike by all the party.

Hardly had ten minutes passed when the four by the fire heard a shout. Elmer instantly answered it, thinking, of course, that as Lil Artha had dropped his ax Alec wanted some sound to serve as a guide to locating the camp. To the astonishment, and also consternation of the others, they heard the Scotch lad calling:

"Here's a hungry cat facing me, and growling like everything. Aye, but he's wild to get at me, and I don't know just what a braw scout should do under the circumstances. Shall I gi'e the gillie a rap o'er the head wi' me stick; or beat a retreat like a wise general? I'm no' so taken wi' his looks I confess that I'm wishin' to make his further acquaintance. Hey; ye would bite me, eh? Tak' that, then, and learn better manners!" [141]

Elmer snatched up another stick, while Lil Artha darted over to the tent and immediately reappeared bearing his trusty Marlin. They knew what it meant to be attacked by an angry bobcat, even if it was far in the morning, and these animals usually hide during the better part of the day, preferring the shades of night for their prowling.

Even as the pair started toward the spot, followed in turn by George and Rufus, as soon as the others could manage to find some sort of crude weapon, they heard a most terrific crashing going on. There were also short cries, now of pain and again of momentary triumph, to tell how Alec was progressing in his task of beating off the savage attack of the hungry wildcat.

There was no trouble in locating the spot where all this disturbance was taking place; the scuffling of Alec's feet, his jerky cries, and now and then a plainly heard snarl from the enraged cat led them as truly as the magnetic needle of the mariner's compass points out the North Star.

When they finally came in sight of the little woods drama they were thrilled to see how the brave Scotch lad managed to keep his four-footed enemy at bay by means of his clever strokes with his stick. Even as they looked he gave the beast a good blow upon the head that rolled it over; but instantly the cat was on its feet once more, and leaping at him. The performance was [142]

repeated, with the same result; but in case Alec failed in his stroke, he stood a good chance of having the animal land on his breast, when its claws and teeth would do terrible damage.

"Get the beast, Lil Artha!" cried Elmer, seeing that even their bursting on the scene did not appear to intimidate the enraged feline adversary that Alec was battling with.

He had hardly given the word than a report sounded. Lil Artha had once been quite a smart hunter, though of late his ambition to excel along those lines had waned. On this occasion his aim was particularly true, for the cat was seen to be writhing on the ground, as though fatally injured. Lil Artha immediately ran up and dispatched the dying beast with several blows from a stone; for although a hunter by instinct, Lil Artha could not be cruel and see anything needlessly suffer.

"I sure hated to have to do it the worst kind," he told Elmer, as he looked down at the now quiet beast, ferocious even in death, "because I reckon now she's got kits somewhere near by, which was what made her act so savage like. She smelled the food in camp, and was sneaking around in hopes of stealing something, when Alec, he chanced to run across her, and I guess waved his stick in a way she didn't just like. But I had to shoot her, and you thought the same, Elmer, you know." [143]

"Yes, it couldn't be helped," the scout-master told him, "and besides, a fellow need hardly ever be ashamed of making way with a wildcat, because they are mighty destructive to all game. Why, this one beast would, in the course of a year, devour more young partridges, quail, rabbits and squirrels than half a dozen human hunters. And besides, I was afraid she might get inside Alec's guard, though he did swing that stick of his in great fashion."

"A few scratches is all the beastie managed to gi'e me," admitted the still panting Alec, and then, as he looked down on his now quiet adversary, he shook his head, continuing: "faith I tauld ye to tak yersil' awa' and leave me alone, but ye knew best. I'm awfu' sorry ye had to be kilt, but it was no fault o' mine."

Elmer and Lil Artha exchanged satisfied glances. They both felt that for a tenderfoot, Alec had proven a credit to the troop, and this was encouraging. After all, this outing seemed bound to be the making of a couple of embryo scouts; it would bring out whatever good qualities they possessed, and show what sort of foundation there might be for their immediate future.

"Come back to camp with me right away, Alec," Elmer told the other, who was still curiously examining the dead cat, especially interested in its savage looking claws and the cruel teeth that were exposed in the snarl that death had set upon its face. "I want to take a look at those same little scratches you mention. They may appear harmless enough, but many a fine hunter has died from such simple things." [144]

Of course Alec was astounded. He stared hard at his hands, and shook his head in a skeptical way.

"I ha'e nae doot but that ye knaw best, Elmer," he finally said, "but would ye tell me the noo how such a wee bit o' scratches could mean so much?"

"Blood poisoning is apt to set in," explained the other, readily enough, as he locked arms with the Scotch lad and hurried him off toward the camp. "You see, carnivorous animals that live upon the flesh of their prey are apt to have their claws contaminated. Even a slight abrasion caused by those claws is impregnated with just so much danger. Nothing might come of it; but scouts believe in taking as little chances as possible. I've got a phial of permanganate of potash along for just such purposes, and we'll daub some of it on. You'll resemble a wild Indian with the splotches, for it stains a deep purple, but safety first before looks."

Indeed, Alec did look rather odd after his several slight injuries had been duly attended to, for Elmer did not spare the "painting."

"I wish me mither could see me the noo," chuckled the Scotch boy, after he had surveyed his mottled appearance in a tiny hand mirror one of them had been thoughtful enough to fetch along. "Ye ken, she's often tauld me about the Highland chiefs in their war-paint in the gude auld days of lang syne. I warran ye she'd think her son and heir had copied after the McGregor, Rob Roy, ye remimber, our outlaw ancestor." [145]

Lil Artha was to fetch along the defunct wildcat, for it was designed to save the skin, and present it, when properly tanned, to Alec, who could use it in his den at home for a small mat. Every time he looked down at it he must be forcibly reminded of his stirring adventure, and it would serve to encourage him in his endeavor to become a first-class scout.

It was perhaps half an hour afterwards that Elmer heard voices, and looking toward the spot where Lil Artha had been working with the pelt of the bobcat, he was both surprised and thrilled to discover that the long-legged scout was talking with a small party in whom Elmer immediately recognized Conrad Shock!

CHAPTER XIII

A CALL FOR HELP

"WHAT'S this mean?" Elmer heard George saying, which proved that the other had also discovered Conrad's presence. "I reckon that must be your Boy Wonder with the fiddle and the bow, Elmer. Now, whatever brought him away over here to visit us, do you think? Perhaps his folks don't know that scouts are at home in the woods, no matter what sort of gay storm crops up. Mebbe now they were afraid some of us had suffered. Well, it was nice of them to send a messenger, anyhow."

But Elmer was disposed to view the matter differently. He could see that there was a look of considerable apprehension visible on the peaked face of Conrad. Elmer scented some kind of trouble at once. The boy had sought them out, possibly sent with a message by his mother.

Lil Artha had entirely suspended operations with the pelt which he had been engaged in fastening to a crude but effective stretching board, fashioned after the directions he had received from the old scientist and trapper some of the boys had visited a while before.^[B]

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Lil Artha loved good music, in which he differed from George. Hence he had felt considerable interest in all Elmer told them about Conrad being the direct descendant of the famous violinist, Ovid Anderson, of whom he had often heard. He was in truth quite eager himself to hear the child play, though ready to take Elmer's word for it that Conrad was the possessor of wonderful genius.

As Elmer hastened toward the spot Lil Artha looked around and discovered him.

"Hi! here's your young friend come to hunt you up, Elmer!" he called out. "He is just telling me that his mother sent him. I hope now there's nothing gone wrong over at their place. If we can do anything, of course we'd be only too willing."

The boy shot him a look of gratitude at hearing Lil Artha say this. Then he turned eagerly toward Elmer.

"Mother sent me over to see you," he went on to say in a voice that quivered a little despite his manly effort to control his feelings.

"I hope she isn't sick, Conrad?" ventured the scout-master, anxiously.

"No, it's father," the boy said after he had gulped several times. "You see, he hasn't come home; and we're so afraid something dreadful has happened to him."

Elmer looked doubly concerned.

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"Do you mean he was away from home during that awful storm last night?" he went on to ask.

The other nodded his head, and then managed to explain further. Even the proximity of Elmer seemed to have already done him much good; for there was a certain atmosphere connected with the resolute scout-leader that inspired the utmost confidence.

"He started to go to the lake that is farthest away, for there are two small ones, you may not know," Conrad explained. "He had some set lines there that needed attention, and we wanted the fish for eating, too. But father backed out once, for he said he had wrenched his leg and felt a little lame. But in the end he decided to start, though mother didn't just like him to go."

"About what time was that, Conrad?" asked Elmer, in his methodical way, eager to grasp the full details so he could figure out the answer.

"Just about an hour before the storm came along," the boy told him. "Father said he believed it would hold off long enough for him to get there and back, but his leg must have kept him from walking as fast as he generally does. So the storm broke, and we kept watching through the window when we could see anything, for the rain and the flying leaves. But night came, and oh! what a night we had, mother and I. It never seemed to end. I did fall asleep somehow, but I don't believe she once shut her eyes—poor mother."

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Elmer was fearful of the worst. A sturdy man like Jem Shock, accustomed to buffeting the rough storms to be met with in the woods of a summer, was not likely to stay away from those he loved unless something terrible had happened to him. Elmer shivered as he remembered those dreadful crashes in the depth of the forest, each signaling the collapse of some mighty tree that had breasted the gales of a century, perhaps, only to meet its fate in the end.

"And then your mother thought we might help find your father, did she?" asked the sympathetic Lil Artha; while the others crowded around, listening with white faces to the conversation; for even the two tenderfeet could realize how serious the conditions must prove to be.

"Yes, that is why I am here," said the manly little fellow, whose correct manner of speech astonished Lil Artha, himself apt to be more or less "slangy," and even ungrammatical, in his careless boyish way. "She knew of no one else close by to turn to; and Elmer was so kind, she said. Oh! please come with me, and help find father. We are afraid that he was caught under one of the falling trees; or he may have tripped in the darkness, with that lame leg giving way under him, and fallen into some terrible hole."

Elmer's mind was of course made up on the instant. Indeed, such an appeal never came to a scout camp without being immediately accepted; for every fellow who so proudly wears the khaki has it implanted in his heart that he must eagerly grasp such golden opportunities to prove his

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worth, and be of assistance to those who are in distress.

Elmer knew, too, that he could depend on his comrades to back him up. Lil Artha, of course, must go along, for the tall scout's excellence as a tracker was well known, and this might come in very handy before their end was accomplished.

Then it would be of more or less benefit to the tenderfeet to have a share in his rescue work; Elmer hailed the opportunity to increase their fund of woodcraft knowledge with eagerness. They could pick up more valuable points through practical experience than by means of any books or technical advice.

As for George, he must stay by the camp. Elmer remembered just then that George had been limping, more or less, and complained of having stubbed his toe since breakfast. Then it would be best for him not to walk so far, or he might be lamed for the balance of their stay in camp.

The scout-master quickly explained his plan of campaign. George, of course, frowned at first, and took on the look of a martyr; but then that was his customary way, and Elmer paid very little attention to it except to say that "a stitch in time saves nine"; and that George might thank his lucky stars he did not *have* to go along, but could rest himself, and let that injured foot have a chance to get well again. [151]

Conrad was wild for them to get started, and so Elmer lost as little time as possible. Before he went, however, he made sure to carry along with him several things he thought might be needed in case they found Jem with a broken leg—he only hoped it would be no worse than that, for many a man had had his back broken by the fall of a tree.

"Lil Artha, be sure not to forget the camp ax," he called out.

Of course that excited the curiosity of the two greenhorns, and seeing the look of bewilderment which they exchanged, Elmer took occasion to explain just a little.

"If Jem has been badly hurt in any way, and lies several miles away from home," Elmer told them, "we would want to make some sort of stretcher so as to carry him back to his cabin. A hatchet or an ax is indispensable under such conditions; and you may have a chance to see just how it's done."

George saw them go away with a wry face, for he did not like to be cheated out of any pleasure; still, when he stepped around and found how his foot hurt if he made any unusual exertion, he must have realized on second thoughts that Elmer knew best. [152]

Elmer had an idea at first of getting Conrad to head toward home, when they were well upon the trail leading toward the lake, and which the boy had said he could show them. Upon suggesting such a thing, however, he immediately met with a prompt refusal.

"No, mother told me to take you to the second lake, and I shall," Conrad said firmly. "Oh! I can stand much more than you would believe; I am stronger than I look. And I have been over the trail with father, many times. What does a few miles matter when father may be lying there, and suffering terribly? Besides, mother depends on me to take you there. What if you went alone and could not find it, for, you see, it is hidden in the woods, and not at all easy to see if you haven't been over the trail before. He might lie there for hours if that happened. So I must go."

Of course that settled it. Elmer could not have the heart to deny the lad the privilege he demanded. Besides, he knew that on the whole it would be much better for them to have some one along who was acquainted with the lay of the land. They might go astray, experienced though two of them were in the secrets of woodcraft; for confusing trails might deceive them, especially after the storm had washed away Jem's late footprints.

And so they hurried along. Little Conrad walked as though eager to even run; and more than once Elmer had to restrain the anxious lad. He saw that Conrad was worked up to a feverish pitch that was not good for him; and accordingly Elmer made it his business to try and reassure the little fellow. [153]

"Depend on it we'll find your father, Conrad," he went on to say in that steady tone of his that carried weight, and could soothe even the most troubled breast like "balm of Gilead," as Lil Artha slyly told Rufus, trotting along at his side. "And the chances are a broken leg will be the extent of his injuries. Why, he may not even be so badly off as that, you know. Perhaps he was called on to help some other unfortunate family in that storm, and has been held up on that account."

But Conrad sadly shook his wise little head. He knew Elmer only meant to encourage him; and that even he could have little hope such a strange thing had happened.

"Oh! I'd like to believe that, Elmer," he said, with half a sob, "but there is no other family near enough for such a thing to happen. But I'm still hoping for the best. Mother told me to keep thinking that way. She will not believe he could be taken away from us while we need him so much. Yes, we must find him, poor, poor father!"

All this while they were heading in a certain direction that Elmer knew would, in due time, unless they changed their course, take them to the cabin in the clearing, where he had met Conrad's father and mother. [154]

Just as he expected, however, eventually the boy brought them to a halt.

"See," he called out, as he pointed ahead, "there is where the trail lies. One way is home, the other the first lake, with the second one farther away. Now we must keep right on, and listen as we go. I shall call out, too, ever so often, for if he hears my voice and can answer he will let us know where he lies."

As they started to follow what was a plain trail, every one had his senses on the alert, expecting to make some sort of discovery sooner or later. Rufus and the other tenderfoot scout were very much excited. It was their first experience on missionary work, and it gripped their hearts with an intensity they may never have felt before.

FOOTNOTE:

[B] See "The Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts Storm-Bound."

CHAPTER XIV

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SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE

EVERY step they took now was carrying them on toward the twin lakes that nestled amidst the woods and valleys, their presence really unsuspected by the vast majority of people living in towns within thirty miles of the place. Elmer himself was wild to try the fishing there, for he fancied that the bass must be enormous fellows, and as gamey as could be found anywhere. Lil Artha, too, would be sure to want to make more than one trip across country, and spend a few hours casting in the almost virgin waters in the solitudes where sportsmen had possibly seldom invaded.

Conrad kept up amazingly, but then it was love that gave him additional strength, and Elmer knew full well what that could do for any one. Many times they heard some slight sound that gave them a start, for their nerves being on edge they imagined every such noise to be a feeble cry for help. The snappy bark of a red squirrel as he clung head downward to the lower trunk of a tree, and watched the intruders of his sacred realm; the sudden cawing of a startled crow; the rasping cry of a bluejay; or it might be the distant screech of an eagle poised above some fish-hawk that had darted down and secured its dinner which the bald-headed robber of the air would snatch away from him presently, after a swift pursuit upwards—all these they heard, and many times did one of the greenhorns ask to be told what it meant.

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Still nothing was seen or heard to indicate that Jem Shock had been overtaken by a falling tree while on his way from the first lake. They did come across several such overthrown monarchs of the forest that had fallen close to the trail; and once the way was really blocked by a mass of broken limbs, together with the heavy trunk of a tree that had come crashing down.

Conrad darted hastily forward before Elmer could interfere, and was looking, oh, so eagerly, and with such an expression of anxiety, for any sign to indicate that the dear one he sought might be lying under the wreckage.

"Father, father!" he called out, with such a plaintive ring to his voice that Rufus felt something rising in his throat; while Alec McGregor might have been seen to turn his head aside, and then violently blow his nose, as though he had taken cold.

But there was no response. Elmer and Lil Artha went all around the fallen tree, and even crawled underneath the same to make positive that Jem was not there. Finally even Conrad became assured as to this, for he expressed an eagerness to once more go on.

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So they proceeded. From the lay of the land, and other signs that his quick eye caught, Elmer guessed that they could not be far away from the first lake. Perhaps he was guided somewhat in making this decision by the sight of that fish-hawk or osprey, which he knew would be apt to hover over a body of water, since it must obtain its whole sustenance from the lakes.

"What's that glistening in the sunlight yonder, Elmer?" suddenly asked Alec, who, it seemed, possessed a pair of incredibly keen eyes.

Lil Artha laughed.

"That's one on us, Elmer," he remarked, "when a tenderfoot is the first to discover the presence of water. I reckon now, Alec, you've got the making of a pretty good scout in you, if you stick at it; and they do say the Scotch are the most persevering chaps going. That's the lake, the first one Conrad told us about, I should say."

"Yes, that's the first one," hurriedly admitted the boy, "and we'll soon reach its border. You will say that it's a lovely little sheet of water, too. Father told me he had never set eyes on one that struck him as more beautiful. And I love to sit and look out over it when the wind dimples the surface, or it is so quiet that you can see a picture all along the shore, with the trees reflected in the water like a big looking-glass."

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"Then we'll have to call it Mirror Lake," said Lil Artha, struck by the wonderful poetic way in which the small boy described things, which may in part have come to him through his mother.

"Yes, that is what my mother calls it," Conrad instantly told him; "for once she crossed over with me to see the water. We shall be there very soon now, in less than ten minutes I think."

Nothing further occurred to startle them during the balance of the time that was consumed in covering the ground separating them from the shore of the lake. When Elmer and his three comrades found themselves staring out upon that wonderfully clear and altogether charming body of water, they felt that words must fail to describe it and do justice. Elmer had looked upon a good many pretty lakes, both large and small, but never one the equal of this.

As for Lil Artha, he knew now what would be occupying considerable of his spare time during the balance of their stay in camp. Why, even as he looked he could see big bass "break" here and there, as though they might be feeding on flies, late though the season was. All the sporting blood Lil Artha possessed was on fire at the sight. He had resolved to give up much of his love for hunting, because of the change that had taken place of late in his ideas concerning the cruelty of such sport; but nothing would ever cause him to lose that eager desire to match his wits and a slender line with a fly attached to the leader against the strength and cunning of a bronze-backed black bass, and see which could win in the struggle for supremacy.

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"Oh! listen, please!" exclaimed the boy, anxiously, his very soul in his voice.

"That was only a kingfisher calling," said Lil Artha, who knew all about such things; "see, there he flits across that little bayou, and perches on the limb that overhangs the water. He's after his dinner, I guess, and was calling to his mate. But lead the way, Conrad, and we'll keep along after you."

They began to follow the uneven indentations of the shore. Elmer knew that this must be the favorite course taken by the fish poacher when going to see what his set lines held. A plain trail it was, and even Rufus or Alec might have followed it most of the way; though at times they would have hard work to pick it out, since the heavy rain had washed things pretty badly.

But Conrad knew where he was going, and just at which point they were to turn their backs on Mirror Lake, heading for its mate near by.

"We'll like as not run across the intake or outlet of this water," Lil Artha told the two new scouts, "because, of course, the lakes are connected by a little stream. And sure enough, there it is right now."

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Both tenderfeet were visibly impressed with this show of knowledge on the part of the elongated scout. Doubtless they mentally determined that eventually they too would be able to tell just such things by using the power of deduction that a scout's education puts into his head.

Conrad turned sharply upon arriving at the small stream. Elmer noticed that it ran *from* the lake they were just in the act of leaving; and this fact told him the other must set somewhat lower down, and have an outlet of its own.

All these things were interesting enough to fellows who had made a habit of observing whatever took place around them; nevertheless, Elmer wished the main object of their coming might be attained without much further loss of time. He was himself beginning to grow exceedingly nervous from the long-continued strain; and could understand just how poor Conrad must feel.

Lil Artha was more and more amazed to learn what a wild bit of scenery lay within thirty miles of the home town. He never would have believed it possible, had he been told about it by any one; but seeing is a convincing way of settling things, and Lil Artha certainly knew he could depend on his own eyes.

Through small openings among the trees they quickly caught glimpses of the other sheet of water. The second lake was about the same in size as the first, but lacked of the wonderfully rugged surroundings that made the other so beautiful. Still, had they not set eyes on Mirror Lake, the boys would have quickly called this one a spot well worth a long tramp just to see, not to mention its potentialities along the line of fishing.

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Once again they had come across a fallen tree that lay close to the trail, even bridging the little stream with its trunk, and forming a picture that Elmer immediately resolved to take with his snapshot camera before leaving the region.

"Looks to me," remarked Rufus shrewdly, "as if the old storm must have hit this particular section a whole lot more violently than any place we've struck so far. Right from where we stand I can see three, yes, four trees that have been uprooted, and tumbled over, all lying in the same direction, too, which is odd, I should think."

"Oh! that's a common occurrence," said Lil Artha, "I've seen hundreds of fallen trees in a place where a hurricane passed through the timber, and they lay like a sheaf of matches, all in the same identical direction. You see, the same wind took them down, as it did here. But so far as I can notice, there's no sign of anybody under this tree; how about it, Elmer?"

"No, he wasn't here when this fellow crashed down," admitted the other, in a satisfied tone. "He had either passed farther along, or else had not reached this place."

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"Then let's go on farther," pleaded Conrad.

Lil Artha knew that their chances of finding Jem were gradually getting less and less, as they covered more of the ground he must have passed over. He wondered what they should do if after all their efforts they could manage to obtain no trace of the missing man. Perhaps it would be good policy to head for the cabin, in the hope that since Conrad had left, his father might have managed to make his way home, and consequently they would find him there, too weak and exhausted to start out again.

"We must go around the lake, to make sure," the boy was saying in a strained tone that cut Elmer to the heart, because he could understand how Conrad must be beginning to fear that his father was dead, since he did not answer any of his cries.

As they began to circle the new sheet of water, Conrad again lifted his childish treble and kept calling that one word: "father!" He seemed to have faith to believe that if only he could reach the ears of Jem Shock, an answer of some kind would be immediately forthcoming.

Again his appeals were mocked by some of the startled birds, unaccustomed to having their solitary haunts invaded by two-legged creatures that gave forth such doleful sounds. Step by step the little party persevered along their course, following the shore of the second lake. It was harder going than before, because of the density of the growth surrounding this body of water; but Conrad kept along, always on the lookout for signs or sounds that would assure him success was near at hand. [163]

After all, it was Lil Artha who gave the word, and he thrilled them when he went on to say:

"I think I heard a voice just then, fellows, and it seemed to come from over on the other side of that little bayou just ahead of us. Get a good grip on yourself, Conrad, because mebbe we're going to find him right away."

The boy was really beyond the power of making any verbal reply, but the look he threw Lil Artha, because of those cheering words, was full of gratitude. To gain the other side of the indentation, they must go around for quite some distance. Conrad, too, had by now managed to remember something; and finding his voice he weakly remarked:

"Oh, yes! I know now where we are. Father told me he always had the best luck with a line set from that point over there. The fish seem to be larger than anywhere else about the lake, too. Oh! and I can see that there is another big tree down, right in sight!"

Elmer knew that this was so, for he himself had already made the same significant discovery. He raised his voice and gave a lusty shout. [164]

"Jem—Jem Shock, are you there?" was what he called.

Then they all listened eagerly. A woodpecker tapped noisily on a dead stump; but even the breeze seemed to temporarily stop rustling through the tops of the tall trees, as though sympathizing with their anxiety, and bent on giving all possible chances for their hearing any reply to this hail.

"There, somebody answered you, Elmer," snapped Rufus, delightedly.

"We've found him," said Elmer, gravely. "Be brave now, my boy," as he laid a hand affectionately on the shoulders of poor trembling Conrad. "For one thing, he's alive, and that's enough to be thankful for."

"Yes, oh! yes, I *am* thankful!" cried the boy, "but please hurry, Elmer. Oh! what he must have suffered; but he *did* answer you, didn't he, and so he must be alive! Poor father. We're coming!" he tried to call aloud, though the effort only resulted in a screech; "I'm here, father, your own Conrad! Mother sent me to find you. Just be patient, and we'll soon reach you. Oh! if only I had wings how glad I would be!"

Elmer and Lil Artha led the way. They quickly started around the tongue of marshy land bordering the little bay, for the ground was low there; and doubtless the natural outlet of the twin lakes would be discovered somewhere in that section, the scouts concluded. [165]

Now they were advancing upon the fallen tree. They could see it was a big one, and that it reached almost to the water's edge as it lay there, a derelict of the recent storm.

Every eye was keenly on the alert to discover a first sign of the unfortunate poacher who had been caught, not by the stern hand of the law, but through a freak of the storm, and pinned to the ground, so that he was utterly helpless to free himself from the toils.

Then Conrad gave a sudden shriek.

"I see him!" was the burden of his shrill cry. "Oh! there, he moved and tried to wave his hand at me! Elmer, did you see him do that? He's really alive, and that is enough for me!"

RUFUS MAKES A STAND

THEY were quickly at the tree, for every one just had to keep up with Conrad, who fairly flew along, such was his eagerness. Elmer saw immediately that they had a pretty tough job before them, for the tree in falling had caught Jem Shock fairly and squarely in a trap. A good-sized limb bore him down so that he could hardly do more than breathe.

His face was streaked with blood from various scratches, and so he looked considerably worse than might otherwise have been the case. At sight of Conrad, however, he actually smiled, which was enough to prove what a hold the lad had upon the father's heart.

"We'll get you out of that in short order, Jem," said Elmer, promptly. "You see, we fetched our ax along for just such a purpose. Lil Artha, get busy, and start a cross-cut of this limb. Strike in about here. I'll spell you if you want me to."

"Shucks! watch the chips fly, that's all!" jeered the tall fellow, as he immediately set to work; and the lively ring of steel smiting hard wood rang through the aisles of the adjacent forest as well as out upon the water of the second lake, where a loon was swimming, and watching these newcomers suspiciously. [167]

Elmer noted the fact that the limb seemed to have fallen directly across only one of Jem's legs, a rather peculiar circumstance, by the way, he considered. There was not the least doubt in his mind but that the leg must have been broken; indeed, he could already see that this was so. Apparently, then, they must be ready to make that stretcher which had already been mentioned to the greenhorns; but then such a task presented few real difficulties to experienced scouts, trained in all the ways of the woods, where every one had to *know* how to do things.

Conrad was fondling his father, who had one free arm about the shoulders of the little chap. No doubt Conrad took occasion to tell Jem how kind these new friends of his had been, and how readily they had responded to his appeal for assistance.

The scout-master wondered just how Jem would take it. That proud spirit of his was bound to show itself. He might feel indebted to the others, and not mind so much, but to realize that one of his rescuers was the son and heir of the very Snodgrass whom he believed he had such abundant cause to despise and hate, would gall him, and "cut to the quick." [168]

Yes, Elmer, watching, could see the different shades of feeling crossing the strong face of the injured man, just as sometimes he had observed clouds chasing athwart the blue sky in fleecy array. Love for the child; pain because of his injury and long wait there by the lakeside; suspicion concerning the presence of Rufus Snodgrass, and something like genuine gratitude toward the rest of the scouts—all these varying emotions Elmer could detect as they passed in review across the face of the other.

In the endeavor to take Jem's thoughts from his late precarious condition, Elmer now started to talk with him, asking how it happened that a woodsman of his long experience should be caught by a falling tree in a storm.

The man laughed a bit harshly, as though disgusted with himself.

"It was an accident, pure and simple, boy," he went on to say. "Jem Shock never believed he would be caught like a rat in a trap; but I ducked the wrong way, my foot slipped, and before I could recover I was down. So I've lain here for hours, hoping my Conrad might come along, for he knew about the lakes, and where I went to look after my fish-lines. I never once thought about you boys. Yes, I'm glad, of course, you came, because Conrad never could have got me out alone; only it hurts me to be beholden to *his* son."

And Rufus, hovering near by, heard this. His face flushed painfully, and he bit his lips until the blood came, while his eyes flashed indignantly. With an effort, however, he managed to get a grip on himself. Perhaps it was the look he caught on the face of the scout-master that brought this about. At any rate, when Rufus spoke, his voice was fairly calm; and, moreover, there was a note of entreaty in it. [169]

"Jem Shock," he said, in thrilling tones, while the methodical "chunk" of Lil Artha's ax told how its sharp edge was biting deeply into the hard wood of that limb by which the man was pinned down, "please listen to me. I can understand just how you must feel while you believe my father did you a great wrong. I don't blame you a particle either, for feeling mean toward him. But you must know that sometimes terrible mistakes do happen, and that even the best of men may blunder. I tell you I am dead sure such a thing came about, and that at this day my father is utterly unconscious of the fact that you believe he wronged you."

"Not quite that, youngster," said the man grimly. "He knows before now what my opinion of Hiram Snodgrass is; because, after I learned that he'd come to a town near by to live, I sent him a letter."

Rufus refused to be disconcerted by this startling intelligence.

"All right," he said, "I'm real glad you did, Jem. My father ought to know what a cloud his name is under. I meant to tell him all about it myself just as soon as I got home from this trip. Make your mind up you'll hear from him before long, Jem. He'll never rest easy until he's investigated the thing to the bottom, and found out the whole truth. If some men bamboozled you, and let you [170]

believe he was in the bunch, my father'll fix them, all right. They'll do the right thing by you when *he* gets after them with a sharp stick, or I'll eat my head. I guess I ought to know my dad better than anybody else could, and he's straight as a die, even if he is a real estate speculator."

Elmer was visibly impressed with the splendid way in which Rufus stood up for his father. He only hoped the elder Snodgrass might prove to be just the kind of man the boy claimed. Jem Shock, too, could not but be somewhat affected by the sturdy championship of the accused man's cause; though a sneer found a place on his blood-streaked face, and his eye still showed signs of coldness and unbelief.

At least, he allowed the subject to drop as though he did not wish to say anything further in that line, which was so unpleasant. He confined himself to petting Conrad, and giving Lil Artha further directions as to just how to finish his task; for, as a competent woodsman, Jem Shock knew all about the use of an ax. Elmer could see that, despite his agonizing condition, the man had kept his wits about him. [171]

Finally, the limb separated, and after that the boys, by uniting their strength, were enabled to raise the portion that still held Jem pinned down. He wriggled free, although the pain was so great that he almost fainted.

After that, Elmer took charge again. Water was brought, and a fire made to warm it in the pail Alec had been told to carry along. Once it was heated, Elmer proceeded to cleanse first Jem's face, so that he might not look so terribly grim; and after that he started to get at the broken leg.

He found that it was indeed pretty serious, for it had swollen dreadfully on account of the neglect; but Elmer was a pretty good amateur surgeon, as his chums all knew, and understood just how to go about setting the fractured bone, after carefully washing the limb.

Alec and Rufus had their hands full just about that time. They did not want to lose a single thing of all that was going on around them, and were often called upon by Elmer to lend a helping hand. It was noticeable that Rufus was always the one to do this. Jem seemed to visibly shrink from the touch of the boy's fingers, as though they affected him somehow; but even this aversion failed to prevent Rufus from persevering. Evidently, he was determined that Jem should know that the Snodgrass family did not have all the bad traits with which he, Jem, had in his mind endowed them; and, besides, Rufus was bound to keep in close touch with the man who had so long believed ill of his father. [172]

It pleased Elmer more than a little to notice this trait in the tenderfoot. He believed Rufus had the making of a good scout, and that association with the other fellows of the troop would in time serve to cast out the bad traits in his character mainly produced through the mistaken weakness of his adoring mother, who had always given in to his every whim.

But the wonderfully clever way in which Elmer managed to handle that broken leg, and then bind it up carefully, was not the only thing Rufus and Alec had to watch in their ardent desire to acquire practical knowledge of what a scout should know.

There was the industrious Lil Artha, working away like a trooper, and making a rude but amply sufficient stretcher, on which the wounded man could recline, while four sturdy boys bore him toward his home, since it would be utterly impossible for Jem to even hobble, with that injured limb under him.

Both greenhorns watched the stretcher grow, and marveled at the skill displayed by the accomplished Lil Artha, who felt proud to be the one to show them how easy it was for a fellow who had been taught to bring his knowledge into play when the emergency arose. [173]

Finally everything was done. Elmer had bound the leg up so firmly that Jem was full of praise for his work.

"I want to say that you boys sure know your business," he told Elmer, still refusing to look at the persistent Rufus, who continued to hover near him, despite all these rebuffs, for he was a stubborn fellow, it seemed, and would not abandon his plans easily. "I've heard some about scouts, and thought they didn't amount to much, but I reckon I'll have to change my mind after this. A regular sawbones couldn't have done the job neater, Elmer. I'm thanking you for it too; and I calculate that a lot Conrad's been telling us about you must be true."

"Oh! it is, father, it is!" ejaculated the pleased boy, with tears in his eyes. "Elmer is just a grand fellow; and besides, he promised me that I'd get a chance to be taught by some one who would know what to do with me. You'll not set your foot down on that, will you, father?"

The man smiled grimly, though this changed to a tender look as he smoothed the fair hair of his little son.

"We'll see, Conrad, we'll see," he told him. "Just now it don't look like I could set one of my feet down on anything for a month or more. But they're going to have a hard job of it getting a heavy man like me all the way home."

"Oh! don't you worry about that, Jem Shock!" sang out Lil Artha, blithely enough; "we know just how to go about it; and besides, it isn't going to be such a very tough task divided among four of us. Now, Rufus, you can take the upper left end, and I'll look after the right. Elmer and Alec will manage the foot of the stretcher easy enough." [174]

Rufus shot him a look of gratitude, showing that he readily understood how the wise Lil Artha had purposely allotted him one of the holds that would be apt to keep him as close to Jem's face as possible. The elongated scout evidently considered it good policy to force Jem to grow accustomed to the proximity of a Snodgrass; while familiarity is said to often breed contempt, in this case Lil Artha meant that it should be the cause of a growing confidence.

So they gaily started forth. Conrad ran alongside, and at times persisted in keeping hold of his father's hand. He would now and then utter words calculated to cheer the other up, as though he feared that the strain of the trip, on top of his father's condition after lying there so long unattended, might cause him to show signs of a relapse.

But they got along famously. The first lake was soon reached and put behind them. Lil Artha cast several longing glances over his shoulder as they left, and it did not need the aid of a prophet to tell that he was making up his mind to be back there the first thing in the morning, to test the voracity of the bass fighters that dwelt in those waters. [175]

Following the plain trail, they continued to put much ground between themselves and the spot where they had found Jem. The man bore the journey well, all things considered, though many times Elmer could see him compress his jaws as if to better stand the acute pain that shot through his bruised body.

So they finally drew near the clearing where the cabin stood. Elmer, who had been there once before, as will be remembered, saw familiar signs to tell him of this fact, for he had impressed certain landmarks on his memory.

"Oh, listen!" suddenly exclaimed Conrad, "I hear voices, and they are men talking, too, strangers. What can it mean, father?"

The man on the stretcher winced painfully, and then smiled grimly.

"Well, things generally come with a rush, Conrad," he said. "There are some men that have been wanting to interview me for a long time now. I reckon they've found the nerve to come away up here, just to see what's going on. But they've got to have proof in order to convict a man of poaching game out of season. Anyhow, I'm in no condition to resist now; and I don't believe they'll stir up any evidence around the cabin. Woods mutton is scarce these days." [176]

It was Rufus who now uttered a cry.

"There, I can see several men now in front of a cabin," he went on to say, "and oh! as sure as you live, one of them is my own father! Do you hear that, Jem Shock, the Snodgrass you've been believing cheated you in a land deal has come straight up here to see you just as soon as he got that letter of yours. Does that look like guilt, tell me? Oh! something is going to happen, and before long you'll be changing your mind about the Snodgrass tribe!"

Quickening their pace, the little procession hastened to reach the cabin, where several men stood watching their coming, with both wonder and interest showing on their faces. The good wife ran out to meet them, and was soon crying copiously over the figure on the stretcher, though Jem told her it was all right, and not to worry.

CHAPTER XVI

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL!"

It was a moment of considerable suspense to the boys when Mr. Snodgrass, bustling forward, looked down at the injured man. Jem with clinched teeth glared up at him, but said nothing, waiting for the other to speak.

"I'm sorry to see you hurt in this way, Jem," said the magnate. "Just as soon as I received your letter I went to the city, and had a little heart-to-heart talk with Messrs. Bolten and Hall, my former partners in that real-estate deal of some years ago. I threatened them with immediate prosecution if they did not own up to deceiving both of us; and Jem, here they are ready to eat humble pie, and make good that property they defrauded you out of some years ago. Fool that I was never to have suspected the truth; but thank Heaven, it isn't too late yet. We'll soon fix this thing; and after they've made good, Jem Shock, I'm going to offer you my check for fifty thousand dollars for that land of yours; because it's doubled in value since you let it pass from your hands." [178]

Rufus fairly beamed with happiness.

"What did I tell you, Jem Shock?" he burst out with. "I knew my father wouldn't stand for a crooked real estate deal. He's proud of the record he's made, and lots of people think he's the only honest land speculator there is. And now perhaps you will shake hands with him, Jem; yes, and with me, too. The Snodgrasses aren't so *very* bad a tribe, once you get to know them."

Jem had some difficulty in grasping the wonderful change that had come about in his financial condition, when later on the two real estate men admitted that they had played a sharp trick upon him, for which they were genuinely sorry—Lil Artha winked several times very hard when

he heard them say this, and thought of "alligator's tears."

Jem even offered his hand to the man he had for years been condemning as an unworthy friend, and a treacherous dealer in land.

Conrad was the happiest little fellow imaginable. He would run from his father to Elmer and pat their hands; then back again to kiss his mother, and possibly shake hands with Lil Artha, Alec and Rufus.

"It's all happened because of the scouts coming up here to camp," he said in the midst of his great joy. "Oh! what don't we owe to you, Elmer?"

"He fixed my broken leg as fine as any army surgeon could have done, for one thing," admitted Jem Shock, now looking as though a great load had been taken off his shoulders; "and for that alone I could always remember the boy. Yes, it's been a great day for all of us. I'm glad now that tree caught me, and all the time I lie around waiting for the bone to knit, I'll be saying that I got just what I deserved for thinking evil of any man."

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"None of that, Jem," said Mr. Snodgrass, with more or less asperity. "You were justified in holding hard feelings toward me, and thinking me a scoundrel. For once in my life I allowed a pair of precious knaves to dupe me, and never suspected how matters stood until I had your letter. But I forced them to make restitution. I stood ready to land them both behind the bars if they refused."

Messrs. Bolten and Hall had departed before this was said, pleading an important engagement, and promising to do anything else Mr. Snodgrass demanded, so long as he kept his word not to make the affair public, as it would ruin their legitimate business to have it known that they had been concerned in one big shady deal. Doubtless their ears must have burned as they retraced their way in the direction of the car that had brought them from the distant station; but then, since all was now well, even Jem Shock could forgive them.

While Mr. Snodgrass spent two days in camp with the boys, he had plenty of chances of hearing Conrad play, for the boy kept his promise to come over with his wonderful Stradivarius violin, and charm them with his magical music. The gentleman agreed with Elmer that the child was very precocious, and had the "touch" that had made his grandfather illustrious.

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"It would be a great crime," he said, "if such wonderful genius failed to find expression. If his father was unable to send him to the right master I'd certainly insist on it myself. And between us, boys, I'm determined on forcing Jem Shock to allow me to advance all the funds needed to put Conrad where he belongs. It's the only way I can make up in part for my unconscious share in his troubles."

Later on this same thing was arranged, and Conrad, it is needless to say, is at present studying hard under the best violin teacher in New York. Those who watch his career are loud in their praise, and say that when his time comes to appear in public, all such stars as Elman, Kreisler and Maud Powell will have to take a "back seat."

Of course since George had not been present when all these wonderful events came about, the others were forced to give him every possible opportunity to learn the exciting details. He asked a thousand questions, and heard the whole story told over and over again, from the time the expedition left camp up to the unexpected meeting between Jem and Mr. Snodgrass, and the humbling of the pair of precious real estate sharks.

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Indeed, it usually did take several tellings to convince so skeptical a fellow as Doubting George, especially when there was something quite out of the common going on.

The balance of the scouts' stay in camp up at Raccoon Bluff was filled with all sorts of good times. Lil Artha went fishing over at the twin lakes, and came back with as heavy a load of fish as he could stagger under. He announced that never before in all his varied experience had he known such gallant fighters as those bronzed-backed warriors of Mirror Lake. His arms fairly ached from reeling them in; and he would never forget what a glorious morning he had had there. Of course this caused Elmer also to long to wet a line; and as Alec expressed a desire to see how the thing was done over in America—he had actually caught a big salmon once upon a time in a Scotch loch—he insisted on going along.

This was only a part of the glorious times they enjoyed. Rufus even got busy again with his surveyor's outfit, and did a little more work, just to "keep his hand in," he said; but as Alec had other things on the programme that he fancied much better than "running a line," or "slashing" through a thicket with an ax and bush hook, he absolutely balked on giving up much more time to that sort of thing.

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They took pictures, and Elmer made sure to get one of the tree that in falling had arched the streamlet in such a remarkable way. Elmer also tried a few night exposures, catching some of the prowling 'coons in the act of stealing bait from a trap set so that when the trigger was sprung there would be a flashlight exposure, and the startled little animal would really take its own picture, being "caught in the act."

Besides they paid many visits to Jem's cabin, always carrying over heaps of good things to eat, despite the protests of Conrad's mother. Elmer explained that greedy George had deceived Rufus, who provided the provender for the week's campaign; and that consequently they had

brought enough along to last a whole month; which they hated to "tote" back again, and so wished her to accept a few trifles, because Jem would not be able to be moved for some weeks, and hence no supplies could be laid in.

Conrad, of course, always played for them, and even George, whose ear for music was not of the best, for he rather preferred ragtime to "classical stuff," admitted that the little fellow did wield a magical bow, and could fairly make that "fiddle talk" when he got down to serious business.

They saw no more ferocious wildcats, though for several nights after the storm, Rufus complained that he was kept awake by some sort of plaintive mewling, though he was unable to exactly locate the sounds. Elmer feared that this might be caused by a kitten left behind by the cat Lil Artha had been compelled to slay in order to save Alec from rough clawing. He even hunted around during the daytime, hoping to find the small beast, but was unable to do so. Finally, the mewling was heard no more; from which they concluded that the kitten had either succumbed to hunger, or else, being fairly able to provide for itself, had departed for other fields.

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The 'coons, however, afforded the campers no end of amusement by their curious antics. George gave it as his opinion that whoever named that particular section of country Raccoon Bluff knew his business, for never had he seen one half so many of the "bushy-tails" as during their stay there.

They proved to be great pests in the bargain, stealing whatever cooked food was left over; and becoming so tame, that it was a common occurrence to have several prowling around at any time of the day; while at night one of the campers found it necessary to rush out of the tent several times during the period of darkness in order to "shoo" the impudent rascals away.

Mr. Snodgrass had enjoyed himself heartily during the parts of two days he stayed with the boys. He expressed deep regret that pressing demands of business caused him to start back to town, Rufus seeing him safely to the nearest station, some six miles distant, as the crow flies.

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And from what they all saw of Mr. Snodgrass during his stay, the others were inclined to believe Rufus knew what he was talking about when he so boldly told Jem Shock that his father was as "honest as the day was long," and "the best man that ever lived." Elmer concluded that any father who had so lived that his boy believes this of him has a right to be proud, and feel that "example is much better than precept." Too many fathers, Elmer realized, act upon the theory that a boy can maintain his respect for his parent who advises him to "do as I say, not as I do."

When finally the time came for breaking camp, the two tenderfeet felt sure they had made giant strides along the road that led to their goal—the distinction of becoming a first-class scout. They had learned innumerable things since leaving home; indeed, life looked altogether different nowadays, because they saw ten interesting things where before there had appeared but one. And the thirst for knowledge had gripped them so that never again would either Rufus or Alec be content to plod along as before, "seeing things as through a glass darkly," and not more than half comprehending what wonders surround boys of today on every side, if only they have the vision to notice and comprehend.

There is really no need for us to accompany Elmer, George, Lil Artha and the tenderfoot squad home again. But the story of their achievements while up there in camp at Raccoon Bluff will always make a bright page in the annals of the Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts. Of course we expect to meet these good friends again at no far distant day, in the pages of another volume, wherein may be detailed further of their interesting and often thrilling adventures. Until that time comes we must lower the curtain, and write the last words,

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THE END

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Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

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