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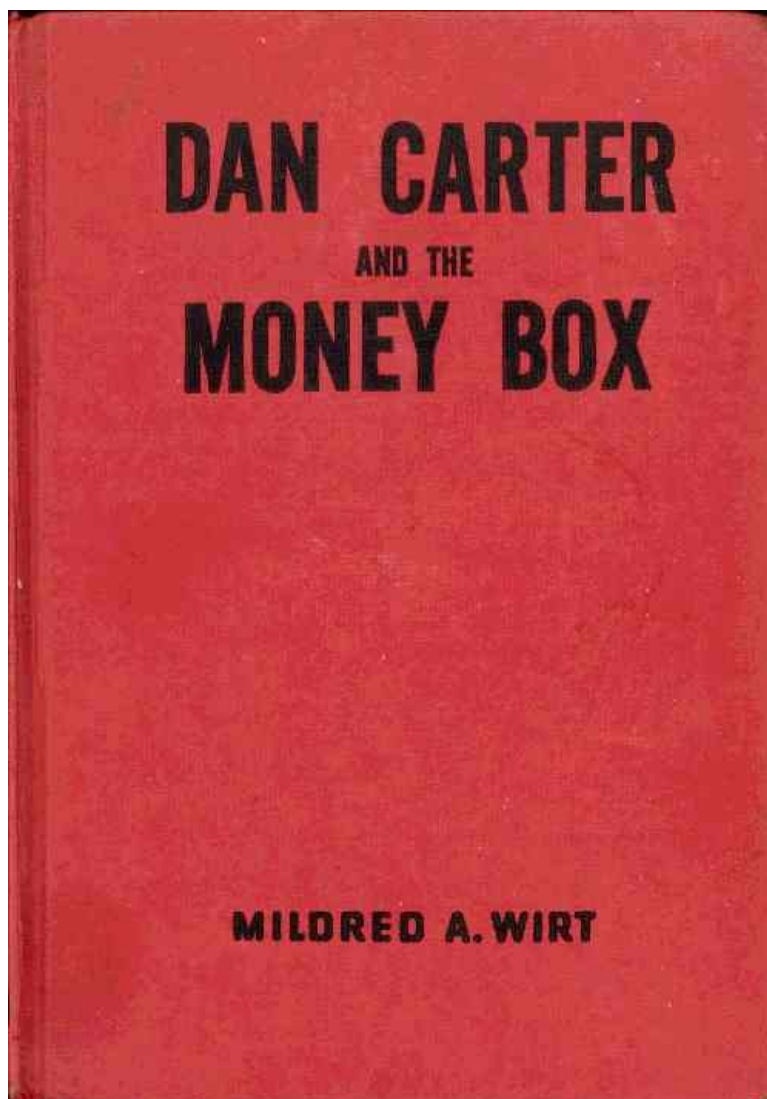
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAN CARTER AND THE MONEY BOX ***





Triumphantly, he brought out the tin box.
"DAN CARTER AND THE MONEY BOX"

(See Page 188)

Dan Carter and the Money Box

by
Mildred A. Wirt

Illustrated

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DAN CARTER AND THE MONEY BOX

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[1]

CHAPTER 1 The Stranger in the Storm

Burrowing deep into the hoods of their slickers, the two Cub Scouts hastened along the darkening street.

Stinging gusts of rain pelted their faces. The strong wind fairly bowled them off their feet.

"Say Brad, this is awful!"

"It's sure coming down—and how!" agreed the older boy.

Brad Wilber, dark-haired and serious, was a Boy Scout and a leader among the younger boys. An outstanding athlete and nearly ready for high school, he served as Den Chief of the Webster City Cubs.

His companion, the blue-eyed, sandy-haired Dan Carter, had just turned ten.

Firm of muscle and old for his years, the younger boy grew so fast it was hard to keep him in Cub uniforms.

[2]

He and Brad had been good friends ever since Sam Hatfield had organized Den 2. On this particular evening, they had been overtaken by the storm on their way to a Cub meeting at the church.

"Say, let's hold up a second!" Dan gasped as a heavy curtain of rain veiled the sidewalk ahead.

The pair halted a moment under a store awning, there to catch their breath.

"This may turn to ice or sleet before the night's over," Brad said anxiously. "Then watch the cars pile up!"

"It's almost cold enough for sleet," Dan agreed with a shiver. "The storm certainly rolled in fast.

Maybe Sam Hatfield decided to call off the Cub meeting."

Brad moved back against the building wall to escape the awning drip. "Not Sam," he said cheerfully. "He knows the Cubs are tough. Anyway, we're a little late. The others are probably at the church now, waiting for us."

From their shelter the two boys could see the church building a half block ahead, on the opposite side of the street.

The windows on the lower floor shone dimly through the wall of rain.

[3]

"The place is lighted, so Sam must be there at least," Brad commented. "Shall we go on now? We don't want to be late and hold up the meeting."

"Okay," Dan agreed, buttoning his slicker which had pulled apart.

Heads low, they bored directly into the wind. The rain scarcely had slackened. Droplets dashed into their eyes, completely blinding them.

The boys were nearly opposite the church when Brad, who was ahead, ran full tilt into a man huddling against a building wall.

"I'm sorry," the boy apologized. "I didn't see you standing there."

"Watch where you're going next time!" the other growled.

Because the man spoke in such a surly tone, Brad looked him over carefully.

The fellow was no one he ever had seen before. His face, beneath a snap-brim hat which dripped rain, appeared shadowy and unfriendly. He might have been thirty years of age, maybe older. A day-old beard made it difficult to judge.

"Sorry," Brad apologized again.

He and Dan started on, only to be stopped in their tracks by a question.

[4]

"Hey, kids," the stranger addressed them, "what's going on over there?"

"Over where?" demanded Dan.

"In that church. It's lighted up like a Christmas tree."

"Oh, just a Cub meeting," Dan explained briefly.

Again he and Brad tried to move away, but the stranger more or less blocked the street.

"A Cub meeting?" the man echoed. "What's that?"

Brad had a feeling that the stranger in asking such a stupid question was stalling for time. He seemed to be looking over the two boys, studying them.

"It's the younger boy program of the Boy Scouts of America," Brad explained briefly. "We have a whale of a lot of fun."

"But what's the church doing all lighted up?"

"Dan told you," Brad said patiently. "The Cubs are having their monthly meeting."

His answer still did not satisfy the stranger. "But the church has been closed, hasn't it?" he mumbled.

"That's right." Brad began to edge away for he resented the delay.

[5]

"The church was closed nearly a month while repairs were made on the heating system," Dan added. "Now the work is finished, so services will be held again."

Muttering something, the stranger turned and slouched off in the rain.

"Queer duck," Brad commented as he and Dan started to cross the flooded street. "What did he mumble?"

"I'm not sure I caught it right. I thought he said: 'A fine thing!'"

"Must be a screwball, Dan. Somehow I didn't like his appearance."

"Same here. His eyes were so intent they gave me the creeps. Wonder why he was interested in the church anyhow?"

"Oh, idle curiosity, I suppose. You didn't know him?"

"Never clapped eyes on him before," Dan replied, leaping over a river of gutter flow. "He must be new in Webster City."

The boys had reached the vestibule of the church.

Brad pulled open the heavy double doors and they went in out of the rain. Shaking out their slickers, they hung them up before entering the main part of the church.

[6]

The room smelled of fresh paint and seemed rather cold. Lights were on, however.

Hearing voices, Brad and Dan tramped on back to a small meeting chamber in the rear of the building.

All of the Cubs had gathered there—Chips Davis, Midge Holloway, Red Suell, Fred Hatfield, and Babe Bunning, the youngest addition to the Den.

Babe, whose real name was Clarence, barely had passed his eighth birthday.

Because he was the youngest Cub in the Den the fellows made it a little tough for him, calling him Babe Bunning instead of his real name.

Babe didn't like to be kidded, but he was game—all the Cubs admitted that.

"Say, we thought you guys weren't coming," Chips greeted Brad and Dan. "How'd you get here anyhow?"

"On a raft," Dan bantered. "Hit a lamppost on Main Street and had to swim the rest of the way."

"Oh, go on!" Chips laughed. "I guess the storm's let up."

"Like fun it has," Dan corrected. "Look at the rain sluicing down those windows."

Sam Hatfield, the assistant Cub leader, seemed unconcerned about the storm. He told the boys he had his car parked at the rear of the church. If the rain failed to let up before the meeting ended, he planned to take everyone home.

"And now let's forget the storm and get down to business," he said, calling the meeting to order. "We have some important matters to take up tonight."

To stir their blood and start the session off, the boys gave the Cub yell.

Like healthy young wolves, they howled in unison: "A-h-h-kay Iaa! W-e-e-l d-o-o-o-o-o-o-r Best!"

"And that's exactly what I hope we'll do in the job that's ahead of us—our best," Mr. Hatfield emphasized as the room became quiet again. "You fellows know why I called you here tonight?"

"It's something about the church building fund, isn't it?" Midge Holloway recalled. He had heard his father, one of the Den "Dads" mention the matter at home.

"That's right," Mr. Hatfield agreed. "As everyone knows, we need a new church or, at the very least, another wing. Now that temporary repairs have been made, the building can be kept open another year or so. Our crying need, though, is for a new building."

"A campaign is under way to raise funds, isn't it?" Brad remarked, for Mr. Hatfield had discussed the matter with him.

"Yes, Brad. The church trustees have asked the Cub Scouts to pitch in and help. What do you say, fellows?"

"How much will we have to raise?" Chips asked, running a hand through his short-cropped hair.

"No definite sum has been set. We'll be given a list of prospects to see. Whatever we raise will be that much to the good."

"I vote we do it," said Brad.

"Same here," agreed Dan heartily. "We've used the church meeting room, so it's only fair we help 'em a little."

Midge, Red, Babe and Fred said they were willing to go along with the idea, even though it meant hard work.

Chips gave consent by silence. Never as enthusiastic a worker as the other Cubs, he wasn't too keen over the thought of ringing doorbells.

Mr. Hatfield gave the boys instructions and handed out pledge cards.

"Our program this month isn't entirely one of hard work," the Cub leader then said cheerfully.

"How many of you have read the story of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table?"

Three hands waved in the breeze, and all faces brightened.

"We're using the King Arthur theme to dramatize important points in a Cub crusade to 'Strengthen the Arm of Liberty,'" Mr. Hatfield went on. "We'll make our own Round Table, armor, spears and maybe horses for the knights to ride. How does the idea strike you fellows?"

"Swell!" shouted three of the Cubs.

The other boys were equally excited. Eagerly they plied the Cub Scout leader with questions. How would the Round Table be made? What would they use for armor?

"One question at a time," laughed Mr. Hatfield. "It would be great if we could build a huge oak table such as King Arthur and his knights used in the old days. I'm afraid it would be an ambitious attempt."

[10]

"Can't we use an old dining-room table—one that's circular?" Brad suggested.

"That's what I had in mind. By the way, who knows why King Arthur used a round table?"

Dan, who had read the book, had an answer. "Wasn't it so he could provide a place of equal importance for every knight?"

"That's right, Dan. A round table has no foot or head. Each knight was the equal of every other knight. It's the same way here in America. One person has the same rights as another."

"When will we start making armor and spears?" asked Midge impatiently.

"We'll gather together the articles we need and maybe start in at our meeting next week. Mrs. Holloway, the Den Mother, has promised to help." Mr. Hatfield told the Cubs they would need cardboard, silver or gold paint, burlap and several other items.

"We'll make banners and turn this room into a regular King Arthur's Court," he declared. "The place right now is as cold as an ancient castle! Wonder what happened to that fire I built?"

[11]

Mr. Hatfield had noticed that despite jackets, several of the Cubs were shivering.

A little heat was rising from the registers. But not much.

"Want me to take a look at the furnace?" Brad offered.

"It might be a good idea," agreed the Cub leader. "Toss in three or four shovels of coal."

"I'll go with you, Brad," Dan offered.

The two boys descended a narrow, dimly lighted stairway to the church basement.

Walls were damp to the touch. In several places water oozed in through cracks in the decaying masonry.

Cobwebs hung from the overhead beams. In the

semi-darkness, Dan ran into one, cringing as it wrapped silken threads about his throat.

"Glug, glug," he intoned, making a strangling sound. "I'm being choked to death!"

"Cut it out!" Brad ordered. He reached for a switch and the basement room became flooded with light. "What you trying to do? Work up a case of nerves?"

[12]

Dan laughed and opened the iron door of the cavernous furnace.

Mr. Hatfield had built his fire well, but it needed more fuel.

"I'll heave some in," he offered.

While Brad poked at the coals, Dan went to the bin.

The shovel had disappeared. But after hunting a while, he found it behind the bin door.

Selecting smaller lumps, Dan fed the furnace two large shovelfuls. The coals leaped into fiery flame.

"Better give 'er a couple more for good measure," Brad advised.

Dan trotted back to the bin. As his shovel bit deep into the coal pile, it struck an object which gave off a metallic sound.

Curious as to what it might be, the boy dug deeper. His shovel brought to view a square metal box approximately a foot square.

"Jeepers creepers!" he whispered in awe. "How'd this get here?"

[13]

CHAPTER 2

The Metal Box

Stooping low, Dan lifted the metal box from the shovel. It was surprisingly heavy.

The boy tugged at the lid, but it stubbornly resisted his efforts.

From the furnace room, the waiting Brad now called impatiently:

"Hey, slow poke! Hurry up with that coal, will you? You've been in that bin a couple of hours!"

Dan emerged into the light. His hands were smeared with coal dust. So was his blue Cub Scout uniform. A long black smudge lay across his cheek.

"Say, what you been doing in there?" Brad demanded, staring at him. "If you aren't a sight!"

Dan ignored the gibe. Grinning triumphantly, he thrust the metal box into the astonished Brad's hand.

[14]

"Look at this," he directed. "What d'you say? Did

I waste my time in that coal bin?"

Brad stared at the box and then shook it hard.

"You found this under the coal?" he demanded almost in disbelief.

"You catch on fast," Dan grinned. "I found it under the coal."

"Well, what are we waiting for? Why don't we open it?"

"Go ahead," Dan encouraged.

Brad pried at the lid but could not raise it.

"Stuck," he observed. "At least the box doesn't seem to be locked."

Determined to open it, Brad rapped one corner of the lid against the hard cement floor.

The cover flew back so suddenly that an object tumbled out.

Brad and Dan stared. At their feet lay a package of bank notes, neatly held together with a rubber band.

"Money!" Dan exclaimed. "Twenty dollar notes! Must be counterfeit."

"Gosh, it looks genuine enough," Brad muttered, equally dumbfounded. "And look at the rest of 'em here in the box!"

[15]

The boys counted ten stacks of paper money. Some were in fives and tens, but a larger portion was in twenty dollar bills with at least a few fifties.

"Say, there must be a couple thousand here," Brad said, making a rough estimate. "Maybe more. Where'd you say you found it?"

Dan showed him the place in the coal bin. "How'd you suppose it got here?" he demanded.

"That's what I'd like to know. Someone must have hidden it here."

"Sure, but who would leave a pile of money kicking around loose? Anyone who would risk it must be crazy."

"I'll bet a cookie someone hid it here in the empty bin—"

"The bin isn't empty."

"Of course it isn't now," Brad said impatiently. "But you remember the church has been closed. Coal probably was loaded in here only a day or so ago. It was heaved in through the chute and no one saw the box."

"Your theory is as good as any," Dan admitted. "Anyway, we're rich."

Brad gave a snort of disgust. "Rich, my eye! You're not such a dum bunny as to think we can keep this money?"

[16]

"But if no one should claim it—"

"It will be claimed fast enough. In any case, we're not getting ourselves mixed up in

anything. We turn this box over to Mr. Hatfield—right now.”

“Sure, I guess you’re right,” Dan admitted. “I intended to show it to him. Only I thought if no one claimed the box, the money might go into the Cub’s treasury or maybe the church building fund.”

“That’s an idea,” nodded Brad. “But let’s not count any chickens—or rather, cash! I have a hunch whoever planted this money here won’t forget about it!”

Excited over their discovery, the two boys hastily tossed another shovelful of coal on the fire.

Then, carrying the precious metal box, they took the stairway two steps at a time.

As they burst into the Cub meeting, Mr. Hatfield was explaining the different types of armor used by knights in early days.

“One type was made of steel mesh”—the Cub leader said, and his voice trailed off.

“Excuse us, sir,” Brad apologized. “Dan found this box in the basement. It’s full of money!”

[17]

The Cubs would have suspected the two boys of playing a practical joke. However, Brad floored them by plumping the box itself on the table.

He jerked back the lid, revealing the packages of money.

“Ye gads!” shrieked Red. “Is it real?”

“Where’d you find it?” demanded Midge, fingering one of the fat packages. “Inside the furnace?”

“Would that be likely with a fire going?” Brad demanded. “Dan dug it out of the coal pile. Must be a couple thousand dollars here at least.”

“Let’s count it,” proposed Fred Hatfield.

Sam, who was Fred’s father, had not spoken. However, very soberly he had been examining not only the metal box, but many of the packages of money.

“Do you think it’s genuine, sir?” Dan asked eagerly.

“I’m not an expert on money,” the Cub leader replied. “But this looks like straight goods to me.”

“How do you suppose the box came to be here in the church?” Brad asked.

“I haven’t the slightest idea. It bothers me though. I must notify the pastor and the church trustees at once. Also, the discovery should be reported to the police.”

[18]

The Cubs wanted to see the exact spot where Dan had found the money box. For that matter, so did Mr. Hatfield.

They all trooped down into the basement to re-examine the coal bin. The Cub leader could find no clue as to the person who might have hidden the box.

True, he pointed out several large-size shoeprints visible on the dusty basement floor. But he agreed with Dan and Brad that they likely had been made by workmen who had repaired the furnace.

"Say, maybe one of the workmen hid the box!" Red exclaimed.

Mr. Hatfield said he considered the possibility an unlikely one. However, he would not venture even a guess as to who might have left the box in the coal bin.

"For all we know, it might even be stolen money," he commented.

Dan, who had stood near the foot of the basement stairs, had heard an unusual sound overhead.

"Listen!" he commanded.

[19]

The Cubs became quiet. Distinctly, they could hear a rattling noise.

"Sounds like someone trying to raise a window," Brad said. "That box of money on the table—"

Mr. Hatfield started up the stairs, but without undue haste.

"Take it easy, boys," he said. "It's only the wind rattling a window. The money's safe enough."

Despite reassurance, the Cubs were uneasy as they followed their leader up the creaking stairs.

If the box were gone—

Mr. Hatfield opened the door of the study. Every eye focused upon the table.

The box of money was exactly where it had been left.

"Well, that's a relief," Mr. Hatfield admitted, chuckling at his own uneasiness. "I'll acknowledge that hearing the window rattle gave me a most uncomfortable feeling."

"How much do you suppose is here?" Dan speculated, fingering one of the packages. "Shall we count it?"

"Well—" the Cub leader hesitated. "I'm not too eager to stay here in an empty church with so much money. But then, go ahead. The job shouldn't take long."

[20]

The Cubs seated themselves at the table. Mr. Hatfield began to count, while the Cubs checked his work.

Since the onset of colder weather, Den 2 had made use of the church as a meeting place for both Den and Pack gatherings.

In warmer weather they usually assembled at The Cave, overlooking the river. As its name implied, the chamber had been carved by water action, and was reached by a flight of stairs built by the Cubs and their fathers.

During the previous summer, the boys had enjoyed many an adventure along the waterfront. The story of their difficulties with river pirates has been told in the Cub book

entitled: "Dan Carter and the River Camp."

In the first Cub Scout book, "Dan Carter, Cub Scout," the boys tried a little back yard camping. Even so, they found themselves battling a flood at a pheasant farm, and incidentally, meeting several unpleasant persons.

Now, as the Cubs watched Mr. Hatfield count the money found in the tin box, they sensed that once again they were on the verge of adventure.

[21]

The Cub leader tallied eight hundred and forty dollars in twenty dollar denominations. Brad carefully set this amount down.

Next the Cub leader started to count the ten dollar bills. He was well into the third package, when Dan, a little weary of watching, raised his eyes to the window.

What he saw nearly caused him to rise off his chair.

A face was pressed against the windowpane.

In the fleeting instant that he saw it, Dan gained only a vague impression of a flattened nose and intent eyes.

Too startled to cry out, he kicked Brad's foot under the table.

"Hey, cut it out!" the older boy exclaimed. "Be your age."

"The window!" Dan muttered. "Look!"

Not only Brad, but Mr. Hatfield and all the Cubs turned to see what had attracted Dan's attention.

But the face had vanished.

"What's eating you, Dan?" Brad demanded. "Now you've mixed up the count. Has finding this money got you jittery?"

"It sure has," Dan admitted. "But I know I didn't dream up that face. I saw it plain as day!"

[22]

"What face?" asked Mr. Hatfield.

"I saw it only a minute ago at the window. Someone was looking in here—watching us count the money!"

"Dan has got a bad case of the jitters," Midge chuckled.

"No, he hasn't either!"

Dan's unexpected defender was none other than Babe Bunning. The youngest member of Den 2 made his announcement in a shrill voice which quavered with excitement.

"I saw the f-face too," he chattered. "Only I was so—so scared I couldn't say anything."

"You saw it too!" Brad echoed. "Say, this may add up to something!"

Mr. Hatfield already had darted to the window.

The rain had nearly ceased. Gazing out into the drenched churchyard, he could see no one.

"Turn off the light a minute," he instructed.

Brad found the switch.

With the study dark, it was easier to distinguish objects in the church yard. The Cubs clustered at Mr. Hatfield's shoulder, tense and uneasy.

"I don't see anyone—" Mr. Hatfield began.

[23]

He broke off and Dan finished the sentence. "Over there by the bushes, to the right of the walk! See!"

"Someone sneaking off toward the street!" Brad added. "Let's nab him!"

"The dirty old peeping Tom!" yelled Chips. "Come on! We'll get him!"

"Wait, boys!" Mr. Hatfield advised. "We don't know—"

Usually obedient, the Cubs now were too excited to listen.

Before Mr. Hatfield could stop them, they darted through the empty church and out into the yard.

"Surround the bushes and close in," Brad instructed.

The Cubs circled the area where they last had seen the mysterious prowler. Soon it was apparent, however, that the man had eluded them.

He had slipped away in the brief time it had taken them to reach the church yard. Although they looked up and down the street, the man was nowhere to be seen.

"We've lost him!" Brad declared in deep disgust.

"Perhaps it's just as well," said Mr. Hatfield. The Cub leader, a little short of breath, had followed the Cubs into the yard.

[24]

"Just as well?" Brad echoed. "I don't get it."

"It's no crime to look into the window of a church, Brad. Didn't you act rather hastily?"

"I guess I did," Brad admitted. "I was so anxious to catch that fellow I didn't stop to think what the outcome might be if we did nail him."

"Dan, did you recognize the person?" the Cub leader asked him.

"No, Mr. Hatfield, I didn't. All I saw was a face flattened against the windowpane."

"You think, though, that he was watching us count the money?"

"I'm sure of it."

"It's possible that the person—whoever he was—may have been the one who hid the money in the basement," Mr. Hatfield said, thinking aloud. "On the other hand, it may have been a curious passerby attracted by our light in the study."

"In any case, we were seen counting the money," Brad pointed out.

"And that's not good," Mr. Hatfield completed,

[25]

his face troubled. "I'd hate to have it noised around Webster City that we've found a box of money. It might make trouble."

"What do you think we should do?" Brad asked anxiously.

Mr. Hatfield already had made up his mind. He spoke decisively:

"The most important thing now is to get the money box to a safe place. I'll take it home for tonight."

Well satisfied with the decision, the Cubs trooped back into the church to gather together their belongings.

With the exception of Brad and Dan, the other Cubs lived close by. The two boys were to ride with Mr. Hatfield and his son Fred.

"The storm has let up now, so I'll trust the rest of you to shift for yourselves," the Cub leader said. "Go straight to your homes and don't stop along the way to pick any daisies. I'll report to you in the morning as to what will be done with the money box."

"We'll be okay," Red said cheerfully.

"Sure," agreed Midge. "It's only a couple of steps. Just take good care of that money box."

"Dan, Brad and Fred will help me guard it," Mr. Hatfield said. "I don't mind admitting I'll be relieved to turn it over to someone else for safe keeping."

[26]

Before taking the box to his parked car, the Cub leader carefully wrapped it in his coat. Everyone breathed a bit easier when they were out of the church.

Mr. Hatfield locked the money box into the rear compartment of his car.

"Oh, by the way, boys, just a word of caution," he said as he prepared to drive away. "Until I've had a chance to report to the police, it's just as well that no one learns about the money. So I'm depending upon you to keep our discovery a secret."

[27]

CHAPTER 3

Jack, the Runaway

Although only a misty rain now fell, street gutters raced with water which could not be quickly carried off.

In Mr. Hatfield's car, Fred, Dan and Brad watched the slow-moving traffic ahead. Even taxi-cabs crept along, wary of surface water on the pavement.

"It's hard to see the road ahead," Mr. Hatfield complained. "What a night!"

"You don't need to take Dan and me home," Brad said quickly. "We walked to the church and we don't mind walking back."

"It's no trouble," the Cub leader returned. He snapped on the windshield wiper again as a few drops of rain splattered the glass. "Fact is, I'm glad to have company."

Mr. Hatfield fell silent, paying close attention to his driving. From the slight frown which settled over his face, the three boys guessed that he was worrying about the money box.

"It's certainly queer how it came to be in the coal bin," Dan remarked. "I nearly fell over when my shovel turned it up."

"We never did finish our count of the cash," Brad recalled. "Seeing that man in the churchyard gave us all a jolt."

"I'll count the money at home," Mr. Hatfield promised. "Tell you the truth, I wanted to get the box away from the church. I'll feel more comfortable after it's turned over to someone else for safekeeping."

The car had halted at an intersection. As the light turned green, Mr. Hatfield started up too quickly and stalled the engine.

"The sparkplugs must be damp," he complained.

As the Cub Scout leader ground his foot repeatedly on the starter pedal, Dan noticed that a car directly behind had not taken advantage of the green light.

Although the driver had ample space in which to go around the stalled car, he did not do so.

Lowering the car window, he signaled for the other automobile to pull around. Even then it did not do so.

"What's the matter with that dumb cluck anyhow?" he muttered.

Just then Mr. Hatfield succeeded in starting the car. Quickly he shifted gears and rolled through the intersection an instant before the light turned red again.

Dan glanced back through the rear window to watch the other automobile. The driver had been caught by the red light.

To Dan's astonishment, however, he ignored it, deliberately "crashing."

"That motorist is dizzy," he commented. "First he waits for a green light—then he goes on the red."

Mr. Hatfield turned at the next corner, heading toward the street where Brad lived.

To Dan's surprise, the automobile directly behind also made the turn.

"That driver sticks to us like a burr," he observed. "Say, you don't suppose—"

"Suppose what?" Fred demanded as Dan broke off.

"I was wondering if maybe he's following us."

Mr. Hatfield glanced quickly into the mirror. At the next street, he deliberately made another turn although it took him slightly off his route.

"That other car's right behind!" Dan announced a moment later.

"Where did we pick him up?" Mr. Hatfield asked. "Was he on our tail when we left the church?"

No one had noticed. Dan first had observed the car at the intersection.

"Note down the license number if you can," the Cub leader instructed. "The car probably isn't following us—but it's just as well to have the license number."

The three boys peered intently through the rear window. The license plate number could not be easily distinguished.

"It's too misty outside," Dan complained.

"He's dropping farther back too," Fred observed. "Must have caught on that we're watching him."

"I got the first two letters and number," Brad said, jotting it down on a scrap of paper. "FJ-3. I couldn't make out the last number too well. I think it was 2, though."

[31]

The following automobile now had dropped a considerable distance behind.

"It may have been our imagination," Mr. Hatfield said in relief. "Finding that box of money and having it in our possession, has given us all a case of the jitters."

At the next corner, the Cub leader swung back onto the main, well-traveled street. The other car had disappeared from view.

"I guess I was wrong," Dan admitted. "Either that, or the fellow became suspicious that we were watching."

"At any rate, we've lost him," Mr. Hatfield declared. "Hello—what's this up ahead?"

The car approached a railroad underpass. In the depressed area beneath the archway, surface water had failed to run off. The flooded area stretched for a considerable distance ahead.

"It doesn't look very deep," Mr. Hatfield said, weighing their chances of getting through. "Think we can make it?"

"If we don't, you have three good pushers," Brad answered. "Anyway, here comes another car."

"They're going to try it, so I guess we can," added Dan.

[32]

The approaching coupe, in which two persons were visible, barely slackened pace as it came to the area of water.

Noticing that the flood seemed only hub-cap high, Mr. Hatfield likewise started through it.

A moment later, however, he noted that the water rapidly was deepening on the car ahead. It began to falter, and finally came to a standstill.

"Stalled!" Fred exclaimed in dismay.

"And we're blocked," added Brad. "Think we can back out of it?"

"I'm going to try," Mr. Hatfield said grimly. "I should have waited."

Shifting into reverse, he slowly backed away from the stalled coupe.

The two cars, however, had churned up high waves. As they slapped against Mr. Hatfield's automobile, the engine began to sputter.

"Oh! Oh!" groaned Fred. "Here we go."

The next instant the motor gave a final wheeze and died.

"Come on, fellows, let's push!" Brad urged, starting to open the door.

"No, wait!" Mr. Hatfield directed. "I don't want you to wreck your clothes unless it's absolutely necessary. Someone may come along to help—"

[33]

The Cub leader's voice trailed off, for his attention had been drawn once more to the stalled car ahead.

Quite suddenly, the door on the left hand side had swung open.

A boy who might have been twelve or thirteen fairly hurled himself from the car.

In his haste to get away, the lad tripped and fell flat in the muddy water which raced through the underpass.

"Wow!" exclaimed Brad anxiously. "Did he take a tumble!"

The boy was on his feet again almost in an instant.

To the astonishment of Mr. Hatfield and the Cubs, he plunged off through the water, moving as fast as he could.

At the same time, the right hand door of the coupe shot open.

The headlights of Mr. Hatfield's car revealed the head and shoulders of another occupant of the stalled coupe—a man whom the Cubs recognized as Guy Wentworth, a referee in Juvenile Court.

"Jack, come back here!" he shouted.

[34]

The fleeing boy paid no heed.

Mr. Wentworth then sprang from the car and started after the boy. Jack, however, had a good start and the advantage of being more agile.

"Try and get me now!" he taunted. "See you in Juvenile Court!"

Reaching the sidewalk, he waved derisively at the referee. Then, with a scornful laugh, he turned and darted down an alleyway between two shadowy buildings.

[35]

CHAPTER 4

High Water

As Mr. Hatfield and the Cubs watched, Guy Wentworth leaped from the stalled car.

"Come back here, Jack!" he shouted after the fleeing boy.

The lad, however, had disappeared.

Mr. Wentworth splashed through the high water to the curb. Realizing that he could not hope to overtake the agile boy, he entered a drugstore, evidently to telephone police.

Upon his return a few minutes later, he paused beside the Hatfield car to talk to the Cub Scout leader.

"What happened?" Mr. Hatfield asked him.

"Oh, Jack Phillips, one of the boys from the Child Study Institute, eluded me. I've notified the police. They may pick him up later tonight, but I doubt it. Jack is as slippery as an eel."

[36]

"You were taking him to a boys' industrial school?" Mr. Hatfield inquired.

"No, to a private boarding home—to a woman named Mrs. Jones," the social worker replied. "Jack's a real problem."

"I'd judge so," commented Mr. Hatfield.

"He's restless and unstable. Parents are dead. He's been under our supervision more or less for three years now." Mr. Wentworth drew a long breath. "It's been a job, I'm telling you. Jack always has an itch to run away, and get into trouble."

"I take it he didn't look with favor on the idea of being placed in a private home?"

"Jack likes to fend for himself," the social worker replied. "He hates restriction. That, of course, is what he needs and must have. I'm afraid, despite our efforts, he'll end up in an industrial school."

"Think you'll ever see him again?"

"Oh, the police will pick him up eventually," Mr. Wentworth said. "They always do. But the question is—what to do with him when he is brought back."

"Well, I hope you think of something," the Cub leader returned. "I hate to think of a boy being sent to an industrial school, if he has any good in him."

[37]

"Jack took advantage of me, when my car stalled in this high water. I see you're stuck too. Maybe I can give you a push."

Applying his shoulder, the social worker tried to roll the car backward toward higher pavement.

"Don't do that," Mr. Hatfield commanded. "You'll strain yourself. I'll call a tow car."

"We'll help push," Brad offered, starting to get out into the water.

"No, wait," Mr. Wentworth ordered. "You youngsters oughtn't to freeze yourselves. This water is like ice. I'm already soaked to the knees. Tell you what! I'll go back to the

drugstore and telephone for a tow car that will push both autos on through."

The solution seemed the most satisfactory one. Mr. Wentworth started back toward the drugstore. Half way there, he paused as his ears detected the sound of an approaching vehicle.

A moment later a fire engine, returning from a run, came into view. The driver, seeing the water ahead, pulled up.

"Stalled?" he called to Mr. Wentworth.

"That's right."

"Hop back in your car, and we'll give you a shove," the fireman offered.

[38]

Both Mr. Wentworth's automobile and Sam Hatfield's sedan were pushed through the water. Neither could be started immediately. However, after the spark plugs were dried out, both cars were in running order once more.

"Many thanks," Mr. Hatfield told the firemen. "I'll be glad to get home. I'm carrying a valuable load tonight."

The firemen, assuming that Mr. Hatfield referred to the carload of Cub Scouts, made a joking reply. They told the Cub leader that the storm had been a severe one. Several trees had blown down and many streets were flooded.

Relieved to be on their way once more, Mr. Hatfield drove directly to his residence.

"I want to rid myself of this money box first of all," the Cub leader said. "Then I'll take you boys home."

"Why don't we stay a few minutes and help you count it?" Brad suggested. "The job shouldn't take long."

"Not a bad idea," Mr. Hatfield agreed. "Just so your folks don't worry. Better telephone them and explain that you've been delayed a few minutes."

[39]

The Cub leader carried the money box into the living room. While the boys were telephoning, he built a fire in the grate.

"Now to count the money," he said when the Cubs had returned to the living room. "Fred, pull the blinds. We don't need any spectators."

Fred hastened to obey.

"I hope no one followed us here," Dan said uneasily. "That car—"

"Oh, we lost it before we stalled in the high water," Mr. Hatfield reassured him. "The chances are we imagined we were being trailed."

"Maybe, only I thought—"

"Fellows, just because we found a cash box is no reason for working up a high-grade case of the jitters," the Cub leader said. "The important thing is to maintain a sensible outlook. Now let's count the money."

"Right-o," grinned Dan. "Guess I did let my

imagination lead me a race.”

With the blinds lowered, the boys opened up the money box. The neat packages were stacked on the dining-room table.

Mr. Hatfield counted while the others watched and wrote down the tally.

[40]

“Two thousand one hundred and seventy-five dollars!” he announced when the last bill had been counted.

“Wow! What a haul!” Dan exclaimed.

“What will we do with it?” Brad asked. “Turn everything over to the police?”

“That’s the only thing to do,” Mr. Hatfield declared. “I dislike to be bothered with a lot of questions tonight though.”

“Then why not wait until morning before calling police?” Brad suggested. “That is, if you think the money will be safe here.”

“Oh, I’m not worried on that score, Brad. I’ll put the box away and lock all the doors. Yes, I believe I will wait until tomorrow before notifying the police. Then they can make a thorough investigation.”

Replacing the money in the box, Mr. Hatfield carried it upstairs. A few minutes later, he returned empty handed.

“Where’d you hide the cash?” Fred asked his father. “Under a mattress?”

“A better place than that, I hope,” replied Mr. Hatfield. He did not reveal the hiding place.

[41]

Brad and Dan picked up their caps, ready to leave.

Mr. Hatfield again offered to take the boys home.

“Oh, we can walk,” Brad said quickly as the Cub leader searched for his car keys. “It’s less than two blocks.”

“Sure,” agreed Dan. “You stay here, Mr. Hatfield, and guard that money.”

Observing that the rain had ceased, the Cub leader allowed himself to be persuaded. However, he accompanied the boys to the front door.

“Since you were the ones who found the money, the police probably will want to question you tomorrow,” he warned.

“That’s okay,” Dan said. “We’ll be around.”

“I’ll call the police station early in the morning,” Mr. Hatfield promised. “Meanwhile—don’t speak to anyone about the box or how much it contained.”

Dan and Brad were rather surprised that the Cub leader should mention the subject twice.

“You may be certain we won’t,” Brad promised.

“I should say not,” added Dan emphatically.

"All the Cubs can be trusted, I know," Mr. Hatfield declared as he bade the pair good-bye. "Well, boys, I'll see you in the morning. Good night to you both, and no nightmares about hidden treasure!"

[42]

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CHAPTER 5

Two Claimants

Dan was midway through breakfast the next morning when the telephone rang.

"Will you answer it, please?" his mother called from the kitchen where she was frying ham.

Absently, Dan reached for the instrument which was tucked into a shelf nook beside the breakfast table.

"Hello," he half-mumbled, his mouth filled with toast.

"Is that you, Dan?" asked a familiar voice.

Dan came to life then, for it was Sam Hatfield at the other end of the line. Something must be up, else the Cub leader wouldn't call him so early in the morning! Like as not the police were wanting to question him about the money box.

"Dan, can you come over right away?" Mr. Hatfield asked.

[44]

"Why, sure. That is, I guess so, unless Mom's got work lined up for me. Anything wrong?"

Dan was certain from Mr. Hatfield's tone that something urgent had come up. More than ever, he was convinced the matter concerned the money box.

"Well, yes, I am a little disturbed," the Cub leader answered his question. "I'm asking all the boys to come over to my place as soon as possible."

"The money box hasn't been taken?"

"Oh, no! Nothing like that Dan. Just come over as soon as you can."

Completely mystified, Dan bolted the remainder of his breakfast.

Fifteen minutes later he presented himself at the Hatfield home where Chips and Red already had gathered.

"What's up?" Dan asked the pair.

"Search me," Chips shrugged. "Mr. Hatfield asked us to come over right away, so we did."

"He hasn't explained yet," Red added in an undertone, "but he seems plenty worried."

In a few minutes Babe Bunning arrived at the house. Close upon his heels came Brad, who reported that Midge Holloway would be a little late.

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"He told me to report he has to do some work at

home," the Den Chief told Mr. Hatfield.

"We'll go on without him," the Cub leader said. "Boys, now don't get me wrong. I didn't call you here to make accusations or scold. I'm not blaming anyone—"

"What's wrong, Mr. Hatfield?" Brad cut in anxiously.

"Well, somehow the news leaked out about us finding the money box."

The Cubs were dumbfounded.

"Then someone must have babbled!" Chips exclaimed. "It sure wasn't me!"

"Or me," echoed Red.

"I can't understand how anyone would blab the secret," said Brad slowly. "Every Cub has real ideals or he wouldn't be in the organization. Cubs are Square—they keep their promises. And we all promised not to mention the box until after you had time to talk to the police about it."

"That's right," Mr. Hatfield agreed. "You put it well, Brad. I can't believe, either, that anyone would tell—at least not intentionally."

"How do you know the information got out?" Dan asked thoughtfully.

[46]

"Through a visitor. I was eating breakfast this morning when Everett Wilson, owner of the Elite Dry Cleaning Co., came to the door. He's not a member of the church, but does attend irregularly. Any of you fellows know him?"

All of the Cubs except Babe shook their heads.

"I know him when I see him," Babe said. "We take our dry cleaning to his place. We're quitting though. Last time my Dad left a pair of trousers there, he shrunk 'em an inch and wouldn't make good."

"You say Mr. Wilson heard about us finding the money box?" Dan asked the Cub leader.

"It's worse than that. He not only heard about it, but he's put in a claim for the money."

"But how did he happen to hide it in the coal bin?" Dan demanded in perplexity.

"That's what I asked him. He didn't have a very satisfactory answer. Furthermore, he wasn't able to tell me how much he had in the box."

"Then maybe it wasn't his!" Chips exclaimed.

"I thought of that right away, Chips. I had a feeling that perhaps he was putting in a false claim. At any rate, I refused to turn the money over to him."

[47]

"Have you called the police yet?" Dan questioned.

"Yes, I telephoned the station immediately after Mr. Wilson was here. A man is on his way out now. I'll turn the money over when he comes, and be glad to get rid of it."

"It's sure funny about Mr. Wilson claiming the cash," Dan remarked. "How could he have

known about us finding the box?"

"Someone must have told," Chips replied before the Cub leader could speak.

His gaze fastened hard upon Babe, who unconcernedly was chewing a gumdrop.

The other Cubs looked at Babe too. He had been in the Den only a few weeks and as yet hadn't been promoted from a Bobcat to a Wolf.

True, he had repeated the Cub Promise: "I promise to do my best, to be SQUARE, and OBEY the law of the Cub Pack."

Also, he had learned the Cub sign and the handclasp, the salute and the Law of the Cub Pack. At least, he had said the words correctly. But had they really burned in?

"Babe, did you tell anyone about the money box?" Chips demanded bluntly.

[48]

Babe swallowed the gumdrop and stared. "Who, me?" he asked.

"Yes, you! You're the only one who knew Mr. Wilson."

"I didn't tell him. I didn't tell anyone!" Babe's blue eyes flashed angrily.

"Never mind, Chips," Mr. Hatfield said. His tone made it clear that the discussion must end. "We're not accusing anyone. A Cub's word is good enough for me."

"Remember that face at the window?" Dan reminded the group. "Someone saw us looking at the money. Maybe that's how the story got out!"

"It's very possible, Dan," agreed Mr. Hatfield. "Anyway, it's a relief to know that the Cubs all kept their promises. If Mr. Wilson can establish his claim, he's welcome to the money."

"He must have been dizzy to hide the box in a coal bin," Brad said, getting up from the davenport. "It doesn't make sense to me."

Mr. Hatfield told the Cubs that he considered it most important that no one reveal the exact amount of cash that had been found.

"Brad, Dan, Fred and myself are the only ones who know the correct total," he said. "But the rest of you have a pretty fair idea. The thing is—keep it to yourselves. If the amount should become known, well, it might make it easier for Mr. Wilson to prove a claim."

[49]

"You can depend on us, Mr. Hatfield," Brad said, speaking for the others. "How about you, Babe?"

"Oh, sure," the youngest member of the Den returned carelessly. "I forget now how much it was we counted at the church."

"Midge isn't here, but I'll stop at his house and warn him," Dan offered.

The matter of the cash box having been thoroughly discussed, Mr. Hatfield told the boys his real purpose in calling them was to remind them to start working on the church building fund pledge cards.

"Call on your prospects as soon as you can," he advised. "Today if possible. We want to get that money rolling in."

"What about our plans for the Crusade?" Brad reminded him.

"You'll hear more about that at our next meeting," Mr. Hatfield promised. "Meanwhile, dig up anything you can for costumes."

[50]

"I have an idea—" Dan began.

What it was no one learned, for just then the front doorbell rang.

"That must be Midge," Brad said. "Or maybe the police."

But it was neither.

Instead, when Mr. Hatfield went to the door he found Edgar Brakschmidt standing there, hat in hand.

The Cub leader knew the man only slightly, having seen him occasionally at church services.

"I beg your pardon—you're Mr. Hatfield," the visitor asked.

"Yes, I am." The Cub leader moved aside so that the man might enter. "Come on in. We're having a Cub meeting."

"Oh, I don't want to break it up," the visitor apologized. "Nevertheless, the matter I came to talk about happens to concern the Cubs." Mr. Brakschmidt laughed self-consciously.

"They haven't been in any mischief, I trust."

"Oh, no! Nothing like that. May I speak with you in private, Mr. Hatfield?"

"We can go into the study if you like. However, if the matter concerns the Cubs, why not tell them about it also?"

[51]

"Well—all right, I may as well come right out with it. I lost some money recently—a rather large sum. Information has come to me that this money contained in a metal box, was found at the church by one of the Cubs."

The boys were listening intently, amazed expressions mirrored on their faces. First Mr. Wilson, and now a second claimant!

"How much did you lose, Mr. Brakschmidt?" the Cub leader asked.

"I can't rightly say. For months I had been saving it. The amount was considerable."

"And where was this money lost, Mr. Brakschmidt?"

"Why, in the church. I—I went in there a few days ago—day before yesterday to be exact—to see the pastor. I was taking the money with me to deposit in the bank. The minister wasn't there. I must have put the box down and forgot it, because I didn't discover my loss until later."

"Really, Mr. Brakschmidt, I never knew you to be so careless with money," remarked the Cub leader. "Where did you think you left the box?"

[52]

"In one of the seats," the visitor replied after a slight hesitation.

"That wasn't where we found the box!" Chips exclaimed. "Dan found it—"

Brad gave him a kick in the ankle, a warning not to tell everything he knew.

"May I ask how you learned that the Cubs had come upon a box of money?" Mr. Hatfield inquired.

"Why, the news is everywhere."

Brad was disgusted. So were the other Cubs, who couldn't imagine how the word had spread.

"Babe, 'fess up," Red whispered in the younger boy's ear. "Did you spill it?"

"I did not," he retorted indignantly. "Cross my heart and hope to die!"

"Midge wouldn't tell," Red said. "All the other Cubs have given their word. It's mighty funny—"

Mr. Hatfield was speaking again. "Since the news is everywhere as you say, Mr. Brakschmidt, I may as well admit that the Cubs did find a little money. We expect to turn it over to police. If you have any claim, you'll have to take it up with them."

"You still have the money here in the house?"

"Yes," the Cub leader admitted reluctantly.

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"Then why put me to the trouble of having to go through the police and perhaps the courts to prove my claim? The money is mine. If you return it to me, I'll give the Cubs a suitable reward, a very generous one in fact."

Mr. Hatfield had begun to lose patience.

"I am sorry, Mr. Brakschmidt," he said. "You'll have to take the matter up with police."

Mr. Brakschmidt argued for a while longer. Then, convinced that he was making no headway, he rather angrily departed.

"That's the limit!" Fred sputtered. "Two claimants for the money. What did you think of him, Dad?"

"I barely know either Mr. Brakschmidt or Mr. Wilson," his father replied. "Obviously, both can't own the money. Before the real owner of that box is found, I'm afraid we're in for an unpleasant time."

[54]

CHAPTER 6

A "Tough" Customer

Dan and Brad were sorely troubled over the problem of establishing the rightful owner of the money box.

After the Cub meeting broke up they went directly to the Holloway home.

Midge, a freckled-faced boy with an easy grin, was in the back yard, helping his father stack wood for the fireplace.

"I'm sure sorry I couldn't get over to Mr. Hatfield's house in time for the meeting," he said regretfully. "I promised Dad a week ago I'd help with this job. What came up anyway?"

"Two claimants have appeared for the money box," Brad disclosed. "We suspect both claims may be fakes."

"The worrisome part is that the news is all over Webster City," Dan added earnestly. "Midge, you didn't tell anyone?"

[55]

"Not even my father, Dan. You may ask him!"

Mr. Holloway, a Den "Dad," had listened closely to the conversation.

"Frankly, I'm confused," he said. "What's all this talk about a money box?"

Now that the secret was out, Mr. Hatfield had released the Cubs from their promise not to discuss the matter. He had requested, however, that they provide no information as to the amount of cash found or the type of box.

Accordingly, Dan and Brad disclosed all but a few of the vital facts. "We can't figure out how the story got around so fast," the Den Chief ended. "Some of the fellows are blaming Babe, but he swears he didn't tell."

"Babe hasn't been in the organization long," Mr. Holloway replied thoughtfully. "He's a dependable kid though. I'd take his word any day."

"If the Cubs didn't tell, it simmers down to this —" Dan remarked. "It must have been that man we saw peeking in at the window."

He and Brad stood around a few minutes watching Midge stack wood. Then, aware that it was getting on toward noon, they decided to make a call or two on church building fund prospects.

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"Where do we go first?" Dan asked, consulting a list of names Mr. Hatfield had given him.

Brad studied the prospects. "How about hitting Atwood Merrimac?" he proposed.

"Who's he, Brad?"

"President of the Merrimac Bakery and one of the richest members of our church. He usually makes fairly large donations, but has the reputation of being a little close."

"We'll go to work on him. What's he down on the list for, Brad?"

"Five hundred dollars. We'll be lucky if we get that much. But he should come across with two or three hundred if we put up a good argument."

"That old wreck of a heating plant ought to be argument enough," Dan returned, pocketing the list. "Well, let's get moving. We ought to make at least one call before lunch time."

The Merrimac residence was six blocks farther

on, overlooking a ravine. Massively built of stone and brick, the dwelling was impressive both in structure and size.

Brad and Dan carefully wiped mud from their shoes before ringing the doorbell.

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"If a butler comes, don't let him give you that 'Mr. Merrimac is not at home' line," Dan warned. "Just let him know we're here for business and have to see the big boss."

"Even the butler doesn't seem to be on tap," Brad declared, pushing the doorbell button again.

The boys waited. After ringing repeatedly, they were about to give up in disgust.

"Try just once more," Dan advised, as Brad started away. "I thought I heard footsteps."

This time Brad not only rang the bell, but kept his finger for a long while on the button.

"That ought to raise the dead," he grinned.

"Maybe it did," Dan chuckled. "At any rate, someone is coming."

Through the door glass, he made out a shadowy figure in the front hallway.

The man, bent and old, approached the door and then seemed to hesitate.

"What's the matter with him anyhow?" Dan muttered impatiently. "He acts as if he's scared."

Apparently reassured to see that the two at the door were boys, the elderly man opened it a few inches.

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"Good morning, Mr. Merrimac," greeted Brad, doffing his cap.

The old man relaxed somewhat. Though appearing none too pleased to see visitors, he grudgingly opened the door a little wider.

"I guess you didn't hear the bell at first," Dan said pleasantly. "Or maybe it's out of order."

"The bell's in good order," Mr. Merrimac muttered. "So are my ears. I'd have come sooner only—one never knows who's at the door. Since my butler left a week ago, I've had an unpleasant time of it. Only the other night—but never mind. You wanted to see me?"

"We're here in behalf of the church building fund," Brad explained. "Your name is on our list of prospects."

"Seems as if my name is on every list of prospects," the old man retorted. "Seems like every time I turn around it's, 'Mr. Merrimac, will you contribute five dollars for this? Mr. Merrimac, will you donate ten dollars for that?'"

Brad and Dan exchanged an uneasy glance. Obviously, their prospect was not in the best of moods. It might take super salesmanship to gain his pledge.

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"May we come in for a few minutes to talk about it?" Brad requested.

"I'm busy this morning. With my butler gone, I have to prepare my own lunch, and I'm no hand at it."

"We won't take much of your time, Mr. Merrimac," Dan urged.

"Oh, all right, come in," the old man consented. "I warn you though, you must come directly to the point. I haven't felt well lately, and it makes me nervous to hear a lot of chatter."

Brad and Dan followed their unwilling host into the living room.

The evidence was overpowering that Mr. Merrimac lived alone. Although the room was well furnished, everything was covered with dust.

Newspapers had been dropped where read. Cigar ashes littered the rugs. Blinds which were three-quarters lowered, gave the entire room a gloomy atmosphere.

"I had a bad scare the other night," Mr. Merrimac said, picking up a book so that Dan could seat himself on the sofa. "Someone tried to break in."

"You live here by yourself?" Brad inquired.

"I do since Hayes left me. He was my butler. Said he could make more than I was paying. So the ungrateful scoundrel quit on three days notice. I've been unable to find anyone to take his place."

[60]

"You have had your troubles," Brad said. "Maybe you'd rather we came back some other day."

"No, we may as well get this over with," the old man sighed. "If my name is on the list, I'll be pestered until I give 'em something. How much am I down for? Ten dollars?"

Brad let him have it straight.

"Five hundred, Mr. Merrimac."

"Five hundred!" The elderly man's voice rose to an indignant screech. "What do they think I am? A wealthy man?"

"I believe you contributed that much last year to the Community Chest," Brad said, consulting a memorandum on the back side of the pledge card. "The church really needs your help."

"It certainly does," added Dan. "The heating plant is shot and a good stiff wind might blow the building over!"

Mr. Merrimac permitted himself a tight, half-amused smile. "It's hardly that bad, Dan," he said. "I'll admit though, that we need a new church. The cause is a worthy one."

[61]

"Then how much may we put you down for?" Brad asked, taking out a fountain pen.

"I'm not prepared to make any pledge at this time."

"But Mr. Merrimac, you're our best prospect—"

"I hate to disappoint you, Brad," Mr. Merrimac said soberly. "I honestly do. The truth is, I've

had rather distressing business losses recently. I can't afford to make a pledge at this time."

Brad and Dan were at a loss for an argument. Mr. Hatfield had warned them that Mr. Merrimac might be inclined to whittle down the five hundred dollar pledge. But even the Cub leader had not expected such stiff resistance as this.

"How much have you lost?" Dan inquired. After speaking, he realized that the question was a very personal one.

"Several thousand," Mr. Merrimac answered shortly. "It was stolen from my library. I kept the money in a metal box locked in a desk."

"A metal box!" Dan exclaimed. "Oh, can you beat that!"

"I'm sure I don't understand," said Mr. Merrimac in perplexity.

"You must have heard about the Cubs finding a money box at the church," Brad replied quietly. He was watching the elderly man very closely, wondering whether or not he might be acting a part.

"The Cubs found a money box? My box?"

"We don't know whose box it is," Brad said. "That's for the police to decide."

Mr. Merrimac had grown rather excited. "If you found a box at the church it must have been the one that was stolen from me!"

"If you can prove your claim, you're welcome to it," Brad returned, arising to leave. "It's only fair to warn you though, that two other persons already have said it belongs to them."

Mr. Merrimac pursued the boys to the door. Eagerly he plied them for more information. Dan and Brad, however, were in no mood to be pumped.

"You'll have to see Mr. Hatfield or the police about it," Brad told him firmly. "It's none of our affair. We merely came here in the interests of the building fund campaign."

"Oh, yes, the building fund," the old man recalled. "Boys, if you'll help me recover my money, I'll make it right with you. I'll pledge the five hundred dollars. I might even give more."

Brad and Dan had reached the end of their patience.

"Thanks, Mr. Merrimac," Dan said dryly. "We'll remember."

Scarcely bidding the old man goodbye, the two Cubs hurriedly left the house.

Once beyond hearing, they gave vent to their feelings.

"Three claimants now!" Dan exclaimed. "This positively is the last straw!"

"We come here to get a pledge from old Money Bags, and what does he do?" Brad added. "Why, he turns around and tries to file claim to the money box. I give up!"

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CHAPTER 7

The Last Straw

Discouragement weighed heavily upon Dan and Brad as they left Mr. Merrimac's home.

The bakery owner had been their No. 1 prospect and without a donation from him they knew the Den never could make a good showing in the solicitation.

"Mr. Hatfield gave us Mr. Merrimac's name because he thought we were the best collectors," Brad said in disgust. "Well, we muffed it."

"We caught him in a bad mood," Dan replied, equally sunk in gloom. "Do you think the old cod really lost money as he claimed? Or was it just another trick?"

"Search me, Dan. It's a cinch three persons couldn't have lost that cash. The whole thing is fantastic."

[65]

"I almost wish we hadn't found that box, Brad."

"So do I. It's going to make a peck of trouble. Well, what do we do now? Report to Mr. Hatfield?"

"May as well. He ought to know about Mr. Merrimac's claim, even if it should prove phoney."

The boys found the Cub leader in his front yard, raking leaves. Leaning on his rake, he listened attentively to their account of what had happened at Mr. Merrimac's place.

"It's a bad break not getting the donation," he said. "But don't take it too hard. Mr. Merrimac may come through later on. As for his claim that the money box belongs to him—well, I don't know what to think about that."

"It's probably just another fake claim," Brad declared.

"Was he able to tell the amount of money in the box?"

"He said it was several thousand," Brad answered.

"You didn't ask him to be more definite or to furnish a description of the money box?"

"No, Dan and I were too disgusted. We left as quickly as we could."

"Mr. Merrimac probably will come to see me," the Cub leader responded. Picking up a basket of leaves, he started with it toward the street.

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Just then a black police car pulled up at the curb. Mr. Hatfield put down the basket and went to meet the officers.

"We have a report that you're holding a box of money found by some of the Cub Scouts at a church," Sergeant Billings addressed Mr.

Hatfield.

"That's right. Come into the house and I'll turn it over to you. First though, meet Dan Carter and Brad Wilber. They're the ones who found the box."

"Dan did," Brad corrected. "I just happened to be around."

"How are you, boys?" Sergeant Billings said heartily.

He began to pose friendly but pointed questions which Brad and Dan answered to the best of their abilities.

"Don't worry about finding the rightful owner of the box," he reassured them. "We'll get to the bottom of it in short order. By the way, you didn't happen to find a blackjack or a pair of brass knuckles along side of the box did you?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Dan returned, surprised by the question.

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"It might be smart to let that impression get around," the sergeant chuckled. "Catch on?"

"You mean if folks thought that by claiming the box they would tangle with the law, they might not be so quick to say it was theirs?" Brad demanded.

"That's the idea, kid."

"I don't want the Cubs to become involved any further in this matter," Mr. Hatfield said, speaking decisively. "That's why I called police. I want to be rid of the box and all responsibility."

"Fair enough," rejoined Sergeant Billings. "Just lead me to the box. I can't guarantee though, that you won't have the newspaper reporters on your neck when this story gets out. I'll have to make a report, you know."

"I suppose so," Mr. Hatfield admitted, leading the way to the house. "Well, keep the Cubs out of it as much as possible."

In the living room the Cub leader offered the sergeant a chair and then excused himself.

"I have the money box hidden upstairs," he said. "Wait and I'll fetch it."

Mr. Hatfield was gone a long while. During his absence, Dan and Brad told Sergeant Billings everything they knew about the money box. They even mentioned the mysterious face at the window, and gave the officer the license number of the car which they thought had followed Mr. Hatfield's auto on the night of the storm.

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"Your imagination probably tricked you on that one," the sergeant said, noting down the number. "But I'll check anyhow."

"By the way, have you heard whether or not that ward of the court, Jack Phillips ever was caught?" Brad inquired.

"We've been looking for him," the sergeant replied. "So far he's eluded us. Jack is slippery, but we'll get him back in time."

"How old is he?" Dan asked curiously.

"About twelve—maybe a bit younger. He's wise, though, in the ways of the world. We think he's still around here unless he hitch-hiked to another town. He may be hiding out in the marsh or along the waterfront."

"How does he manage to live?" Brad questioned.

"Oh, Jack's an old hand at getting along. The boy has good stuff in him, but he's made us a lot of trouble. He can't stand confinement."

While the Cubs talked, Fred Hatfield came into the house. He too had been calling on building fund prospects and reported that he had obtained pledges totaling nearly one hundred and twenty dollars.

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"You did better than we did," Brad congratulated him.

"Just luck," Fred returned modestly. "Tomorrow I'll probably get a lot of turn-downs. Say, where's Dad?"

"That's what were wondering," Dan replied, glancing at the wall clock. Already Mr. Hatfield had been upstairs more than ten minutes.

"He went after the money box," Brad explained. "I don't know what's keeping him."

At that moment, Mr. Hatfield came hurriedly down the stairway.

The Cubs saw at once that he did not have the money box.

"Fred," his father said, pausing on the bottom step, "you didn't by any chance dig into the lower drawer of my desk?"

"Why, no, father," his son answered in surprise.

"Then the worst has happened. The money box is gone!"

"Gone?" Fred demanded. "How could it be?"

"That's what I can't understand. Unless perhaps your mother put it away somewhere."

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Mr. Hatfield went quickly to the kitchen to talk to his wife. However, as he had feared, she had not removed the box from the desk drawer.

During the conversation, Sergeant Billings had listened without comment. He now asked to inspect the desk in the upstairs study.

"You didn't have the box in a very safe place," he commented. "Apparently, the drawer wasn't even locked."

"It has no key," Mr. Hatfield admitted. "I thought the box would be safe enough until I could turn it over to police."

"How many persons have been in the house since you brought the box here?" the sergeant questioned.

"Well, quite a few. All of the Cubs except Midge. Then Mr. Wilson came."

"And Mr. Brakschmidt," added Brad. "He didn't go upstairs though and neither did Mr. Wilson."

"No one did except the members of my own family," Mr. Hatfield said earnestly. "I know that neither Fred nor my wife touched the box. But what became of it?"

"How much did it contain?"

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"Two thousand, one hundred and seventy-five dollars."

Sergeant Billings whistled softly. "That's a pretty stiff loss. You're sure the box really is lost?"

Mr. Hatfield regarded him in amazement.

"I can't find it, if that's what you mean," he said stiffly. "Or are you implying—?"

"Well, it looks sort of funny," the sergeant replied. "You say the box has been taken, yet there's no evidence anyone broke into the house. Who knew where you hid the box?"

"Only myself."

"I guessed where you put it," interposed Fred.

"But you didn't touch the box?" his father asked.

"No, of course not."

"I assume full responsibility," Mr. Hatfield said in a harassed tone. "I swear I thought the box would be safe here—"

"I'll make a report," Sergeant Billings broke in. "Likely you'll be called to headquarters for further questioning."

"I've already told you everything I know about the matter."

"Yeah," grunted the sergeant. He arose to leave.

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Mr. Hatfield was thoroughly annoyed by the other's tone.

"See here," he said, "I hope you understand I'm not trying to conceal anything. Why should I?"

"Two thousand a hundred and seventy-five dollars," the sergeant repeated thoughtfully. "A tidy little sum."

"You're not implying that I'm trying to keep it?"

"It's not up to me to figure out motives," Sergeant Billings shrugged. "I only ask questions and turn in the reports. If I were in your shoes though, I'd try to produce that box. Otherwise, we'll have to do a little investigating."

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CHAPTER 8

Round Table Plans

Two days had elapsed.

The Cubs were worried and so was Mr. Hatfield.

Twice since the disappearance of the money box, the Cub leader had been called to the police

station.

Each time he had been questioned politely, but detectives made it clear they were not completely satisfied with his answers.

"Three persons have laid claim to that money, and one at least has come fairly close to naming the amount you say was in the box," Mr. Hatfield was informed. "Furthermore, trustees of the church feel the cash should be turned over to them because it was found on church property. Now you say your home wasn't broken into to your knowledge, and yet the box disappeared. It doesn't make sense unless your own son or one of the Cubs—"

"The Cubs, one and all, are honest," Mr. Hatfield retorted firmly. "Anyway, they knew only that I took the box upstairs. I told no one where I hid it. So let's keep them out of this."

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The police had been quite decent about questioning the boys.

Even so, the Cubs felt that they were involved. Dan especially considered that by finding the box he had brought trouble upon Mr. Hatfield and the Den.

"Why did I have to go digging into that coal pile anyway?" he berated himself. "We wouldn't be in this mess except for me."

"Nonsense, Dan," Mr. Hatfield chided. "I'm glad you found the box. Furthermore, we'll not waste valuable time worrying about the matter. The police are free to make any investigation they wish. We'll cooperate."

The Cub leader kept the Cubs so busy they had little time to think much about the missing money box.

In addition to soliciting funds for the church, they worked almost daily on their plans for King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

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Den one in Webster City also would take part in the Crusade program. At the end of the month the two dens expected to unite their efforts for a gigantic knighting ceremony. Prizes were to be awarded the Den putting on the best display of talent.

In a determined effort to beat their rivals, the boys of Den 2 assigned themselves a full schedule of work.

Aided by their mothers, the Cubs constructed armor of cardboard. The carefully cut pieces were painted with aluminum, bronze and gold.

Red and Chips decked themselves out in mesh-type trappings, fashioning garments of burlap which they painted in metallic colors.

Next, the Cubs designed shields and mounted cardboard spears on the ends of broomsticks.

"If we have time, I'll make myself a cardboard horse," Brad announced. "Also, we ought to have some painted banners to hang on the walls. Then this place will look like a regular knight's hall."

Temporarily, the Cubs were using the church

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study as a meeting place. When the weather turned warm again in the Spring, they planned to resume sessions in their own quarters, the cave high over the river.

Brad had made his own suit of armor by sewing small roofing discs onto burlap. The Cubs, frankly envious, acknowledged the job as the best turned out.

"I could make a good suit too if I had some of those discs," Midge Holloway remarked. "Where'd you buy 'em, Brad?"

"I didn't. Saw a bunch of 'em lying on the ground near a new house that's being built. I asked the contractor if I could have 'em and he said I could."

"Say, are there any more of those discs?" Dan demanded eagerly.

"I guess so. I didn't take them all."

"I want some," piped up Babe.

"So do I," Chips chimed in. "Lead us to 'em, Brad."

"It's a long hike from here," the older boy replied dubiously. "Fact is, to get there we'd have to hike a couple of miles, going and coming. It's right at the edge of the marsh."

This information temporarily dampened the enthusiasm of the Cubs. Then Dan spoke up.

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"Well, why don't we go? It's a good day for a hike. If we had more of those roof discs, we could turn out armor that would look like the real thing."

"And we might win first prize!" Fred said, his interest kindling. "What do you think about it, Dad?"

"Let's take it to a vote," his father returned. "All in favor of the hike, say Aye."

Every Cub voted to go.

"When do we start?" Dan asked impatiently. "If we don't make it today, those discs may be gone."

"That's right," Brad agreed. "Even when I was there, not many were kicking around."

"Brad, you're sure it's all right to take the discs?" Mr. Hatfield asked.

"Yes, the contractor told me I might have all that were lying around."

Reassured, the Cub leader agreed with the boys that no time should be lost in hiking to the site.

"We might have a weiner roast too," he proposed. "On the way, we'll pass a store and can buy anything we want."

The Cubs quickly put away cardboard and paint. All were dressed warmly enough for the hike except Babe who had to be sent home for sturdy shoes and a heavier jacket.

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The youngster was back at the church in ten minutes, however, his pockets bulging.

"Now what have you got?" Chips asked him suspiciously.

Babe grinned and produced several crushed cookies and an apple.

"You and your appetite," Chips muttered, shaking his head. "Why don't you grow up?"

Babe refused to take offense. "I thought I might get hungry on the way," he defended himself.

"You're always hungry," Chips retorted. "If you'd spend less time feeding your face and more time studying the rule book, maybe you'd be promoted to Wolf Rank."

"Cut it out, Chips," advised Brad, who had overheard the remark. "Babe is catching onto Cub ways fast. I'll wager he'll be a Wolf before another certain Wolf I know moves on up to Bear rank."

"Now who's rubbing it in?" Chips complained. "I'm working hard and you know it!"

"Sure, sure," Brad said, giving him a friendly clap on the back. "Only maybe you ought to dig in a little harder on those elective requirements before you toss stones at anyone else."

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Despite the lateness of the season, the day was a pleasant one. Selecting Highway 23, the Cubs, led by Brad and Mr. Hatfield, soon set off in the direction of the marsh.

Their way skirted a built-up area near the city limits. A short distance beyond, they passed a sparsely settled section where a few new houses were in process of construction.

"How much farther?" Babe asked, limping along beside Brad.

He had attached himself like a puppy to the older boy, but found it impossible to imitate his smooth, easy gait.

"We're almost there now," Brad encouraged him. "Guess you aren't used to hiking, are you?"

"My feet hurt."

"Sure, and why wouldn't they, with those tight shoes? Better get yourself some that fit, Babe. The Cubs do a lot of hiking."

"Say, when do we eat?" demanded Red. The brisk walk had made him very hungry.

"Well, we could have the roast before we gather discs," Brad said, glancing over the terrain. "It's for the fellows to decide."

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"All in favor—" shouted Red.

Every Cub voted to halt then and there and build their fire.

Mr. Hatfield selected a suitable place at the edge of the marsh, not far from the road. Under his direction, the boys cleared away dry leaves and debris to insure that the fire could not spread.

While the Cubs roasted weiners on long sticks over the coals, Mr. Hatfield again talked over plans for the coming Round Table jamboree.

"The Pack has chosen a motto or code of honor for this month," he told the boys. "It is this: 'BE ALWAYS READY.'"

"I'm ready right now—for another weiner!" laughed Midge, reaching into the sack Mr. Hatfield had brought along.

"I guess you meant the code in a more serious sense, didn't you, Mr. Hatfield?" Dan asked.

"That's right, Dan. Knights of old always were ready to defend those who could not help themselves. They were prepared to fight in the defense of liberty."

"Cubs can't fight real battles," protested Chips.

"Moral battles are very real ones," the Cub leader corrected. "We must strive always to maintain honor—never to allow our names to be blackened."

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"Isn't that what the cops are trying to do now?" Chips demanded before he stopped to think how the question might sound. "They're making such a fuss about that old money box—"

Brad, who sat next to the boy, gave him a quick jab in the ribs.

Mr. Hatfield, however, did not take offense.

"I'm glad you brought up the matter of the money box, Chips," he said quietly. "The police are not trying to blacken my name. Quite the contrary. Their job is to investigate. I have complete confidence that they can bring to light no information which will discredit either myself or any Cub Scout."

Their meal finished, the boys now cleared away the litter. Brad and Mr. Hatfield not only stamped out the dying coals, but for safety covered them with loose dirt.

"Notice that old farmhouse," Dan remarked, pointing to an unpainted, tumble-down dwelling visible some distance away. "Wonder if anyone lives there?"

"It looks deserted," Brad agreed.

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The house was a gloomy, two-story structure with sagging porches. Roof shingles curled and the brick foundation had partly given away.

"Maybe that place has a ghost!" Midge suggested with a laugh. "Let's go over and find out!"

"I thought we came out here for roofing discs," Brad reminded him. "If we start off on a wild goose chase—"

"A ghost chase," Midge corrected. "Oh, the house can wait. But it does look interesting. After we get the discs, let's find out if anyone lives there."

"Fair enough," Brad agreed. "If we don't start moving, we won't even get our discs for armor. It will be turning dark before long."

Made aware that the sun fast was lowering, the Cubs walked briskly on to the cleared area where four new houses had been built. All were

boarded up for their interiors had not been completed. None were occupied.

"Now you're certain it's all right to take the discs?" Mr. Hatfield asked Brad doubtfully. "We don't want to get into any trouble."

"The contractor said I could have them all. I only took enough for my own suit of armor."

"In that case, go to it, boys," Mr. Hatfield said. "While you're gathering discs, I'll look at the houses."

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The discs were scattered over a large area, half buried in the moist earth.

Brad helped Babe, who was less agile than his companions. With six boys and a scarcity of metal discs it became a race to see who would get enough for a suit of armor.

"If we come out short, maybe we can buy a few at a roofing supply place," Dan commented. "Here's another!"

In reaching to pick it up from amid a pile of boards and broken brick, he noticed that the cellar door of one of the houses stood slightly ajar.

"Say, fellows!" he exclaimed. "This house is unlocked!"

"Then we can go through it!" shouted Chips, hurrying over.

"Hold on!" Brad stopped him. "These houses are supposed to be locked. I had permission to take discs—not to lead a mob through any of the buildings."

"Oh, it won't hurt just to peek inside," Chips protested.

Before Brad could stop him, the boy shoved open the door.

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"Chips!" Brad shouted furiously.

But the boy needed no additional warning. Already he had been effectively halted.

As the door swung outward, a figure loomed up before him.

Chips was so astonished at seeing anyone in the house, he could only stare. The man was stoutish and wore soiled, wrinkled clothes. A stubble of beard gave his face a shadowy appearance.

More than anything else, Chips was made aware of the dark eyes which seemed to bore directly into him.

"I—I beg your pardon," he mumbled, gathering his wits. "I—I didn't know anyone was in the house."

"Who are you?" the man demanded harshly.

"A Cub Scout. We're all Cubs." Chips was grateful that the other boys were behind him, gathering closer. "We're here picking up roof discs."

"Well, beat it!" the man said curtly. "You have no business on the property. Get moving!"

Before Chips or the other Cubs could make any reply, he slammed the basement door in their faces.

[85]

CHAPTER 9

A "Deserted" House

"Well, how do you like that?" Dan muttered as the Cubs gathered in a group near the newly constructed house.

"Who was he, Brad?" Midge asked the Den Chief. "Not the contractor?"

"No, I never saw this fellow before—although his voice sounded sort of familiar."

"Maybe he's one of the workmen," Red said uneasily. "After all, we are on private property."

"I had permission to come here for those discs," Brad insisted. "Furthermore, I don't believe that fellow was a workman. He didn't talk like one."

"Or look like it either," added Chips. Of all the Cubs, he was the only one who had obtained a clear view of the man.

"You didn't know him, did you?" Dan inquired.

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Chips shook his head. "Never set eyes on him before. You know what I think? He's a tramp!"

"Say, he did look like one!" Babe cried, although he had been too far back to catch more than a glimpse of the shadowy figure.

"And I bet a cookie he has no business being in this house!" Chips went on excitedly. "The nerve of him ordering us away! Why, he may have broken in and be living there!"

"Without the contractor or the owner knowing anything about it," agreed Dan soberly. "Say, we ought to tell Mr. Hatfield about this."

At that moment, the Cub leader joined the group. He had been too far away to see the stranger or to hear any of the conversation. However, from the excited comment of the boys, he knew something was amiss.

"What goes on?" he asked, hurrying up.

Brad told him what had happened.

"I'm certain the man isn't a workman," he added. "We think he must be a tramp who broke into the house and is camping there."

Mr. Hatfield noted a nearby sign which bore the name and telephone number of the contractor who had built the dwellings.

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"I'll telephone him as soon as we get back to Webster City," he announced. "These houses are supposed to be boarded up. We have no authority to order anyone away, so we'll just clear out."

The Cubs knew that their leader's advice was sound. However, they disliked to be driven away

from the premises.

"Gather up your discs, fellows, and let's move," Brad told the Cubs. "It's getting late anyhow."

In the act of tying his plunder into a knapsack made from his sweater, Dan glanced toward the basement window of the new house.

"Look, Brad!" he commanded. "That guy's standing there watching us!"

"I don't like it," the older boy muttered. "Mr. Hatfield's right. This is no place for us."

"We ought to be a match for him."

"That's not the point," Brad argued. "For all we may know, he might be a criminal—armed. He looks like a tough customer."

"Face is sort of familiar too," Dan said thoughtfully. "Where have I seen him before?"

"Nowhere that I recall."

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"I've seen him some place," Dan insisted, "or at least he's someone that reminds me of—I got it!"

"You've got what?" Brad demanded.

"I know where we saw that fellow!"

"We?"

"Sure! Don't you recall that night of the rain storm—on our way to the church?"

"The stranger who asked us what was going on there!"

"That's the guy!"

Brad glanced quickly toward the window. The man however, had stepped back beyond view.

"He reminds me a little of that fellow, Dan," the Den Chief said thoughtfully. "All the same, I wouldn't say it's the same person."

"Well, they look alike," Dan insisted. "I didn't care much for the fellow's appearance when we met him in the rain."

"Coming boys?" called Mr. Hatfield.

Dismissing the stranger from their minds, Brad and Dan hastened to catch up with the other Cubs.

As they hiked toward the main road, Mr. Hatfield mentioned again that he would call the contractor as soon as he arrived at home.

"I want to tell him that we picked up the roofing discs," he said. "I'm sure it's all right, but we'll double check. Then I'll tell him about that tramp in the house."

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"He could do considerable damage," Red remarked. "Why, he might even start a fire that would destroy the house."

"Say! We haven't forgotten about exploring the haunted house, have we?" Chips suddenly demanded.

From the main road a weed-choked, narrow lane led toward the unpainted house which stood on

a curving rise of land. Shutters hung at rakish angles and the place had every appearance of being deserted.

"Do we have time?" Mr. Hatfield asked, looking at his watch.

"Oh, it won't take more than a minute!" Chips insisted.

"Sometimes your minutes are pretty long, Chips," the Cub leader laughed.

The other boys also were eager to inspect the old house, so finally Mr. Hatfield consented.

"This would be a spooky place at night," Midge declared as they started up the lane. "I'd hate to live so near the marsh. Imagine building new houses out here."

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"Land is cheap in this area," Mr. Hatfield explained. "Then, Webster City is growing to the south. In a few years, this section may be built up solidly."

The land near the old house was ragged with frosted stubble growth. Some distance away ran a tiny creek, screened by reeds and rushes.

"Must be good hunting and fishing around here," Brad remarked.

Walking over broken, uneven ground the Cubs approached the dilapidated house. Its windows, streaked with dirt from the recent rain, seem to stare at them.

"Wonder how long this place has been deserted?" Dan speculated.

"Not long, that's certain," replied Mr. Hatfield, glancing about the untidy yard. "In fact, I wonder—"

"Oh, look at the old fashioned iron kettle!" Chips broke in without giving the Cub leader an opportunity to complete his remark. "And the old well that turns on a crank."

"It's not the well that turns on a crank, bright boy!" Red laughed.

[91]

"Well, you know what I mean," Chips growled. "That's how the bucket is lifted. Let's have a drink."

"Better not," advised Mr. Hatfield. "This water may be safe enough, but we have no way of being sure."

The Cubs raised and lowered the well bucket several times, but did not drink. Dan went over to look at the big iron kettle which in days past evidently had been used for the boiling of apple sauce or maple sirup.

To his surprise, he noted that the ashes beneath the blackened container were faintly warm.

"Say, maybe this place isn't deserted after all!" he exclaimed in alarm. "Someone's been using this kettle recently."

Babe Bunning, unmindful of Dan's discovery, had pulled a box to a position beneath the kitchen window.

Flattening his nose against the pane, he peered inside.

"And someone's been using this house!" the boy entoned. "In fact, she's right here NOW!"

[92]

CHAPTER 10

Widow Jones

In confusion, Babe backed away from the kitchen window.

The other Cubs also were embarrassed, for they had not intended to investigate an occupied dwelling.

"Gee whiz!" Babe muttered. "Here she comes! I'll bet she's sore!"

The kitchen door creaked open and the mysterious "she" stood on the threshold regarding the boys with curiosity rather than anger.

Tall and wiry, the woman appeared to be about fifty years of age. Her iron-gray hair was combed severely back from her ears. The gingham dress she wore was old fashioned and faded from repeated washing.

"I—I'm sorry," Babe stammered, doffing his cap. "I—I didn't know anyone lived here. The house looked so old and—"

[93]

"We were just passing and stopped to look at the deep well," Brad interposed hastily. "One doesn't see one like it very often."

"Or a house as run down as this," said the woman.

Plainly she had not taken offense at Babe's remark, for she smiled and said: "You boys must be on a hike."

Mr. Hatfield told her about the organization and introduced the boys by name. In turn, the woman said she was Mrs. Jones, a widow, and that she lived alone.

"If you're Mrs. Jones, you must be the one Mr. Wentworth mentioned!" Dan exclaimed, recalling the name. "Do you board wards of the court?"

"I was supposed to take one—a harum-scarum lad who has a tendency to run away," Mrs. Jones replied. "The Court promised me eight dollars a week to look after him. I need the money. But he never showed up."

"That's because he ran away again," Dan informed the widow. "Police still are looking for him."

"Like as not he wouldn't want to stay here anyway," Mrs. Jones said, her gaze sweeping the untidy yard. "There's so much to be done, and no one to do it except me."

[94]

"I should think a sturdy boy would be a help to you here," remarked Mr. Hatfield. "And an

outdoor life might be just what Jack needs. With a woods and marsh nearby, he could interest himself in wild life which he seems to enjoy."

"That's what Mr. Wentworth thought," nodded the widow. "He said several city boarding places have been tried, and each time Jack runs away."

"The boy needs strict discipline but from someone who has an interest in his welfare."

"I've always liked boys—even so-called bad ones," Mrs. Jones declared. "Jack would have good food here and a comfortable bed. The house isn't much, but after all, it's what's in it that counts."

The widow, who wore no wrap, was shivering from cold. Aware that they were keeping her, the Cubs started away.

But as they started off, Mr. Hatfield thought to speak of the tramp who had been seen at the group of new houses.

"Since you live here alone, it might be well to lock your doors at night," the Cub leader advised. "While the fellow probably is harmless, one never knows."

[95]

Mrs. Jones thanked him for the warning. "I'll do as you advise," she said, "but I've never been afraid. It's not in my blood to be afeared of anyone or anything."

The Cubs apologized again for having trespassed upon her property.

"Now you boys just come here whenever you like," she invited cordially. "Next time maybe I'll have some cookies handy in my jar. Growing boys always are hungry. I know, because I had three of 'em. They're grown men now."

A lonely soul, Mrs. Jones would have chatted on and on. The Cubs, however, already were late. So they edged away, waved a final goodbye, and trudged back to the main road.

"That should cure us of peeking into windows," Brad lectured Babe. "She was mighty nice about it, but she could have jumped all over us."

"How was I to know anyone lived there?" Babe defended himself. "You thought yourself the house was empty."

"That's so," Brad admitted honestly. "Mrs. Jones must be as poor as a church mouse. She needs that board money badly."

[96]

"And Jack needs someone like Mrs. Jones to take an interest in him," added Mr. Hatfield. "She is firm but kind."

"Imagine living in a place like that!" Chips commented with distaste. "It's a dump."

"The inside is clean and not badly furnished," informed the Cub leader. "I noticed when she had the door open. As for the outside, the windows could be washed and the rubbish cleaned up in a few hours."

"Say, maybe that's a job for the Cubs!" proposed Brad. "We're supposed to give neighborhood good will. What better way?"

"That yard has a lot of rubbish," Chips said quickly. "It would take more than a few hours—maybe half a day."

"And we're pretty busy soliciting for the church campaign," added Red. "Not to mention our plans for the Round Table jamboree."

"It was just a suggestion," Brad shrugged. "Only I thought the widow seems to need help."

"I'd like to do it," offered Dan. "I could spare a Saturday afternoon."

"So could I," volunteered Fred. "How about you, Midge?"

[97]

"Count me in. While we're clearing away the trash, we might find some things we could use for knight's armor. I noticed a lot of old tin and metal lying around. Also some wheels and things."

"Let's make it Saturday then," proposed Brad. "If Red and Chips can't come, why that's all right."

"Oh, I can make it, I guess," Red back-tracked.

Chips, not to be left out on any Den affair, said he would be on hand too.

The Cubs had spent more time than they had intended exploring the countryside. With a glance at his watch, Mr. Hatfield warned that they would have to walk briskly if they were to reach home in time for supper.

"Maybe we can hook a ride!" Midge suggested. "Here comes a truck. Let's signal the driver."

Despite his frantic hand waving, the truck rolled on past. However, a quarter of a mile farther on, the hikers observed a familiar appearing station wagon coming toward them.

"Say, that looks like my Dad's car!" exclaimed Midge.

He was right. A moment later, with a screech of brakes, the station wagon halted at the side of the road.

[98]

"Hey, you're going in the wrong direction!" Midge called to his father.

"I'll turn around," Mr. Holloway offered. "I heard you boys were out this way on a hike. The weather's turning colder, so I thought you might like a lift back into town. Of course if you prefer to walk—"

A hoot of derision greeted this remark. The Cubs waited until Mr. Holloway had turned the station wagon around on the narrow road, and then piled in.

Midge, Dan and Mr. Hatfield sat in the front with the Den Dad. The others crowded into the rear, stowing their collection of roofing discs at their feet.

"It's sure swell to catch a ride," Dan said gratefully. "My dogs were beginning to ache me."

In the rear of the station wagon, the other Cubs broke into song, making further conversation all

but impossible.

The car presently approached the outskirts of Webster City. At the lefthand side of the road, Mr. Holloway noticed a boy trudging wearily along the edge of the pavement.

"Maybe I should give him a lift," he remarked, slowing the station wagon. "He appears tired."

Dan thought that the boy looked faintly familiar. He could not place him though. [99]

However, as Mr. Holloway brought the station wagon to a standstill only a few yards away from the pedestrian, he caught a full view of his face.

"It's that boy Jack!" he exclaimed.

"Not the one who escaped from Guy Wentworth?" Mr. Hatfield demanded incredulously.

"I'm sure of it."

"It does look like him," the Cub leader acknowledged. Quickly he added: "Boys, don't let on that you suspect a thing or ever have seen the lad before. If we play our cards right, we may be able to take him back where he belongs." [100]

CHAPTER 11 "Do Your Best"

Mr. Holloway waited until the runaway boy came alongside the station wagon.

"How about a lift into town?" he called cheerfully.

The boy hesitated. His clothes were unpresed, his hair uncombed. Plainly he had been sleeping wherever he could find a bed or a haystack.

"No, thanks," he muttered, starting to turn away.

"Oh, come on, you look as if you're tired," Mr. Holloway urged. He swung open the door of the station wagon.

Jack gazed curiously at the Cubs. Apparently however, he did not remember either Dan or Brad, if indeed he had noticed them on the night of the rain storm. [101]

Finally, reassured by the friendly faces of the Cubs, Jack slid into the front seat between Mr. Holloway and Mr. Hatfield. Dan made room for him by perching himself on the Cub leader's knees, his body blocking off the door.

"Going far?" Mr. Holloway asked the boy, as he drove on.

"Just into Webster City," the other replied reluctantly.

"Glad to give you a lift," Mr. Holloway said, deliberately trying to stimulate conversation. "Which school do you attend?"

"Not any right now," the boy muttered. He squirmed uneasily.

"You don't like school, I take it?"

"Not very much. I'd rather be outdoors."

"Schooling though, is a mighty useful thing," Mr. Holloway continued. "It helps one get a better job and appreciate the good things of life."

"The good things of life!" Jack repeated with a snort. "That's a laugh!"

"You speak as if you've had a tough time." Mr. Holloway deliberately was trying to draw the boy out.

[102]

"Oh, I ain't complaining," Jack returned. "I've learned to get along."

"I can see that," Mr. Holloway said dryly. "But you don't seem too happy. This is the time of your life when you should be having a good time—playing football, ice skating, all the sports."

A flash of interest illuminated Jack's face. But it was gone in an instant, to be replaced by a look of suspicion.

"Say, what you handing me?" he demanded. "And who are all these kids?"

"Cub Scouts," explained Dan. At the other's blank expression, he explained: "It's an organization for boys who aren't quite old enough to be Boy Scouts. We have a lot of fun while we're doing helpful things."

"Our motto is: 'Always Do Your Best,'" Mr. Hatfield supplied. "Most of the boys do exactly that."

"Sounds sort of sappy to me," Jack said with a half-sneer. "Who wants to go around with a halo, always looking for good things to do?"

"It's more than that," Dan defended the organization. "We have a lot of secret codes and things. Right now we're getting ready to have a big Pack gathering based on the Knights of the Round Table. We're making coats of armor."

[103]

Despite himself, Jack was interested. But he tried not to show it.

"Kid stuff," he scoffed. "You wouldn't catch me being a Cub Scout. Every time you turn around, I bet someone tells you what you have to do."

"That isn't so," Dan denied. "Mr. Hatfield is our leader. Brad is the Den Chief, and I'm the Denner. Naturally, we make suggestions sometimes that the other fellows carry out. But we aren't bossy about it."

"Cubs nevertheless are required to obey orders and follow the rules," Mr. Hatfield said quietly. "Society is built upon regulations. Otherwise one would have chaos."

"When one person defies or disregards rules, it means hardship for someone else," added Burton Holloway, driving home the point.

"To heck with the rules!" laughed Jack. "That's my motto."

"I fear such an attitude may bring you to serious trouble one of these days," Mr. Holloway remarked with concern. "Better get on the beam, my boy."

"Say, I don't like these sweetness and light lectures," Jack said, his suspicions reviving. "Why'd you pick me up anyhow? You ain't a plainclothes detective?"

[104]

"No, Jack."

"You know my name!"

"Yes, Jack, we do. You're a runaway from the Child Study Institute."

Mr. Holloway now felt fairly safe in revealing his knowledge, for the station wagon approached the Institute.

As he pulled alongside the gray stone building, his young passenger recognized the familiar structure.

"You tricked me!" he shouted furiously.

His elbow gouging Dan, he tried to push open the car door.

"Let me out of here!" he cried.

"No, Jack!" Mr. Hatfield said, holding him firmly by the arm. "You ran away and you must be returned here. I'm sorry."

Jack fought like a wildcat for a minute or two, but found himself quite helpless in the grip of the two men.

"What'll you gain?" he demanded bitterly. "I'll run away again! I'll run away a thousand times! You can't keep me. No one can."

[105]

"You're only cheating yourself," Mr. Holloway told him. "Can't you understand we're only trying to help you? So is Mr. Wentworth and the other men at the CSI. The Court is your friend."

"That's a laugh!"

"If you keep on the way you've started, you'll end up in a boys' reformatory," Sam Hatfield warned. "That, I can assure you, will be no fun. On the other hand, if you act sensibly and make an honest effort to cooperate, the CSI officials may give you another chance."

"Another chance for what?"

"You enjoy the outdoors, Jack. Well, I happen to know that Guy Wentworth was taking you to the home of a Mrs. Jones. The place isn't fancy and you'd have to work."

"Oh, sure!"

"But the house is at the edge of the woods, close to the marsh. You could fish in summer time, trap in the winter and maybe earn a little money."

"Like fun they'd let me do anything I wanted to!"

"I think it could be arranged, Jack. If you'll give your word to make an honest effort to get along with Mrs. Jones, I'll talk to Guy Wentworth in your behalf. How about it?"

[106]

Jack did not answer for a long moment. "Maybe I will," he said reluctantly. "I don't know—it's a lot to promise."

"And a promise always should be kept," Mr. Hatfield stressed. "That's the way it is with the Cubs. Once given, a promise never may be broken."

"Well, I'm not a Cub," Jack said defiantly. "I'm not anything."

"You could be a Cub, Jack. You could be anything you set your mind to, for you're a smart youngster with courage and determination. Well, what do you say?"

"What do I have to promise?"

"To go out to Widow Jones' place if the court elects to return you there. Just promise to do your best, and treat her squarely. The same way she'll treat you."

"Okay, I'll give it a try," Jack agreed. "You got me in a tight spot."

"No, Jack," Mr. Hatfield corrected. "You've been in a tight spot for many years. I don't want you to feel that you're being pressured into anything. This decision must be your own."

"I gave my promise, didn't I?" Jack growled, squirming uncomfortably.

[107]

"And you mean it?"

"Course. Want me to swear on a Bible or something?"

"No, Jack. We'll just shake hands on that promise. The Cub handclasp, with two fingers extended. Here, I'll show you."

The Cub leader demonstrated the grip used by the other boys. Then he swung open the car door, and motioned for Jack to step out. He made no further effort to hold the boy.

Dan and the other Cubs watched anxiously, fearful lest Jack make a bolt for freedom.

The boy seemed to be thinking of it, for he gazed up and down the nearly deserted street. Then, he drew a deep breath and faced Mr. Hatfield.

"Come on," he growled. "Let's get it over with."

The two entered the Child Study Institute together.

Mr. Hatfield was gone more than twenty minutes. Eagerly the Cubs awaited his report.

"I had quite a talk with Guy Wentworth," he said. "At first he was inclined to give the boy the works, but I convinced him otherwise."

"Will Jack be sent to Mrs. Jones' place?" Dan questioned.

[108]

"That's the plan, if she's still willing to take him. Mr. Wentworth has agreed Jack may have this last chance to settle down and make good. If he runs away again, though, it means the state reformatory for him."

"Do you think Mrs. Jones can handle him?"

asked Burton Holloway as he started the engine of the station wagon. "Jack needs a firm hand."

"She can manage him if anyone can," Mr. Hatfield replied confidently. "Furthermore, she needs money. It will make an ideal arrangement, providing Jack doesn't let us down."

Mr. Holloway dropped the boys off at their various homes.

"I'll take you home next," he said to Mr. Hatfield, when all of the passengers had been disposed of except his own son Midge, and Dan.

"I can walk from Mr. Hatfield's place," the latter offered. "It's only a step."

As the station wagon pulled up in front of his home, Mr. Hatfield noted at once that a black car with the numeral 145 stood at the curb.

"That looks like a police car," Dan commented.

"Which means I'm in for another siege of questioning," the Cub leader sighed. With Dan, he alighted from the station wagon. "I'm trying to cooperate, but I've already told police everything I know about the money box."

[109]

"Well, good luck," Mr. Holloway said cheerfully, shifting gears. "Don't let it get you down."

The station wagon drove off down the street. Dan started to say goodbye to Mr. Hatfield. Before he could leave however, two police officers came out of the house.

"I'm Captain Eggleston," one of the men introduced himself. He spoke directly to the Cub leader. "You're Mr. Hatfield?"

"That's right."

"We'd like to talk to you."

"I'll be glad to answer your questions," Mr. Hatfield replied politely. "However, it seems pointless to keep going over the same ground. I've told everything I know about the missing money box."

"We still have a few questions to ask," Captain Eggleston replied. "In fact, we have some new evidence."

"New evidence?"

"May we talk to you inside the house?"

"Certainly," responded Mr. Hatfield, somewhat puzzled by the serious attitude of the police.

[110]

As he started to accompany the two men, Dan turned away.

"Aren't you the boy who found the box at the church?" Captain Eggleston asked him.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you may as well stick around," the captain advised. "We may have a few questions to fire at you too!"

[111]

CHAPTER 12

A Pair of Legs

Feeling almost as if he were a suspect in a crime case, Dan followed Mr. Hatfield and the two police officers into the house.

Captain Eggleston began the interview by asking routine questions of both Dan and Mr. Hatfield. Then abruptly he announced that a check had been made of the car license number noted down by the Cubs on the night of the heavy rain storm.

"The automobile belongs to Frank Jankowski, a salesman for the V. H. Everetts Hardware Co.," he informed.

"Mr. Jankowski!" Dan exclaimed.

"Obviously, the boys were mistaken in thinking that the car was following us," Mr. Hatfield said. "Imagination plays strange tricks on the mind. I thought myself—at least for a while—that we were being followed."

"You've given us several false steers in this investigation," Captain Eggleston said rather severely. "What are you trying to hide?"

[112]

The question irritated Mr. Hatfield. He tried not to show resentment and kept his voice controlled as he replied:

"Absolutely nothing."

"You say you placed the money box in the drawer of your desk?"

"That is correct."

"You considered it a safe place?"

"Safe enough. If I hadn't, I'd have made other disposition of the box."

"Why did you delay in calling police?"

"We've gone over all that before," Mr. Hatfield said wearily. "It was late, and frankly, I was tired. I didn't feel equal to a long harangue with police until I was more rested. So I waited until morning."

"The first discovery that the box was gone was when police arrived here?"

"That is correct."

"And to your knowledge, no one entered or left the house in the meantime?"

"My wife was here, of course. I don't recall anyone else, unless one of the Cubs dropped in."

[113]

"No woman?"

"Not so far as I know." Mr. Hatfield was amazed by the question. He could tell that Captain Eggleston was leading up to a climax, but what it was he could not guess.

The police officer withdrew an ornamental button from his pocket. Carelessly, he dropped it on the table.

Dan noticed that the button was an unusual one of black jet, cut in a diamond shape.

"Ever see that before?" Captain Eggleston asked.

"I don't think so," Mr. Hatfield replied, examining the button minutely. "Why?"

"Your wife allowed us to examine the study again. We found this button in the drawer where she said you had kept the tin box."

"It looks like a button from a woman's dress. But I don't recall that my wife has one with jet fasteners."

"So she said." Captain Eggleston picked up the button and dropped it into his pocket again. "The button may or may not be a clue. It's not much to go on in any case."

"You think the box may have been taken by a woman?" Mr. Hatfield asked in amazement.

[114]

"This button is the only thing that points in that direction. It may have been in the drawer for a long while."

"I never saw it before. At least I never noticed it."

The policemen at last seemed to accept Mr. Hatfield's word that he had told them everything he knew about the disappearance. They asked Dan a few routine questions and finally left.

"I'll be jogging along too," Dan said. "If I don't get a move on, I'll be late for supper."

"Don't forget your roofing discs," Mr. Hatfield reminded him. "See you tomorrow. Meanwhile, don't worry about the money. Sooner or later, police will turn up a clue."

On his way to the door, Dan asked the Cub leader if he thought the jet button had any real significance.

"I can't see it myself," Mr. Hatfield replied. "Though how the button came to be in the desk is a puzzle too. This whole thing is a headache."

"It was my fault for finding the box in the first place."

Mr. Hatfield laughed and clapped Dan on the back. "Now, none of that talk, Dan!" he chided. "We'll get the thing straightened out. Forget about it and let me do the worrying."

[115]

Despite the Cub leader's admonition, Dan could not drive thoughts of the tin box from his mind.

That night, from his father, he learned that it was generally known in Webster City that the Cubs had found the box. Furthermore, a number of thoughtless persons were criticizing Mr. Hatfield for not having taken better care of the money.

"It's awkward that several people have put in a claim to the cash," his father added.

"At least two of 'em must be fake claims, Dad."

"I'd judge so," agreed his father. "But to prove it may not be easy."

On the following day, the Cubs met briefly at the church to compare notes on how they were making their suits of armor.

Mrs. Hatfield and Mrs. Holloway both were there to help the boys with the work. Brad was the only one who had finished his suit. In a burst of enthusiasm he had gone ahead, making a cardboard horse which could be worn over his shoulders.

"We ought to have the best Round Table of any of the Dens," Dan declared, his enthusiasm at high pitch.

[116]

At that moment Babe uttered a loud wail. In the act of painting a coat of arms on a banner, he had upset a can of red paint.

"Dope!" Chips scolded the younger boy. "Why don't you watch what you're doing?"

"I'm sorry," Babe mumbled. "I accidentally kicked the can with my feet."

"Just look what you've done to the carpet. The church will be making us pay for it! The trustees will say the Cubs are just a bunch of careless babies who destroy property."

"I *am not* a baby," the younger boy said furiously. "It was an accident."

"Of course it was," interposed Mrs. Hatfield. "One we're quite prepared for too!"

While the Cubs watched in admiration, she wiped up the paint, and cleaned the carpet with turpentine.

"There, every trace is gone," she assured the crestfallen Babe. "Chips, a knight should practice chivalry, don't you think?"

"What's that?" he demanded suspiciously.

"It means being polite and courteous to others."

"Well, Babe was awkward," said Chips angrily.

[117]

"So are we all at times, Chips. Speaking of a Knight's code of honor, our Den should have one. Any suggestions?"

"We already have one rule," Dan recalled. "Be Always Ready."

"Let's work out some others," suggested Mrs. Hatfield. "Everyone think hard."

"Keep away from deep water!" Red offered eagerly.

Several of the Cubs snickered. Mrs. Hatfield, however, nodded her head approvingly.

"An excellent safety rule, Red. I think, though, we may find others which fit in a little better with knighthood."

"Knights did a lot of fighting," Midge said reflectively.

"Which leads us to this thought," suggested Mrs. Hatfield. "Be prepared always to fight in defense of right, or your own country."

"How about doing good for others?" proposed

Brad.

"Excellent. Now we have three rules for our knights to follow: 'Be Always Ready. Be Prepared. And Do Good Unto Others.'"

"They're easy rules to remember," Dan said. "But to follow 'em may not be quite so simple."

[118]

The Cubs worked a while longer on their armor. As they began to grow tired, Mrs. Hatfield said it was time to break up the meeting. Before the Cubs left the church, she reminded them to keep working on their pledge list for the building fund.

"The money isn't coming in as fast as we'd like," she declared. "We're especially short from the persons we expected to give fairly large amounts. So during the next few days dig in and really do your best."

Dan and Brad were the last to leave, lingering behind to help Mrs. Hatfield and Mrs. Holloway clean up the litter.

"I guess you meant us, Mrs. Hatfield," Brad remarked as they closed the church doors. "Dan and I haven't been very lucky in signing up our best prospects. Especially Mr. Merrimac."

"You've worked hard I know," she praised him. "All the same, it might be worth while to call on Mr. Merrimac again. He might change his mind if you use your best powers of persuasion."

"I doubt that, knowing him," Brad replied gloomily. "We can try though."

After leaving Mrs. Hatfield, the two boys walked on to the Merrimac home. Neither of them had any enthusiasm for the interview ahead.

[119]

"Well, let's get it over with," Brad sighed, as he shoved hard on the doorbell. "He can't do any worse than turn us down again."

Mr. Merrimac kept the boys waiting. Repeatedly, Brad jabbed his finger on the doorbell.

"He's in there," Dan insisted. "I can hear him moving around."

"Like as not he's seen us from a window and is hiding out," Brad returned in disgust. "Merrimac is playing hard to get."

Annoyed because the elderly gentleman refused to come to the door, he punched the doorbell two or three times in rapid succession and then gave up.

"Makes me sick," he complained. "Mr. Merrimac at least ought to see us. That's only common courtesy."

In leaving the premises, the boys walked around toward the rear of the house.

"Why, the kitchen window is wide open!" Dan observed in surprise.

Mr. Merrimac, they both knew, was no fresh air fiend. Furthermore, the weather was far too cold for one comfortably to keep a window wide open.

[120]

"That's funny!" Brad said, stopping short. "S-a-y!"

As the two Cubs stared in utter amazement, a pair of legs protruded from the window.

Before either Dan or Brad could recover from astonishment, a man leaped lightly to the ground. Seeing the two boys, he ducked his head and ran toward the alley.

[121]

CHAPTER 13

Hot Biscuits

"Gosh, a thief!" cried Brad, the first to recover from shock. "He's been rifling Mr. Merrimac's place!"

With one accord, he and Dan gave chase to the intruder.

From the start it was a losing race. The man already had put a considerable distance between himself and the Merrimac house.

Long-legged and surprisingly agile for his weight, he continued to gain on Dan and Brad.

Finally, he slipped between two buildings and was completely lost. Winded, the boys halted to consider what next to do.

"Not a chance to catch him now," Brad puffed. "Let's call the police, and then go back to Merrimac's place. He may have slugged that old man."

[122]

"Brad, didn't you think that fellow looked like the tramp we saw out near the marsh?"

"Well, he had the same general build, Dan. I didn't see his face."

"Neither did I. He purposely kept his hat pulled low over his eyes. Heck, just our luck to let him get away! For all we know, he might even be the one who stole the money box."

"That's possible," Brad agreed. "Our best bet is to put police on his trail. If we can furnish a good description, they may be able to pick him up."

Circling the block to make certain the intruder had not emerged elsewhere in the vicinity, the boys sought a policeman. Unable to find one in the neighborhood, they telephoned their report to the Central station.

"Well, that's done," Brad said in relief. "Now let's hustle back to Merrimac's place and find out if the old man's been hurt. I've got a mighty uneasy feeling."

Upon arriving at the Merrimac home a few minutes later, the boys saw that the kitchen window remained wide open.

"Raise me up and I'll look in," Dan proposed.

[123]

Brad lifted him so that he could grab the sill and partly support his own weight.

"See anything?"

"There's no one on the floor. But I can only see the kitchen. Think I should crawl on in?"

Brad was given no opportunity to decide, for just then a hand was laid heavily upon his shoulder.

Startled, he whirled around so suddenly, that his supporting shoulder deprived Dan of a substantial base. The younger boy lost his balance and slipped to the ground.

"What's going on here? Trying to break in, eh?"

Dan and Brad found themselves confronted by Atwood Merrimac. A sack of groceries clutched in one hand, he held Brad with the other as he gazed sternly at the two Cubs.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Merrimac," Brad murmured in relief. "We're glad to see you're all right."

"I can imagine you're glad to see me! Sort of caught you in the act, didn't I?"

Brad and Dan were aghast.

"You don't think—you can't think we were trying to break in!" the latter gasped.

"Unless appearances are deceitful, you gave a first class imitation of it, my lad! How did that window get open?"

[124]

In their anxiety to clear themselves, both boys talked at once.

Mr. Merrimac's wrinkled face softened as he listened.

"So you thought I might have been laid out," he declared in satisfaction. "I didn't know anyone had that much interest in my welfare!"

Then as the full implication of the open window came to him, he added anxiously:

"This makes the second time my house has been entered! I wonder what's missing this time?"

Handing the sack of groceries to Brad, the elderly man unlocked the kitchen door.

"Come in, come in," he invited, as the boys hesitated. "We'll see what's what."

Nothing appeared to have been disturbed in the kitchen. The room however, was in a frightful state of disorder. Mr. Merrimac had not washed the breakfast dishes, and the remains of a meager lunch remained on the white porcelain table.

"I haven't had time to clean up yet today," he apologized. "Living alone makes one fall into careless habits."

With the boys close at his heels, Mr. Merrimac went from room to room. In none was there any evidence that anything had been taken.

[125]

"Everything is exactly as I left it a half hour ago when I went to the grocery store," Mr. Merrimac said in a puzzled tone. "You're sure you saw that fellow crawling out of the window?"

"We not only saw him, we chased him down the

alley," Dan said earnestly. "You believe us, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm not doubting your word. Only it seems strange. Twice in a week my house has been entered. This time you must have driven the thief off."

"That's probably what happened," Brad agreed. "I certainly rang the doorbell hard."

"When your place was entered that other time—you really lost money?" Dan asked hesitatingly.

"Certainly, I did. More than two thousand dollars. I kept it in a tin box in a drawer of the dining room buffet."

Brad and Dan were convinced that the money they had found in the church must belong to Mr. Merrimac rather than to the other claimants. But if such were the case, how could the box ever have been transferred to the church basement? And what had become of it since then?

[126]

"You may be receiving a call from the police any minute," Dan warned the old man. "We called them and reported the thief."

"Drat it, what did you do that for?" Mr. Merrimac exploded. "Haven't I enough trouble without being pestered by officers who'll ask me a hundred questions."

"I'm sorry," Dan apologized. "We didn't know that nothing had been taken. We weren't even sure that you might not have been slugged."

"There! I shouldn't have been so testy," Mr. Merrimac said. "You did the right thing."

Dan and Brad decided that nothing could be gained at the moment by speaking to the old man about the church building pledge. It would be far wiser, they thought, to bring up the matter at another time.

"Come back whenever you feel like it," Mr. Merrimac invited the Cubs as he escorted them to the front door. "I'm always glad to see you."

"Why, thanks, Mr. Merrimac," Dan returned, startled by the elderly man's cordiality.

"Later on, we'll talk about the church building fund," Mr. Merrimac added, apparently guessing why the boys had come. "Losing all that money upset me. If I get it back, I'll not forget you."

[127]

With this promise, Dan and Brad had to content themselves.

All week the Cubs worked on their armor and made preparation for the scheduled Round Table gathering. So enthusiastic were all the Cubs, that it had been decided, not only Den 2, but the entire Pack comprised of three Webster City dens, would take part.

Nearly every morning before school, Dan was up early making articles which could be used at the grand knighting ceremony.

"I'm glad to see you painting and making designs," his mother praised his work. "I wish though, you'd conduct your creative experiments

outdoors. Fresh paint doesn't go well with the pattern of the kitchen linoleum!"

Dan took the hint and used the back porch for his work.

One morning while the dew was still heavy on the ground, he was painting a triangular banner to hang on the back of a ceremonial chair. Dan brushed on two red diamonds and then experimented with a few bright blue "X" marks sprinkled at random over the surface.

[128]

"Hard at work?" inquired a friendly voice.

Dan glanced up to see the milkman looking over his shoulder. He had not heard the wagon drive up.

"Sure," Dan grinned, moving aside so the man could reach the milk box at the doorstep. "I'm getting ready for the big Cub Scout knighting ceremony we're to have at the church."

"The Cubs really do a lot of interesting things," replied the milkman. He slipped two bottles into the box and gathered up the empties. "I read the other day how the Cubs found some money—say, weren't you the one who turned up that tin box?"

"Guilty," agreed Dan. "I almost wish I hadn't found it too! So many persons have put in a claim. Then to make matters worse, the box disappeared again."

"I read about that too. Some neighbors of Mr. Hatfield told me the police gave him a pretty rough going over."

"They questioned him, the same as they did me," Dan replied indignantly. "But that's routine. He doesn't know what became of the money. Someone swiped it from his house."

[129]

"When was the box supposed to have disappeared?"

"No one knows. We took it there the night it was found in the church. Then the next morning when the police came, Mr. Hatfield couldn't find it."

"You know, I've been wondering if I should report this," the milkman said thoughtfully.

"Report what?"

"I didn't think anything about it until after I'd read about the box disappearing, Dan. Then I began to wonder. I was delivering milk to the house across the street from the Hatfield place. It must have been about six o'clock."

"What did you see?" Dan asked impatiently.

"A woman came out of the cellar exit. She seemed to be quite an old lady in a black dress and a shawl of the same color. I couldn't see her face."

"Mrs. Hatfield never dresses like that. She has modern clothes."

"The woman had a bundle under her arm. The object, whatever it was, had been wrapped in a newspaper."

"What day was this?"

[130]

"I don't remember the date. It was the same morning Mr. Hatfield reported he lost the money. I'd have told him about it, only it didn't register on me until yesterday that there might be any connection."

"So far as I know no one lives at the Hatfield house except Sam, his wife, and Fred," Dan said, deeply puzzled. "Who could the old lady have been?"

"It was no one I knew. She kept the shawl over her head, either to hide her face or protect it from the cold air."

"Which way did she go?" Dan asked.

"I didn't notice. As I say, at the time I thought nothing about seeing her."

"I think Mr. Hatfield should know about this, and maybe the police," said Dan. "So far, the only clue found is a black jet button. Apparently, it came from a woman's dress. But how could a woman have known about the box?"

The milkman did not try to answer. Already late on his route, he started toward his wagon.

"I won't get a chance to talk to Mr. Hatfield until late tonight," he called over his shoulder. "If you think what I told you means anything, Dan, let him know for me."

"I'll do it right away," the boy promised.

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Even before the milk wagon was out of sight, he had gathered up his materials.

"Mom, how about rushing breakfast?" he asked, carrying both the milk and his work into the kitchen. "I want to see Mr. Hatfield before I go to school."

"I'll set the food right on," his mother promised.

Dan ate on the fly. "Don't look for me after school tonight," he advised as he banged out the door. "The Cubs are having a cook-out."

At the Hatfield home, Dan found the Cub leader, his wife, and Fred eating their own breakfast.

"Have a roll and some chocolate with us," Mrs. Hatfield invited.

"I've had my breakfast," Dan replied, eyeing the sugary hot roll with a greedy eye.

"Oh, a growing boy always can eat a little more," Mrs. Hatfield laughed, offering him a chair. "Do have something with us, Dan."

Thus urged, the boy slid into the seat by the window. As he sipped hot chocolate, he told Mr. Hatfield what the milkman had reported.

"An elderly woman in black!" Mrs. Hatfield exclaimed. "I can't imagine!"

"You've had no cleaning woman?" asked Dan.

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"Not in weeks, Dan. And no visitors at such an early hour of the morning."

"I locked all the doors that night we brought the

box here," Mr. Hatfield said slowly.

"The one opening into the cellar?" his wife asked him.

"Well—I'm not sure."

"Which means you didn't," Mrs. Hatfield said. "Oh, Sam, you *were* careless."

"I'm afraid so," the Cub leader admitted. "After all the preaching I've done to the Cubs too."

"It wasn't your fault," Dan said loyally. "Until lately, it's never been necessary to lock a house up tight to keep one's belongings safe."

"This always has been a good neighborhood," Mr. Hatfield agreed. "That fact gave me a false sense of security, I'm afraid."

"If the milkman saw a woman leaving the house, that's obviously where the money box went," Mrs. Hatfield declared, refilling Dan's cup with chocolate. "It explains too why the police found a jet button near where the box had been hidden."

"But who could the woman have been?" Mr. Hatfield murmured. "So far as we know, the only person besides the Cubs who knew about the box was that man caught peeping into the church."

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"He must have told others," Mrs. Hatfield reasoned. "We can be fairly certain of that because so many claims were put in for the money."

"Learning about this woman convinces me of one thing," said Mr. Hatfield. "I'm positive none of the Cubs told about the box. The leak came from another source."

"Will you tell police?" Dan questioned.

"Yes, Dan. This clue may be the most important one yet. I've begun to think though, that the money never will be recovered. In that case, if the rightful claimant can prove his assertion, I'll make good the loss."

"That doesn't seem fair, Mr. Hatfield," Dan protested.

"I assumed responsibility for the money, Dan. Seemingly it was lost through my carelessness. I couldn't face the Cubs if I didn't make good."

Dan said no more. He knew that Mr. Hatfield, being a man of honor, would keep his word. However, he realized also that the Hatfields were only moderately well fixed and could not afford to lose so much of their savings.

"Now don't worry about it, Dan," Mr. Hatfield said as they all arose from the breakfast table. "You're taking this matter entirely too seriously. Everything will come out in the wash."

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"If the money isn't found, we'll give up that new car we had intended to buy," declared Mrs. Hatfield. "Expensive automobiles are an unnecessary luxury."

Dan looked so troubled that Mr. Hatfield, to take his mind off the money box, said quickly:

"All set for the cook-out tonight?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Remind all the Cubs to meet here at my house right after school. Now you and Fred had better get along to school, or you'll be late."

Dan thanked the Hatfields for the breakfast, and gathering up his books, went off with Fred.

Later, after school had been dismissed for the day, all the Cubs met at Mr. Hatfield's home for the hike and cook-out.

No more was said about the missing tin box, for the Cub leader felt that the matter had been too much discussed. He preferred to have the boys center thoughts on the Knight Crusade and their own activities.

Nevertheless, Dan fell into step with Brad as they set off for the marsh area, again bringing up the recent incident at Mr. Merrimac's home. So far as either boy knew, police had not been able to catch the man who had fled from the dwelling.

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"Brad, do you suppose there could be any connection between that thief and the woman who took the tin box?" Dan speculated.

"Search me," Brad returned, shifting his knapsack to the other shoulder. "Let's forget the money for tonight and just have fun. Mr. Hatfield's worried enough without us always reminding him of it."

"You're right," Dan agreed, properly set down. "Guess I have had it on my mind a lot lately."

The boys hiked to an old mill of historical interest. After spending a while there, they backtracked to the marshland area.

"I wonder if that old tramp is still camped out in the new house?" Dan speculated as they passed the construction site.

Mr. Hatfield heard the remark.

"I can answer that one," he informed the group. "I talked to Mr. Keeler, the contractor. He checked and found you boys were right."

"Then the man was a tramp?" Brad asked.

"Yes, he had managed to get in through a cellar window, and then had unlocked the door from inside. Until he was caught, he enjoyed quite a comfortable existence."

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"Arrested?" Brad questioned.

"No, he slipped away before Mr. Keeler could call police. I understand no damage was done to the property. He easily could have set the place on fire though."

"Say, when do we eat?" demanded Midge, impatiently. "The sun's getting low."

"We can stop anywhere," Mr. Hatfield said. "Look for a suitable place."

"How about the one we used last time?" suggested Chips. "It will save us clearing the ground."

The other Cubs shared Chip's impatience, so a little farther on, a halt was called. While Brad and Dan built a fire, Mr. Hatfield set up a reflector oven which he had made from a square five-gallon oil can.

"Pretty fancy, aren't we?" Red said admiringly. "What are we eating?"

"Biscuits, fried eggs and bacon. How does it sound?"

"Swell!" Red answered, smacking his lips. "Just lead me to it."

"Lead you to it, like fun!" snorted Brad. "You're gonna help stir up the biscuits, not have 'em served to you golden brown on a tin plate!"

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"Me? Make biscuits? I don't know how."

"You can learn," the Den Chief assured him. "Nothing to it when you use biscuit mix. You just add water and stir."

While the other Cubs gathered wood, he showed Red how to mix the biscuits and drop them evenly on a metal sheet.

"Each Cub can cook his own bacon and eggs," Brad said, producing a sheet of tinfoil. "Shape 'em into little pans, and fry the bacon just enough to make a little grease. Then drop in the eggs. You can use the crinkled foil for a plate too, and not have to wash a dish."

"What a brain! What a brain!" This praise came from Midge, who above everything else hated to wash dishes.

Soon the wood had burned down to coals. As the reflector oven heated up, Mr. Hatfield tested it, and told Red he could put in the biscuits.

"It won't be long now, boys," he said. "While we're waiting for the biscuits to bake, I wish a couple of you would go for some more water. Try that first house down the road."

Rather than stand around, all the boys except Red took their canteens and trudged off. The latter remained with Mr. Hatfield to keep an eye on the biscuits.

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"They're rising just right," the Cub leader said, presently peeking into the oven. "Another five minutes and they'll be golden brown."

"They sure smell good," Red declared, sniffing the air. "I could eat a dozen of 'em myself."

"We only allowed three for each Cub," Mr. Hatfield laughed. "The fire's burning out though. We need more wood."

The Cubs had not gathered enough. So after taking another glance at the biscuits to be certain they would not burn, Mr. Hatfield and Red set off together to find a few sticks.

Suitable wood was not to be found close to the camp. Already the Cubs had gathered this. Compelled to seek farther away, the Cub leader and Red consumed more time than they had intended in gathering sticks.

"Let's get back," Mr. Hatfield advised. "If we let

those biscuits burn, the boys will mob us.”

As the two returned to the campfire, they met the Cubs trotting in with their filled canteens.

“Hey!” yelled Dan. “Aren’t those biscuits done yet?”

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“They should be,” Mr. Hatfield answered. “Start your eggs frying, boys, so everything will come off the fire at the same time. Brad will show you what to do.”

“How about those biscuits?” Red said anxiously. “They’ve been in the oven a long time.”

“Not too long,” replied Mr. Hatfield. “We want ’em a nice deep brown. But I’ll take a quick look.”

Eager for a peek themselves, the Cubs gathered around.

Mr. Hatfield opened the oven. A blast of heat struck the Cubs full in their faces.

“Why, what happened to ’em?” Dan demanded in astonishment. “Where are those wonderful biscuits you were bragging about?”

The oven was empty. Gone were the biscuits and likewise the metal sheet upon which they had been baked!

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CHAPTER 14

Beside the Camp Fire

The Cubs stared at the empty oven, uncertain whether or not Mr. Hatfield and Red had played a trick upon them.

“Hey, where are they?” Midge demanded. “Who swiped the biscuits?”

“That’s what I want to know,” said Mr. Hatfield.

His grim tone left no doubt that the biscuits actually were missing. Their disappearance was as mysterious to Mr. Hatfield and Red as to the other boys.

“Why, they were here a few minutes ago!” Red exclaimed indignantly. “Someone’s swiped ’em!”

Mr. Hatfield glanced quickly about the camp. No one however, was within sight.

“Of all the dirty tricks!” Dan exploded. “Taking the food right out of our mouths!”

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“How about the bacon and eggs?” Fred demanded. “Have they walked off too?”

A check disclosed that the other food remained untouched.

“Go ahead and fry your bacon and eggs,” Mr. Hatfield advised. “Brad and I will take a quick look around.”

The pair circled the camp, even venturing a short distance into the woods. Because the

ground was firm and dry, they could find no telltale footprints. Nor did they see anyone.

Giving up the search, they returned a few minutes later to share bacon and eggs with the Cubs.

"This supper is ruined without the biscuits," Red complained. "I made 'em super! Honestly, I did."

"I'll bet they turned out so hard you were afraid to serve 'em," Babe joked. "So to fool us, you buried 'em."

"That's not so," Red denied hotly. "The biscuits were perfect when Mr. Hatfield and I went to gather wood. Someone stole 'em!"

"It may have been that tramp who hid out in the house," Brad said thoughtfully. "For all we know, he may still be around somewhere."

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"Just wait until I meet him again!" Midge declared, scraping the last bit of egg from his tinfoil cup plate. "I'll give him a piece of my mind!"

"Maybe it wasn't the tramp," speculated Chips. He poked the coals with a stick, and having stirred the flames, tossed a crumpled ball of foil to the fire.

"Who else could it have been?" demanded Fred. "We've seen no one on this road. Only cars that whiz past at twenty-five miles an hour."

Chips had fastened his gaze upon the unpainted dwelling owned by the Widow Jones. The old house was some distance away, but visible through the trees.

"Remember that runaway boy?" he reminded the Cubs. "He was taken back to Mrs. Jones' House, wasn't he?"

"That's right," said Mr. Hatfield. Squatting beside the fire, he had listened with interest to the speculation of the Cubs.

"Well, I'll bet a cent he went off with our food!" Chips announced. "Let's go to the house and find out!"

"Yeah!" cried Midge. "We aren't going to let him get by with it, are we?"

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"Just a minute, boys," interposed Mr. Hatfield. "You're leaping to pretty fast conclusions, in my opinion. It would be a mistake—one of the worst kind—to go to Mrs. Jones and complain about the boy. We might be doing him a rank injustice."

"Don't forget the tramp," added Brad significantly. "A second ago, you fellows were equally sure he was the culprit."

"Well, it wouldn't do any harm to go to the house and inquire," Chips insisted. "We could be sort of—" he groped for a word.

"Discreet?" asked Mr. Hatfield, smiling.

"That's what I mean!"

"I had intended to stop at the Jones' house anyway," Mr. Hatfield admitted, starting to stamp out the dying coals. "But my purpose is

entirely friendly. I'm curious to learn how Jack is getting along."

"Let's all go," Chips urged. "We want to see if he's well fed—especially on biscuits!"

"Chips, I'm a bit uncertain—"

"Oh, I'll watch myself," the boy assured him quickly. "You can do most of the talking. We'll just listen and keep our eyes open."

"I'm sure I can depend on you," the Cub leader nodded. "Well, let's clean camp. It's getting on toward dark."

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The Cubs put out the fire, covering the smoking coals with loose dirt. Their knapsacks loaded, they soon were ready to hit the trail.

"Now remember, boys," Mr. Hatfield warned as the group approached the Jones dwelling, "even if you are suspicious, don't make any accusations. Jack already is in a bad spot."

"If we complain that he stole our food, Mrs. Jones might send him straight back to the Institute," added Brad. "We ought to be dead sure of our ground before we open our lips."

Smoke curled from the chimney of the widow's house, so the Cubs knew someone was at home. The yard remained untidy, reminding them that they still had a Saturday task before them.

However, there was evidence that someone had been doing considerable work. Kindling wood had been cut and cord wood neatly sawed and stacked by the sagging porch.

Mr. Hatfield rapped on the door. In a moment, Mrs. Jones appeared in her kitchen apron, smiling as she saw the Cubs.

The Cub leader politely told her he had come to inquire how Jack Phillips was getting along.

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Immediately Mrs. Jones looked troubled. "That boy!" she exclaimed. "If I haven't had a handful!"

"I hope he hasn't been giving you a bad time," Mr. Hatfield returned.

"Well, yes, and no. There's good stuff in the lad, but he's a problem."

"Keeping him at home is one of them, I judge."

Mrs. Jones drew a deep sigh. "Jack is off somewhere this very minute. Early this morning I told him to cut the wood. He went through the job like a house afire, and then before I knew it, he was gone."

"Wandering the woods perhaps?"

"Yes, that boy is like a wild thing with his love of the outdoors. He went off for three hours yesterday and I gave him a switching when he came back. But it didn't prevent him from trying the same trick today."

Mr. Hatfield smiled as the widow mentioned the switching. She was a frail little woman, weighing a scant one hundred pounds. Jack, by contrast, was built like a football player and heavy for his age.

"I don't think the switching hurt him any," Mrs. Jones said. "The scamp sort of laughed while I was doing it. I'm right provoked at him today though. He took the rifle when he left."

"Why, that's rather dangerous."

"Oh, Jack's a good shot," Mrs. Jones informed him. "I wouldn't mind him using the gun, if he'd ask me for it. It's those sneaking ways of his that annoy me."

"I know what you mean," nodded Mr. Hatfield, reflecting upon the missing biscuits. "Well, be patient with the lad. He may develop. And if there's anything I can do, call on me."

"If you could round that boy up and send him home, I'd appreciate it," the widow sighed. "There's no telling where he is, or when he'll come dragging in—if at all."

"You haven't had any serious trouble with him?"

The widow hesitated. "I haven't wanted to report his behavior to the Court officials, because if I do, I know they'll pack him off to the industrial school. I'm trying to give him a chance."

"But he has caused you worry? There's more to it than restlessness and running away?"

"Well, a few things have disappeared," Mrs. Jones admitted reluctantly. "Nothing of much value, but it bothers me."

"What are some of the things that have been taken?"

"Jack always is sneaking into the ice box. He'll pack himself a lunch and disappear for hours."

"A typical boy's trick."

"Oh, I'm not complaining about the food. Though it plagues me that he doesn't come right out honest like and ask for it."

"The boy takes other things?"

"One of my black silk dresses disappeared. I'd dry cleaned it with gasoline and hung it up in the shed to air out. To tell you the truth, I forgot about it for several days. When I went to get it, well it was gone."

"What would Jack want with a black silk dress?" Mr. Hatfield questioned dubiously.

"You tell!" Mrs. Jones made a despairing gesture. "He chops wood and then half of it disappears before I can pop it into the stove. I think he carries it off to build fires in the woods and marsh."

"It's curious that he would take a dress," said the Cub leader with a puzzled shake of his head. "The other things more or less fit in with his overpowering desire to lead an outdoor life. But a woman's dress!"

"It was an old one without much value," Mrs. Jones admitted. "I liked it though, on account of the pretty jet buttons."

At mention of jet buttons, Dan shot Mr. Hatfield a quick glance. He saw that the Cub leader likewise was startled by the possibility which

presented itself.

"What kind of buttons, were they?" the boy asked.

"Just tiny jet buttons, diamond in shape."

"If we find the boy, we'll send him home," Mr. Hatfield said hastily.

He was afraid that Dan or one of the other Cubs might say something which would further disturb the widow.

Herding the boys together, he led them away from the house. Once beyond hearing of the widow, they all had plenty to say.

"Jack swiped our biscuits all right!" Red said indignantly. "We're saps to let him get by with it too!"

"We ought to have him sent back to the Child Study Institute!" added Midge. "Who does that kid think he is? We ought to clip his comb!"

Mr. Hatfield had not given much thought to the stolen food. However, he was gravely troubled by Mrs. Jones' reference to the jet buttons.

"Do you suppose Jack was the one who came to your house that morning?" Dan asked, falling into step with the Cub leader.

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"Naturally, it raises a question in one's mind, Dan. But for the life of me, I can't understand how he would know about the tin box."

"Furthermore, he didn't live here at the time the money disappeared from your house, Mr. Hatfield."

"That's so, Dan!" the Cub leader exclaimed, obviously relieved. "For a minute I was afraid of the worst. It only goes to prove one shouldn't jump to conclusions. Guess I've said that a dozen times."

As the Cubs reached the main road, Chips called attention to a curl of smoke rising lazily from the woods.

"Someone must have a camp fire back in there," he remarked.

"It's a rather dangerous place to start a fire," Mr. Hatfield said. "Suppose we investigate."

Turning aside from the road, the Cubs climbed a rail fence and made their way through the thickets. Picking a trail carefully, Mr. Hatfield led them single file.

"Quiet, boys," he advised as Babe kept shuffling his feet through the dry leaves. "No use advertising ourselves."

Before the Cubs had gone far into the woods, they could smell the aroma of food cooking.

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Mr. Hatfield signaled for the boys to slow their pace. Treading noiselessly, they approached with caution.

At the edge of a small clearing the Cub leader abruptly halted.

Eager to see what it was that had drawn and

held their leaders attention, the boys closed in about him.

"Can you beat that!" Dan whispered.

Directly ahead was a wind-sheltered hollow, framed by bare trees. A camp fire had been built close to the banks of a winding stream. On a crudely constructed spit, a dressed rabbit slowly broiled over the coals.

The one who turned the spit had his back to the Cubs. He was wrapped deeply in a heavy coat many sizes too large for his lean frame. Beside him lay a rifle.

But even though the Cubs could not see the lad's face, they recognized him instantly. The one who sat so contentedly by his fire, gazing off into space, was Jack Phillips.

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CHAPTER 15

A Hint from Jack

Mr. Hatfield did not fail to note the rifle, which he knew had been taken from Mrs. Jones' home. Undoubtedly it was loaded, he reasoned. If Jack were disposed to make trouble, he easily could do so.

Saying nothing to the Cubs of his misgivings, the Cub leader stepped boldly into the clearing.

Hearing the crackle of a stick, Jack whirled around.

Instinctively, he reached for the rifle. Then, recognizing Mr. Hatfield, he merely allowed his hand to rest on the butt. His attitude however, was wary.

"How are you, Jack?" the Cub leader greeted him. "A nice little camp you have here. Did you shoot the rabbit yourself?"

"Who else?" Jack retorted a trifle defiantly.

"You did a good job of cleaning it too," the Cub leader praised him. "I can see you're handy and know how to get along."

Jack made no reply. Guardedly he eyed the Cubs, who gradually had circled in around the camp fire.

"No biscuits?" demanded Red, scanning every inch of the camp.

"I never learned how to bake 'em," Jack admitted, relaxing a bit. "You have to have an oven for that."

"A reflector oven isn't hard to make," Mr. Hatfield said. "Any of the Cubs could teach you."

"They could?" Jack gazed at the boys with new respect. "I'd sure like to learn."

"You come with us on our next hike, and we'll show you," Mr. Hatfield promised.

"But I'm not a Cub."

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"That makes no difference. Glad to have you." Jack's face lighted up, and then the old look of frustration returned.

"Thanks," he said, "but I can't make it. The Widow wouldn't let me go. She keeps me chop, chop, chopping wood night and day."

"You seem to be enjoying yourself now," Brad remarked significantly.

Jack stirred the coals and replied: "Oh, I ran off. She'll switch me when I get back. It only tickles though."

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Mr. Hatfield squatted by the fire and said in a friendly way: "How are things working out, Jack? You don't much like it at the Widow's place?"

"Oh, she's okay, I guess," the boy admitted grudgingly.

"She makes you work too hard?"

"I have to chop a lot of wood. I hate that. The other work isn't so bad."

"Mrs. Jones doesn't have much money or any man to help her about the place. Jack, she really needs you."

"I guess so," the boy admitted uncomfortably. "I've been trying to please her. It's just—well, I can't stand being cooped up in the house all the time. Every so often I have to get away or I'll pop wide open!"

"I understand," the Cub leader said. "Had that feeling myself when I was a boy. I never gave way to the urge too much, and I made a point never to take anything that didn't belong to me."

Jack rocked back on his heels, regarding the Cub leader with hostility.

"What do you mean by that crack?"

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"Didn't you swipe our biscuits?" Red demanded before Mr. Hatfield could speak.

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Someone took them from our camp," Red went on, ignoring Mr. Hatfield's warning glance. "If you didn't swipe 'em—"

"Well, I didn't and you better not accuse me! I've been right here for the last forty minutes."

"You're using Mrs. Jones' rifle!" Red accused, refusing to be checked.

"Why not? She never touched it. A rifle was meant to be used not left to rust."

"Mrs. Jones thinks you've been taking things from her."

"That's a black lie!"

"Cord wood for instance."

"What would I steal wood for, when I have to keep chopping more to replace it?" Jack shouted furiously. "Use your head, or haven't you got one?"

At this point, Mr. Hatfield warned Red to drop

the argument.

"Sorry," the boy mumbled.

Jack however, was not willing to allow the matter to pass.

"What else did Mrs. Jones say I took?" he demanded.

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"I don't recall that she accused you," Mr. Hatfield answered. "She merely was disturbed because of the wood and a few other trifles."

"Someone else had been taking that wood. What else did she say was missing?"

"A black dress," Dan answered. "One with jet buttons."

"Of course we don't think you'd have any use for a woman's dress," Dan went on, watching the boy intently.

Jack made no reply. After a long while, he said:

"I didn't take that dress. If I were a mind to though, I could tell you something about it!"

"Suppose you do just that," Mr. Hatfield encouraged him.

Jack smiled in a superior, insolent way. The wave of friendliness which he briefly had displayed, now was entirely gone. Once more he seemed the arrogant, defiant runaway.

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Because it's the right thing to do, Jack. We have a particular reason for being interested in what became of that black silk dress."

"You've accused me of being a thief."

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"No, Jack. The Cubs were a bit abrupt perhaps. They believe in being square and honest. Naturally it made them sore to think you might have taken the biscuits."

"I told you, I don't know nothin' about 'em!"

"And we accept your word, Jack."

"Then you said I took wood and the Widow's black dress."

"No, Jack, we merely were telling you what she said. Unfortunately, when one has a past record, it's apt to plague one unjustly."

"Sure, I'm a bad kid! I know!" Jack said, his eyes flashing. "Okay! Send me to an industrial school! But try to keep me there! I'll run away a thousand times!"

"You're talking wildly now, Jack. No one wants to send you away. Quite the opposite. Mrs. Jones likes you. She's willing to overlook a lot to keep you with her."

"She's been pretty decent to me," Jack admitted, softening again. "I did take food out of the ice box without asking her. Not very much though. Just enough so I could get along out here in the woods."

"She's worried about you now, Jack. She asked

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me to send you home, if I saw you.”

“Oh, I’ll go,” Jack sighed. “I’d intended to anyhow as soon as this rabbit finishes cooking. It’s done now, I guess.”

The boy removed the rabbit from the spit, and salted it, using a shaker which the Cubs were certain had come from Mrs. Jones’ home.

“Have some?” he invited the Cubs.

They declined.

“Well, I’m hungry,” Jack announced.

Dismembering the rabbit, he gnawed at the tough meat. Now and then as he ate, he glanced at the Cubs.

Having finished his meal, he put out the fire and cleaned away the debris. The Cubs noted that he was efficient at it, leaving not a spark which could set off a forest fire.

“I’ll go back to Mrs. Jones’ place now and chop more wood,” Jack said finally, picking up the rifle. “I’ll chop and chop until my hands bleed!”

“I hardly think Mrs. Jones will require that,” Mr. Hatfield said, smiling. “By the way, Jack, who do you figure may be taking that wood?”

The boy gave him a quick, knowing look.

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“I don’t stay up nights watching!”

“But you have a fairly good idea where it is going?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Jack, if you wanted to cooperate, you could be very helpful.”

“I mind my own business. That’s more than I can say about some folks.”

His resentment returning, Jack glared at the Cubs.

“You guys think you’re so smart and know so much about camping out and the like!” he scoffed. “Why, you’re babes in the woods! If you weren’t so dumb, you wouldn’t have to ask so many stupid questions. You’d see for yourselves what’s going on around here.”

“Why, you conceited—” Red began, but Dan checked him with a hard kick in the ankle.

“Maybe we are sort of dumb,” Brad said, falling in with Jack’s mood. “You’re probably right, we don’t know what’s going on around here. That’s because we’re not on the scene much of the time. You’re roaming the woods and the marsh every day. I suppose you’ve seen things we haven’t.”

“You’re darn right I have,” Jack boasted. “I could tell you something about that black dress, if I had a mind to! What’s more, I could tell you about the money box—”

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The boy broke off, suddenly aware that he was talking entirely too much.

“What about the money box?” Mr. Hatfield asked

quietly.

Jack, however, started off through the woods.

"Wait!" Dan called after him.

Jack turned around, but his eyes were unfriendly and defiant.

"You won't get anything out of me!" he taunted the Cubs. "I could tell you a lot if I wanted to. But I won't! I'm not forgetting that it was the Cubs who took me back to the Child Study Institute!"

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CHAPTER 16

Inside the Log

Jack Phillip's hint that he was in possession of vital information relative to the missing money box amazed the Cubs.

Even Mr. Hatfield was so taken by surprise that for the moment he made no attempt to detain the boy.

"Say, are we going to let him get away again?" Brad demanded. "He knows what became of that money box!"

"He took it himself, that's why!" muttered Chips. "Who does he think he is, anyhow? Someone that doesn't have to obey the law?"

"Jack does have a few things to explain," Mr. Hatfield said quietly. "Now, take it easy, boys. He'll not elude us."

"He's heading for the road now!" Red said excitedly. "If we don't stop him quick, he'll slip away and we may never see him again!"

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"We'll head him off," the Cub leader replied, undisturbed. "Brad, you and Dan and Midge start through the hollow which is shorter than the path he's taken. The rest of us will come up from the rear."

"Sure!" Brad said eagerly. "We'll get him!"

"Just circle in and don't use any force. In fact, don't try to hold him until I get there. He has a rifle, you know. It may or may not be loaded, but we're taking no chances."

"We'll be careful," Brad promised, already starting off with Midge and Dan.

At a fast lope, the three boys followed the low ground. For a considerable distance they were unable to see the boy they pursued.

However, as they came presently to a rise of ground, they glimpsed him off to the right not far from the main road.

"He's taking it easy," Brad said in relief. "I guess he doesn't suspect we're following him."

"Shall we show ourselves?" Dan demanded.

"No need to yet, Dan. The minute we do, he'll

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either defy us or start to run. We'll just keep him in sight until Mr. Hatfield catches up."

"Sure, that's what he told us to do," Midge said nervously. "No telling how the kid may react."

Without glancing around, Jack made his way directly to the road. Once he paused to stare at the crotch of a tree which had been split by lightning.

Another time, hearing the crackle of a stick, he looked quickly over his shoulder. Brad, Dan and Midge froze in their positions and the boy did not see them.

"He's heading for the road all right," Brad observed. "We've got to beat him to it."

Dropping back into the hollow, the three Cubs hastened on. Presently, they emerged at a point where they had calculated Jack would come out of the woods.

Nor were they mistaken. In a moment, before they fully had caught their breath, they saw him coming.

Jack was whistling a slightly off-key tune. Seeing the three boys in front of him, he broke off and stopped dead in his tracks.

The moment was a tense one for the three Cubs. They were relieved though that Jack made no attempt to draw his rifle.

"What's the idea?" he demanded, trying to shove past them.

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The Cubs stood their ground.

"Mr. Hatfield wants to talk to you," Brad said pleasantly. "You raised a few points."

"You'll learn nothing more from me!" Jack retorted. "I told you that! Let me past!"

Brad, Dan and Midge refused to move. Jack glared at them, and then whirled, evidently intending to run.

However, he found retreat also blocked.

During the brief conversation, Mr. Hatfield, his son, Fred, Chips, Red and Babe quietly had come up from the rear.

"What's the big idea?" Jack repeated furiously. "You got nothing on me!"

At a signal from Mr. Hatfield, the Cubs closed about the boy in a tight circle.

"Hand over the rifle, Jack," the Cub leader ordered. "You handle it very well for a boy of your age, but you shouldn't have taken it from Mrs. Jones without her permission."

"Aw, she never used it."

"Nevertheless, it was her property. The rifle, Jack."

The boy seemed on the verge of defying the Cub leader. Then, he thought through the matter, and with a gesture of contempt, extended the weapon.

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"It ain't loaded," the boy muttered. "You got nothing to worry about."

Mr. Hatfield checked the rifle for himself, finding that Jack had spoken the truth. Evidently he had used his last shot on the rabbit.

"What d'you aim to do? Turn me over to the cops again?"

"That depends on what you tell us, Jack. From the start, we've tried to give you the benefit of every doubt. Your remarks about the tin box, however, were disturbing."

"I didn't take the money!"

"No one has accused you, Jack. It's clear though, that you know plenty about the matter."

"I read about it in the paper."

"I think you know more than the facts you have read, Jack. Why don't you come clean?"

"You turned me in!"

"We're law abiding citizens, Jack," Mr. Hatfield argued. "What else could we do?"

"I help only my friends."

"We are your friends," the Cub leader insisted. "At least we want to be. Sit down, Jack, and let's talk this over."

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Mr. Hatfield brushed off a hollow log which had fallen near the fence, and made room for Jack. The other boys gathered around close enough so the Institute lad could not hope to make a break for freedom.

"Jack, can't you realize that we're trying to help, not make things hard for you," Mr. Hatfield attempted to reason with him. "You must return to Mrs. Jones' home."

"I was going there anyhow," the boy muttered, his gaze on the ground.

"You weren't running away again?"

"Course not," Jack said irritably. "I wouldn't go away and take her rifle. I'm not a thief. She's been good to me in her way—better than anyone else."

"I'm glad to hear that!" Mr. Hatfield exclaimed. "I knew you had good stuff if you'd just give it a chance to come out. Now about the money box —"

"I don't know anything about it."

"But you hinted—"

"I was just blowing," Jack said, avoiding Mr. Hatfield's direct gaze. "All I know is what I read in the newspaper."

The Cubs were disgusted. But Jack, they knew, did not abide by their standards of honor and fair play.

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"Let me go now," Jack muttered, getting up from the log. "You got no right to keep me."

"Do we have your word that you'll return to Mrs.

Jones' house?" the Cub leader asked.

"I told you I would, didn't I?"

"I'll accept your word, Jack. And here's the rifle. When you return it to Mrs. Jones, why not ask her if you may borrow it now and then? She'd likely give her consent and you wouldn't feel low and sneaking about it. Furthermore, in season you probably could help out by bringing in game for the table."

"Maybe she would let me take it," Jack said. "Sure, I'll ask her next time. I promise."

Mr. Hatfield smiled and reached out to shake the boy's hand.

"Good luck, Jack," he said. "You'll do all right. I'm confident of it. I—"

An odd expression came over the Cub leader's face. Without finishing what he had started to say, he stooped down to examine one end of the hollow log.

The Cubs then saw what had attracted their leader's attention. A bit of water-soaked cloth protruded from the end of the log.

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"What's this?" Mr. Hatfield murmured.

As the boys watched in amazement, he removed a wadded-up garment. The Cub leader shook it out, revealing a woman's black dress trimmed in diamond-shaped jet buttons.

"Why, that must be the costume stolen from Mrs. Jones' place!" exclaimed Brad as Mr. Hatfield spread the garment over the log.

"Sure, the same one maybe that was worn by the thief who made off with the money box!" added Dan, becoming highly excited.

Mr. Hatfield carefully examined the diamond-shaped buttons.

"Aren't they the same as the one police found in your desk?" Dan demanded.

"They certainly look the same," the Cub leader admitted. "I wonder how this dress came to be in the log?"

"Someone must have stuffed it in here just to be rid of it," Brad ventured.

His gaze fastened upon Jack Phillips. The boy leaned on his rifle, staring at the dress with a fixed, almost frozen expression.

Observing the odd look of his eyes, the Cubs could not fail to wonder what he knew of the matter.

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"Jack," said Mr. Hatfield, without mincing words, "have you ever seen this dress before?"

"Have I seen it?" the boy echoed indignantly.

"That's what I asked, Jack."

"No, I never saw the dress before!" the boy answered sullenly. "What's more I didn't put it in this old log! I had nothing to do with stealing your money box!"

"Finding this dress here gave me a bad moment," Mr. Hatfield said. "Frankly, it's something of a shock."

"Well, blame me! I always get accused of everything whether I did it or not!"

"No one has accused you of anything, Jack. We only want to get at the truth of the matter. I have a deep-seated feeling that you might help us, if only you would."

Jack remained silent.

Mr. Hatfield examined the dress and then wrapped it into a tight roll.

"Jack, we'll walk along with you to Mrs. Jones' place," he said. "I think this is the dress that disappeared from her shed. I want to find out for certain."

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"I didn't take it," Jack denied. "What would I want with a woman's dress? If you go back and tell the widow, she'll think I stole it! She'll send me back to the Institute!"

"Not if you tell a straight story, Jack," Mr. Hatfield reassured him. "Come along, boys. We're wasting valuable time."

Jack did not openly defy Mr. Hatfield or the Cubs, but he made it evident by glances he directed at them that he resented their interference.

As the group approached the old farmhouse, Mrs. Jones saw the boys from afar. She was waiting at the door when they came up.

"Well, I see you caught the rascal!" she commented grimly.

"We found him," Mr. Hatfield corrected. "Jack wasn't running away though. He said he intended to come back."

"Jack, why do you do it?" the widow asked, taking the rifle from him. "Haven't I been good to you?"

"Yes'm," the boy responded, his eyes on the ground.

"I'll fix you some victuals. You must be hungry."

"I've had enough to eat. I'm sorry about taking so much from the refrigerator."

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The tight lines around Mrs. Jones' mouth relaxed. "There! I reckon boys are all alike," she remarked. "I had three of my own once. I never could break 'em of taking cookies from the jar."

The widow cordially invited the Cubs into the kitchen. Mr. Hatfield declined the invitation for them.

"Mrs. Jones, here is something we wish to show you," he said, exposing the rolled-up black gown to her gaze. "Did you ever see this dress before?"

"Land sakes! It's the dress that disappeared from the shed!"

"You're certain it's the same one?"

"Of course I'm certain. Didn't I wear that dress for six years? Where did you find it?"

"In a hollow log not far from here."

"Well, of all places! How did it get there?"

"That's what I'd like to know myself. Dan tells me that someone in a black dress was seen leaving my place on the day the money box disappeared."

"A jet button exactly like those on the dress was found by police in Mr. Hatfield's study," Brad contributed.

"My stars! Then you think the money was taken by someone who wore my dress?"

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"Naturally, one wonders," Mr. Hatfield replied.

Mrs. Jones gazed searchingly at Jack.

"I didn't do it!" he said, almost fiercely. "Quit lookin' at me like that! I always get the blame for everything."

"I'm sure Jack didn't take the dress," Mr. Hatfield declared. "As I recall, Mrs. Jones, I believe you said it disappeared some time ago."

"That's so! Before Jack came here! Land sakes, I guess we get so in the habit of blaming a boy, that we don't give him the benefit of any doubt."

In a gesture of kindness, she reached out and drew the boy to her. He resisted, but as her arm remained firm, finally allowed it to remain thrown around his shoulders.

"I'm fairly convinced Jack didn't take the dress," Mr. Hatfield resumed. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid I can't say I think he isn't hiding vital information. I believe Jack knows more about the affair than he is willing to tell."

Mrs. Jones' arm fell from the boy's shoulder. Sternly, she regarded him.

"Jack, is that the truth?"

"Maybe!" The boy regarded her defiantly.

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"Then you just tell Mr. Hatfield everything you know!"

"Wild horses can't drag it from me! I'm no snitcher. I don't help anyone who made it hard for me!"

"You little ninny!" Mrs. Jones exclaimed, losing patience. "I declare, I wonder if you have an ounce of sense. Now march into the house."

"Yes'm," Jack muttered.

"Everyone come in," Mrs. Jones invited. "We'll thrash this out right here and now. If there's one thing I can't stand it's nonsense!"

The Cubs trooped into the warm kitchen, fairly overflowing the tiny room. Mr. Hatfield, Babe, Chips and Fred found chairs. Dan perched himself on the corner of the wood box by the stove. The others stood.

"Jack, I'd try to switch a little sense into you, but I know now it doesn't do a mite of good," Mrs.

Jones sighed. "Now what's wrong with you anyhow?"

"Nothin'."

"Then why don't you speak up and tell Mr. Hatfield and the Cubs what they want to know?"

"They turned me in!"

"I reckon it was mighty inconsiderate of 'em to give you another chance," the widow said, her brittle voice edged with sarcasm. "You've had a hard lot here. I've kept you chopping wood every day and helping with the housework. At night you've had to do your lessons."

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"The work wasn't so hard," Jack muttered.

"You've been chained to the house—never could go away—"

"Aw, quit rubbin' it in," Jack pleaded. "I've liked it here. I'm willing to stay."

The widow regarded him steadily.

"You may be willing," she said, "but I don't want you any more."

Jack drew in his breath and for a moment could not reply.

"You—you're sending me back?" he finally stammered.

"Just as fast as I can send for Mr. Wentworth. I did the best I could for you, Jack. I needed a boy I could depend on that would help me with the work, and act like my own son. Well, you let me down. So I'll go on living here alone."

The words cut deep into Jack. "I'll do better," he promised. "Please don't send me back to the Institute. I'll cut all the wood you want me to—honest I will. I won't take things out of the ice box again or run off so often. Only just once in a long while, when I get to feeling tight and mean inside. And I'll tell you ahead that I'm going—I promise!"

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"You're promising a heap, Jack," the widow returned dryly. "Only trouble is, you've made a lot of 'em before you never kept."

"I never made any to you."

"Well, that's a fact. You have kept your word such as you've given."

"Then let me have another chance. Just one more!"

"Not unless you tell the truth about that black dress of mine."

"I never took it!" Jack said desperately. "Believe me, I never did!"

"But you know how it came to be in the hollow log?"

"Not for sure," Jack hedged.

"You could make a pretty shrewd guess."

"Maybe."

"Then suppose you come clean and tell the Cubs everything you know."

"Help 'em after they turned me in?"

"Did they really do you such a bad turn seeing to it that you were sent out here to my place?"

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"No'm," Jack murmured. "I'm all mixed up. I don't know what to do—"

"I want you to stay with me always, Jack. You're a fine boy."

"You mean that? You ain't just handing me a line so's I'll do what you want?"

"I really mean it, Jack. You should know by this time that when I give my word I keep it."

Jack debated with himself only a moment longer. Then he arrived at his decision.

"I want to stay here," he said earnestly. "I'll do whatever you tell me to—and I ain't crossin' my fingers when I say it, either! You can switch me whenever you want to and I won't try to take the switch away from you."

"Now that's right considerate of you, Jack," Mrs. Jones smiled. "We'll get along fine from now on. And we won't need that switch again."

"I'll fill the woodbox," Jack offered eagerly. "You're most out of kindling."

Mrs. Jones hauled him up short. "That job can wait, Jack. You got something else more important to do."

"Tell us everything you know about the tin box," Mr. Hatfield urged. "You'll be doing the Cubs a real service, Jack. You see, not only myself but the entire organization has been under a cloud since the money disappeared."

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"I ain't sure what became of it, but I may know," Jack admitted.

"Then suppose you tell us," the Cub leader urged.

"I'll show you instead," Jack offered. "Follow me to the woods, and you may see something kinda interesting!"

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CHAPTER 17

Through the Window

Skirting the marsh, Jack led the Cubs deep into the shadowy woods. Apparently he had gone that way often, for he seldom hesitated in choosing the trail.

"Where do you think he's taking us?" Dan speculated, bringing up the rear with Brad.

"It has me guessing, Dan. He seems to know where's he's going though. I have a hunch he may show us something that will have an important bearing."

After a brisk five-minute hike through the woods, Jack abruptly halted.

"If you want to see anything, you got to be quiet from here on," he warned.

All conversation ceased. Still led by Jack, the Cubs moved on at a slower pace. Carefully they trod, taking care not to step on sticks or dry leaves.

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Presently Jack again halted. This time he did not speak.

However, the Cubs, gathering close about, saw that they had neared their destination.

Directly ahead, in a tiny clearing close to the stream, stood a crude shack. Side walls were badly built from odd-shaped lumber which the Cubs guessed had been taken from near-by construction jobs.

The flat roof was made of tar paper. Some of it had torn loose and flapped in the light breeze.

"You didn't build the shack?" Mr. Hatfield whispered to Jack. He had noted a tiny curl of smoke rising lazily from a tin pipe cut through the roof.

Jack shook his head. Motioning for the Cubs to follow, he moved in a little closer.

"Who lives there?" Brad whispered, impatient for information.

"Wait," Jack said. "We'll get in close, and maybe you can see for yourselves."

"If we all move in, we'll likely be seen," Mr. Hatfield insisted.

It was decided that Jack, Mr. Hatfield, Brad and Dan should go on ahead, leaving the others in the shelter of the trees.

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Moving softly over the uneven ground, the trio crept close to the shack. Keeping close to the wall, they reached a broken pane of glass which served as the only window.

Jack pressed his face against it and nodded in satisfaction.

"He's in there! Have a look!"

Jack moved back to allow Dan to take his place.

The boy peered into the dark interior of the shack. At first he caught only an impression of an empty room with an old box which served as a table.

Then gradually he made out a balsam-bough bed on the floor, covered with an army blanket. Sprawled on the bed, fully clothed was a man with a stubbly beard.

"It's that same fellow who looked in the church window!" Dan murmured, startled to recognize him.

"Careful, Dan!" Mr. Hatfield warned, for in his excitement, the boy very nearly had spoken aloud. "Let me have a look."

Dan moved aside so that both the Cub leader

and Brad might peer at the stranger.

"It's the same man all right," Brad confirmed Dan's identification. "He's dead to the world!"

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Mr. Hatfield had turned to Jack. "This is all very interesting," he whispered. "But you promised to show us something that might explain about the missing money box."

"I can't show you while he's in there. But he's got it."

"Not the money?"

"Sure." Jack thoroughly enjoyed his knowledge.

"How do you know this, Jack? Did you see the box?"

"Right from this very window. I was wandering through the woods late one afternoon when I came onto this shack. I was curious, so I sneaked up and looked in."

"And this same tramp was living in there?" Dan asked. "When was that?"

"Oh, I didn't find the shack until a couple of days ago. I don't know how long it's been here."

"Tell us about the money box," Mr. Hatfield urged.

"Well, as I looked through the window, I saw that tramp take it out from under his bed. While I watched, he counted the money. I saw a lot of bills in neat stacks."

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"Jeepers!" Dan whispered. "It must be the money we found in the church!"

"That hunk of baloney saw us through the window, and probably found out that the box was taken to Mr. Hatfield's house," Brad reasoned. "But how did he get it from there?"

"Remember Mrs. Jones' black dress!" Dan reminded him.

"Sure, I get it. He must have stolen it from her place and wore the garment when he slipped into the house."

"That's why the milkman reported seeing a woman leave the place," Dan nodded, peering again through the window. "The dope still is sleeping hard."

"After stealing the money, it's odd he didn't try to get away from here," Mr. Hatfield thought aloud. "Well, let's get back and report to the Cubs. It's risky standing here in the open."

After taking one more peek through the dirty pane of glass, the boys followed the Cub leader to the shelter of trees. There they were bombarded with a multitude of questions.

"Let's march into that shack in a body and make that tramp give up the money!" Chips proposed boldly. "Then we'll have him arrested!"

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"Aren't you putting the cart before the horse?" Mr. Hatfield suggested. "It's far wiser to have him arrested first and let the police demand the money."

"That's so," agreed Brad. "We aren't arresting officers."

"That tramp may sleep another hour or perhaps only five minutes," Mr. Hatfield said uneasily. "Tell you what! I'll take Red and head for the nearest telephone. The rest of you stay here in the woods. Watch the shack but keep out of sight. I'll be back as soon as I can call police or a state trooper."

"We won't let him get away," Dan promised.

"Brad's in charge," Mr. Hatfield said as he and Red started off through the woods. "Obey his orders."

After the Cub leader had gone, Brad told the boys to spread out a little and to flatten themselves on the ground.

"Hey, I want to take a peek into that window!" Chips announced.

"Nothing doing!"

"You and Dan got a chance to look. I guess if you did, the rest of us can too!"

"Sure, let's take turns," proposed Midge.

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Brad gave him a withering look. "Am I going to have trouble with you guys?" he demanded.

"Mr. Hatfield didn't say we couldn't," Chips argued.

"Use your head. You know if we all start going back and forth to that window, sooner or later we'll be seen. We have an important job to do."

"That's right," Dan supported the older boy. "And Brad's in charge. What he says goes."

"That's all right for you," Chips argued. "You already had your look."

Surprisingly, Jack Phillips now entered the discussion.

"Pipe down, you!" he flung at the astonished Chips. "You're yapping like a baby. We do as Mr. Hatfield said—see!"

Chips and Midge both subsided.

Time passed very slowly. Brad began to think it was taking Mr. Hatfield and Red a long while to telephone police. The Cubs, he could see, were growing cold and restless. Babe in particular, who had not dressed warmly enough, huddled against the older boy.

"How much longer will it be?" he asked.

"I sure wish I knew," Brad replied. "Listen, Babe. You're shivering. Why don't you hike to Mrs. Jones' place and warm yourself?"

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Babe shook his head. "Nothing doing," he said stoutly. "I'm as tough as the other fellows any day."

Another five minutes elapsed. Brad was shifting into a more comfortable position, when Dan gripped his arm.

"Look, Brad!" he whispered.

The door of the shack had opened. For a moment the tramp stood there in his wrinkled clothes, gazing directly toward the woods.

"Lie still, fellows!" Brad ordered. "I don't think he sees us."

"What's he going to do next?" Dan speculated uneasily.

The tramp stretched himself, and wandering down to the stream, washed his face. After taking a drink, he re-entered the shack.

"I sure hope he stays there," Chips whispered.

The wish was a futile one. A minute or two later, the tramp reappeared, carrying a few cooking utensils.

Turning his back to the Cubs, he followed the curve of the creek and vanished from sight.

"Is he leaving for good?" whispered Dan.

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"I don't think so," Jack Phillips answered. "I've seen him cook his food in a rock shelter about a hundred yards down-stream. He doesn't dare have a fire inside the shack, or he'd likely burn it down."

"All the same it's our job to keep him in sight until the police get here," Brad said. "Jack, suppose you and Fred follow and find out where he goes. Report back as soon as you can."

"Sure!" agreed Jack, liking the assignment. "We won't let him get away."

"If he should lead you a chase, mark the trail," the Den Chief advised. "Fred knows how to do it so the Cubs can follow."

Fred and Jack hastened off in pursuit of the tramp. However, it seemed they scarcely had disappeared until they returned again, breathless from hurrying.

"Anything wrong?" Brad demanded.

"Not a thing," Jack reassured him. "It's just as I thought. The tramp is cooking his meal. He'll be at it a half hour at least."

"All the same, we ought to keep him in sight," Brad decided. "You two hustle back and watch. If he starts this way, give some sort of signal."

"What'll it be?" Fred asked. "I know! I'll whistle like a whippoorwill."

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"Are there any of 'em in the woods at this time of year?"

"Oh, the tramp won't notice," Fred said. "I could give my siren whistle."

"No, the whippoorwill signal will be better," Brad decided quickly. "That siren of yours would send him hot-footing in the opposite direction. But don't use any signal unless it's absolutely necessary."

No sooner had the two gone off, than Chips again urged that the Cubs investigate the shack.

"Jack said the tramp will be tied up for a half hour," he argued. "This is our chance! We can

get in there and find the money!"

"Sure, Mr. Hatfield would want us to do it!" Midge backed him up.

"Well, I don't know—it's sort of risky."

"Oh, you're too conservative," Chips said hotly. "I'm not afraid!"

"No one is afraid," Brad retorted. "It's just a matter of common sense. If the tramp should catch us here before the police arrive—"

"Heck! We're seven to his one! What do we need? An army?"

The taunt annoyed Brad. "I'm just trying to do what Mr. Hatfield would want us to," he retorted. "You're so hot-headed."

"Then go in there yourself and search the shack!" Chips challenged. "Or are you afraid?"

"No, I'm not, and you know it! I just have sense enough to figure that the tramp could come back here any minute."

"Fred and Jack are watching, aren't they? If the fellow leaves the creek, they'll whistle. Go on! The important thing is to get that box of money!"

Brad gazed thoughtfully toward the creek. From a short distance away, he could see a few wisps of smoke arising.

"All right, we'll take a chance!" he decided reluctantly.

Chips started for the shack, only to have Brad haul him back.

"Not you!" he said. "Dan and I will search the shack. You and Midge and Babe stay here and keep watch. If you hear a whistle, or see anyone coming, give us a warning."

"Some guys have all the fun!" Chips complained.

"Fun!" Brad snorted. "We're taking the risk. Don't forget, that tramp may be armed, either with a revolver or a knife. If he should catch us in the shack, he might give us a tough time of it."

"If you're scared, let me go."

"Oh, you make me tired!" Brad snapped in disgust. "Stay here and watch. Come on, Dan."

The two darted across the clearing and opened the door of the shack.

A few garments hung from pegs on the wall. An orange crate had been fashioned into a table. Otherwise, except for the balsam bed on the floor, the room was bare.

Losing no time, Dan and Brad began to tear the bed apart.

"It's not here," Dan said in disappointment. "Wait"—his hand struck a metal object buried deep amid the carefully laid brush.

Triumphantly, he brought out the tin box.

"Good work, Dan!" Brad praised. "Is the money

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still there?"

Dan raised the lid. The box appeared filled with bills and coins.

"Not much can be missing at any rate," he said in satisfaction. "Finding this box will clear Mr. Hatfield and the Cubs!"

"Now our only problem will be finding out who's entitled to the money—"

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Both boys froze into alert attention. Faintly they had heard a whistle from down-creek.

"Gosh!" Brad exclaimed. "We're getting out of here!"

At that same moment, someone tapped on the glass pane at the rear of the shack.

Whirling around, Brad and Dan saw Chips' contorted face pressed against the window. He motioned frantically.

Seizing the tin box, Brad and Dan started for the door.

Before they could reach it, heavy footsteps were heard outside.

Then the door creaked back, and the tramp stood there blocking the exit!

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CHAPTER 18

Pursuit

"Well!" said the tramp unpleasantly. "Visitors, I see!"

Dan gripped the tin box, standing close beside Brad.

The shack had but one exit, the door which was blocked by the tramp. Dan and Brad knew they were in a spot. Their best bet was to stall for time, hoping that the other Cubs would circle in from the rear and come to their aid.

"Hand over that box!" the tramp ordered.

"No!" Dan defied him.

"You'll give it up or I'll break every bone in your body!"

"You stole the money from the church—or rather from Mr. Hatfield's place!" Dan accused. "It's not your box!"

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"Hand it over!" the tramp ordered again, moving a step closer. He reached his hand into his pocket as if for a weapon.

"Better do it, Dan," Brad advised quietly.

Even then the boy was reluctant to relinquish the box.

Appraising his chances, he gazed beyond the tramp. Through the open door he could see Chips and Midge moving in closer.

A daring plan flashed into his mind. But should he risk trying it? The chances were about even that he would fail.

Chips was a star baseball player and his reactions were fast. But would they be speedy enough?

"Listen, you!" the tramp ordered again. "Give me that box!"

Dan no longer dared stall. Chips and Midge were quite close to the door now, though not near enough to attack the tramp from the rear. Behind the two, almost in line were Fred and Jack who had hastened up from the direction of the creek.

For Dan's purpose, the line-up was very nearly perfect. The moment had come. He had to take the chance and hope that the other Cubs didn't muff it.

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"Sure, I'll give you the box," he said. "CATCH!"

Even before Dan shouted the word, he had tossed the box in a high arch over the tramp's head.

Belatedly the man made a leap for it, but he clutched only air.

Behind him, the box was falling almost directly into Chips' hands.

"Get it!" shouted Dan.

Chips already was closing his hands upon the box. He fumbled, recovered and held fast.

"Pass it!" shouted Dan. "PASS!"

The command momentarily confused Chips. But as the angry tramp started toward him, he suddenly realized what Dan meant.

Pivoting, he shoved the box into Midge's hands.

By now, all the Cubs had caught onto the trick.

Midge ran a few steps and tossed the box to Fred.

"Come back here, you!" shouted the tramp furiously.

Forgetting Dan and Brad, he started in pursuit of Fred and the box.

The two boys ran out of the shack.

"Make for Mrs. Jones' place!" Dan shouted.

Fred was a fast runner and already had a long start on the tramp.

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But to the alarm of the Cubs, the man did not give up the chase. Determined to recover the box, he kept after him.

Brad rounded up Jack and the other Cubs, heading for the road, by a shorter route. Anxiously, they looked about for Mr. Hatfield and police officers, but the highway was entirely deserted.

"Something's delayed them," Brad said anxiously, scribbling a note which he speared on

a barb of the wire fence. "I hope he finds this. I've told him to look for us at Mrs. Jones'."

The Cubs had reached the road a minute or two ahead of Fred. Soon they saw him rolling under a fence thirty yards farther down the highway.

"Good boy!" Dan exclaimed. "He still has the box!"

The Cubs raced to join Fred. Brad relieved him of the money container.

"We can't stop to pick any daisies!" Fred panted. "That ape is right on my heels!"

"Let's have it out with him!" Chips exclaimed. "We're seven to one—lots o' fun!"

"We're heading for Mrs. Jones' place!" Brad ordered firmly. "I think the fellow has a knife. We're taking no chances on being carved."

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The Cubs loped off, leaving the tramp farther and farther behind.

"Guess he's given up the chase now," Midge said, as they drew near the Jones' home. "No, by George! He's still following!"

"Say, what if Mrs. Jones isn't at home?" Babe quavered. "What'll we do then?"

"Don't dig up trouble," Dan advised him. "Wait until it nudges you in the shoulder."

He pounded on the door with his fist. The Cubs waited uneasily. The tramp had turned into the lane and was running faster now.

"Wait, boys!" he shouted. "I got something to tell you!"

"He probably wants to give us a stick of candy!" Dan muttered. "Oh, why doesn't Mrs. Jones open the door—"

Just then, the widow did answer the knock.

"Let us in and we'll explain later," Dan said breathlessly. "That tramp is after us!"

Without asking questions, Mrs. Jones hustled the Cubs into the house.

"Better lock the door," Brad advised, setting the money box on the kitchen table. "That bird may try to break in."

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"Let him!" said Mrs. Jones. Nevertheless, she locked the kitchen door as the boy had advised.

The Cubs barely had time to explain where they had obtained the money, than the man was pounding to be let in.

"Don't do it," Brad advised the widow. "He's a tough customer. Better let the police handle him."

Chips and Midge had gone to the window to look out.

"Come back, boys," Mrs. Jones ordered. "If that tramp is a criminal, he might take a shot through the glass."

Alarmed, the two boys moved back out of range.

Outside, a door slammed as if in the wind. Mrs. Jones, hearing the sound, stiffened.

Then, unmindful of her own warning to the Cubs, she ran to the window.

"Why, that sneak!" she exclaimed. "He's opened the double doors leading down into the basement!"

"Then he'll be up here in another minute!" Babe quavered. "He'll get us!"

"Oh, no, he won't," said Mrs. Jones confidently.

Moving across the kitchen, she locked the inside door which led into the basement. As a double precaution, she then placed the heavy oak table in front of the door.

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"That should hold him," she announced. "I have another little idea too!"

The Cubs could not guess what the widow was up to as she darted out of the house, not even bothering to put on a wrap.

In a moment though, they understood. Mrs. Jones slammed shut the double doors entering into the cellar, and bolted them.

As Dan and Brad ran out to help, she told them to bring several pieces of heavy machinery from the shed. These the boys trundled out and placed on top of the double doors.

"That should hold him!" Mrs. Jones declared, well satisfied with her work.

From inside the house, they could hear the tramp pounding on the door.

"He may break it down!" Dan said uneasily.

"He could," the widow admitted. "Dan, run down the road and see if you can find out what's keeping Mr. Hatfield and the state troopers. Meanwhile, the rest of us will hold the fort. Or to be strictly accurate—the kitchen!"

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CHAPTER 19 "I Promise"

Knowing that Mrs. Jones and the Cubs might not be able to hold the tramp a prisoner very long in the barricaded basement, Dan ran as fast as he could down the road.

He had no idea which way Mr. Hatfield had gone. However, it seemed to him that the house most likely to have a telephone, was a large white one a quarter of a mile farther on toward town.

Dan was midway there when he saw a state trooper's car approaching. His heart leaped. Help, he thought, was at hand.

Even before the boy signaled, the car came to a grinding halt a short distance away. Two state troopers were in the front seat, with Mr. Hatfield sitting between them.

"Get in, Dan," the Cub leader said, as the door swung open. "What happened at the shack?"

Dan tersely told him.

"On to Mrs. Jones' place," one of the state troopers declared, shifting gears. "We'll get the fellow!"

As the car swung into the farmyard a few minutes later, Mrs. Jones met the group at the door.

"I'm glad you got here!" she said in relief. "That tramp has been making a frightful fuss in the cellar. We were afraid he would break down the door."

The troopers decided to accost the man from the outside exit, rather than subjecting the Cubs to possible gunfire.

With weapons drawn, the two officers flung wide the double cellar doors.

"Come out or we'll shoot!" the order was given.

The Cubs thought the tramp might defy the officers. However, in a moment he came out of his dark hole, hands raised.

Officer Peterson snapped a pair of handcuffs over the man's wrists and marched him into the house.

"Your name?" he demanded.

"Carl Blakemore." The tramp blinked owlishly, his gaze roving from one face to another.

"You've been living in a shack near here?"

"I've been sleeping there nights," the man muttered.

"You're under arrest for stealing money from the home of Sam Hatfield. Anything to say?"

"Not a thing," the tramp muttered. Then he suddenly changed his mind. "Yes, I have too!" he announced. "I know you'll take me to jail, so I may as well tell you the whole story. Not that you'll believe me!"

"Go ahead," the trooper encouraged.

"All right, I stole the money," the tramp frankly admitted. "The first place I took it from was the Merrimac house."

"Then he was telling the truth when he said he'd lost a strongbox!" Dan exclaimed. "The other claimants were false."

"It was Merrimac's money," the tramp confirmed. "What's more, except for twenty-five dollars I used to live on, every cent of it is still here in the box."

"How did the box get in the coal bin of the church?" Mr. Hatfield questioned.

"I'm coming to that. But first I'd like to tell why I came to Webster City in the first place."

"Tell the story in your own way," Trooper Peterson instructed him. "You can put your hands down now."

"Thanks."

"It's only fair to warn you that anything you say may be used against you in court."

"I got nothing to hide," the tramp said with a shrug. "I've had a tough life, knockin' around the world. Sometimes I've had enough to eat—sometimes I haven't. For awhile I worked on a lake freighter. Then I got a bad infection in my leg. When I came out of the hospital, I was broke and discouraged.

"I began to turn things over in my mind, wishing I could settle down and start a new life. Then I remembered I had an uncle here in Webster City that was well fixed. I'd never paid any attention to the old duffer, or he to me. I couldn't even remember his name. But I thought I'd drift out this way and look him up. Figured he might stake me to a new start."

"Who was your uncle?" Mr. Hatfield asked curiously.

"You'll hear in a minute. Well, as I was saying, I came out here and tried to look him up. I didn't have any luck. Finally I was down to my last dime.

"I was desperate. I tried to get help from charity, but was told they couldn't help me because I was a non-county resident."

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"Never mind all these details," State Trooper Peterson cut in impatiently. "You robbed the Merrimac home?"

"Yes, I heard talk in a pool room that the old man had a strongbox. I noticed by watching the house that he was careless about locking his doors. So I watched my chance and slipped in. I found the box without any trouble. But as I was leaving, I saw a photograph that gave me a terrific shock."

"Mr. Merrimac's picture?" questioned the trooper.

"No, it was a picture of my mother. In a flash, I knew that I was robbing my own uncle, because he was the only person in Webster City who would have such a photograph."

"But you went through with the deed all the same?" Officer Peterson reminded him.

"I didn't have time to think things to a conclusion," the tramp said lamely. "As I was looking at the photograph, a woman came into the house to do some work. Seeing her, I got panicky and fled."

"With the money."

"Yes, I kept it. But right away, my conscience began to bother me. I'd never stolen anything before. The last thing I wanted to do was take money from my own relative.

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"I made up my mind I'd return it and then try to get Merrimac to help me."

"What changed your mind?"

"Everything worked against me. First I made the mistake of hiding the money box in the empty

church. It was my bad luck that the Cub Scouts had a meeting there before I had a chance to get it back again."

"You were the man we met on the street that night in the rain!" Dan identified him.

"Sure, I asked you what was going on. That was the first I knew the church had been reopened."

"Then later you peeked through the church window!"

"I saw a light in the basement first," the tramp explained. "That gave me a real scare. But I had a worse jolt when I saw you kids had found the money and were counting it."

"You followed us in a car after we left the church?" Mr. Hatfield inquired.

"Where would I get a car?"

"Then how did you learn where the money box was taken?"

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"I knew you'd either take it home or to the police station."

"So you broke into my home later and took the box?"

"I had to get it back."

"You dressed as a woman so you wouldn't be recognized?" Mr. Hatfield resumed the questioning. "You wore a black silk dress with diamond-shaped jet buttons?"

"That's right!"

"You mean you wore my dress!" Mrs. Jones exclaimed indignantly. "Why, then you stole it from the shed! You've been taking wood too!"

"Only a little."

"All this time I wrongfully was blaming Jack," Mrs. Jones said. "And the boy never once spoke up to set me right!"

"After using the dress, I suppose you hid it in the hollow log in the woods," Mr. Hatfield commented.

"That's right," the tramp agreed. "For a while I slept in an unoccupied house near here. After the contractor drove me away, I had to throw up that shack in the woods. It was pretty cold at night."

"What about the money?" Trooper Peterson reminded him.

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"There's not much more to tell. I made up my mind to return it to Merrimac like I said."

"But you never did?"

"I tried. Once I got into the house, but before I could put the box where I'd found it, someone rang the doorbell. I had to get out fast!"

"You could have left the money," the trooper pointed out.

"I guess so," the tramp admitted. "I was sort of rattled. I just crawled out the back window and

beat it as fast as I could.”

“After that, you didn’t make another attempt to return the money?”

“I didn’t know what to do. I used a little to buy food. Oh, I was weak all right—I admit it. But it’s the truth I never intended to steal from my own uncle. I know you won’t believe my story.”

“On the contrary, everything you have told us tallies with the facts as we know them,” Mr. Hatfield assured him.

“Well, that’s my story and it’s all there is to it,” the tramp said, making a despairing gesture with his hands. “You may as well take me off to jail now.”

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The troopers escorted the man to the waiting car. As the man left the home, he paused in the doorway to direct a word to the Cubs.

“No hard feelings, boys,” he said. “You fellows made it plenty tough for me, but I’m not blaming anyone except myself. I led a useless life and I got what’s coming to me!”

After the car had driven away, Mr. Hatfield told the Cubs they must return to Webster City without further delay. So much time had elapsed that he was afraid lest their parents worry.

“Jack, we owe you a lot,” he said, shaking the boy’s hand. “Through your cooperation, my name will be completely cleared, and Mr. Merrimac will have his money again. Many thanks not only from me but from all the Cubs.”

“Sure, that’s okay,” the boy replied in deep embarrassment. He hesitated, and then with a darting glance at Mrs. Jones asked: “Are you going to send me back to the Institute?”

“Send you back?” Mrs. Jones demanded with a quick laugh which had real affection. “Why, Jack! What an idea! I need you here to help me.”

“You do? You aren’t just saying it?” said Jack.

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“Jack, I truly need and want you,” the widow repeated. “Since my own sons grew up, I’ve wanted another boy the worst way. One I could depend on. Shucks! I wouldn’t have a boy without spirit!”

“I’ll never run away again,” Jack said earnestly. “I promise!”

“When a Cub gives a promise, he never breaks it,” Mr. Hatfield reminded him. “So be sure you really mean it.”

“I’m not a Cub,” Jack said slowly. “I’d like to be one someday.”

“There’s no reason why you can’t join the organization if you’re willing to live up to the rules,” Mr. Hatfield assured him. “We’ll give you a little start now. Boys, show Jack the Cub sign.”

The boys all raised the two first fingers of their right hands, holding them high.

“What does that mean?” Jack asked curiously.

“Those two fingers signify the ears of the Wolf,” Dan explained.

"It's the Indian sign for 'intelligence,'" Mr. Hatfield added. "If you want to be a Cub, Jack, you must learn to use your head instead of your emotions. Remember that the next time you're inclined to do something rash."

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"I'll remember," Jack grinned, making the sign with his right hand. "From now on, you can depend on me. I promise!"

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CHAPTER 20

Knights of the Round Table

In the Cubs' meeting room at the church, parents had gathered to witness a knighting ceremony of the entire Pack.

The room had been gaily decorated with colorful banners made by the boys of Den 2. Chairs had been arranged in a perfect circle to represent the Round Table.

Earlier in the evening Den 1 already had offered its ceremonial performance. Now it was time for Den 2 to show what it could do.

From the ante-room where the Cubs were scrambling into their suits of armor, a buzz of conversation issued forth.

"Hurry up, fellows!" Dan urged the others. "We're three minutes past starting time now. Everyone all set?"

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"I can't get this flashlight to work," complained Red. As a torch bearer, he was assigned to hold a long pole with a flashlight attached to the end.

"You've been playing with it too much," Brad told him. "Luckily, I brought some extra batteries. Here, put this in, and we'll be ready to start."

"I'm going to forget my lines," Babe mumbled, repeating them over and over.

"You'll do fine," Brad encouraged him. "All ready, fellows? Dan, you're to do the knighting honors. So get in there!"

A trumpet, slightly off-key, blared a triumphal salute.

Pulling his armor into place, Dan marched into the ceremonial hall to take his position in front of a torch bearer. Addressing the onlooking parents, he said clearly:

"Among us tonight there are a few who have not yet joined the Knights of the Round Table. Although these newcomers have no armor of steel, they are equipped with armor of good will, squareness and honor. So we are gathered here to welcome them into our circle. Bring the first man forward!"

Brad, holding a torch high, led Jack Phillips from the sidelines. At a signal, the boy knelt on his left knee in front of Dan, who said:

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"As a knight of the Cub Scout organization, you

must promise always to do your part. You must follow our leader, obey his orders and give good will."

"I promise always to do my best," slowly repeated Jack, who had been coached in his lines.

With his wooden sword, Dan tapped the boy lightly on the shoulder.

"I dub thee a Knight of the Round Table," he said. "As a knight and member of Den 2, you are expected to help with all our crusades. Arise!"

As Jack scrambled up, everyone cheered and clapped. The ceremony however, was not over.

"We welcome you, Sir Jack!" Dan continued. "Don your armor!"

A suit fashioned from cardboard, burlap and roofing discs had been prepared for the boy. Babe and Midge helped him get into the costume.

Then as Jack reappeared all decked out as a knight, the other boys formed a double column, facing each other. Swords were raised above their heads to form a long archway. Jack walked through to take his place at the end of the line.

Next, Babe, who was only a Bobcat, received the Order of the Wolf. Other promotions and achievement awards were given out.

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As a climax to the knighting ceremony, Dan was promoted from Wolf to Bear rank. The boy had worked hard to win the honor, learning rules of safety, making many handicraft articles and learning how to tie difficult knots.

His most appreciated task however, had been the making of a fifty-page Den scrapbook.

In the book the boy had included press notices of Den meetings and activities. Ten of the pages were devoted to snapshots of the Cubs and to published accounts concerning the missing money box and its recovery.

"This scrapbook will be one of the Den's most treasured possessions," Mr. Hatfield assured him at conclusion of the knighting ceremony. "It will serve always as a nice reminder of our little adventure."

Before the evening was over, the Cubs were to have another very pleasant surprise. Soon the Cub Master made the announcement for which everyone had been waiting. Den 2 had won first prize in the knighting ceremony, with Brad and Dan being awarded individual honors for having the most original suits of armor.

After congratulations were over, Dan thought to ask Mr. Hatfield if he had heard what was to become of the tramp, Carl Blakemore.

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"He was in jail the last I heard," the Cub leader replied. "I was told though that Mr. Merrimac offered to go his bail. He investigated and found that the fellow had told the truth about being his nephew."

"Queer that he didn't know him by sight."

"He'd never seen him—not even as a boy," Mr. Hatfield explained. "It was quite humiliating for Mr. Merrimac to find out about Carl. However, he's making the best of a bad situation, and I understand, wants to help him if he can."

The Den Mother and her helpers had prepared a fine supper for all the Cubs. Dan and Mr. Hatfield were starting toward the table, when at the same moment they saw a newcomer enter the church meeting room.

"Why, it's Mr. Merrimac himself!" Dan exclaimed.

The elderly man never before had attended a Cub meeting, and in fact, derived little enjoyment from social affairs.

Now his gaze wandered from Cub to Cub until he had picked out Dan and Brad from the group. Made aware that he seemed to be looking for them, they went over to speak to him.

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"Well, boys," he said heartily, "I believe I made you a little promise several days ago. And according to the code of the Cubs, a promise always must be kept. Right?"

"Right," agreed Brad, smiling broadly. Already he had a notion as to what had brought Mr. Merrimac to the Cub meeting.

"You boys did me a big favor," the man continued. "I never expected to see the color of my money again, but thanks to your fine organization I got nearly every penny of it back."

"Jack Phillips had a hand in it too," Dan reminded him.

"I am fully aware of that," Mr. Merrimac nodded. "Fact is, I've talked to court officials about the lad. I mean to help him if I can."

"He has a good home with Mrs. Jones," Brad said hastily. "What's more, he likes it there."

"Oh, I have no intention of taking the boy away from her. That thought never entered my head. I did think that later on, the lad may want a little special schooling that Mrs. Jones may not be able to provide. That's where I aim to step into the picture."

"Why, that's fine!" Brad exclaimed, while Dan echoed the sentiment.

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"To get back to the purpose of my call here tonight," Mr. Merrimac resumed. "You'll remember I promised that if my money were recovered I'd not forget the church fund?"

"Yes, but we wouldn't hold you to it," Brad said generously.

"Tut! I always intended to give to the building fund. I was a bit testy about it because of my loss. Well, I can see you're in a hurry to get started on those victuals, so I'll cut it short. Here's my donation."

He handed Dan a check. The boy read the figure \$1,500.00 and whistled softly.

"Wow! This is more than generous, Mr. Merrimac! It's magnificent."

"Your contribution will put the Cubs over the top!" added Brad.

"That's all I have to say," Mr. Merrimac declared. "I have to get back home now."

"Stay for supper, Mr. Merrimac," Dan urged.

"No, I want to be home," the old man replied. "My nephew is there now, you know. Came this afternoon."

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The information was new to the boys, but they tried not to show curiosity.

"Carl will stay with me for a while," Mr. Merrimac explained. "I was able to get him off on probation. If he leads a straight life, as I think he will, he'll be assured of a good home with me."

"Your heart's in the right spot, Mr. Merrimac," Dan declared warmly.

"Tut!" the old man chuckled, embarrassed by the praise. "Well, good-bye boys, or should I say, Sir Knights!"

A delightful social hour followed for the Cubs, their parents and friends. Among those present was Mrs. Jones, who seemed as proud of Jack as if he were her own son.

All too soon to please the Cubs, it was time for the meeting to break up. Brad began to put away the swords and other items used during the ceremony.

Coming upon the scrapbook which Dan had made, he fingered through it.

"You did a bang-up job recording the history of the Cubs," he praised. "But why all the blank pages at the end?"

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"They represent the future," Dan laughed, stepping out of his armor. "And boy! Judging from the past, what a future we'll have. How about it, fellows?"

"We'll do our best to make 'er glow!" shouted Chips.

The other Cubs, gathering up their belongings, signified agreement, by giving a long and lusty wolf wail.

"A-h-h-kay Iaa!" they shouted. "W-e-e-l d-o-o-o-o our Best!"

On that note, the Cubs in a burst of enthusiasm, grabbed Dan and tossed him a little way into the air. Then, like a pack of healthy young wolves, they raced out of the meeting hall.

Transcriber's Notes

- Silently corrected a few typos (but left nonstandard spelling and dialect as is).
- Rearranged front matter to a more-logical streaming order.

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