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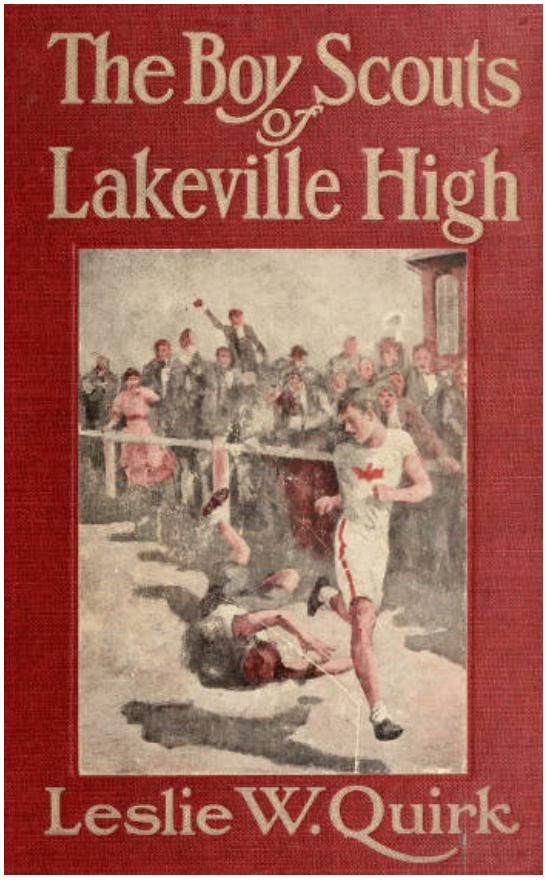

THE BOY SCOUTS OF LAKEVILLE HIGH

By LESLIE W. QUIRK

The Wellworth College Series

The Fourth Down
The Freshman Eight
The Third Strike
Ice-Boat Number One

The Boy Scouts Series

The Boy Scouts of Black Eagle Patrol
The Boy Scouts on Crusade
The Boy Scouts of Lakeville High

"Sit tight," he called, "and I'll have you out in a jiffy."

Frontispiece. *See page 96.*

THE BOY SCOUTS
OF
LAKEVILLE HIGH

BY
LESLIE W. QUIRK

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
WILLIAM KIRKPATRICK

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THE BOY SCOUTS OF LAKEVILLE HIGH

CHAPTER I

THE NEW BOY

"Help!"

As though snipped off short by one of its own whirling blades, the lawn mower in the next yard stilled abruptly. Almost on the echo, a mop of red hair popped above the garden fence.

From her perch on the turning-pole, which jutted out of the big butternut tree in the Sefton back lawn, Molly Sefton watched the brick-red thatch and the serious face beneath it. She wondered whether the boy were fifteen years old or sixteen, and whether these new neighbors who had moved in only the day before would prove as "nice" as she had found the rest of the little village of Lakeville. Then a sharp twist of pain made her forget everything except her right foot.

"Please help me loose," she called. "I was climbing up to get my kitten, and my foot slipped in here. Now I can't get it out."

By this time, the red-headed boy had drawn himself to the top of the fence. Almost before she had finished explaining, he had dropped on the other side. Scrambling up to the horizontal bar beside her, he squinted thoughtfully at the imprisoned foot, wedged between the tree-trunk and the wooden strip that held the end of the bar.

"Pull your foot straight up."

She made the effort and winced. "It's too tight."

The red-headed boy frowned. "You're wearing thick, outdoor shoes," he said. "If I just unlace this one, you can wiggle your foot out as easy as pie."

While she remained standing on the bar, balancing herself by the tree, the boy straddled the pole and began switching the shoe lace out of the stops.

"It was my kitten I wanted to get," she said slowly. "That's how it happened. And he's up there yet."

The red head looked up. Two feet out of the girl's reach, clinging to a tiny limb, hung a black and white kitten. From time to time, it opened its mouth and let out a whimpering cry that sounded like "*Me-e-e!*"

"How did it get up there?"

"The Claxton's dog pretty nearly scared it to death; it started climbing and was afraid to stop."

"I see," nodded the boy. "Well, you jerk your foot out of that shoe, and we'll get the kitten easy enough. Are you all ready? Now!"

Molly made the effort to free herself.

"I can't!"

"It's just as easy as falling—if you'll only try."

"It's not easy." She was beginning to lose her temper. "I'm stuck just as fast as I ever was. You haven't done a bit of good." Before she finished the sentence, she was ashamed of her words, for a hurt look overspread the face beneath the red hair.

"Are you sure you can't yank it free?"

"I know I can't."

Very deliberately, he bent down and pulled from his own right foot the white tennis slipper.

"I'm sorry I can't get you loose, but I know how to get your kitten down."

"What are you going to do?"

Without answering, he drew back his slipper in a position to hurl it at the helpless kitten. He measured the distance with his eye, poising the shoe for the most accurate throw possible.

"What—what are you going to do?" She was very close to screaming.

"Hold tight. That kitten might come down right on your head."

"You horrid, *horrid*—"

"I'll count three slowly, and if your foot isn't out by that time—"

"You—you mustn't do such a thing! You shan't!" Molly gasped her indignation, meanwhile clinging to the tree with both hands.

"Just the same, I'm going to. Get your arm out of the way."

He pulled back his tennis slipper to aim at the kitten. "One!— Two!— Thr—"

A little half-scream interrupted him, and behold! Molly's stockinged foot rested beside its booted mate as she lunged forward to prevent the outrage upon the little black and white kitten.

Strangely enough, the red-headed boy was merely grinning good-naturedly.

"I knew you could," he said. "I knew, if you really wanted to—"

For a little moment, Molly stared sternly at him, before she bit her lower lip with an expression that was somewhere between vexation and relief.

"Why, I—I don't believe you meant to throw your slipper at all," she reproved him.

With a little broader grin, he nodded his head frankly.

"Of course, I didn't. I wouldn't throw anything at your kitten any more than I'd throw anything at ours, and we've got an awfully funny little fellow. All I wanted to do was to get your foot loose." Molly smiled in spite of herself. "Now, if you'll get down on the ground, so I can shinny up the tree a bit, I'll catch the kitten, and then I'll get that shoe of yours."

With her stockinged foot cushioned on the soft grass, Molly watched the boy struggle up the tree and clumsily but gently rescue the kitten from its roost. Afterwards, when the animal lay safely in Molly's arms, he pried loose the shoe from its wedged nook and dropped a bit heavily, to the ground.

"It was splendid of you!" Molly began, and then stopped, horror-struck. "But look at your clothes!"

The red-headed boy glanced down, but continued to smile, in spite of the dark stains that had spread where he gripped the tree-trunk and sundry leaf and nut clusters between his knees.

"I'm always doing something like that. I wish it wasn't the first day of school, though," he added a little ruefully. "It's most schooltime, too."

But now Molly was her practical self once more. "You get your books," she ordered, "and I'll take you down in our automobile. Horace Hibbs (he's an inventor with the Fair Play Factory) has his workshop near the school, and he mixes a sort of patent stuff that just takes any kind of a spot out of your clothes. He's the Scout Master of the Black Eagle Patrol of Boy Scouts, too. See, father's getting the car ready now. You come right over."

While Mr. Sefton drove the car, Molly and the red-headed boy sat side by side on the rear seat. After deftly finding out his name (which was Rodman Cree) and his age (fifteen) and his grade (first-year high) Molly began telling him all about Lakeville and about the new high school, which had resulted from the combined efforts of Horace Hibbs, the Fair Play Sporting Goods Factory, and, most of all, the Black Eagles, Lakeville's patrol of Boy Scouts.[1]

"I came pretty near being a Scout last year myself," Rodman said suddenly. "I was all ready to pass my tenderfoot examinations when we moved out on a farm and staid there till we came to Lakeville."

"Oh, that's fine!" Molly assured him briskly. "You'll be taken in with the Black Eagles. You see, Handy Wallace moved to Beloit almost a year ago, and Sandy Anvers was sent East to school; so that leaves only seven. And the patrol is going to do things this year," she went on warmly. "There will be high-school football teams and baseball and basketball teams and everything else, and there will be lots of Black Eagles on every team, too. I just know so."

The boy's face lost its smile. "I'm not sure whether I'd be taken into that bunch or not," he confessed slowly. "I'm not much good at athletics."

"Nonsense! Of course you are!" nodded Molly reassuringly. "And, besides, even if you aren't, you'd be good in just a little while. You only have to try."

"I—I'd like to," he agreed, as the car stopped in front of the Fair Play Factory's annex. "I'd certainly like to."

A round, jolly face showed at the window to the right of the door, and presently Horace himself, Scout Master of the Black Eagle Patrol, middle-aged and good-natured, greeted him from the entrance.

"What can we do for you this morning, Mr. Sefton?" smiled the inventor. "Do you want to buy a pair of skates or some hockey sticks, or shall you wait for the cold weather?"

Molly's father laughed. "We have a young man here who has been climbing a butternut tree, and Molly tells me you own a special brand of stain remover that can handle even accidents like this one."

Horace Hibbs raised his right hand. "Don't say another word. We will send those stains to the Happy Hunting Ground in about two minutes."

By the time Rodman Cree came back to the waiting car, not only was his clothing free from the blemish of the butternut, but his wish to join the Boy Scouts had grown from a very moderate desire to one truly giant-sized. Never before, he thought, had he met anybody who understood boys as did Horace Hibbs; and what the Scout Master told him about the patrol made him wish that he knew scouting from A to Z, and, in addition, could run the hundred in ten seconds, and broad-jump across a river.

"Of course he's fine," agreed Molly, "but just wait till you know the boys in the patrol—Bunny Payton, the patrol leader, and Bi and Nap and S. S. and Jump and Specs and Roundy; and, oh, just wait till you've seen our new high school!"

Up Elm Street the car turned, and down Freemont, pulling to a stop in the middle of the block.

"Look!" cried Molly.

Artistically centered in a big lot, the building stood, with a scrub ball game already in progress on the new diamond. The gray rock side walls, that seemed to be more window than anything else; the graceful lines that rose in exquisite proportion; the main door, with its roofed, stone-pillared veranda on each side,—all made a structure that savored more of a home than a school. It was the sort of place you would enjoy going to, if the teachers only lived halfway up to the building. And the crowd of pupils already gathering for the first day proved how deeply Lakeville's first and only high school had stirred the little village and the country roundabout.

As Molly looked over the young people grouped at the door or watching the game of "work-up," she recognized not only every Lakeville boy and girl of high school age, but as many more from farms and villages within ten miles. By automobiles, by train, a-wheel and on pony-back, they had gathered for the opening session. Peter Barrett, his patched suit neatly brushed and pressed, stood by his father's farm wagon; ten yards away, Royal Sheffield, son of the wealthy, real estate man of Charlesboro, was just climbing from a new eight-cylinder car. "Buck" Claxton, who for the past two years had worked at the local flour mill, was playing a noisy game at first base, while on the side-lines, Clarence Prissler, his nose out of a book for once, was explaining the fine points of the sport to Marion Genevieve Chester, who tilted her nose, smoothed her hair, and looked very bored.

But the Boy Scouts of the Black Eagle Patrol were neither watching from the side-lines nor bored. Heart and soul, they were playing the game, from Specs McGrew, taking a lead off third, to Bunny Payton, thumping the palm of his catching glove with his other hand and signaling to Bi Jones, out in the pitcher's box. Handling the bat itself, Roundy Magoon waved the stick back and forth, while Bi, with maddening slowness, made ready to pitch.

"Hurry it up!" shouted Bunny. "This fellow is as good as gone, and I want a crack at the ball before the bell rings."

Herbert Zane, whose nickname of "Spick and Span" had been shortened to "S. S.", was creeping as far off first as he dared, with an occasional glance at his clothes, as if wondering whether or not it would pay to risk the gorgeousness of a brand new suit by sliding into second.

"Let the next one go!" he called to Roundy, apparently having made up his mind that it would be better to wallow in the dust, and thus perch on second, than be forced out or made the victim of a double play.

Roundy nodded. Very likely, too, he intended to do just that thing. But the ball floated over so slowly, so tantalizing "right", that at the very last instant he swung hard enough to drive it over all the roofs of Lakeville. But Bi had put his muscle into the heave, and Roundy had started his swing a fraction of a second too late. Though all his stout body went into the blow, only the handle of the bat made connection, and the ball hit in front of the plate and dribbed toward first.

Like a flash, Bunny leaped forward, scooped it up, tagged Roundy before that slow-moving youth had stirred into full action, and, with a bluff toward Specs, pegged to second.

It was a good throw, although high, and Jump Henderson took it with one of his old circus leaps, touching S. S., who slid nobly but too late, and relaying the ball back to Bunny in time to prevent Specs from making an attempt to score.

"Don't mind me! I'm nobody!" Specs howled mournfully, scampering back to third; while Roundy and S. S. trotted out to the field, Buck Claxton stepped into the pitcher's box, Nap Meeker put on the catcher's glove, and Bi and Bunny came in to bat.

"Leave me here," wailed Specs. "That's right! Leave me here! I'm having a lot of fun on this base. Yes, I am! I've watched eight of you fan or hit pop-ups or easy grounders; and here I am waiting yet."

"You won't be there long, Specs," Bunny promised cheerfully, picking up the bat.

"That's what they all say," Specs growled. "But nobody brings me in."

"Nobody will bring you in, either, old socks," observed Nap. "You're licked in this war. All right, Buck. Give him one right here."

The ball was shoulder high. Too eager to wait for a good one, Bunny swung lustily, managing to foul it off over Nap's head, past the Sefton automobile and across the road, where the ball lodged under the high fence of the Anvers yard.

"Tell my folks to send my dinner out here," groaned Specs, plumping himself down on third base and burying his head between his knees.

It was just as Nap started after the lost ball that Bunny spied the car with Molly and Rodman in the rear seat.

"Oh, Bunny!" shouted Molly.

A moment later, the new boy and the leader of the Black Eagles had formally shaken hands.

"And he can pass the tenderfoot tests, and he's awfully good at athletics, and—"

"But I'm not *any* good at athletics," protested Rodman, laughing. "I'm no good at all in that sort of thing."

"He's just too modest to say so. You ought to have seen how he saved the kitten."

"Have you ever played baseball?" demanded Bunny suddenly.

"Sure—a little. But I'm no good. I can't bat decently, or catch or field."

Bunny held out his bat. "Come on over and take my place," he invited. "I doubt if I can hit Buck, and poor old Specs has been perched on third for hours. Everybody who comes to bat knocks a baby grounder or a pop-up or something, and Specs stays right there."

"All right, Bunny!" Nap broke in, crossing back to the school yard with the ball.

Molly dropped her hand on Rodman's arm. "Go and try," she urged. "I know you can do it."

"Hurry up, Bunny! Pretty near time for the bell!" Nap flung over his shoulder.

Rodman was plainly wavering. "But—but—"

"Try it, anyhow."

"Oh, you must!" Molly commanded.

The new boy climbed out of the car, smiling. "I'm no good, but I'll give you a chance to see just how bad I am."

"This Claxton," Bunny confided, as they jogged to the diamond, "pitches a hard ball, and he has a sure-enough out-curve; but if you stand up to the plate and don't let him bluff you back, it will be all right. Remember, though, you have only two strikes left."

From the car, Molly watched Rodman and Bunny join the others. For a little while, there seemed to be some objection to Rodman's substituting, but Buck Claxton ended the argument.

"Let him come to bat," observed Buck loudly. "He can't hit. I can see it in his eye."

"I'll bet he can't," assented Specs sadly. "None of 'em can."

Rodman touched the plate with his bat. Buck wound up with an exaggerated movement to deliver the pitch. It was a hard, straight ball, with just the hint of a drop in it, but the bat met it over the very center of the plate.

Spang!

The ball was off like a shot; off and up and over the fielder's head in center, till it struck a tree twenty yards beyond and rolled and bounded to the left.

Specs loafed in from third, and before the fielder had finished juggling with the ball, the red-headed boy had rounded the three bases and touched home. Then, while Specs was slapping Rodman on the back, and a little scattered applause was rising from the crowd, the school bell added its share to the celebration.

"He's a dandy!" chuckled Bunny enthusiastically, as Molly met him hurrying to the building. "He's going to be a Black Eagle, all right."

"Won't that be fine!" agreed Molly, quite as pleased as though she were a Scout herself.

And that was the way the new-comer to Lakeville High School—the new high school that would never have been built if it had not been for the Black Eagle Patrol—began his first day.

FOOTNOTE:

[1] See "The Boy Scouts on Crusade."

CHAPTER II

TRACK TROUBLE

Before the end of the first lap, Rodman Cree had quit. It could hardly be called his fault, because the elastic waistband which held up his running pants had snapped, and a further awkward gallop with his hands holding up the slipping garment proved futile. So he veered off the track.

"No use!" he laughed. "Besides, I'm not a runner, anyhow."

It was the laugh that brought the scowl to Spec's face. "Of course, it was not his fault," he grunted, "but why does he laugh about it? He's running for us to-day; he's our eighth man in the patrol. Doesn't he understand that we want to win?"

It had been rather a last-minute affair, this field day between the Black Eagles and Buck Claxton's team, which he had called the All-School; and it was Specs who had quite unconsciously started it all.

"I guess everybody knows," Specs had said in a loud, clear voice during the first morning's recess, "who it was that made this school possible."

"I don't!" snapped Buck Claxton. "Look here, if you Scouts think you're so much, I'll get together eight fellows who can beat you at baseball or football or track or anything else."

Though Bunny wished that Specs had spoken a little more modestly and in a great deal lower voice, he was not altogether sorry that the field meet had been arranged. Because a half-holiday had been declared, to enable the Citizens' Club of Elkana to inspect the new high school building, it was on Tuesday morning that the Scouts (plus Rodman Cree, to round out the eight mentioned in the challenge) clashed with the All-School team on field and track.

It was Bunny's idea that the field day might spread the Scout movement among the new fellows of the school, and especially among the following that Buck Claxton was rapidly acquiring. The leader of the Black Eagles felt, moreover, that they had been too much by themselves, and that a second patrol would not only wake them out of their clannishness, but that, in addition, it would keep them from sleeping on their laurels. And, of course, it was a splendid chance to see what they could do when pitted against boys slightly older and larger.

"That was some race!" chuckled Specs, after S. S. had broken the tape. He and Bunny were walking toward the competitors for the high jump. "Buck ran a good race, even if he was nosed out. How about taking him into the Black Eagle Patrol? He's crazy to get in, all right, no matter what he says. How do you feel about it?"

"What's the matter with Rodman Cree? He's acting as our eighth man to-day. Seems to me he should have first chance to join the patrol."

Specs wrinkled his forehead. "Y—yes. Oh, of course, he's all right. But he says himself that he just hit the ball by mistake yesterday morning; and you saw what happened just now in the half-mile."

Bunny threw back his shoulders. "I don't care whether Rodman Cree is any good at athletics or not. He's the right kind of a fellow; that's the main thing. Anyhow, I think he is. Besides, he may make good at one of these other events."

But wherever his abilities lay, it was plain that the red-headed boy had not been cut out by nature for a high jumper. Others skimmed the bar as lightly as swallows, but at the very outset Rodman began to flounder and fail. Twice, at three feet, he knocked off the crosspiece; the third time he came down on it squarely, smashing the wood to flinders.

"I'm no high-jumper, I guess," he laughed, as he quit the line of contestants. "I seem to be a pretty good faller—only there's no falling race."

While Specs frowned his disapproval, Bunny tried to hearten Rodman with a word of encouragement; for it seemed to him that under the boy's good nature there was a raw, sore spot.

"Don't you care!" he encouraged. "Before the morning's over, you will find that you're good at some one of these events. Besides, Jump will take care of first place here."

Jump did. To top this win, Bunny finished first in the hundred-yard dash, and, a little later, in the two-twenty. It was not till the discus throw that the Scout team suffered an overwhelming reverse. This defeat was the more disappointing because Bi and Roundy had counted on scoring points for first and second between them. But in spite of Bi's efforts and Roundy's weight, an All-School boy by the name of Bob Kiproy proved that he had the knack of discus throwing and that Bi hadn't. And Peter Barrett, the farmer boy, without any form at all, managed to land the platter-shaped weight some twenty-six inches beyond Roundy's best. As for Rodman Cree, his throws went woefully wild.

Now followed the most extraordinary event of the morning.

"You can't throw the discus," Specs said maliciously to Roundy. "You've proved that. Now, why don't you go in and win this hurdle race?"

"All right," snapped the late weight-thrower. "Just to prove that I can, I will."

It was the 120-yard course, with low hurdles, however, instead of the customary thirty-six-inch regulation barriers.

"Don't make a show of yourself," whispered Specs, as Roundy lined up for the start.

"I wasn't joking," retorted Roundy. "You watch!"

And, to the surprise of everybody, it was Roundy who breasted the tape first. While the others

were rushing frantically at the hurdles and falling as they tripped and blundered, Roundy took his obstacles "high and handsome," to use the words of Horace Hibbs. Jump, who should have done well in this event, hurt his knee at the fourth hurdle, where he was forced out of the race.

"Attaboy!" exulted Specs, clapping Roundy on the back. "I knew you could do it."

"No, you didn't, either," Roundy answered, too pleased with his performance to be angry at anybody. "But I won the five points all right, even if I'm not one of you light and airy speedsters. What's next?"

The shot put was won by Bi, and, as Specs put it, "lost by Mister Rodman Cree," who finished a bad last.

"I'm leaving now," Bi told Bunny, after that event. "Date with the dentist at eleven, as I explained. Before I go, though, I'd just like to say that I don't think this new fellow is any good. He can't run. Well, that's all right. But he can't do anything else, either."

"This isn't a secret society, Bi, and it isn't an athletic club. It's a patrol of Boy Scouts. And if Rodman isn't good at some of these things that don't really count, I know he's worth while in other ways."

Bi shook his head. "Let some new patrol take him in. He may be all right, but I'd rather have somebody in the Black Eagles who isn't such a dub."

With only three more events on the program, the Scouts' lead seemed to promise a sure victory. But when the All-School team romped away with both first and second places in the broad jump, matters began to look more grave. Once more, Rodman Cree made a mess of his efforts as a jumper. He switched between taking off clumsily and falling back after landing.

"He just won't do," said Roundy soberly, as the city hall clock struck eleven.

"But he's really trying," protested Bunny. "His laughing and all that is just on the surface. He likes us, and he wants to make us like him."

"Too many other good fellows in school to bother with him," Roundy retorted. He paused for a moment. "Bunny, I wish I could stay for the relay race, but I promised my father to mow the lawn this forenoon, and I can't get it done unless I start now. You don't need me as a sub, do you?"

Bunny shook his head. "No; we have S. S., Specs, Jump and myself; and Nap could be shoved in at a pinch. You trot along, and this afternoon we'll tell you how we won. Anyhow, I think this pole vault will give us a nice lead. That's one thing Nap can do, to say nothing of Jump."

Had Nap been satisfied to limit his strength to pole-vaulting, he might have made a first in that event; but he came to it exhausted from his earlier efforts, and his best was a creditable third. Jump's knee, bruised from the hurdles, was bumped again in his first attempt. Second place was the limit for him.

When Horace Hibbs called time for the relay race, the summary of events stood as follows:

Event	First	Second	Points	
			Scouts	All-School
Half Mile	Scouts	All-School	5	3
High Jump	Scouts	All-School	5	3
220-Yard Dash	Scouts	All-School	5	3
Discus Throw	All-School	All-School	0	8
Hurdles	Scouts	All-School	5	3
Shot Put	Scouts	All-School	5	3
100-Yard Dash	Scouts	Scouts	8	0
Broad Jump	All-School	All-School	0	8
Pole Vault	All-School	Scouts	3	5
Totals,			36	36

The score was a tie, therefore, with the result of the meet depending upon the relay race.

"We'll be ready to run in two minutes," Bunny said, and turned to discover Jump limping toward him. The boy's face was drawn with the effort he was making to walk naturally.

"I—I'm all right, Bunny. My knee will straighten out in just a minute. Please let me run. I'll be all right as soon as I start."

Horace Hibbs bent beside him, as Bunny examined Jump's right knee, which was discolored from its bruises and already slightly swollen.

"Won't do," said Horace Hibbs firmly. "It will come around all right in a day or two, but he must not abuse it by running in the relay. I won't have it. You'll have to get somebody else."

Bunny nodded agreement. "Oh, Nap!"

From his blanket on the ground, the Scout pried himself to his feet, with legs none too steady under him.

"Can't use him, either," decreed the Scout Master. "He has been running his head off in every event from the half mile down, and he is thoroughly exhausted. I won't allow him to start."

Bunny frowned. Though the man was right, it left no choice when it came to picking the fourth runner in the race. For a moment, he wished with all his heart that Bi, or even Roundy, were there; but it was too late now for wishing.

"Rodman," he called, "I'm putting you on our relay team."

The boy's eyes opened wide. "I'll try, of course, but you know as well as I do that I can't run to amount to anything."

"All you have to do is your best. Nobody wants any more of you than that. Three of us are better than any three on their team. You will start the third relay with a lead, sure, and if you lose it on your lap, I'll try to gain it back the last time around."

With quick, eager movements, Rodman Cree stripped off his jersey. "I am going to do all I can," he said in a low voice. "And you don't know how much I want to help you win."

"Look here," whispered the excited Specs, as he pulled Bunny to one side. "Do you mean that you are going to trust him to run in this race?"

"There's nobody else."

"He'll lose the race for us."

"Not if we other three gain on our laps as we should."

"He'll lose the race for us," repeated Specs despairingly, "and then, when it's all over, he'll laugh. I know him."

"Places for the relay!" shouted Horace Hibbs.

CHAPTER III

THE RELAY RACE

"It wasn't much of an argument," Scout Master Hibbs confessed to his relay team. "I simply suggested that we have each runner pass the little block to the next, rather than merely touch hands. Buck Claxton was the only one to raise any objection. He runs the last lap."

None of the four to whom he was speaking offered any comment. It was Jump Henderson who finally spoke; poor lame, disappointed Jump.

"Probably figured that if the race was close, he could get away before the third runner touched him," he offered.

"Oh, you're wrong there." The speaker was Rodman Cree. "I'm sure you're wrong. I know Buck. He isn't that sort at all. He wouldn't even think of taking an unfair advantage."

Bunny happened to be looking at Horace Hibbs, who, in turn, was staring fixedly at the new boy. "I suppose not," agreed the Scout Master, in a tone that was not wholly reassuring. "Anyhow, the use of the block makes trickery impossible; that's why it has been adopted so widely. Well, let's get over to the track."

There was something queer, Bunny felt, in the man's speech. It was as if he suspected somebody's honesty; not Buck Claxton's, perhaps, but—well, somebody's. He couldn't quite make it out.

But once Bunny was lined up beside the cinder track back of the Black Eagles' clubhouse, he forgot everything except the race itself. Everybody was cheering and yelling advice and encouragement; horns were tooting, and somebody who had brought a bell was clanging it madly. It was no time for solving puzzles.

Almost before he realized it, the race began. The crowd gasped suddenly and went absolutely still. A shot rang out; and around the queer, slanting track ran S. S., of the Scouts, and some tall, thin chap of the All-School team, whom Buck had been saving for just this event. Instead of the easy race S. S. had expected, Bunny could see that he was fully extended to hold his own. Side by side the two runners raced, neither able to wrest a yard's advantage from the other. The crowd seemed to have gone mad.

"Get ready, Specs," he heard Horace Hibbs say; and good old Specs, who ran the second relay, walked, trembling with excitement, to the starting line. Bunny puzzled gravely over his teammate's display of emotion and could not understand it, until he recalled that his turn would come presently, and that he must take up the race where Rodman Cree dropped it. His own cheeks reddened hotly, and his fists persisted in clenching and unclenching spasmodically as he waited and waited.

S. S. swept around the last sharp curve, with his body leaning far inward, and held out his little crimson block of wood. Still running by his side, the tall, thin chap thrust forward a blue one. Two clutching hands closed upon them, and Specs and his opponent were off upon the second relay. The race was still nip and tuck, with no advantage to either team.

But there was no holding Specs. He ran as if his very life depended upon eluding the other fellow; and little by little, just an inch or two in each few strides, he forged into a clean lead. Rodman Cree was on the track now, waiting his turn with white, set face and wildly groping fingers. As Specs reached him at last, now a good dozen yards ahead of the All-School fellow, Bunny sucked in his breath. Suppose—suppose something should happen; some accident, say, that would mull things up and worry the new boy.

But none did. As smoothly as clockwork, Specs reached forth a hand with the crimson block, and Rodman grasped it and began to run. There has been no pause, no halt, no delay whatever. And the third man of the Scouts' relay was off with a commanding lead.

Bunny relaxed and began to breathe easier. By his side, some boy was puffing mightily, like a motor with its exhaust open. Not till the other spoke, though, did Bunny recognize who it was.

"He—he can't hold his—lead," wheezed Specs mournfully. "See! What—what did I tell you? He's losing—losing ground every second."

Rodman was, too. There was no question about his determination; he was running with every ounce of will and ambition. But something was wrong.

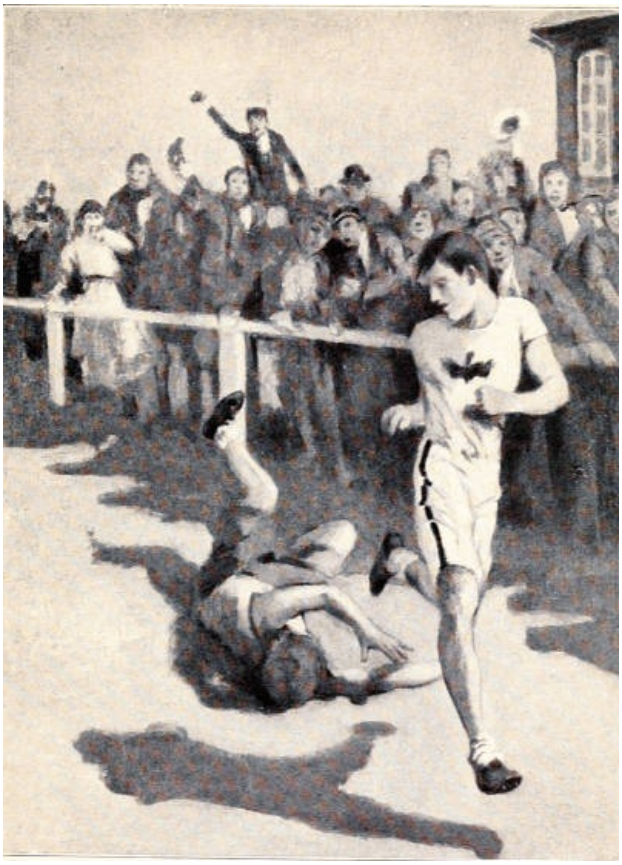
"He—he's just no good!" puffed Specs. "Can't run—or jump—or throw—or anything. No good!"

The All-School runner was at Rodman's heels now. He swerved to the outside and came abreast of his opponent. For a brief span, they ran side by side. Then, like an elastic band that stretches longer and longer as the pull upon it increases, the gap widened alarmingly.

"I told you so," groaned Specs. "He's going to lose the race for us."

"It isn't lost yet," said Bunny grimly. He walked out upon the track, breathing hard and with knees wobbling treacherously. It seemed suffocatingly hot. Already his forehead was moist with perspiration.

The seconds he waited for the runners to reach him seemed to stretch into hours. At last, when the suspense was driving twitches through every muscle of his body, he heard the grateful *thud-thud* of feet behind him. Half turning, he held out his hand. But it was not Rodman; he realized that when he saw that the extended block was blue. Buck Claxton grabbed it, leaped forward like a race horse when the barrier is sprung, and was yards away before Bunny's bewildered brain righted.



Just as he reached a point a foot or two short of Bunny, he tripped suddenly and fell.
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Rodman Cree came pounding in at last. But just as he reached a point a foot or two short of Bunny, he tripped suddenly and fell, plunging toward his team mate from the impetus of his running. The accident was embarrassing, to be sure, but it could hardly have occurred at a luckier spot. Even as he sprawled helplessly toward Bunny, that runner took a quick side-step, to prevent a violent collision, and dashed forward upon the last relay of the race.

The pursuit of Buck seemed well-nigh hopeless. But Bunny did not despair. He fixed his eyes on the bobbing head of the boy in front of him, and urged himself toward it with every muscle of his lithe legs and every beat of his stout heart. On the straightaway portions of the track, he bent forward till it seemed he must fall; on the curves, he leaned inward till those near him among the spectators moved rapidly away in alarm. Always he kept his unwavering gaze upon the stubby shock of black hair that flaunted before him; and, little by little, it grew nearer and more distinct.

His wonderful burst of speed shook the crowd to a mighty roar of applause. He did not hear it. He did not even know they were cheering him. He was dumb to everything but the *thud-thud* of Buck's foot-beats and the beckoning thatch of his jerking head. His only thought was the dogged determination to reach and pass Buck. He must do it. He could do it. Why, the race—the whole meet—depended upon his beating Buck!

The time came when the shaggy head was before his very face. He swung to the right, ever so slightly, and parted his lips in a parched grin as he saw from the corner of his eye that it was by his side. When he risked another glance, he was in front of the bobbing head. But even as he exulted, Buck drew upon some hidden reserve of strength and pulled up even again.

They were at the very finish now, with the tape just ahead. For one last desperate moment, Bunny forced his legs to drive a tiny degree faster than they had been pounding, lifted his hands high in the air, threw himself forward, and felt the flimsy woolen string hit his chest,—hit it, cling for one awful instant, and then snap.

He had won. The relay, with its eight points for the winner, was safely tucked in the Scouts' total of firsts and seconds. Race and meet were theirs.

The cheering boys who had watched the heart-breaking finish charged upon him. He was lifted high upon the shoulders of Roundy and Jump, now quite unaware of their own lame and halt condition. S. S. and Specs were pounded and buffeted about. Of the four runners of the victorious team, only Rodman Cree was neglected.

Afterward, in the clubhouse, where the remaining six members of the Scout team retreated to get away from the boisterous crowd, there was more jubilation. Everybody seemed to want to talk at once; that is, everybody except Rodman Cree, who sat a little back from the group and stared straight ahead, not smiling or laughing now. So great was the babel that it took Horace Hibbs a minute or two to make himself heard, when he came in abruptly.

"There's an argument outside," he began abruptly. "A—yes, you might call it a protest. They claim you fellows didn't win the race fairly."

"Who says so?" It was Spec's indignant voice. "Buck Claxton?"

Horace Hibbs' solemn face relaxed into the hint of a smile. "No, not Buck. Somebody else; somebody not on the All-School team; somebody who doesn't matter."

"Oh!" said Rodman. It was just as if he had said, "I'm glad it wasn't Buck."

"But what—why—What do they mean, we didn't win fairly?" stuttered Specs.

"The claim has been made," Horace Hibbs told them, speaking very slowly, "that your third runner did not pass the block of wood to Bunny, who ran the last relay. If it was not properly passed, and Bunny ran without it, he may be disqualified."

The resultant silence was vaguely disquieting. Outside, a wondering breeze whipped through the oak tree at the back of the clubhouse, and a dozen dried leaves pattered on the roof like raindrops.

"Well?" Horace Hibbs straightened his shoulders, as if he had a disagreeable task to perform. "Suppose we thresh out the claim. What are the facts, Bunny?"

But before the Scout leader could answer, Rodman Cree pushed his way into the little circle. "I can tell you," he said unsmilingly. "Just before I reached Bunny, you remember, I tripped and fell. I dropped the block on the track instead of passing it to him."

A bomb could not have produced greater sensation. Specs uttered an exclamation of disgust. S. S., hero of the first relay, gasped audibly. Bunny nodded grudgingly. Only Horace Hibbs seemed to take it in other than in a spirit of disaster.

"I am glad there is no dispute about the facts in here," he said. Bunny glanced up quickly and found the man's face beaming happily once more. "Yes, I am more than glad," continued Horace Hibbs. "Because, you see, I have already taken up the matter with Buck Claxton."

"And he thinks his team won?" snapped Specs.

"No," said Rodman Cree quickly. "He doesn't, does he, Mr. Hibbs?"

Horace Hibbs fairly exuded good-nature. Something seemed to have pleased him immensely.

"No," he admitted; "Buck said—let me see if I can quote him exactly—he said, 'Shucks, no, Hibbs! We don't want to claim we weren't licked fair and square, when we were. We lost because Bunny Payton ran the eye-teeth out of me on that last lap. The block doesn't count. That was why I objected to it in the first place: 'fraid somebody would lose it and gum up things. You go and tell your bunch of Boy Scouts that they beat us to-day for the first and last time—yep, beat us on the level; but that I can get up a gang that will wipe the earth with them at football or baseball or basketball or anything else—except a track meet.' And so"—Horace Hibbs smiled broadly—"so you may consider yourselves told, and act accordingly. But I should suggest that hereafter you and Buck work together for the good of the school, instead of against each other."

"We will," promised Bunny; and he was heartily seconded by little echoing tags of, "Sure, we will!" and "You bet!" and "Why not?"

"Good!" exclaimed Horace Hibbs. "I don't see how any track meet could prove a greater success." He walked to the door and turned for a final word. "Nap, I am inclined to think Napoleon was right when he said, 'There are no Alps.'"

Bunny didn't pretend to understand this queer remark. But he would have been a very laggard Boy Scout, indeed, if he had failed to observe one thing. Although Horace Hibbs spoke to Nap, he was looking straight at Rodman Cree.

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOL ELECTIONS

"Just a minute, fellows!" called Bunny, as the other Scouts straggled toward the door of the clubhouse, after Horace Hibbs had gone. "I want to tell you something. This morning I spoke to Professor Leland about having a meeting of the whole school, to get ourselves organized and to elect officers. The school, you see, is a good deal like a troop of Boy Scouts; there must be a leader over everybody, and each branch, like each patrol, must have its leader, too. I mean that a student president is to be elected, and a football manager, and somebody to head the athletic association, and—and I don't know what else."

"When will the meeting be?" asked Nap.

"Professor Leland says it will be held late this afternoon, just before our first football practice. Now, the school may feel like electing some of us to offices—"

"Of course," agreed Specs complacently. "Will there be enough offices for all of us, Bunny?"

"That's just what I wanted to talk about," the patrol leader answered soberly. "We're organized, of course, and we're known by most of the students, and I think we're pretty well liked. If two or three of us are elected, that will be fine. But we mustn't use our—our power to run things. We mustn't try for all the offices. There are lots of other bully fellows in school, and we want the best man elected to each office, whether he's a Black Eagle or not."

"H'm!" said Specs gloomily. "That won't be the way Buck Claxton and his gang will look at it. They'll be out to gobble everything they can get. I'll bet they have it all figured out already."

But at a quarter of four that afternoon, when Professor Leland announced to the school that the remaining fifteen minutes of the period would be devoted to a mass meeting of all the pupils, it was evident that "Buck and his gang" had heard nothing of the plan. As a matter of fact, Buck looked uneasily at Peter Barrett, the farmer boy, and at Royal Sheffield, who came to school in an eight-cylinder motor car, as if he were wondering whether they were at the bottom of this move. Marion Genevieve Chester and Clarence Prissier also appeared at a loss. Rodman Cree, who seemed to have forgotten how to smile, showed neither surprise nor any other emotion.

"This afternoon," Professor Leland began, "we have our first football practice. It is customary, of course, for the squad to elect its own captain, but the school should vote on the team's manager. Moreover, we shall need somebody to act permanently as president of the athletic association, whose duty it will be to look after all athletic activities. One boy has spoken to me about a literary and debating society. Now would be an excellent time for its organization. And, lastly, although it will be better to have a temporary chairman of this meeting, we need a president of the student body to handle future elections. Nominations are now in order for temporary chairman."

"I am going to nominate you, Bunny," Nap whispered excitedly from across the aisle.

Bunny shook his head. "Please don't. They will think we are trying to run the school."

"I nominate Peter Barrett," flashed Buck.

This was too much for Specs. "I nominate Bi—I mean, Charlie Jones," he countered.

"Move that the nominations be closed." It was Buck again.

"All those in favor of Mr. Barrett say 'Aye,'" announced Professor Leland, when it had been decided to accept no more names.

The room shook with the thunder of the answer.

"All those in favor of Mr. Jones will signify in the same manner."

The response was hearty, but hardly a third as loud as the first.

"Mr. Barrett has been elected temporary chairman of this meeting," decided Professor Leland. "He will take the chair at once."

Amid a good deal of hand-clapping, Peter Barrett climbed to the rostrum and pounded on the principal's desk with a ruler. His face was red and his patched clothes very conspicuous, but he spoke calmly and slowly.

"Nominations for manager of the football team," he invited.

A little movement a few seats away caught Bunny's eye. After writing something on a slip of paper, Royal Sheffield passed it down the aisle.

"Mr. Chairman."

"Mr. Claxton."

"I nominate Roy Sheffield." Quite as if it had been arranged beforehand, the mention of the name was greeted with a volley of applause.

Bunny moved uneasily in his seat before rising to be recognized. In some inexplicable manner, he sensed that some plot he could not fathom was under way, and that it was a move against the Black Eagle Patrol. Perhaps he could swing the school with a neat speech of nomination.

"Mr. Chairman, I want to propose the name of a boy who has the ability to handle this job as well as anybody in school. In the first place, he has brains; in the second place, he can give his whole attention to his job, as I think he is too light to play on the team; in the third place, he has had plenty of experience, because he's managed a scrub team that we Boy Scouts have had for the last two years. He arranged games for us, and he fixed the business end so well that at the end of last season we had our football suits paid for and a little left over. And you'll admit that's pretty good for a team of kids. I don't suppose it's necessary to say for him, any more than it is

for anybody else in this school, that he's absolutely honest. I nominate Emerson Elliot Meeker."

"For the love of Marengo!" gasped Nap Meeker, who had grown very red.

A boy named Leeton was nominated by a little clique at the back of the room. After a long pause, during which nobody seemed to have anything to offer, the nominations were closed.

"Count the ballots," ordered Peter Barrett to the volunteer ushers who had collected the slips of paper from the pupils. It took nearly five minutes to total the various choices.

"The vote for manager," announced the chairman, "has resulted as follows: Meeker, 10; Leeton, 17; Sheffield, 80. Mr. Sheffield has been elected manager of the football team."

Puzzled and hurt, Bunny Payton crushed in his hand the note that Specs had just slipped over his right shoulder. What was the matter? Why had Nap been so badly beaten? Why? Opening his hand, he smoothed out the note and read in Specs' angular handwriting:

> Bunny:
>
> You will have to admit that we are not the only wideawake bunch in school. I have just seen Molly Sefton, and she says that all yesterday afternoon Buck and his gang were going around telling everybody that we Scouts had said we were going to boss this school. I don't know who is at the bottom of it; maybe *Rodman the Athlete*. (Specs had underlined these three words.) Anyhow, there are a lot of people just waiting for a chance to vote against a Boy Scout, whether he is any good or not.
>
> —Specs.

Bunny set his teeth. He hoped Specs was mistaken. But if it should turn out to be true—

Professor Leland had left the room when Peter Barrett, rapping smartly on the desk, called for the election of a president of the athletic association.

A fellow named Bob Kiproy nominated Buck Claxton.

Specs hopped to his feet, plainly excited. "I nominate—"

"Move the nominations be closed," interrupted Sheffield.

While Specs struggled against the current, wildly protesting, the motion was carried with a roar, and a moment later Buck Claxton was declared unanimously elected president of the athletic association.

Nothing daunted, Specs did his best to nominate S. S. for the presidency of the literary society, but again the school overwhelmed him, carrying into office Clarence Prissier on the crest of the tidal wave.

But one more place remained to be filled. However much the opposition had made up its mind to bar all Scouts from office, it was clear that Specs had grown desperate. Before the chairman had finished asking for somebody to head the student association, Specs was on his feet, waving his right arm and shouting wildly, "Mr. Chairman!"

"Mr. Cree."

Peter Barrett was looking directly over Specs' head toward Rodman Cree, who stood, feet apart, in the aisle. The Scout construed this recognition as another unjust fling at the patrol, although, as a matter of fact, Rodman had risen an instant before Specs.

"Mr. Chairman!" the latter repeated.

"Mr. Cree has the floor," declared Peter Barrett.

"I—I nominate—" Specs began lamely.

The chairman rapped again on his desk. "We are hearing from Mr. Cree. Go on, Mr. Cree."

Now, Bunny, for one, was in no sense adverse to hearing Rodman's nomination. He liked the new boy, and he was sure the new boy liked him, to say nothing of the others in the Black Eagle Patrol. Although he might have scoffed openly at the idea, deep in his heart he was confident that Rodman was about to show his true colors and nominate one of the Scouts; not just any one of them, but their leader, Bunny himself.

As Specs floundered back to his seat, Rodman Cree began. "I don't want to nominate any fellow for this office," he said. "I just want to make a suggestion. It's this: There are about forty boys in this school and over sixty girls; and I think this last office should go to a girl." He sat down to a gathering applause that began with a few faint hand-spats and ended in a tumult of cheering. The speech was like a douche of cold water to Bunny.

"I nominate Marion Genevieve Chester!" shouted Buck through the noise.

Immediately, as before, the nominations were closed, and Marion declared elected. Then, just as the minute hand of the clock touched four, Peter Barrett declared the meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER V

NOBODY

"Who cheers me up when I feel sad?
Nobody!"

sang S. S. softly, as the pupils trooped down the stairs from the assembly room and out the main door.

"Who gets me out when I'm in bad?
Nobody!"

It was Roundy who carried on the refrain. "That song is pretty near right; don't you think so, Bunny?"

"I've stopped thinking," said Bunny shortly. "It's about time to do something."

"Do what?"

"That's for us to find out."

Some twenty of the Lakeville High boys were reporting for football practice. Those with suits shifted to the basement, where a shower bath and lockers had been installed, while the others tramped directly to the field back of the schoolhouse, to begin their work with punting and drop-kicking.

The little basement was crowded with candidates in various stages of undress. But because their two years of experience had accustomed them to slipping into their togs in a hurry, the seven Scouts were the first to leave. By common consent, they moved to the shady plot under the big oak.

"Something has happened," Bunny said briefly. "For some reason, the whole school is against us. I don't know why; but whatever the reason is, we'll have to prove that we're the right sort, and that we're not trying to run the school or anybody else except ourselves. The question is, how to do it."

"I know how I'd do it," said Specs. "I'd pull right out of this business, unless they want to treat us right. We've played scrub football for two years and made four trips; and I don't believe there is anybody else in school who has been on a regular eleven. Just say the word, Bunny, and we'll get up a team of our own."

Roundy growled assent.

"No, we don't want to do that." Bunny doubled his fists emphatically. "You remember what Horace Hibbs said about working for the school. Fighting the school isn't the kind of thing Scouts ought to do. We don't even care who runs it; all we want is a fair chance to help."

"We won't get it. From now on, Bunny, any time we try something, it will be Waterloo for us," Nap jerked an indignant nod.

"Why can't we take one of them into the patrol for our eighth member?" put in Bi. "Suppose Buck, for instance—"

Bunny shook his head. "A week or two ago, Buck might have joined the Black Eagles, but now, if we asked him after this election, he'd think we wanted him because we couldn't get along without him and because we could run the school through him. And I guess that goes for the rest of them, too."

"I know they wouldn't be Scouts," added S. S. "I heard Buck and Roy Sheffield and Bob Kiproy talking together. What they are trying to do is to get up a secret society to buck our patrol."

"Then there is just one thing for us," Bunny said earnestly, "and that is to go on being the right kind of Scouts just as hard as we can. If we take care of our good turns, they'll take care of us. And if we are loyal and helpful and trustworthy, and live up to the rest of the Scout law, they're going to take off their hats to us, whether they think so now or not. What's more, I bet that before the end of the year they will be asking us how they can form a patrol of their own."

"That's all right!" Specs interrupted suddenly. "Maybe they will—at the end of the year. But right now four or five of us are going to make the football team. You know more about the game and can play better than anybody else in school. Are they going to elect you captain or aren't they?"

"Can't find out till the votes are counted," Bunny returned cheerily. "If anybody nominates me for captain, I'll run, of course."

"Then you'll run, all right," promised Specs. "And if you are not elected, then I'm through with football at this school. Ab-so-lute-ly! I'll take my suit home to-night. Come on; there's Professor Leland waving to us."

Gathering the squad about him, the principal explained that the school board had detailed him as coach. "We may as well begin our practice," he said, "by lining up on both sides of the playground and punting the ball back and forth."

First kick at the oval fell to Buck Claxton. Perhaps he was a bit nervous. At any rate, his toe, instead of whirling the ball roof high, sent it tumbling and bounding along the ground, till a low bounce shot it into Bunny's arms.

"Now show 'em what you can do!" urged Specs in a hoarse whisper.

Carefully poising the ball, Bunny booted it up and across the field, till it spun down with a plop

into Bi's arms.

"Nice work, Payton!" shouted the coach.

"That's showing him!" commented Specs. "He'll see that you didn't play in the back-field two years for nothing. Why, there isn't anybody else in the squad who can punt like that."

The next ten minutes proved Specs' boast. Not only could Bunny punt far and away better than the other candidates, but he could drop-kick almost as well. And when the players formed in a great circle and fell upon the ball, the members of the Black Eagle Patrol distinguished themselves again. With the exception of Roundy, who dove so heavily that the ball escaped through his arms, the Scouts downed the pigskin as surely as though it were a watermelon. With the others, this practice did not go as well; even Buck Claxton missed as the ball bounded at an unexpected angle.

"We'll top off with a little running and tackling," announced the coach, as he retrieved the ball from the last man. "Jones, you take your place forty yards down the field, to catch punts and run them back. Kiproy, you go with him to act as interference. And Claxton, when the ball is punted, you charge down the field and try to tackle Jones between the knees and waist."

With Bi in position, Kiproy beside him, and Buck crouching on the line, the coach kicked. It was a high punt, and Buck was almost upon the pair before the ball plumped into Bi's arms. Kiproy ran toward the tackier, but Buck, swerving to one side, eluded him and drove squarely at Bi's legs. Had the latter been under full speed, he would have toppled like a falling tree; instead, checking himself, he jolted back out of the grasping arms, and while Buck floundered in the dust, jogged complacently down the field.

"All right, Payton; you act as tackler this time. Claxton catches the ball. Jones is the interference."

Specs slapped Bunny on the back. "Show 'em what you can do. Grab that fellow, if it takes a leg!"

Either Bunny was luckier than Buck, or a better tackler; opinion stood divided. But whatever the truth of the matter, Bunny skillfully dodged Bi's forward defense (and Bi was playing hard, too) and managed to stop Buck and actually throw the heavier boy backward.

With the next shift, Bunny caught the punt. Buck, with his lack of experience, bungled the interference, but Bunny pushed off Sheffield with his open palm, and romped safely out of danger. Later, on the last change, Bunny shouldered hard-running Peter Barrett out of the way as interference, thereby giving safe passage to Roundy, even after the latter had fumbled the ball.

"You are running away with the game, Payton," smiled the coach kindly. "If you keep this up, we shall have to put you in a team by yourself."

"What did I tell you!" chuckled Specs. "No matter whether they like the Scouts or not, they have to elect you captain. There just isn't anybody else."

Bunny said nothing. However much of a glow he felt over Professor Leland's compliment, there remained the undeniable fact that the school was at outs with the Black Eagle Patrol. It was unpleasant to be in this position, but it was worse still to realize how this attitude hampered the Scouts at every turn, both in working for the good of the school and in creating interest in the Scout movement.

Specs insisted, in a very audible whisper, that Rodman Cree was part and parcel of this conspiracy, and even hinted that he had purposely tried to lose the relay race, both while it was being run and afterward, and had later prevented a fitting nomination for presidency of the student association.

"Look at that!" he growled, as Rodman failed in an easy tackle. "He's no good at anything in the world; anybody can see that. But he makes himself solid with the other crowd by hitting at us."

Meanwhile, could they have known it, Royal Sheffield was saying much the same thing about poor Rodman, except that it was Sheffield's idea that the new boy was trying to "get in" with the Scouts by working against the balance of the school.

"Good enough!" commented the coach, as the last uniformed player went down the field for a tackle. "We have the material for a strong team. Now I want you to elect a good man captain, and we shall call it a day's work."

There was a moment's silence in the crowd gathered about Professor Leland, which was broken by Specs, his voice high-pitched and shrill.

"I nominate the best player in the squad—Bunny Payton!"

Without hesitation, Sheffield nominated Buck Claxton; and Jack Turner, whose farm adjoined the Barrett place, put forward Peter.

"If anybody has the nerve to vote for Buck after the showing he has made this afternoon," said Specs hoarsely, "I'll eat my hat."

The coach himself collected the bits of paper which had been distributed as ballots, and counted the returns.

"The vote stands as follows," he said slowly. "Barrett has received two, Payton seven, and Claxton eleven. Claxton is therefore elected captain of the team. The practice to-morrow night will be at the same time. All those who have no suits will see me before they go home."

The Scouts stood dumbfounded. Bunny was the first to recover, leaving the group and walking over to congratulate Buck with a warm handshake.

"Well," observed Specs, "what about it? Do we quit this rotten business, or don't we?"

"No," Bunny snapped, "we don't. We keep right on practicing every night. If they won't put us

on the first eleven, we'll play on the second."

"You can play on the third, if you feel like it." Specs had completely lost his temper. "As for me, I've eaten all the crow that's good for me. I'm through!" He turned his back and walked rapidly toward the basement.

For a long moment, Bunny stood fast on the field, while the others of the squad drifted toward the dressing room. Rodman Cree he could see waiting uneasily at one side, as if he wished to come up and speak to him. But though Bunny had none of Specs' feeling toward Rodman, at that particular moment he did not wish to speak to anybody. He stared toward the road, pretending to be unconscious of the other's presence.

From the basement floated the tenor voice of S. S., singing the final refrain of the "Nobody" song:

"Who cares for us an awful lot?
Who always helps us on the dot?
Who is the only friend we've got?"

And the final word, roared by all of the six Scouts, came out in a thundering:

"NOBODY!"

CHAPTER VI

BEFORE THE WIND

Molly Sefton had something on her mind, a very serious "something," Molly thought; and it was because of this something that Rodman Cree had been invited for his first canoe ride.

A light wind curled the water into tiny ripples. It was morning of the last Saturday in September, and across the lake you could see a faint yellowish-red tinge on the maple trees of Shadow Island.

The two stood on the pier at the foot of High Street, with the Seftons' new sailing canoe riding in the water alongside. Only the day before it had been delivered from the Fair Play Factory, and now, with the newly varnished paddles and nickled trimmings and white lateen sail, the craft looked very inviting indeed.

Molly giggled.

"What's funny?" Rodman turned, mildly surprised.

"You are! Why, I haven't seen you smile for a week, but now you simply must, else I shan't allow you in the canoe with me."

He did smile, half-heartedly at first, and then more broadly and honestly, till the smile had grown into an old-time laugh.

"That's better. I am going to take you sailing, after all. But are you sure," she added slyly, "that you can swim?"

Rodman answered the question with a contemptuous sniff. "Maybe you can't, though," he said.

"Well, I just can," Molly asserted proudly; "I can swim two hundred yards. If I kick off my slippers, this dress won't be much heavier than a bathing suit, either. But, of course, father says I must do my sailing where it isn't deep."

"Then we'd better edge the shore to that bay by Magoon's boathouse; there's lots of room for tacking, and it's all shallow water."

Molly stared suspiciously at the stretch of lake he had pointed out. "How do you know?"

"Look at the color of the water. Don't you notice that it is a whole lot lighter than the rest of the lake? And did you ever see anybody fishing there? And did you ever notice how that steamer from the other end of the lake never puts in, even when it wants to land somebody at Magoon's pier?"

Molly nodded slowly. "But if it's so shallow, why isn't it a swimming-hole?"

For a moment, Rodman had no answer. "I don't know—Yes, I do, too. Look at the beach. If you've ever walked along it, you know there's the finest collection of sharp stones on that beach you ever saw, and it must be the same way under water. You couldn't go in swimming there unless you wore hobnailed shoes."

"You're right," Molly admitted, "though I never put things together like that. Of course, then, that's the place for us to go."

While Rodman steadied the canoe, she climbed in gingerly, holding to the pier with one hand until he was also aboard.

"Wait just a minute before you push off," she warned. "Somebody's coming."

"It's Horace Hibbs," he said, continuing to look toward the bow of the boat and away from the pier.

"How do you know?" Molly's voice showed her surprise.

"By his step, of course. Hello, Mr. Hibbs!"

Smiling and genial, the Scout Master bustled out to the end of the pier.

"Caught a glimpse of you down here; so I thought I would stroll over and see you set sail. Better stick to that bay over there by Magoon's, Molly. It is a nice, level beach, not higher than your chin anywhere. Ready for the football game this afternoon, Rodman?"

"I am as ready as I'll ever be, sir," the boy returned slowly.

Horace Hibbs laughed. "We can't all make the team. You will have your chance some day. All ready, Molly? Lee-board set? I'll give you an easy start, and in a second or two you will be under way."

In no time at all, it seemed to Rodman, the sail had filled, and the canoe was slipping over the surface as gracefully and with as little effort as a swan floating downstream.

"All you have to do," Molly told him, "is to sit still and let me manage the boat. I am a very good sailor."

For the second time that morning, Rodman laughed. "You may be a very good sailor, but you're not a very old sailor."

Molly paid out the sheet a bit. "I don't see how you know whether I am an old sailor or just a beginner. Maybe I have been sailing canoes for years."

"I don't know for sure," apologized Rodman, "but not longer than a week ago I saw you in the library getting a book on sailing. Now, I never heard of a real sailor reading a book about it. They always know it all; at least, they always say they do."

It was Molly's turn to laugh now. "You're right. I haven't been at it for years; but Horace Hibbs took me out nine or ten times in that canoe of his, and the last few times I sailed it all by myself. Then yesterday, too, I took him out in mine, and he never gave me a bit of advice, and I tacked

and came about and made a beautiful landing—he said so himself. But you do notice things, don't you, Rodman? I've never seen anybody that noticed little things the way you do."

They were in the bay now, and Molly pointed the canoe toward the outer edge of the shallow area. The wind was almost directly inshore, but by keeping the sheet close-hauled Molly skimmed along at a merry clip almost into the teeth of the breeze.

"Ready to come about," warned Molly.

"Turn to your right; starboard, you know."

Easily and with a fair degree of safety, the canoe came about to port. Rodman shook his head.

"I wouldn't risk that, Molly. When you turn again, running before the wind, come about the simple and natural way—toward the lower tip of your sail."

She stole a quick look at him. "How do you know which is better? You told me you were never in a sail-boat before."

"Well, I haven't been. Shucks, that's just common sense. If you come about the right way, the sail only straightens out; if you swing the wrong way, the—the boom, I guess you call it, whips across the boat and may upset it. Anyhow, I should think there would be danger. But here is some first-class information. By the looks of the lake, we are going to be in a dead calm before two minutes; and after that"—he studied the horizon—"look out!"

True to prediction, the breeze spent itself, leaving the canoe tossing lightly some two hundred yards from shore. Only a bank of hard-edged clouds proved that the wind had not gone home for the day, but was merely resting to muster reinforcements.

"I'm glad it died down," Molly said promptly, "because now I can talk to you. Rodman Cree, I didn't get you out here just to go sailing, but to find out what's wrong with you. For three weeks, at least, you've been sneaking around like a hermit or something. You don't go with anybody, and nobody goes with you. You used to be happy and light-hearted; now I don't even hear your whistle any more. You don't seem to like anybody, and nobody seems to like you. What's the matter, Rodman? Tell me about it."

He straightened his shoulders defiantly. "Well, I guess there is no reason why the fellows should like me. I'm no good. I'm no good at athletics; I can't even play football. The Scouts think I am in with Buck Claxton's gang, and Buck thinks I am working for the Scouts. Why, Bunny Payton is the only friend I have, and you know as well as I do that he has troubles of his own right now."

Molly's eyes flashed. "It's miserable, that's what it is; miserable that the school is all split up. But that's no reason why you shouldn't have friends. Why don't the Scouts like you?"

Chin on his hands, Rodman doggedly told her the story of the field day between the Scouts and All-School teams. "The Black Eagle fellows think I didn't run my best in the relay race; they think, too, that I was willing to toss away the win after it was over. But that isn't the worst. Do you remember, at the school election, when I said I thought a girl should have some office. Well, the Scouts believe I said that just to keep Specs McGrew from nominating Bunny for president of the student association."

"I'll tell them that wasn't so," Molly offered.

"It won't do any good. Bunny knows the truth, but the others think I am just plain worthless. In football it is the same. I have been out for practice since the first day, but I haven't any chance of making the team. And I am heavier and stronger than a lot of the players on it, too. I've about decided to quit trying. Perhaps my folks will move somewhere else next year. I hope they do."

"But it is just a question of time," urged Molly, "before you learn enough to play on the first eleven. Surely you'll do it next year."

Rodman's shoulders settled back in a curve. "No, I don't think I'll ever make it. I'm no good, that's all; no good at anything."

"I'm ashamed of you, Rodman Cree!" Molly took the sheet line in her fingers once more. "Yes, sir, just plain ashamed of you for being a quitter! Why, if the wind wasn't coming up, I believe I'd make you walk ashore. So there!"

"It wouldn't make me feel any worse than I do now."

Scudding across the lake, ruffling the placid water into combing waves, a gust of wind was leaping toward them. Molly surveyed it with approval. Her chin was set in a firm little curve, and she nodded her head, quite as if she had suddenly come to a decision.

"Watch!" she said.

As the first breath of the breeze reached them, she let out the sheet. In less than a minute, as it tautened, the canoe was racing before the romping wind, its lateen sail almost at right angles to the craft.

In the exhilaration of the speed, Rodman forgot his troubles. "Be ready to turn—come about, I mean," he warned, "or you'll go ashore."

"I know what I am going to do," answered Molly, a peculiar note in her voice. "You sit tight and wait."

Straight as an arrow, the bow cut the water, with the growing wind tugging hard at the filled sail, till the canoe seemed pulled ahead by some great but invisible water animal.

"Ready!" shouted Rodman. "Sail's on the port side, you know; don't come about to port."

"Well, I'm going to."

"You'll upset!"

"I won't upset! I know I can come up into the wind by swinging to starboard, but I'm going to show you that I can do it the other way, too."

"Molly!"

"You're just a passenger. You sit still and watch." They were barely twenty-five yards from the shore.

"Coming about!" shouted Molly.

Instead of turning to starboard, she deliberately forced the canoe to port. There was a moment of suspense. Then, exultingly, the quickening wind lost its grip on the sail, shivered it an instant as it hit the edge, and finally banged it violently across the canoe.

"Keep your feet free of the lines!" Rodman yelled, as he threw his weight toward the windward side, in an attempt to counterbalance its power.

"Look out for yourself!" Molly flung back. "I'm going—"

She never finished her sentence. It was choked short as the canoe heeled abruptly and dumped its occupants into four feet of cool September lake.

For a moment they stood facing each other; Molly laughing, Rodman furiously out of temper.

"Why—why don't you do what you can do?" he demanded.

"Why don't you?" Molly retorted.

There was something in her voice that took the anger out of his system.

"Wha—what do you mean?"

Molly pointed to a swimmer far over to the left. "Who's that?"

Rodman shaded his eyes. "It's Specs. What's that got to do with it?"

"How do you know it's Specs?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure it is a *Scout*, because that's where the Scouts go in swimming. Specs has quit trying for the football team; so he's the only one that would be in swimming, on account of the game this afternoon. And I know the way Specs swims. He uses the overhand stroke, and he does it a good deal better with his right arm than his left."

"There you are!" Molly was triumphant. "Why don't you take your own advice, and do what you can do? You are a wonderful observer. You notice everything, and you remember it, too. You can do as much that way as any other. You were right when you said that a girl should be elected to one of the offices, and they all know you were right, no matter what they say. You noticed something there, and you had the courage to tell everybody else about it. What if you can't make the team? If you just do your best, the time is going to come when you will accomplish as much by seeing as the rest will by doing."

The look on Rodman's face was a queer mixture of shame and pleasure. He swallowed hard.

"You're right, Molly. You—you tipped us over here on purpose, didn't you?"

Molly smiled, but said nothing.

"Yes, you're right," admitted Rodman Cree. "And I'll—well, I'll prove that you are." He swallowed again. "Now, if you say so, we'll walk this boat to shore and get another start."

For the third time that morning, he smiled. As he towed the light canoe ashore, he even whistled.

CHAPTER VII

TWO YARDS TO GO

"Hold 'em, Lakeville!"

The crowd surged against the rope that had been stretched along the sides of the football field where the Lakeville and the Grant City high-school teams were playing the first game of the season. It was a vacant lot at the north of town; not an ideal ground, by any means, but put in order for the sport by being cleared of rocks and stubble and marked with broad stripes of whitewash.

"All ready, Chick!" "Are you ready, Bert?" "Signal!" "What's the signal?" "Steady there." "Signal?"

The Grant City team, which seemed to have occasional spells of confused conversation, appeared all at sea as the ball was about to be put in play.

"Signal?" "Hey, signal!"

The left guard and tackle of the visitors rose from their crouch, apparently uncertain as to the play. At that instant, however, the ball was passed. Logically, with two men out of the play, Lakeville should have had no trouble in stopping the runner with the ball. But he crashed through the Lakeville line between right tackle and end, past Peter Barrett, on secondary defense, in spite of that youth's frantic dive, and so free till, some twenty-five yards distant, Bunny, who was playing back, wriggled through the interference and plumped the runner to earth.

On the side lines, Substitute Rodman Cree dug his finger nails into his palms. "It's a trick play," he muttered. "They don't seem to understand it themselves, but they gain every time they try it. What's the secret?"

"Three minutes of the half left!" Horace Hibbs, acting as official timer, squinted inquiringly at the two teams. "If our boys don't stop that maneuver, Grant is going to score, sure as shooting."

"It's the third time, too," Rodman put in, "but they always gain their distance—and more. I wish I could figure it out."

Following his resolution of the morning, he had come to the game without hope of playing, but with the fixed intent to do everything in his power for the team. So far, he felt he had failed.

True, before the game started, his quick eye had noted that the cord used by the linesmen for measuring downs was almost a yard short. This fact he had pointed out to Mr. Sefton, acting linesman for Lakeville, and the mistake had been corrected. It was Rodman, too, who before the game had discovered and levered away a small boulder, hidden near one of the goal posts. In the case of Bennett, the substitute halfback, who squatted on the side lines and followed each play with the movements of his body, thus wearing himself out before he was put in the game, Rodman had induced the boy, by a joking remark or two, to stretch out and relax until he was wanted. But he felt that these aids were really nothing at all. Wasn't it impossible, after all, to do anything worth while for the team when you weren't the coach, and couldn't play, and when everybody had lost faith in you?

But, at least for the moment, he forgot his difficult task in the smash of the play that was bringing the first half to an end. The ball had touched Lakeville's thirty-yard line, when Jump intercepted a forward pass and ran it back a third of that distance. A sturdy drive by Barrett brought fifteen more; a forward pass netted another substantial gain; three line plunges left Lakeville but twenty-five yards to go.

"Six—eight—five—seven—three!" cried Bunny at quarter. Like well-oiled bits of machinery, the Lakeville eleven clanked into the kick formation, with Bunny back to receive the pass. Professor Leland shook his head.

Rodman saw the gesture and understood. Because the Lakeville team was lighter, the coach had ordered a kicking game, with a try for goal from the field whenever the eleven was well within the enemy's territory. Twice before, however, Bunny's attempts had failed; there was no reason to expect him to put the ball over the goal this time.

The long pass was made and caught. Bunny dropped the pigskin point-down, caught it with his toe as it touched the ground, and kicked it toward the looming goal posts. It went short and wide.

"He can't do it." The coach was talking for his own benefit. "I was afraid he couldn't."

Rodman plucked up courage. "No, he can't, of course. I knew he couldn't."

The coach turned to the substitute. "What do you mean, Cree? I thought Payton was a friend of yours."

"He is, sir; my best friend. But don't you see why he can't get off a good drop-kick?"

The whistle had blown to signal the end of the half. Both teams were trooping off the field. But Professor Leland, after turning as if to join the eleven, stopped by Rodman's side.

"Look here, Cree, if you know any reason why Payton can't kick as well in a game as he can in practice, suppose you tell me now, before I instruct the boys not to follow this plan of play in the second half."

"Yes, sir, I'll tell you." Rodman's voice was joyous. At last, he was able to do something worth while. "Look at the sun. The game started late, and now it shines toward the west goal, directly in Bunny's eyes every time he kicks. See that sun? Then there's the wind. It isn't much of a wind, sir, but it's kicking up a lot of dust, which always blows toward Bunny—into his eyes. But that isn't all." His words came fast; he was afraid the coach would leave before he was done. "Those Grant City fellows, sir, have three corking fine players at center and guards, and our line doesn't

take care of them. They get Roundy excited and nervous, and he passes the ball high and wild. That means the kick is sent off in a good deal more of a hurry than it should be. And Buck isn't playing close enough to the line to stop that right tackle."

Professor Leland nodded. "I believe you are right, Cree. I've noticed a few of those points myself, but you've seen more than I have. All right; we'll give Bunny another chance at a goal from the field."

The talk between halves to the team was full of encouragement. "We're doing well," the coach told them; "mighty well. But we are going to do just a little better. We must score on that team, and we must hold it. Now in this business of field goals—"

To the unmixed delight of Rodman, Professor Leland made use of the very arguments which the substitute had brought up a minute before. "When they kick off to us this half, as they will, I want the ball rushed down the field to a point where we can try another drop for goal. Then, Payton, because we shall have changed goals, your eyes will be free of dust; Claxton will handle that tackle; Jones and Turner will take care of the combination at center, which will allow you, Magoon, to make the best pass of your life. We can do it all, I know."

As the boys stretched out to rest for the remainder of the period, Rodman's satisfaction was marred by only one thought. Although he had done his part to aid the team, neither Bunny nor the others knew anything about it. And it was their friendship and respect he wanted.

"Old Leland is the boy!" Roundy commented lazily to Bunny. "He saw what was wrong, and he fixed it up, too. He's the kind of coach to have."

"We all know that," Bunny responded fervently.

"Why, you can't kick into the sun and dust any more than you can fly; but I couldn't tell him so."

It was on the tip of Rodman's tongue to explain the origin of the suggestion. In spite of the impulse, however, he kept silent.

"All ready to save the day, Cree?" jeered Buck. "You'd be all right, at that, except that you'd probably stumble over the whitewash on the goal line and drop the ball."

It was hard to keep his temper under these flings with which Buck Claxton favored him from time to time. So far as his naturally friendly nature was capable of hating anybody, Rodman had begun to hate Buck. Above everything else, he was glad that Professor Leland was the coach, instead of Buck, and that he himself was working for the whole school and not for Buck Claxton.

At the same time, he admitted to himself that Buck was not a bad captain, despite his tendency to fumble in a crisis. With Roundy Magoon at center, Turner and Bi Jones at guards, Kiproy and Collins at tackles, Sheffield and Jump Henderson at ends, and a back field composed of Barrett and Collins at halves, Buck Claxton at full, and Bunny at quarter, the Lakeville High football team was developing into a snappy, hard-fighting eleven. They were sure of themselves.

When the whistle called them out on the field again, Rodman noted that they trotted forth with a jauntiness which matched very favorably the do-or-die expression of the Grant City players.

"Everybody in it!" shouted Buck, as the team made ready to receive the kick-off.

Jump caught the punt, running back the ball at an angle and passing it to Sheffield, who drilled to the middle of the field before he was stopped. Capping this gain came a series of short, sharp plunges, till the distance to Grant's goal was halved.

"Six—eight—seven—five—thirteen!"

At the warning of the key number, seven, Bi and Turner crowded closer to Roundy at center, while Buck played close to the line to block a threatening tackler. Guarded on both sides, with wind and sun at his back, and with a sure, swift pass to handle, Bunny drop-kicked a perfect goal.

The first points had been scored. The count stood: Lakeville, 3; Grant City, 0.

The crowd, made up largely of Lakeville people, shouted joyously, threw hats into the air, and celebrated with much squawking of auto horns. After she had yelled herself hoarse, Molly climbed from the Sefton car to exchange a word with Rodman.

"Isn't it glorious?" she cried. "We're winning our first game. S. S. told me what Professor Leland said about Bunny's kicking. Wasn't that just too smart for anything?"

Rodman's face lengthened. He wanted very much to tell Molly that the advice was the result of his observations. But something, he could not tell what, checked the words.

"We're getting them, all right," he said, instead. "All we have to do now is to hold when they begin to batter against our line."

"Oh, we can do that." Molly nodded confidently. "You wait and see."

Following the kick-off, the battle raged uncertainly in the middle of the field. Near the end of the third quarter, however, Grant City took the ball on downs, and began a steady onslaught that was formidable. Then, when the Lakeville line seemed to have braced, Rodman came to his feet like a puppet on a string. There it was again! Grant was calling for its trick play.

"Signal! What's the signal?" called a confused voice. "All ready, Bert?" "Dig into 'em!" "Signal?" "Wait a minute!" "Hold it!" "Signal!"

Grant's right guard and tackle stood up straight in their places, looking helplessly toward the quarterback.

"Signal?"

Like the flare of a flashlight, the mystery cleared in Rodman's mind. Why, of course, that was the answer! Why couldn't Buck solve it, or Bunny, or some one of those players in the Lakeville line, already glancing up at the confused babel of voices. Surely, they must see through such an obvious device.

They must—No! Back whirled the ball; forward shot the compact interference and runner. Before the wiry half was tackled, he had covered a cool fifteen yards. It was first down again for Grant.

An unworthy thought burned in Rodman's brain. Why should he tell Coach Leland about the play? Why not put the problem squarely up to the squad at the end of the quarter, when, by previous agreement, it would be permissible to talk with them? In that way, all of the fellows would see they had been mistaken in him; would be forced to realize that he was some good, even if he couldn't make the team. Why should he allow the coach another chance to walk off with borrowed laurels?

His forehead creased with trouble wrinkles while his conscience wrestled with the question. No-o!... It wouldn't be the thing to do, after all. He was still a member of the football squad. As such, it was his business to acquaint the coach, or whoever was in charge of the team, with any helpful information. Simple loyalty demanded that.

"First down; ten yards to gain!"

As he foresaw, Grant did not attempt the trick again. It was a clever play, but its abuse would certainly lead to discovery. Probably, indeed, if they were shrewd—and somebody with brains was undoubtedly in command of the visiting eleven!—they would not try it until they were within striking distance of the goal. Then, unless checked, it would mean a sure touchdown and the game.

Twice more Grant City made small gains. As they lined up for the next play, time was called, with the ball in possession of the visiting team on Lakeville's thirty-yard line.

Rodman started. He must warn the coach at once.

"Professor Leland!"

At that very moment, Mr. Gorse, who was refereeing, called to the coach.

"Just a second, Cree." Throwing a hasty word of advice to the team, the coach started across the field toward the referee.

Fifteen seconds passed. Professor Leland was still arguing some point with Mr. Gorse. Thirty seconds! The conversation went on.

Well, if he couldn't talk to the coach, he must put the matter squarely before the next man under him. But the person now in charge of the team was Buck Claxton; and Buck—well, Buck was Buck! He couldn't bring himself to tell Buck anything. He even started to squat again on his blanket, when, quite to his own surprise, he found himself walking over to the side of the captain. After all, as long as he practiced with the squad, he must be loyal.

"Oh, Buck!"

"Well?" snapped Claxton. "What d'ye want?"

Rodman hesitated, tempted at the last second to turn back with the message undelivered. But once more a better impulse prevailed. In a voice purposely low, that the others might not overhear, he offered his explanation.

"That play where the whole Grant team gets to talking before the ball is passed—watch it! I thought first it was some trick, but it's really only a straight plunge by their half. The reason they gain is because they throw you fellows off by yelling for the signal and all that. Part of the line stands up and looks at the quarterback. You all think they are mixed on the signal, but they aren't. The reason it works is because they catch our team when it doesn't expect the ball to be passed, when our own guard and tackle have straightened up a little, too, to see what's going on. Yes, they do! I've been watching 'em. But they don't realize it."

Buck tried vainly to interrupt, but there was no checking the torrent of Rodman's words.

"They get all your attention off the game, and then, bingo! the ball is put in play. It's a fact, Buck! Remember now, if they start jabbering at each other, and one side of the line begins to stand up straight, that means the play is going right through there. Remember that—"

He was still talking earnestly when the whistle blew, with Buck, his face stolid, staring steadily at the ground and scraping marble rings in the dust with his right shoe-toe.

"Ready, Lakeville!" shouted the captain; and the game was on again.

A lucky fumble brought the ball into the home team's hands, and Bunny punted out of danger. After that, steadily and surely, with all the advantages of weight and experience, the Grant eleven began to grind its way down the field. Desperately, Lakeville crouched and set itself; still more desperately, Grant City ploughed onward. The formations were slow and deliberate; the visitors risked no fumble or error. Often the gains were only a foot or two, but each fourth down found another ten yards covered. Rodman realized that some keen brain was directing the team, balancing time against gains, and playing for one touchdown that would turn the threatened defeat into a victory.

"Curtains!" groaned Specs somewhere in the background, quite loudly enough for Rodman to hear. "Curtains! Hold 'em, fellows! Hold 'em!"

"Three minutes to play!" announced Horace Hibbs.

"If we can only hold them from that goal!" muttered Coach Leland.

"Grant's ball! First down; ten yards to gain!"

A plunge through center netted three of them; a wriggling half eeled around right end for another two; the same play on the other side brought the total to eight. Lakeville was fighting gallantly, but superior weight was beginning to tell.

"Fourth down; two yards to gain."

Already the ball was in the very shadow of the goal posts. If this final attack succeeded, it

meant a touchdown. Rodman Cree shivered in his blanket. Suppose they tried the trick play now. Would Buck—

"What's the matter, Billy?" "Ready there, Chick!" "Signal!" "What's the signal?" "Never mind!" "Hold her!"

The right tackle and guard of the Grant City team straightened up.

"Signal?" called a bewildered voice.

Rodman gripped his fists tight. Was it to go through, even after he had warned Buck? But suddenly, hard and high above the din from the Grant line, the Lakeville captain's voice rang clear:

"Get down, Bi! On the job, Kiproy! They're coming through you! It's the right half! Everybody together now! *Stop him!*"

The ball was snapped. Like a battering-ram, the right half of the Grant team, pocketed in perfect interference, catapulted against the Lakeville line,—against Bi and Kiproy, backed by Peter Barrett and Buck Claxton. For just the fraction of a second, the line wavered, threatening to snap. Then it tautened into a stone wall, against which the runner crashed and fell back. There was no gain. The trick had failed. It was Lakeville's ball almost on her goal line.

Bunny punted out of danger. Grant City had just time to line up for one weak charge before the whistle announced the end of the game. By checking that one play, Lakeville had prevented a touchdown and had won, 3 to 0.

In the minds of the victorious players, there was no doubt as to the fellow who deserved the credit. Scouts and all, they hoisted Buck to their shoulders, cheering him as they marched around the field.

From where he stood, Rodman Cree could see Molly leaning from the car and waving her pennant. On the side lines, Clarence Prissler was executing a war dance of his own. In the midst of a group of girls, Marion Genevieve Chester was leading the school cheer. And it was all for Buck!

Nobody knew what Rodman had done, of course, except the coach and Buck; and evidently they weren't going to tell. For a bitter moment, Rodman argued with himself. Should he go on with the thankless job?

Across his brain flashed the memory of a sentence he had read in the Scouts' "Handbook", "*A Scout is loyal.*" It was one of the twelve laws; it meant him, too, whether he was a Scout or not. It was a law that applied to everybody all over the world. He didn't have to be a Scout to keep that law.

With a stiffening of his shoulders, he lifted his head, as if to stare all Lakeville in the face.

"I'm going to keep on," he said, "whether anybody knows what I am doing or not. I may not be a Scout, but I'm as loyal as any one of them. I am loyal to the school, and to the team, and to everybody who has a claim on me. Yes, and I am going to keep on being loyal."

They were giving three cheers for Buck now, with Specs, clad in his street clothes, leading them all. Before he knew it, Rodman was adding his voice to the praise.

"And I wouldn't be anything else," he said suddenly. "I wouldn't be anything else."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PEACE PICNIC

This is the story of Molly Sefton's great peace picnic, which was held on the following Saturday afternoon. It didn't seem funny at the time; in fact, nobody could have been more serious or in earnest than Molly when she planned the picnic. But afterward—!

At any rate, here is what happened:

In the first place, the game with Grant City had done one very good thing, among many others. After seeing Buck stop Grant's trick play, Master Specs changed his mind about not muddying a football suit that season. He would not admit, of course, that Buck could compare with Bunny; but he began to feel that Buck had some good points, after all. So he was back in the squad, trying hard for an end position and with a fair chance of winning the place. That was one difficulty ironed out.

"But here's the reason for the picnic," Molly chattered to Bunny the day before. "First, I want the Black Eagle Patrol to like Rodman Cree; and, second, I want the rest of the school to like you Scouts. Now if we have a nice, jolly picnic, everybody will get acquainted and understand everybody else. You see, they all have wrong ideas about each other. For instance, Specs thinks Rodman isn't good for anything."

"Well—I," admitted Bunny cautiously, "he isn't much of a track athlete or football player."

"But he can play baseball. I know he can. I saw him bat the first day of school, even if he does say he hit the ball accidentally."

Bunny agreed. "All right. We'll take along a bat and ball and a couple of gloves, and maybe Specs and the others will like him better after they see him play."

"Of course." Molly was growing more and more enthusiastic. "As for the others: Peter Barrett thinks you are a lot of snobs and won't associate with fellows who happen to have patches on their clothes and that kind of thing; Buck Claxton says that you try to run things, and that if anybody outside the patrol has a plan, you oppose it, just because you didn't happen to think of it first; Royal Sheffield thinks you are a bunch of sissies, who don't dare walk across the road without asking permission from your Scout Master; Genevieve Chester says you hate her because she was elected president of the student association, and are always hoping something awful will happen to her; Clarence Prissler honestly believes you never think of a thing but athletics, and aren't interested in books or education—and you know he is planning to be a teacher." Molly paused to take breath. "Now, I say that if we have a nice, lively, get-acquainted picnic, everybody will find out his mistakes. Don't you think so?"

Whatever Bunny really thought made no difference, because the picnic was already under way; and at precisely two o'clock Saturday afternoon some thirty-five boys and girls, accompanied by Mrs. Sefton, boarded three borrowed launches and crossed the lake to Turkey Point.

And this is how everybody succeeded in misunderstanding everybody else.

How Specs Found He had been Mistaken in Rodman Cree

"How about playing a little scrub ball?" proposed Bunny at three-fifteen that afternoon. "You come in on this, Rodman."

Rodman Cree wrinkled his nose in perplexity. "But I can't play baseball. You know I can't. I've told you so."

"Oh, rats! You knocked a home run that first day of school, and you can do it again. Come on, Buck; let's choose up."

The game lasted only three innings, for by that time the girls had started a marshmallow roast; but it was quite long enough. In the first inning, Rodman played third until he had muffed two perfect throws, when Bunny shifted him to the outfield. Here he misjudged an easy fly and strained to correct his error by throwing the ball twenty feet over the head of Bi, who was wildly trying to nip a runner at second.

At bat, in the third inning, with two out, bases full, and Bob Kiproy pitching a straight ball, poor Rodman had his last shred of reputation removed.

Three times Kiproy pitched wide, high balls. Rodman scraped the dust trying to hit, and lunged two feet across the plate trying to hit, and jumped high in the air trying to hit.

And he never touched the ball.

"I see I was mistaken," observed Specs, as he walked in from third, where he had been stranded high and dry as a runner. "I thought he was some good at baseball, anyhow, but he's no good at anything."

How Peter Barrett Observed the Way Scouts Regarded Patched Clothes

At four o'clock Peter Barrett was walking in a little grove back of an open field, attempting to memorize a poem for Monday's class. Also, between times, he was endeavoring to be fair to the Black Eagle Patrol; for a talk with Molly had convinced him that perhaps he had made a mistake in supposing the Scouts to be snobs. At this juncture, he caught sight of Bunny, legs apart, talking defiantly to a ragged youngster from the nearest farm.

"No, you can't come in here," Bunny was saying shortly. "We have this place for the afternoon.

You will have to go somewhere else."

"But I won't hurt anything."

Bunny became even sharper. "I've told you already to go home. Run along now. We don't want you here, and you know why. Hurry up!"

Reluctantly and sorrowfully, the boy in the ragged clothes turned and slouched back to the farmhouse.

"Exactly!" said Peter Barrett grimly to himself. "Just what I thought right along. They're snobs. They haven't any use at all for poor folks."

How Buck Claxton Tested the Scouts' Willingness to Co-operate with Outsiders

Five o'clock had come, with the time for serving the lunch brought by the girls still two hours away, when a bright idea dawned on Buck Claxton.

"What do you say to this?" he began enthusiastically to Roundy. "About a quarter of a mile down the road, there is a little store where they sell ice cream. Suppose we all chip in and buy enough for the crowd? It would be a nice thing to do."

Roundy's face assumed a wistful expression, and he nodded his head. "But I—I'm afraid I can't," he declined.

Buck turned to Nap. "How about you?"

"Waterloo!" said Nap firmly. "Can't think of it!"

"Busted!" added S. S. lamely.

Four other Scouts gave the same answer.

"Oh, all right!" remarked Buck, with a superior smile on his face. "I'll see some of the others."

A little later, he came back with ice cream for everybody. But no Scout had paid for even one little frozen chunk.

How Royal Sheffield Discovered Whether the Scouts Dared Cross the Road Without Asking Permission

At five-thirty, to the west of the picnic grounds, Royal Sheffield and S. S. observed a husky young farmer blazing away at a tin can with a rifle.

"That's my cousin," observed S. S.

"Fine!" exclaimed Sheffield. "We'll borrow the rifle, pay for some cartridges, and have a big shooting match."

S. S. seemed troubled. "I don't think we ought to do that," he objected. "Horace Hibbs isn't here, and somebody might get hurt."

Sheffield stared in amazement. "We would shoot at a target, of course," he explained.

S. S. continued stubborn. "There are too many of us. Somebody might get shot."

"Tell you what we will do, then: you and I will slip over there and get him to give us a couple of shots."

S. S. was more embarrassed than ever. "No, I don't think we ought to do that, either, Roy. No, we certainly ought not to do that." He turned toward the picnic crowd. "Let's get back to the bunch. Maybe they are starting something. Yes, let's go back."

"All right!" snorted Sheffield contemptuously. "But it's too bad Horace Hibbs won't be here when we eat."

"Why?" S. S. asked innocently.

"If he isn't here, how will you know whether you may eat two kinds of sandwiches and cake, and how hot you may drink your coffee?"

And Royal Sheffield walked away, leaving S. S. without an answer.

How Marion Genevieve Chester Proved (to Her Own Satisfaction) How Much the Scouts Cared for Her

It was ten minutes past six when Bi and Marion Genevieve Chester, very gay in her new red dress, started over to a little spring to get water for the coffee. Bi suggested skirting the rail fence to the lane, instead of cutting across fields.

Marion Genevieve tossed her head. "What's the use of being in the country if you can't walk on the grass. You go any way you want to. I'm going straight across."

Bi's shoe had become untied, and he was stooping to lace it when wild screams, mingled with angry bellowing, came from the field into which Marion Genevieve had ventured. Looking up, he saw the girl dashing toward the fence, her mouth open and her eyes wide with fright. Meanwhile, the bellowings grew loud and furious.

"Oh, you're all right," he called, as she reached the fence. "You have plenty of time."

For a bit, due to her frightened exhaustion, it looked as if Marion Genevieve might not be able to climb over the fence. Bi sauntered toward her.

"Come on," he said. "You're all right."

"If I am all right," snapped Marion Genevieve, once more out of the field, "it's not your fault. For all you cared, that bull could have tossed me over, and you wouldn't have made a move to help me."

"But—"

"Yes, and I believe you knew the bull was in there all the time, and you never said a word about it." She pointed her finger at him. "Didn't you know the bull was in there?"

"Why, yes," said the hapless Bi. "I did, of course, but—"

"Then don't you ever dare to speak to me again, you hateful boy."

And with this farewell, Marion Genevieve Chester flounced angrily back to the picnickers, leaving Bi and the pail by the side of the fence.

How Clarence Prissler Interviewed the Scouts to Learn Their Views on Educational Matters

It was the shouts of laughter that drew Molly to the bit of sandy beach near the boat landing. Lunch was ready, and she crossed over to let the jolly ones know about the coming meal.

There were three principal actors and two spectators in the group. Specs, Jump and little Prissler stood in line on the sand, while Bob Kiproy and Jim Collins, stretched at full length, were doing most of the laughing. Around Prissler's waist circled a sort of rope harness, with a dangling line on each side. These ends, at the moment when the boy began his somersault in the air, were grasped by Jump and Specs.

"I'm not going to try it again," whined Clarence Prissier. "I'm not going to; that's all there is to it."

"Oh, you're coming along in fine style," said Jump comfortably. "Never mind those fellows. Just try it once more."

"Go on," Specs commanded. "We're waiting."

"Yes, try it again, Prissy," said Kiproy feebly, between shrieks of laughter.

"I'm not—"

"We're waiting," snapped Specs, giving the rope a tug.

Prissier bent his knees, swung back his arms, and then, with a desperate leap, essayed a back flip through the air. It was not forceful enough, however, and he came down on his hands and knees. Though Specs and Jump kept him from crashing, he landed hard enough to lurch forward into the sand.

Kiproy and Collins rolled over in violent laughter.

"You're getting it," said Jump encouragingly. "You're getting it."

"Sure, you're getting it," agreed Specs.

"But I tell you, I don't want to get it," protested Prissier, rubbing the sand out of his clothes. "And what's more, I'm not going to do it again."

Molly interrupted. "Lunch is ready," she said, in a voice so different from her ordinary tones that Specs looked at her in astonishment.

"What's the matter?" he ventured, after Clarence Prissier, still weakly complaining, had managed to slip the rope from his waist and was walking with the others toward the spread tablecloths.

"You know well enough what the matter is," said Molly severely; "and if you're not ashamed. I'm ashamed for you." Deliberately, she turned her back on him.

The balance of the evening was not a success. Though the picnic lunch would have satisfied anybody, the picnickers felt ill at ease. The Scouts were uncomfortable, and Buck, Barrett, Sheffield, Prissier and Company were more so, to say nothing of Marion Genevieve Chester. Even the launch ride around the lake, which ended the picnic, was a dismal failure, because nobody seemed to want to sing. When the party broke up, it made about as much noise as so many homeward-bound rabbits.

Almost in tears, Molly Sefton walked home with her mother, accompanied by Bunny as basket bearer.

"It—it all went wrong." Molly was very near sobbing as she said good night. "Oh, why did you do it? I tried so hard, and Specs and Bi and—and everybody just went and spoiled everything. I heard all about it."

Bunny looked genuinely astonished. "What did we do that was wrong? You can't blame me because Rodman can't play ball. I didn't know he was going to pieces like that."

"It wasn't just Rodman. Why did you keep that poor little boy with the ragged clothes from coming over to the picnic? We had enough to eat for a dozen more. Peter Barrett said you chased him away. Why did you do it?"

Bunny heaved a sigh of relief. "There was a scarlet fever sign on the house. When I found he lived there, I told him to go away and stay away. I couldn't do anything else, could I?"

"No," admitted Molly. "But why wouldn't any of you help buy the ice cream?"

"We spent our last cent paying for gasoline for the three launches. We borrowed the boats, but we had to pay for the gas. None of us had a penny left."

"S. S. wouldn't borrow his cousin's rifle, even for a single shot."

"S. S. told me about that. He was right to argue against bringing the gun over for any target shooting. There were too many of us; it would have been dangerous. But it would have been more dangerous for Roy Sheffield if S. S. had taken him over where his cousin was, though Roy doesn't know it. You see, about two years ago, this cousin was driving in town, and Roy threw a newspaper in front of the rig, which frightened the horse so much it nearly ran away. The fellow has had it in for him ever since."

Molly thought for a moment. "Bi let Marion Genevieve Chester get almost killed by a wild bull. He knew it was in that field, and he saw that she had on a red dress."

"There wasn't a bit of danger," Bunny laughed. "The bull was tied up and fenced off from that field. Anyhow, Marion Genevieve was never as close as fifty yards to the bull. She never even saw it."

"You'll admit that was an awful thing they did to poor little Clarence Prissler."

Bunny grinned. "I was to blame for that. You see, Molly, I thought it best not to tell the boys about those people who don't like us, because I figured that if we just acted natural they would find out that we don't mean to be snobbish or stingy or anything else low-down. But I did tell the Scouts about Prissy's thinking we weren't interested in learning things. So when Clarence went up to Jump and began to ask questions about the circus, and how the acrobats got to be acrobats, and all that, why, Specs insisted that Jump teach Prissy the back flip. Honestly, Molly, I believe Specs thought he was doing the right thing."

Molly and Bunny looked at each other. Then the girl, brushing her hand across her eyes, broke into a laugh, in which the boy joined.

"It is funny," she said. "I didn't see it that way before, but it is funny. Only everything's in a worse tangle now than it ever was before."

"But we'll fix it," Bunny said. "We'll fix it somehow."

CHAPTER IX

THE TENDERFOOT

If Specs had not stopped on his way to school that morning to play with Felix; and if Miss Seeby, the botany teacher, had not expressed a desire for a specimen of *aspidium fragrans*, which is a variety of fern; and if Professor Leland had not called a mass meeting for four o'clock that afternoon, there is no telling how the day might have ended for the Black Eagle Patrol.

Felix was the Magoons' dog. He included in his affections all friends of the family and particularly Roundy's brother Scouts. There were people, indeed, who claimed that Felix was the eighth member of the patrol. But that was ridiculous, of course; for how could a dog pass the tenderfoot tests of tying knots, or take the Scout oath, or know the history of the flag?

Felix probably didn't worry about his official position. What counted with him was the friendship of the Scouts; and that morning, when care-free Specs McGrew hove in sight, with a stick in his hand, Felix barked happily and said, as plainly as a dog can, "Throw it! I'll retrieve it for you!"

So Specs whipped the stick fifty feet away, and Felix rushed after it. As soon as he had thrown, Specs raced for the corner, to get out of sight before the dog could recover the bit of wood and return it. But Felix was too quick for him, too wise in the game. All the way to school they played it till, at the very door, with the last bell ringing, Specs hurled it farther than he had any time yet, and then took advantage of Felix by dodging into the hall and running upstairs to his seat in the big assembly room.

This was a mistake. The way to end a game with Felix was to stand sternly before him and say, "Go home, Felix; go home, sir!" and wait till the dog dropped his tail between his legs and crept away.

The school day started like any other for Specs. He answered "present" at roll call, joined the others in singing, and listened attentively to the five-minute address by Professor Leland. It was not until he had marched with the class to Room 4 for his botany recitation, indeed, that he thought of Felix again.

"The *aspidium fragrans*, or fragrant fern," Miss Seeby was saying, "is a rare and hardy little species, growing in clefts on the faces of precipices. It is aromatic, with an odor said to be like new-mown hay composed largely of sweet-briar rose leaves. This fern is to be found in our State, and I should like very much to have a specimen to show the class. Look for a place where there is a bare cliff, overhanging a little, perhaps, so the rain cannot reach the plant, and up above all the trees, so that it can have no shade at all. If you find a fern there, test it by its fragrance, its stickiness and its beautiful brown, curling fronds." She paused, walked toward Specs and said, in a wholly different voice, "Is that your dog?"

Specs looked down. Faithful Felix had evidently followed him through the hall when he left the assembly room and was now lying beside his desk, thumping an eager tail against the floor. His unexpected presence provoked discreet mirth from everybody except the teacher and Specs himself.

"No—no ma'am. It's the Magoons'." Common honesty made him add, "But he followed me to school, I guess. I was playing with him."

"Indeed!" said Miss Seeby, looking more offended than ever. "*Indeed!* Well, put him out —*immediately*!"

Specs coerced Felix into the hall and warned him to go home and behave himself like a good dog. But there must have been meekness and apology in the command; for, instead of obeying, Felix went only as far as the outer corridor, where he slunk into a dark comer. Two minutes later, in any event, he was scratching at the classroom door and whining for admittance.

Miss Seeby had just shown her pupils a drawing of the fragrant fern and asked again that any one who knew where it was to be found secure a specimen at the first opportunity. She paused suddenly, and her face hardened.

"Take that dog away," she ordered Specs; "yes, take him home. And you need not come back to school yourself until you have a note from your father to Professor Leland, stating that you are sorry for this outrage and promising that you will not bring that animal here again."

Very penitent, although somewhat confused over the exact nature of his guilt, Specs rose and made dizzily for the door. As he closed it behind him, he could hear the giggling of the class and a smothered reference—he credited it to Rodman Cree—about "Mary's little lamb", interrupted by the teacher's sharp admonition for silence.

To Specs' credit, be it recorded that he followed instructions to the best of his ability. With an affectionate twist of Felix's ear, he strode down the hall and outdoors, even forgetting his cap in his hurry, with the dog tagging at his heels. Straight to the Magoons' he led Felix; sternly he told him to stay there. Then he ambled downtown, to explain to his parent as best as he could the disgrace that had befallen him.

"Your father's out in the country," the clerk in the McGrew hardware store told him. "He'll be back in an hour or two, though."

Deep thought slowed Specs' steps on the return trip. In front of the Magoons' the forgiving Felix crept out and made it plain he was sorry and wanted to be friends again. The Scout stared at him with a slow smile.

"Come on!" he called. "I can't go back to school till I get that note, and I can't get that note till father comes back to town. Tell you what, Felix; you and I will chase out along the lake shore and

find one of those smelly ferns for Miss Seeby. I know where they grow. Come on, old boy!"

Directly after school that afternoon, as has been intimated, Professor Leland called a mass meeting. After Marion Genevieve Chester, as president of the student association, rapped for order, the principal rose from his chair on the platform and stepped forward.

"To-morrow afternoon," he began, "Lakeville High School plays its second football game. I have called this meeting to suggest that we organize to encourage the team during the game. We made enough noise at the other; but some of us cheered at the wrong times, when it wasn't quite fair to our opponents, and not at the right times, when it might have heartened our own boys; and some of us cheered all by ourselves, without any attempt to swell the volume of applause and encouragement. What I wish to suggest is practicing the Lakeville cheer, till we can pour it forth like the *boom-boom-boom* of a cannon, and the appointing of cheer leaders for the different sections."

Nominations were promptly offered, and the candidates as promptly elected. Profiting by that other meeting, the Scouts made no attempt to win a place.

"I wonder," continued Professor Leland, "if all of us realize that we may help, even if we are not playing on the team itself. Let me show you what I mean."

And then, while Bunny and Buck listened just a little more intently than the others, perhaps, he told them of the drop-kicks that had failed in the first game because of wind and dust and bad passes, and how Rodman Cree had pointed out the handicaps and made possible the goal when the teams changed sides.

A little applause rippled over the room. Everybody squirmed about in his seat to see how Rodman took it, but it was soon evident that the boy had not attended the meeting.

"The Grant City team," went on the speaker, "had a curious and effective trick formation, which was solved by our boys in the nick of time, thanks to Captain Claxton. Now, if some one of us who was not playing had discovered that trick and warned our team, it would have helped."

"Mr. Chair—I mean, Miss Chairman!"

It was Buck Claxton who interrupted. Very embarrassed he looked as he stood there, and very white, but very determined, too.

"Mr. Claxton," recognized Marion Genevieve Chester.

"Somebody did discover that trick," blurted Buck. "Rodman Cree did. He told me about it between quarters. That was why I knew what to expect. That—that's all." He sat down with an audible thump.

Very wisely, Professor Leland dismissed the subject with a brief, "Then we have something more for which to thank Cree," and turned to another subject. "Suppose we practice the Lakeville cheer now," he said. "Let's shake the rafters."

If the cheers inspired by the new leaders did not actually shake the rafters, it was because the school building was new and rigid. They echoed and re-echoed from basement to attic; they forced Marion Genevieve Chester to thrust hurried fingers into her aristocratic ears; they made you believe that Lakeville was the best and biggest and most loyal high school in all the world. In some mysterious way, everybody seemed to think he could help win the morrow's game by yelling just a little bit louder than his neighbor.

At the door, as they filed out, Bunny Payton stopped each member of the Black Eagle Patrol long enough to say, "Scout meeting at the club house to-night. Seven sharp. Be sure and come."

Roundy was the last to leave. "Seen Specs?" Bunny asked him. The patrol leader was not in Miss Seeby's nine-o'clock botany class and knew nothing of the morning incident. "H'm! Neither have I. That's funny. Well, don't forget the meeting."

Rodman Cree was not a Boy Scout, but Felix may have overlooked this point. Perhaps he realized that Rodman was worthy of his friendship, or perhaps it was merely the cap in the boy's hand that drew him like a magnet. Whatever the reason, at four that afternoon, when school was dismissed, Felix ran straight to Rodman and tried to tell him, in dog language, that something was wrong, and that it had to do with somebody connected with Specs' cap, which Rodman had observed hanging in the coatroom, although he knew its owner had not returned since his exile from Miss Seeby's botany class.

Felix nuzzled Rodman, yelped sharply and trotted away. When the dog saw that he was not followed, he came back again, very patient with the dull human who couldn't understand plain signs, and repeated his actions. But it was not till the third time that the boy began to get an inkling of the truth. Felix clinched the matter by sniffing at the cap held toward him, barking excitedly, and racing off at full speed.

Rodman may not have been a Boy Scout, but he constructed this problem and its answer with a deft brain. Miss Seeby had asked for a specimen of the fragrant fern, which grew on the sides of cliffs. Specs had been sent away from school in disgrace, accompanied by Felix. He had not returned. The only cliffs near Lakeville were to the west, along the shore of the lake. Felix had smelled Specs' cap and run in that direction. It followed, as surely as two plus two make four, that he was endeavoring to lead somebody to the missing boy.

"Maybe poor Specs fell over a precipice and hurt himself," Rodman said, shivering uneasily. "All right, Felix, I'm coming. The old mass meeting can go hang!"

At first, while the dog kept to the road, there was nothing that Rodman could do save follow. But later, when Felix left the main highway where it curved to avoid the sandstone cliffs near the lake, and began pushing his eager nose through the underbrush and over tangles of grass, the boy recognized that this was virgin country. Specs could not have come that way without

unconsciously leaving signs for anybody who came afterward.

Where some less observant boy might have found nothing, Rodman readily picked up the trail. A pebble, lying with its damp side up, proved that a careless foot had turned it over. A splatter of partially dried mud on the trunk of a tree revealed that the passer-by had left the spot some hours before. Broken branches, their tips toward the lake, pointed the way like arrows. Grass and leaves added their mute evidence by lying brushed forward till their under sides showed. It was comforting, at least, to be certain Specs had hiked over this very stretch.

"Yes, he came this way," Rodman told Felix. "Find him, old fellow!"

At the top of the wooded rise they had been ascending, the hill culminated in barren knobs, which broke off abruptly in sandstone cliffs, sheer to the lapping water of the lake. In places, the rock was solid, save for little dirt-filled crevices, from which hardy vegetation sprouted; in others, the stone had crumpled into fine sand, which day by day sifted downward till a niche had been formed in the solid wall. It was toward the top of one of these indentations that Felix raced, with Rodman hard on his heels.

Throwing himself flat on his stomach, the boy wriggled to the edge and peered down. Some twelve or fifteen feet below him, squatting on a narrow patch of sand, Specs McGrew was engaged in disconsolately tossing pebbles upon the placid bosom of the lake. On either side of his little prison, the walls of the precipice fell straight to the water's edge, apparently extending for hundreds of yards in both directions. Specs was safe enough, to be sure, but he was as effectually cooped upon the tiny plot of sand by the smooth rock cliffs and the deep lake as if the iron bars of a cage encompassed him.

"Hello, Specs!"

The imprisoned boy looked up. "Oh, it's you," he said sullenly. "Got a rope?"

"No."

"Oh, of course not! You'd have one if you were a Scout. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"How did you get down there?" Rodman asked.

"Fell down, you chump!" snapped Specs.

Rodman wanted to snap back, "Well, fall up here, then!" But he fought back the temptation. Instead, "Sit tight," he called, "and I'll have you out in a jiffy."

Back in the woods, wild grapevines twined over the trees. It was the work of only a few minutes to cut and trim one eight or ten feet long and lower it over the sandy cliff.

"Grab hold," he called to Specs, "and you can walk up the side of this sloping sand-pit as easy as falling off a log. Ready! Up you come! Steady there! Careful! Careful! There you are, safe and sound and on top of the world once more. Now, is there a fragrant fern anywhere around here?"

At seven o'clock that evening the Boy Scouts of the Black Eagle Patrol met in their clubhouse. Before seven-thirty they had threshed out the problem of electing another member, and there was not a dissenting vote when the name of Rodman Cree was proposed to fill the patrol roster.

"Which is just as it should be," Horace Hibbs approved. "Unless every single one of us thinks he is the best fellow for the place, he should not be invited to join. Now, if Specs—"

"Yes, Specs!" groaned Bi. "We'll never convert Specs; no, not in a thousand years. He says Rodman is no good, and I guess he'll grow long white whiskers before he'll admit he's wrong. No, siree, if we wait for Specs to make it unanimous, this patrol will be one man shy the rest of its life."

"I wish," began Bunny, "that Specs—"

The sentence was chopped short by the rattle of the latch. As the Scouts turned, the door flung wide, and Specs himself popped into the room.

"Come on in, Rodman," he called. "Say, fellows, Rodman is a whiz. You know the cliffs out near Old Baldy. Well, I fell down one of them this morning, reaching for a fragrant fern, and Rodman came looking for me. Found me, too, by following my trail and—"

"Felix led me to him," Rodman said depreciatingly.

"Rats!" scorned Specs. "You did it. Felix didn't make a grapevine rope, did he, and pull me up the cliff? I guess not. And who reached down and plucked this fern? Felix? Huh! Smell it, Bunny. Listen, fellows! Rodman knows all the things we do about trailing, and the woods, and the birds, and tying knots, and making fires without matches, and—oh, everything. I always told you he was all right!" Specs made this statement gravely and sincerely; he had forgotten his former opinion of the new boy. "Well, then, what's the matter with making him a Scout in the Black Eagle Patrol? Anybody object?"

He stared at them fiercely, defiantly, as if daring one of them to protest. Nobody did. Horace Hibbs stroked his chin in high glee.

"Rodman," the Scout Master said, "can you tie—let me see—these knots: the square or reef, sheet-bend, bowline, fisherman's, sheepshank, halter, clove hitch, timber hitch and two half hitches?"

"Yes, sir. I know some others, too."

"And do you know the Scout laws, motto, sign, salute and significance of the badge?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about your country's flag. Do you know its composition and history and the customary forms of respect due it?"

"Yes, sir." The boy was both eager and confident in his replies.

Horace Hibbs smiled. "One more question: Would you like to join the Black Eagle Patrol of Boy

Scouts?"

There was no formal "Yes, sir!" this time. Instead, Rodman Cree gulped once or twice, as if it were difficult to speak, and then fairly shouted, "You bet I would!"

"In that case," pronounced Horace Hibbs judicially, fitting the tips of his fingers together, "I see no reason why you should not take the tenderfoot tests at once. Bunny, will you get us a rope?"

Twenty minutes later, when Specs rose to replenish the dying flames in the great brick fireplace, his eyes fell upon Rodman Cree.

"Shucks!" he laughed, "what's the use of wasting our wood when that fellow's head is a regular bonfire?" He paused to digest his remark. "Say—say, let's call Rodman 'Bonfire' after this. It's a dandy name for him."

Horace Hibbs glanced shrewdly across the table at the recruit. "Do you mind?" he asked.

The boy grinned happily. "Of course, I don't. I—I like it," said Bonfire Cree, tenderfoot of the Black Eagle Patrol.

CHAPTER X

HALLOWE'EN

Clarence Prissler lay motionless upon bed Number 9 in the free ward of the model little hospital that the Fair Play Factory had built in Lakeville. The nurse pointed him out to Bunny Payton, and the latter tiptoed softly to the sick boy's side. Before Prissler opened his eyes and looked up at him, the caller had clenched his hands nervously and swallowed hard. He wondered if he would be welcome, and what he was going to say. In spite of the fact that Clarence Prissler had been a schoolmate of his since the first of the year, he hadn't exchanged a dozen sentences with him in that time.

The misunderstanding at Molly's picnic had been deplorable. On the following Monday morning, Bunny had resolved to seek out the boy and apologize and explain; in a way, that would be a Scouts' good turn. But Prissler had not come to school that day. He was missing again on Tuesday and the succeeding days of that week. Saturday the football team played and beat Elkana High, and the victory was enough to make a fellow forget almost everything. Besides, nobody seemed to know what had become of Prissler; nobody, indeed, seemed to have missed him. But when a second week had faded into the past, and part of a third, Bunny stirred into action.

Professor Leland gave him the first clue. With something of an ache in his heart, Bunny went straight to Horace Hibbs.

"Yes," said the Scout Master, "he is in our hospital. He has been very ill." The man looked thoughtfully at Bunny. "Do you recall the seventh Scout law?" he asked, and quoted it slowly, "'A Scout is friendly.'"

At the hospital now, while Bunny fumbled with his cap, the halting conversation got under way. Prissler was glad to see him; he said so very politely and very meekly. After Bunny had told him how sorry he was about the picnic incident, they talked of general topics. Presently, though, there came another of the embarrassing pauses.

"To-night's Hallowe'en, isn't it?" ventured Prissler.

"Why, yes," said Bunny. He fancied he detected a note of wistfulness in the other's tone. "Why, yes; so it is. I—I wish you could come out with us."

"I wish I could." The sick boy tried bravely to put some simulation of enthusiasm in his voice, but failed.

Bunny rose to his feet. He couldn't imagine the bookish and hermit-like Prissler skylarking with the fellows; the boy didn't—well, didn't just "fit." He wasn't "one of the crowd." But, of course, you couldn't say that to a fellow who was sick. And you could say something nice!

"I'll tell you what, Prissler," he proposed. "I'll be your proxy to-night when we're out. I'll pretend, you know, that I'm walking about on your legs, and using your arms and your brain; and then to-morrow I'll come again and tell you all the things you did—through me, by proxy, you understand. It will be the next best fun to your being actually one of the bunch, won't it?"

"Yes," answered Prissler dutifully; "yes, I suppose so." He held out a weak hand. "Well, good-by, Bunny. It was fine of you to come and see me. Good-by."

Out in the hall, Bunny met Doctor Maxwell. A sudden impulse made him stop the man.

"Doctor," he said, "I am a classmate of Clarence Prissler's at the high school. Can you tell me how he is getting along?"

The physician eyed him thoughtfully. "I am glad you called upon him," he said presently. "The truth is, young Prissler isn't recovering as he should; he isn't building up in mind or body after his siege. I've thought, once or twice, that he needed a more intimate touch with the outside world; that's why I am glad you called upon him. Nobody else has."

"He—well, sir, he isn't what you call a very popular fellow in school," apologized Bunny. "Doesn't play any games, and keeps to himself, you know, sir, and seems to prefer his own company to anybody else's. There isn't any—any danger that he won't get well, is there, sir?"

"There is every danger," replied Doctor Maxwell soberly. "He is in a weak, despondent condition, from which he does not seem to be able to arouse himself. He has no interest in what is going on, no apparent desire to rally and grow stronger. If it were possible to inject fresh enthusiasm into him, some actual ambition to get up from his bed and out into the world again, it would mean more than any attention or medicine we can give him here. He—well, I'm glad you called, anyhow. We shall hope for the best."

There was a big lump in Bunny's throat when he left the hospital. It was as if the physician had accused him of some deliberate neglect. After all, he had failed in practice to observe that seventh Scout law. He remembered times when he might have sung out a cheery greeting to Prissler in the days that were past, or stopped to chat with him a minute, or flung an arm over his shoulder and walked a ways with him, as he often did with the other fellows. But he hadn't done any of these things; he hadn't even suspected that the boy was hungry at heart for companionship, and wanted to share in the joys and disappointments of those about him.

Bunny Payton wasn't quite himself when he joined the other Scouts that evening for the usual round of Hallowe'en pranks. Two or three of them commented upon his moody silence, and eventually he had to explain that he couldn't free his mind of the picture of Clarence Prissler in the hospital, lying pale and weak and ready to give up on his white cot. He even told them how he had proposed becoming Prissler's proxy for the night; told them about it grimly, in short, jerky

sentences, as if he dared them to laugh at the idea. None of them did.

The following afternoon, directly after school, he called again to see the patient. This time he greeted the sick boy boisterously, as he might an old friend.

"Here's a glass of jelly," he said, after he had shaken hands. "Mrs. Lannigan sent it to you."

"Mrs. Lannigan? Why, I—I don't understand."

"Well," laughed Bunny, "I think she means it as a sort of thanks offering. Fact is, you helped her quite a bit last night."

"I? How could I—"

"You did it by proxy. You see, we fellows went out last night to celebrate Hallowe'en. We strolled past Mrs. Lannigan's. Her gate was swinging loose on one hinge, and sagging down the whole strip of fence in front of her cottage. That wasn't right, of course; our sense of the orderly told us that. So we—"

"So you took the gate with you, I suppose." Clarence Prissler's lips pursed a little.

"Well, I'll confess that some of us thought of doing just that. But we didn't. If we had been representing ourselves alone, we might have yielded to the temptation in a thoughtless moment. But, you know, I was acting as your proxy. I said to myself, 'What would Prissy do?' And so—well, anyhow, we satisfied our sense of beauty by cautiously repairing that fence and bolstering up that giddy gate. About the time we were through, the good Mrs. Lannigan herself pounced upon us; thought we were walking away with the whole fence, I guess. When she realized what we had done, she was inclined to weep. Women are funny that way, you know. But she smiled at the same time, and asked:

"'Who was responsible for this?'"

"'Clarence Prissler, over at the hospital,' I told her; and then she thanked me for you, and insisted upon my taking a glass of her new jelly for you, and she's coming around to see you in a day or two, and—"

The sick boy lifted a protesting hand. Bunny saw two faint pink spots on his cheeks. "But I wasn't really responsible for what you did," he declared.

"Nonsense! Of course, you were. I was your proxy, and you had to stand or fall by my actions. And I might have done something else—something for which I should have been very sorry afterwards—if I had been acting for myself only."

Prissler pondered this for a long minute. Then he looked up at his caller quizzically. "Did I do anything else last night?" he asked with genuine interest.

"Lots of things. You wheeled back to its old corner Pop Gan's peanut roaster, after some fellows—young kids who didn't know any better—had run away with it; and you enjoyed racing it back to its old stand as much as you could if you'd been running away with it. Pop's put a sack of goobers aside for you, against the day when you'll come around personally to call for it. And you took Mrs. Ginty's baby carriage, that had strayed downtown, and put a sack of potatoes in it, and wheeled that back home, too. And you stopped one youngster who was forgetting himself, and lectured him—oh, mightily eloquently—till he saw things a little clearer, and insisted upon joining your crowd. And you happened to be of service to your old landlady."

"Mrs. Stone?" The pink spots in Prissler's cheeks vanished.

"Yes, Mrs. Stone. Seems your trunk had been put out of your room, and you stopped to ask about it. She didn't quite understand that you'd be home shortly and make up the work you do to pay the rent of your room. There were lots of chores undone, and you got the crowd to pitch in and carry the wood to the shed, and cut some kindling, and clean up the yard; and then, over your protest, mind you, the fellows in your crowd agreed to come around daily and do the work you'd been doing, until you were able to do it yourself. You said—"

"The Boy Scouts are going to do it, you mean."

"Well-l, yes. You said that would make you get well in a hurry, and Mrs. Stone said she hadn't realized how matters stood with you, and it didn't matter if the fellows pitched in as your work proxies or not. But they're going to, just the same."

"Oh!" said Clarence Prissler softly. "Oh!" The pink spots in his cheeks crimsoned suddenly—and the color lasted.

"And you ran across little Jimmy Bobbs, too," continued Bunny, smiling a little over the recollection. "He was standing on a corner and looking mighty lonesome, and when you invited him to fall in with the other fellows in the bunch he jumped at the chance and said 'Thank you!' away down in his throat. And he turned out to be a dandy sort of fellow himself. Seems he's wanted to know you for a long time; says you're the smartest boy in school. He's coming around to the hospital this afternoon to see if you'd mind his bucking up on his studies with you as an audience. He thinks it will help you to catch up and help him, too, at the same time. Want to see him?"

"Why—why, yes, I certainly do. I—I've been worrying a lot, Bunny, about my lessons."

"You needn't any more, then. Because Nap Meeker is planning to do exactly the same thing. Wants to. And all the other Scouts are coming to see you, too, if you don't mind their crowding in here."

Prissler blinked his eyes. "I—I don't mind," he said, with a catch in his voice.

"Well, let's see. I think that was about all you did. Oh, yes, I nearly forgot Professor Leland. I think he was a bit suspicious of our actions. Anyhow, he loomed up suddenly in a dark spot and demanded to know if we had done or were planning to do any ma—malicious mischief. I just wish, Prissy, you could have been there in your own body to hear yourself—your proxy, I mean—deny any such intentions. Specs McGrew asked if he didn't understand that you, Clarence Prissler,

were leading the crowd. Professor looked at me kind of funny, and I had to explain. He just smiled and begged our pardons, and said that if he had known you were at our head, even in spirit, he wouldn't have bothered to question us. He knew you!"

There followed a brief silence. Bunny broke it by remarking, in a careless manner:

"Now that Rodman Cree is a member of the Black Eagle Patrol—you knew that, didn't you?—and almost ready to be promoted from tenderfoot to second-class Scout, he's beginning to worry about ever getting to be a first-class one. You see, Prissler, before he can be advanced, he must train some other boy to become a tenderfoot, and he can't find anybody in town who thinks enough of the Scouts to want to be one of them."

The boy on the bed squirmed uneasily.

"But when he does—"

"Bunny!"

"Yes?"

"Would—would he train me?" gasped Prissler. "I—I think I am just beginning to understand you Scouts, and—and"—the words came out in a torrent—"and—Oh, Bunny, I want to be a Scout!"

Bunny jumped up and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Why, Bonfire will be tickled to death to train you; yes, sir, plumb tickled to death! Do you mean it, Prissy?"

The sick boy could only nod dumbly, but there was undeniable happiness in the eager bobs of his head.

For ten minutes more, the two were deep in the intricacies of Scoutcraft. When Bunny finally rose to go, the patient was breathing rapidly, and his cheeks were flooded with color.

A day or two later, Bunny met Doctor Maxwell on the street.

"I don't pretend to understand young Prissler's case," the physician said; "but he's taken the most marvelous turn for the better. He will be out of the hospital in a week now. As nearly as I can diagnose the improvement, something has aroused his interest in the outside world again. Something has restored his faith in mankind, and made him want to live and help and be helped. I suspect—" And the man laid an approving hand on Bunny Payton's shoulder and left the sentence unfinished.

"By the way," he added, "what about Hallowe'en? I forgot all about it, and nothing in the way of results happened to remind me of the occasion. Didn't you boys get out? Or was the night a failure?"

"We were out, sir," said Bunny, grinning happily, "and I think—in fact, I know—that there was never a better nor a more successful Hallowe'en in this town. Ask Clarence Prissler over at the hospital. He led our crowd."

CHAPTER XI

THE TOUCHDOWN

Buck Claxton was genuinely worried. It was Thursday of the week that was to end with the post-season football game against Belden High, and the practice was going all wrong. The little Boy Scout, Bunny Payton, who as quarterback was the most important cog in the machine, wasn't "delivering."

Because he was big and heavy, and because the regular team needed defensive drill, Buck had been shifted temporarily to the scrubs. And that was the reason, also, why two very poor players, whose names do not matter, had been substituted in the line. Coach Leland wanted to test his backs on defense.

The scrubs were given the ball in the middle of the field. The two elevens crouched, facing each other, and awaited Specs' signal, which came presently, like the crack of a whip. On the last number, the backs broke into action. It was a line plunge, with Buck carrying the ball.

The weak link in the first team's line snapped at once. Bunny Payton, backing it up, gave ground and swerved into the path of the runner. Buck, big, solid, a veritable battering-ram when he was under way, looked as if he might crush this ambitious tackier as easily as an elephant might an ant in its path.

But the ant, who was Bunny, did not falter. As Buck reached him, the boy leaped toward the runner, tackling low and fiercely, and brought his opponent to the ground with a tremendous thump.

Buck sat up presently. He was unhurt, except as to pride. "Trying to lay me out?" he blazed. "You needn't half kill a fellow to bring him down."

The look he gave Bunny made some of the other substitutes shake their heads wisely. The little quarter had offended his captain. It wasn't exactly diplomatic, and—Well, they guessed he wouldn't try it again.

But a few minutes later, when exactly the same situation arose, they wondered what he would do. Again Buck took the ball on a straight line plunge; again his interference swept aside the other tacklers of the secondary defense, leaving only the shunted Bunny as a possible danger.

Runner and tackler met. The two came together with a crash. Buck staggered forward blindly, tottered, caught himself once, and then fell heavily. Bunny rebounded from the shock, but he did not plunge to the ground. Instead, a very remarkable thing happened.

In the very twinkling of an eye, so sudden was the transformation, Bunny ceased to be a tackler and became a runner. In some mysterious manner, the ball that Buck had been carrying, snuggled in the crook of his arm, was now the other's.

There appeared to be no tardy recognition of the shift on Bunny's part. Even as Buck was falling, the quarterback started racing down the field toward his goal. The point of the ball was tucked into his armpit. His hand clasped the other end. The biceps of his arm pressed hard against the rough surface.

Bunny could run like a deer. Before the astonished scrubs could recover their wits, he was flashing past, dodging now and then, circling some more alert tackler, pushing off another with a moist palm, but always sprinting over the white lines that marked the field.

But the surprising play was not yet done. Without any apparent reason, the runner slowed to a trot and finally stopped altogether. Specs rushed up and tackled him apologetically.

A certain touchdown had been sacrificed by Bunny on some mad impulse.

The little crowd of rooters that fringed the field babbled its consternation and disgust. The scrubs smiled knowingly at each other. Coach Leland plucked off the players who had piled on the boy with the ball, and then yanked the youngster to his feet with a practiced hand.

"What made you stop?" he demanded hotly. If there was one thing more than another that angered the coach, it was an exhibition of mental stupidity.

Bunny looked down the field; down to where Buck was striding forward belligerently. Scrubs and regulars alike bent forward to listen. When he spoke, he faced the coach squarely.

"I committed a foul," he said slowly. "When I started to tackle Buck, I saw that he was holding the ball loosely. It had slipped out of his armpit. So, under cover of the tackle, because of some crazy notion, I jerked it away from him. I violated a rule. I'm sorry."

Coach Leland opened wide his blue eyes, but he said nothing then. A little later, when he was by Buck's side, he asked his question.

"Did you fumble when Bunny tackled you?"

"Maybe I did," said the captain shortly; "it seems to be a habit of mine." He kicked at a little clod of dirt. "Hang it all, coach," he volunteered, "the—the Scout was grandstanding for my benefit. He's afraid of me."

The practice that day ended with drop-kicking. Lining up the scrubs some thirty yards from the goal, Leland gave Bunny the ball, with instructions to boot it over the bar.

Bunny failed on five successive attempts. Twice he fumbled good passes. Twice he caught the ball with his toe too much on one side. Once he juggled it wildly, allowing himself to be tackled before he made the kick. And each time, as Buck noted with wrinkled brow, opposing players were close enough to threaten any kicker who might have fear in his heart.

When he made his fifth failure, Buck groaned. With the post-season game for the State high-

school championship only two days away, his quarterback, the very pivot of the team, was in a stage of cowardly panic. He wished now that the game with Belden had never been arranged; that they had been content with a clean slate for the season; that they had agreed to claim the title jointly with unbeaten Belden.

Saturday afternoon came at last, with no change in the situation. The two opposing teams lined up.

"Are you ready, Belden?" asked the official.

No answer.

"Are you ready, Lakeville?"

Crouching just behind the line on which the new football lay teed, Buck Claxton nodded his head. The great crowd stilled expectantly. On the side lines, blanketed and squatting like Indians, the substitutes hunched forward their shoulders.

The official shrilled a blast on his whistle. Before the echo had died, Bunny Payton's toe lifted the ball from the ground and sent it hurtling high and far toward the opposing eleven. The game was on.

As he ran, Buck sighed with relief. He had been afraid of that first kick; afraid that Bunny's toe would thug into the ground, or hit the ball askew, or roll it feebly along the ribbed field.

But now, with the game actually begun, the splendid kick-off gave Lakeville's captain hope. As Buck ran, indeed, he let out his breath with an explosive gasp, and the decisive way in which he downed the Belden fellow who caught the ball was proof of his renewed confidence. If Bunny Payton could only keep that yellow streak under cover!

In the gruelling battle that followed, Buck was forced to admit that Bunny shirked no duty. His end runs were triumphs; his forward passes were pinnacles of accuracy; his share in the interference were niceties of skill and training. But always, as the tide of the game flooded or ebbed, Buck shivered apprehensively over possible situations that might reveal to their opponents his quarterback's cowardice.

As they might have expected, Belden proved no mean enemy. They could gain at times; once, indeed, they might have pushed through the wavering Belden line for a touchdown, except for a fumble. And that fumble, as Buck recalled with grim pain, was his own. Couldn't he ever learn to hold the ball once he had it?

But Belden gained, too. Like Lakeville, when they couldn't advance the ball, they kicked. And so, for three full quarters and part of another, neither team was able to cross the other's goal line. Now, near the end of the final period, the two teams fought in the middle of the field. A scoreless tie seemed inevitable.

It was Lakeville's ball. As the players scrambled into position for the scrimmage, Captain Claxton held up his hand.

"How much longer?" he shouted toward the side lines.

"Four minutes to play," the timekeeper told him.

Buck groaned. They could never make it; they could never carry the ball over those countless lines of white to the goal beyond. True, they might go on smashing forward a yard or two at a time, even making their distances often enough to hold the ball, for Belden was clearly tiring; but it would take longer than four minutes to reach the last rib of the field. Buck felt suddenly weak and limp. He would never make that glorious touchdown of which he had dreamed each night of the past week.

"Well, don't quit!" he snarled at his quarterback.

Bunny stepped into position. "Line up!" he yelled shrilly. "Line up! Seven—four—six—two—ten!"

Buck's tired brain wrestled with the signal. It was a new play they had learned that past week, a double pass, with the quarterback eventually taking the ball. Well, why not? Bunny was fast enough, and there was no element of courage involved. Besides, in this desperate eleventh hour, it was high time for trick plays.

The ball was passed. As the Belden line braced for the onslaught, Buck swung in behind Bunny, took the soiled pigskin from him, ran with it toward the left end, and then slipped it backward into the boy's eager hands. The other team was jamming in front of the Lakeville captain, and he plunged head-down into the mass, to carry on the deception. As he slipped and fell, his ears caught the first rumble of a mighty cheer. Perhaps—

He flung off the fellow who had piled upon him and sprang to his feet. Down the field, almost in the shadow of the goal posts, Bunny was just going down under the tackle of the Belden man who played back. The trick had succeeded. They were within striking distance now. If Bunny had the nerve to try it again, he might score.

Before Buck reached him, the quarterback was on his feet again, dinning his eternal, "Line up! Line up!" As the team rushed forward to obey, the boy spat out his signal, "Nineteen—thirty—seven—four—six!"

What play was that? A cold wave of horror enveloped Buck. His numbed mind told him nothing. It was surely not a repetition of the trick they had just tried. He might have known it would not be, he thought contemptuously; this was a ticklish situation calling for every ounce of nerve a player possessed. Bunny would take mighty good care not to use himself in the pinch. But what play was it?

"Signal?" the captain called.

Again the quarterback rattled off the numbers.

And then, abruptly, Buck's mind cleared. With only a precious yard or two to go, the play must be a line plunge, of course. Tricks were for long gains under desperate conditions. But why "seven—four—six"? the captain asked himself in amazement. That wasn't his signal; and it was only fair, only right, that he, as the team's leader, should have the honor of the touchdown.

"Signal?" he yelled angrily.

A third time it came. Buck knew the play now; it was Barrett, right halfback, between tackle and guard. So that was it! Another fellow was to carry the ball over the line. Bunny was venting his petty spite by refusing to allow his captain to make the attempt.

"Change signals!" Buck stormed.

In his position behind center, Bunny straightened a little from his crouching position. "I'm taking the responsibility for this play, Buck," he said evenly. And then, like a flash, the signal rolled out once more, the ball chugged into the quarterback's hands, and the two teams were scrimmaging.

To his credit, be it said that Buck charged with the others. The Belden line sagged, tautened, broke for an instant. The players eddied and tossed, and were sucked into the human whirlpool. Somewhere at the bottom, Buck heard the long pipe of the official's whistle. Then, as daylight reached him, he discerned the smeared white goal line directly beneath him, and on it—no, a good inch beyond!—the soiled yellow ball. It was over. The touchdown had been made.

The balance of the game was like a vague dream. Somebody kicked the goal and added another point. Somebody kicked off. The teams lined up once more before a whistle ended the game. Lakeville was interscholastic champion of the State.

Bunny slapped his captain on the back. "We beat 'em, Buck!" he yelled. "We beat 'em, didn't we?"

"Yes," said Buck Claxton distinctly, "we beat them, you little sneak!"

The team cheered Belden then; and Belden came back with a pretty poor apology of the formula that runs, "What's the matter with Lakeville? They're all right!" And then Belden, sad, defeated, yearning for seclusion, shucked out of its football suits and into street clothes, and went away from there just as fast as it could.

Before the game, the Scouts had invited the Lakeville squad to the Black Eagle Patrol clubhouse for supper. When the invitation had been extended, Buck, Barrett, Sheffield and Co. had looked blank, neither accepting nor declining. But at six o'clock they were there, appearing awkward and embarrassed, but altogether too happy over the result of the game to bear any resentment. That is to say, all of them looked that way except Buck, who stared straight ahead during the meal, and wouldn't talk, and didn't appear to be listening to the jokes and jests that were bandied back and forth.

But when the meal was done, and Bunny, as toastmaster, with clenched hands under the table, where nobody could see them, and a forced smile on his face, which everybody could see, rose and said easily, "I guess we'd all like to hear from the captain," Buck met the issue squarely.

"I'm not much of a speech maker," he began slowly (and rapidly proved that the literary and debating society had taught him to be a very good one, indeed), "but there's something that must be said, and I'm going to ask you fellows to listen while I say it. This last week has been a hard one for all of us, I guess, but I think the one who's felt the hurts most is Quarterback Bunny Payton."

They all looked at Bunny, of course, and the boy felt his face go white. What was the captain of the football team going to say about him?

"Back a while," Buck went on doggedly, "I thought Bunny was no good. I guess a lot of you saw what happened during practice—you know, when I was sore at him, and he tackled me and got hold of the ball, and then wouldn't make a touchdown because he thought he had committed a foul. He was—was in pretty bad, because it looked as if he had a streak of yellow and was afraid of—well—me. I thought so. But I was—was way off. It was just plain nerve that made him stop when he had the ball.

"And about those goals he didn't kick. You know what I mean. It sorta cinched what I thought about him—a coward, I mean. But that wasn't right, either. He had gashed his hand on a rock; that's why he fumbled and juggled the ball and dropped it crooked on his toe and—and everything.

"Then in the game to-day, he played like a trooper; topnotch all the way through. You know what I mean—that trick play that put the ball right on top of the goal and—and everything.

"Well, I wanted to make the touchdown then. Jiggers, how I wanted to do it! But he wouldn't let me, and I was sore at him all over again. You know what I mean—how I felt, captain and everything, and he wouldn't give me the ball. But I've been thinking that over, and I hand it to him for his nerve again. He gave Barrett the ball, and Barrett went over with it. Say, that riled me. Why didn't he let me do it? But—well, I've figured that out now. Barrett's a good old sobersides hoss; you can always count on old Barrett. And me—no. I fumbled once before in the game; I guess maybe I'd 'a' fumbled again, and tossed away the chance to win. Maybe. You know what I mean. So he passes me up for Barrett. Talk about nerve! Why, that took more courage, I'll bet, than anybody else here ever thought of having; about a million times more. But he did it. He knew the sure way to win that game. Understand?

"Well, now listen to me. Maybe I won't go to Lakeville High next year. So we ought to elect a captain who will—sure. You know what I mean. And—well, say, how about Bunny Payton for the job?"

It seemed to the little quarterback that the fellows had gone suddenly insane. Before his dazed

mind could fully grasp Buck's suggestion, he had been unanimously elected captain, and Buck was congratulating him, and the party was breaking up.

"But—but," he stammered to Buck, "we need you for next year. Are you sure you won't be in school?"

"Well," drawled the ex-captain, winking prodigiously, "I may die before then, or—or make a million dollars and build me a school of my own, or—or something like that. Anyhow, you'll be a better fellow for the job than I ever was. You should have been leading the team this year."

That was all, except that at the door Buck drew Bunny aside.

"Look here," he said. "I'm just beginning to realize that you Scouts are the real goods. You're fine fellows, and you're fine athletes." He looked warily over his shoulder. "It strikes me I'd like to be a Scout myself, if they ever get up another patrol in this little old town of ours."

CHAPTER XII

THE ICY HILL

Two days before Thanksgiving, it began snowing in the late afternoon, going about the business of carpeting the earth in white with such stubborn determination that weatherwise folk were surprised when the following morning marked the end of the storm. The sun peeped forth; the snow packed into a soggy, slushy mass, only to freeze that night under the grip of a bitter wind from the northland. As a result, Thanksgiving was ushered in to the merry jingle of sleigh bells, with cutters crisping their way over the icy surfaces of the roads.

Breakfast over and chores done, Bonfire Cree strolled forth that morning to take a look at the new winter world. He was whistling cheerfully, like a true Boy Scout, and he was keeping his eyes alert for some opportunity to do a good turn before the day emerged from its swaddling clothes.

His chance came at the top of "Old Forty Five Hill", where a group of what Bonfire decided must be the littlest and the most shopworn boys in town were staring forlornly at the broken runner of a bobsled. Their ages ranged from perhaps eight to eleven, and they were clad in a collection of last year's mufflers, sweaters and overcoats that would have made a ragman frown.

"Hello, Mr. Raggedy Tatters!" Bonfire greeted a youngster who appeared to be the leader. "How did you break your sled?"

"I didn't break it. Petey Flack did; he coasted over a rock. And my name isn't Raggedy Tatters, either; it's Jimmie White."

"Thanks!" said Bonfire. "Glad to know you, Jimmie White. Let's take a look at that sled." He turned it over and ran a practiced eye over the runner. "H'm! Can't patch that without iron braces, and the blacksmith shop is closed to-day. 'Fraid you'll have to call off this coasting party till to-morrow."

"Aw, the snow'll melt by then," objected the youngster. He dug the toe of his torn shoe into a little drift and kicked disconsolately. "Let's nail on a brace and try it."

"Your grandchildren will always be sorry if you try that," Bonfire told him gravely. And then, somehow, his mood changed; he began to understand the disappointment of the little boys, and to sympathize with them, and to search his mind for ways to help. "Look here, Jimmie White," he said abruptly, "know where the Scouts' clubhouse is?"

"Sure!"

"Well, you take this key, trot over there, unlock the door, and—"

"—and what?"

"And bring back the long bobsled you'll find inside. Here," he called, as Jimmie grabbed the key and sped away, "don't forget to lock the door again."

"No," flung the boy over his shoulder; and, as if that were inadequate to such a benefactor, "No, sir, I won't, Mister."

"What's the idea, Cree?" asked a voice behind him.

Bonfire turned quickly. In the seat of a sleigh that had driven up sat Peter Barrett, while the head of a little chap of five or six, too like Peter's to belong to anybody but his little brother, barely showed above the snug fur lap-robe.

"Morning, Barrett!" Bonfire called. "Oh, I'm just going to take my friends coasting."

"Your friends?" repeated Peter Barrett, studying the group of little boys.

"Of course," said Bonfire easily. "Aren't you my friends, fellows?"

They were. They said so emphatically and loudly.

"You see," grinned Bonfire. "Oh, I'm just getting acquainted with them, if that's what you mean. But we're going to like each other. Their sled's busted; so I sent Jimmie White over to the clubhouse for the Scouts' bob. We went over that last night; put in a new slat, sand-papered the runners, and so forth. Want to go down the hill with us, Peter?"

"I don't mind," admitted the farmer boy. He tied his horse to a tree and tucked the fur cover more snugly about his little brother. "Say, I—I'd like to steer once, if you'll let me."

"Come ahead!"

By this time Jimmie White had arrived with the bobsled. Almost before it had been straightened for the start, the youngsters were scrambling aboard, with Peter Barrett in front, Bonfire just behind him, and the others piled on hit-and-miss to the very last inch of the broad plank.

A second later, after some left-over boy had given them a push, the big sled was coasting over the icy trail, gathering speed with every foot. The hill had been nicknamed "Old Forty Five" because of its steepness; so sheer was the drop of the road in places that the suggestion of an angle of forty-five degrees was not altogether ridiculous. It seemed even steeper to Bonfire. He sucked in his breath gaspingly.

"Don't be scared," Peter Barrett flung back over his shoulder.

"I'm not scared," protested Bonfire, but he knew his voice was far from convincing.

Near the foot of the long hill, a railroad track cut across the trail. Bonfire was peering at it over the steerer's right shoulder when the bob veered sharply to the left. In spite of himself, the Scout grunted audibly. A moment later, when the long sled straightened out again, swishing along a road parallel to the track, he would have given anything in the world to have recalled that

sound.

They ground to a full stop. Bonfire piled off with the others, pretending not to see Peter Barrett's superior grin.

"I think it would be best," he offered, "to take that turn with a long sweep."

"And sink the runners into the soft snow at the side?" asked Barrett scornfully. "Why, that would slow the sled to a walk, and it wouldn't run more than fifty feet farther. I know how to steer, and I am willing to take a chance. You Scouts—" But he thought better of it, and left the accusation unsaid.

During the long climb up the hill, Bonfire was silent. But at the top, when the bobsled had been turned for the next trip, he took the forward position.

"Sure you can manage it?" asked Barrett. "Can you make the turn this side of the railroad track, where the road branches?"

"Of course."

"Because, if you can't, you'd better let me steer again. You see, the other branch goes straight ahead over the track and then around a corner with a big drop to the creek on the outside edge. It's dangerous."

"I can turn this side of the track," said Bonfire doggedly.

"All right," decided Barrett. "I'm ready."

So, it seemed, were the raggedy-taggedy youngsters. Bonfire braced his feet on the crossbar and gripped the steering lines. Another left-over boy, not the same one this time, pushed them off.

"Clear!" he shouted the warning down the road after them. "Clear for coasters!"

Halfway down the slide, round the first bend, the long bobsled spun into a straightaway that was partially blocked. A heavy wagon on runners seemed to occupy the entire road. Bonfire saw it instantly. There was a chance—just a bare, scant chance—that he might steer by on the right, grazing the ponderous wagon. But there would be only a foot or two to spare, and at the terrific speed they were traveling a collision might mean serious accident.

His quick eye told him something else, too. On either side of the road, the snow was banked high in great cushions. He made his decision instantly. Jerking desperately on one line, he steered the bob off its course and into the drift, turning it completely over and spilling its human load into the soft mattress of snow.

Nobody was hurt in the least. The little fellows picked themselves up, righted the long sled, and dragged it back into the road. Two or three of them stared solemnly at Bonfire, but only Jimmie White ventured any comment.

"A good steerer could have slipped past that wagon, I guess," he said slowly. "Your—friend here could."

Bonfire shut his lips tightly. What was the use? Perhaps, after all, he had been too cautious. It didn't matter much now, one way or the other, for he knew very well what Peter Barrett was thinking of him.

They dragged the bobsled to the top of the hill again. At the very crest, while they were stooping to turn it about, little Jimmie White uttered a sudden cry. As the others whirled, startled, Jimmie pointed a trembling finger down the hill. Ten yards away, gaining momentum as the first runway of the trail fell sharply downward, was a single sled. Upon it lay a tiny figure. Too small to know anything about steering, the child was simply allowing the sled to carry him along in the groove worn by the coasters.

For a long moment, the little group stared in stunned bewilderment. Then, all at once, three of them spoke.

"He'll go across the railroad track to the turn of the creek," said Bonfire, with queer huskiness, "and—"

"—and tumble into the creek," wailed little Jimmie White. "The rocks there—"

"Catch him!" shouted Peter Barrett. "Catch him! Stop him! It—Cree, it's my kid brother!"

It was too late to whirl the bob about and begin the chase with that. Two of the youngsters were tugging at it, but precious seconds were being lost. There was just one thing to do, and the three who had spoken seemed to recognize it the same instant.

Each grabbed a light, single sled from its dazed owner. Each lifted it clear from the icy trail, ran for perhaps twenty feet, and then flung himself and sled headlong upon the slide.

Luckily, the road was wide. The three sleds, already racing dizzily from the running start, sped along side by side, with Peter Barrett's on the right, little Jimmie White's in the middle, and Bonfire Cree's on the left. Far ahead now—hopelessly far, it seemed to Bonfire—the runaway, with its precious human cargo, jounced and jolted its way down Old Forty Five.

Weight told at the outset. In the first hundred yards, little Jimmie White dropped slowly behind the other two, despite his frantic efforts to keep up. This left only Peter Barrett and Bonfire actively in the chase, and they raced along as if some invisible link yoked them together.

At the first bend, Barrett swung a little wide. Bonfire took the turn at a sharp angle, shutting his eyes for a moment as his sled ran on one runner, and leaning inward till half his body was over the side. It seemed to him the sled would never right itself again. But it did. With a welcome clank, the soaring iron came back to the surface. When they straightened out once more, beyond the turn, he was a full length ahead.

The memory of the wagon that had blocked the bob made him shudder. Suppose another should be on the road! But when he saw that it was clear, with only the black dot of the runaway

sled blotting its white surface, he drew in a long breath of thanks and relief. He could forget the danger of a possible collision now; he could give to his mad coast every shred of his skill.

He flattened himself low on the sled; that would lessen the wind friction. He steered almost wholly by swaying his body; to shift the course by digging a toe into the trail would mean a tiny loss of speed. He swerved around cloying drifts of snow, he avoided holding ruts, he picked the icy sweeps of the road. As the sled answered to each trick of jockeying, he wondered grimly what Peter Barrett thought of his coasting ability now. He might be too cautious, perhaps, when recklessness meant danger to others, but Peter could never again sneer at the way he steered.

But even with all these aids, he gained slowly on the sled ahead. He had hoped to catch it halfway down the hill. But as he whizzed past the rock that marked this point, he was still far behind. Well, there was still a long stretch before the runaway reached the railroad track. He might catch it yet; might—no, must!

Under him, the runners rasped and sang. Tiny particles of ice and snow pelted, sleet-wise, in his face. Rocks and bumps in the road seemed to leer at him. They hid from sight till he was fairly upon them; then tried to upset his sled. Once, in steering about a particularly dangerous clod, he barely skimmed it; and it tore the mitten half from his hand, and knocked the skin from his knuckle. The hurt bled a little, but his fingers did not relax.

He was going like the wind now. The distance between pursued and pursuer was being eaten up in great bounds. If only he had a little more time! If only the railroad track, with its fatal turn beyond, were a little farther away!

Mingled with the *scratch-scratch* of the iron-shod runners came another sound,—loud, long, mournful. He wondered vaguely what it was. Perhaps Peter's sled behind was sending out that doleful wail. Then, like a flash, came the explanation.

It was the whistle of an engine. A train was coming over the railroad track. If the child on the sled crashed into it—

In a frenzy of alarm, Bonfire lifted the forepart of his sled from the surface. It skewed and tipped. One runner creaked ominously. Forcing himself to think only of the business of steering, he flung it back on the trail, till the runners pointed dead ahead once more.

He could see the railroad now. A scant half-mile away a heavy freight train was ploughing forward toward the intersection of trail and track. And as nearly as he could calculate, runaway sled and engine would reach it together.

"I must catch it before it gets to the track!" he told himself. "I must!"

The ice-drive filled his mouth as he spoke, half choking him. Already his eyes were encrusted with a film of frozen sleet, and objects ahead were blurring into an indistinct white mass. For the first time, too, he began to realize the doubt that he might reach the child in time. A cowardly desire to swerve into the snow-bank at one side, as he had done with the bob, fought for a place in his mind. He knew now that he could never pull up even before they reached the railroad track.

But he fought back the temptation. "'A Scout,'" he told himself, "'is brave. A Scout is brave. A Scout is brave.'"

Another sound dinned into his ears. It swept back from the frozen trail ahead of him, and presently he came to know that it was the frightened cry of the child on the other sled. So near it sounded that he could not believe the distance between them was more than the reach of his arm. But it was. When he lifted his head, he saw that a full ten feet still separated them.

The sled ahead was already taking the slight rise to the railroad track. It would clear the onrushing engine by a few precious feet. But in another second or two, the path of the coasting slide would be effectually blocked by the train. This child would cross in time; he himself had no such margin of safety. In all probability, he would strike the very prong of the cow-catcher.

"Too late!" he moaned. "I can't do it!" Then, abruptly, his mind jerked back to what lay beyond: to the turn they had told him about, and the creek below, and the rocks. Resolutely, he held his sled to the course.

As he swept upon the upgrade to the track, he heard from behind Peter Barrett's shout.

"*Don't!*" it rang out. "Don't try it! You can't—"

The whole world seemed to roar at him. There was the clang of a bell, the hoarse whistle of the engine, the hiss of steam, the rasp of brakes hard-set. To his left, bearing down upon him, was a great monster of iron and steel, with a sharp-pointed triangle skimming low to destroy him.

To his left, bearing down upon him, was a great monster of iron and steel. *Page 135.*

He shut his eyes. Beneath him, the sled snapped angrily over a steel rail. He was upon the railroad track. He waited for the second click of the far rail—waited—waited—waited. Would it never come? Then—*snap!*—he felt it. A flurry of wind sucked behind him. A shadow darkened the white snow. With a scream, as of terror, the monster of iron crossed the trail a second after he had cleared the track. He was over safely.

A little decline slanted from the railroad. At its very foot was some obstacle; and he jerked his sled to one side, angry over the forced loss of speed. The big rock, or whatever it was, appeared to be calling to him. He jerked his head savagely to clear his eyes, wondering dully why he did not pass it. Then he laughed hysterically. It was the sled with Peter Barrett's little brother, running over the icy road at his very side.

He swerved toward it, reached out a shaking hand, and closed his fingers upon the flare of the runner. The two sleds were one now.

The dangerous turn was just beyond. It led to the left, and he dug his left toe savagely into the trail, holding it there like a brake, till the double-sled pivoted to its friction and swung where the road led. But there was no room to spare. Before they were around, they had climbed the bank overhanging the creek, balanced perilously a moment on its brink, and dashed back to the middle of the road.

Afterward—some minutes afterward—when the locked sleds had ground to a standstill, and the train had passed, and Peter Barrett and little Jimmie White had come coasting gingerly and frightenedly to the foot of Old Forty Five, they found Bonfire sitting weakly on the snowy ground, with one arm about the child. The latter was talking happily, but Bonfire was too exhausted to speak.

"I never saw anything like it," said little Jimmie White. There was honest hero-worship in his eyes. "No, never!"

It was harder for Peter Barrett. "I—I did a lot of thinking back there," he began awkwardly, "trailing you down Old Forty Five. I—I guess I've been blind, Rodman, when I looked at you Scouts. I thought you were—well, stuck on yourselves, and too good for poorer people. But this morning—" He waved a comprehensive hand toward the top of the hill, where the ragged little band of boys had been left behind, and did not complete the sentence. "When that train cut me off—Do you know, I think you Scouts have the right idea of things, mostly. I—Well, it—it's Thanksgiving." He winked his eyes rapidly as they turned toward his little brother.

"Yes, Peter," said Bonfire understandingly, "it's Thanksgiving."

CHAPTER XIII

APRON STRINGS

"It's an outrage!" declared S. S. Zane, banging an indignant fist on the table in the Scouts' clubhouse. "Yes, sir, an outrage; that's what it is!"

The subject under discussion was a bulletin that had been posted that day on the board in the high-school hall. It read:

> N O T I C E !
>
> The following basketball players will report at 12:30 Saturday afternoon, ready for the trip to Elkana:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | *Left Forward* | Kiproy |
> | *Right Forward* | Barrett |
> | *Center* | Sheffield |
> | *Left Guard* | Collins |
> | *Right Guard* | Turner |
> | *Substitutes* | Payton, Jones, Henderson, Zane |
>
> (Signed) ROYAL SHEFFIELD,
> *Captain*.

"Spite-work, I tell you!" chimed in Specs. "You know who picked the players as well as I do, with Professor Leland home sick in bed. Sheffield did. He's captain of the team, president of the athletic association, and—and enemy of the Boy Scouts, isn't he? Well!"

"Sheffield's all right himself," Bi admitted slowly, "but"—he looked up defiantly—"but the others aren't any better than we Scouts who have been playing."

"We were on the regular team when we beat Elkana that first game, I guess!" blazed Jump. "It was the other way around then, with Kiproy, Barrett, Collins and Turner as the substitutes. Right after that, Sheffield began to sack us, one at a time. There were three Scouts on the team that beat Grant City, then two in the Charles City mix-up, and finally only Bunny against Deerfield. Now there isn't a single one of us on the regular five. It's a wonder we are still in the running for the pennant."

"Well, we won't be," prophesied S. S.; "not after this Elkana game. You just wait and see!"

"They certainly buried us the last time," said Bunny, making a wry face. "But so did Grant, and you all know we nosed them out in the rubber. I wonder—Bonfire, what's wrong? What does this new line-up mean, anyhow?"

Number 8 of the Black Eagle Patrol stopped tapping the table with his pencil and looked up. "Want the truth?" he asked, with a smile.

There was a sheeplike nodding of heads. One and all, the Scouts had been won to the uncanny results of Bonfire's powers of observation.

"Well," began the tenderfoot slowly, "I have an idea Sheffield is trying to face Elkana with the strongest team he can put together; he'll have to if he expects to win, because Elkana has easily the best team, with the possible exception of our own, in the high-school league. I don't think he has dropped you Scouts because of spite."

Bi bristled. "You mean that those other four are better players than we are?"

"No." Bonfire considered the case judicially. "No, you fellows are better than they are—individually."

"But—"

"Wait a minute, Bi. I think I can make you understand what I mean. Basketball, you see, isn't like football, where the quarter calls a signal that tells some player what to do; nor like baseball, where you field a certain position, or bat yourself on base, or try to bring another fellow home. No, basketball is different, a lot different. When the ball comes to you, maybe you dribble it along and pass it to somebody else, and maybe you try for a basket yourself."

"I don't see—"

"You won the first Elkana game," Bonfire interrupted placidly, "by pure luck. You lost the second because you were outplayed at every turn. You'll lose the third and deciding one, too, if Sheffield starts the same team again, playing the same kind of game."

"But you just said we were better players than Barrett and Kiproy and Collins and Turner."

Bonfire looked him squarely in the face. "Better individually, I said. The trouble with you fellows is that you are too good. You can shoot baskets so accurately that you forget there is more to the game than merely looping the ball for a goal every time you get hold of it. Look here, Bunny, who shot the most baskets in the game we won from Elkana?"

"Sheffield," the patrol leader admitted readily.

"And in the Grant game? And the Deerfield game?"

"Sheffield. We aren't claiming, though, that he isn't the best basketball player in Lakeville. He is, I guess. But in those last games, at least, he had more chances to score than any other player."

"Exactly!" said Bonfire. "And that is how Lakeville will beat Elkana Saturday—if it does. By teamwork, by each player's forgetting himself for the good of the machine, by feeding the ball at every opportunity to the best basket-shooter of them all—Royal Sheffield. Kiproy won't try to score, but to pass the ball to Sheffield whenever he can, and then hover under the basket for a possible miss; and so will Collins and Barrett and Turner. You four fellows might loop it in from the center of the floor, or from off to one side—sometimes! Sheffield won't miss one try out of five. Do you see what I mean?"

It was obvious that they did. There was a solemn nodding of heads. Curiously enough, slow-thinking Bi was the one to voice the thought that was taking root in the mind of each of them.

"But why," he asked, "didn't Sheffield explain his system to Bunny and S. S. and Jump and me, and have us feed the ball to him in the game?"

Bonfire answered with another question. "Why did you fellows think he had dropped you from the team for spite?" He waited a moment for the idea to grip. "Don't you see, Bi, that just as surely as you have been mistrusting him, just that surely he has been questioning your willingness to do him a good turn without hope of reward? The others are so glad to make the team that they will play as he says."

"But we would—"

"Of course, you would," Bonfire caught him up. "But Sheffield doesn't know that your good turns are not done for pay, even in applause. He doesn't know that when a Boy Scout does a good turn, he doesn't wait around for thanks; doesn't even tell anybody else he has done a good turn. I am sorry he can't understand, because I know that if you fellows only had the chance, you'd play up to him as those others never will. But—Well, let's keep that eighth law in mind; let's be cheerful and obey orders." He glanced apologetically toward Bunny. "I didn't mean to preach," he added, smiling.

Bunny smiled back understandingly. At that moment, he was thinking not only that Bonfire was a mighty good Boy Scout, but that he would make an equally satisfactory patrol leader. If the Black Eagles ever needed a new Number 1——

"Going to the game?" Specs asked Bonfire abruptly.

"No—o. I'd like to, but I can't afford to spend the money."

Bonfire did not mention the ninth law, about thrift, but Bunny knew the boy had it in mind. "Yes, sir," he told himself, "he'd make a dandy patrol leader. Wish he was going to Elkana with us; he helps win more games than any player."

If Bunny had known of the problem he was to face at seven-thirty the next Saturday evening, between halves, he would have put that wish in stronger words; for he was to need Bonfire's advice and help more than ever before.

At two-ten on the afternoon of the fateful day, the manager of the Elkana Athletic Association met them as they stepped from the train.

"Good news!" he greeted. "We have arranged to play the game this evening in the Hallworth College gymnasium. Come on; I'll take you right over."

And a little later:

"This is the dressing room. You can put your clothes in this big locker while you play. Yonder are the shower baths. Now, if you like, you can use the main floor upstairs to practice till three-thirty; sort of give you the feel of the place, anyhow. Well, good-by and good luck to-night—only not too much of that last!"

Captain Sheffield elected to take advantage of the invitation to put his five through a short, brisk practice. Ten minutes proved ample, not only to satisfy him that the team was on edge, but to bathe it in perspiration.

"Call it a day!" said Sheffield at last. "Now get your baths and meet me here about six, to go out to supper together."

Bunny noticed that he left them free to do as they pleased the balance of the afternoon. It worried him a little. If he had been captain of the team, he would have warned the boys, at least, to loaf and rest as much as possible, that they might be fresh for the game. But, after all, Sheffield was in charge, not he; and Bunny knew Royal well enough to realize that youth's contempt for "tying anybody to his apron strings", as he had once put it.

But the tiny unrest would not down. Ten minutes later, his body glowing pink after a shower and a brisk rub with a great Turkish towel, Jump fed new fuel to the worry.

"Bunny," he said carelessly, "you don't mind if we go swimming, do you? There's a big tank in there, with the water so clear you can see the bottom all over."

"Sorry, Jump," the patrol leader decided, "but it wouldn't do. You'd tire yourself out in no time."

"The other fellows are swimming right now," Jump protested.

Bunny clenched his hands. "The Scouts, you mean?"

"No, Kiproy and Collins and Turner and Barrett. Bi said we ought to get your permission before we went in."

"Not now," Bunny told him. "After the game, maybe, but not now." He watched Jump slouch dejectedly away. "I wish," he told himself, "that Sheffield had stayed around and told those others not to go swimming. It won't help their speed any in the basketball game."

But at supper that evening, when they were guests of the Elkana team, the four boys who had been in the tank looked so fresh and fit for battle that Bunny decided no harm had been done. The business of eating a delicious meal, and of getting acquainted with their opponents, and of

bandying challenges and promises and good-natured threats back and forth apparently galloped the hands of the clock on the wall; and it seemed no time at all before they were piling upstairs from the gymnasium dressing quarters into a room flooded with brilliant light and banked on all sides by a large and noisy gathering.

Some official tossed a coin for choice of baskets, and Sheffield said "Heads." He laughed when he won.

"I don't see any advantage either way," he told the Elkana captain. "Pick your side, please."

From the substitutes' bench, Bunny nodded his appreciation of this fine sportsmanship. After all, Sheffield had his good points. He watched eagerly as the Lakeville captain and a tall, rangy Elkana boy faced each other in the middle of the floor. Then the referee tossed the ball high into the air between them, piped a shrill blast on his whistle as it reached its top limit, and the game was on.

What followed was so rapid that Bunny could hardly follow the play. Sheffield leaped and whacked the ball to the right, straight for the side. But Turner was there to make the catch. He dribbled it, dodged a rushing opponent, dribbled it another yard, and suddenly shot it, with a long underhand pass, across the floor to Collins, far on the left. Like ants, the players swarmed toward him; the whole playing court, indeed, was curiously like an ant hill. Collins bounced the ball just once before he shot it to Barrett, on the opposite side. Barrett spun it through an open space to Kiproy, who was in a corner of the great quadrangle. By this time, Sheffield had raced down the center to a spot just in front of the basket. Here he took a perfect throw, balanced the ball in his hands, and then looped it upward for the net, scoring the first two points of the game in exactly twenty-seven seconds.

"Oh, boy!" gasped Jump on the bench, "I guess that's teamwork." And the other three Lakeville substitutes agreed that it certainly was.

But one basket in the first half-minute does not spell victory. Even before Lakeville had scored again, by an intricate triangular shooting combination that evolved a forward crisscross, Bunny fancied he could detect a laggard movement here and there; not enough, in any one instance, to interfere with rapid and accurate passing, but still a hint of possible future trouble.

After that, while Elkana was looping its first basket and Lakeville countering with its third, Bunny saw more and more clearly that only Sheffield was maintaining the dashing pace the team had set in the beginning. Barrett was puffing hard and running with a slight effort; Collins and Turner were slowing perceptibly; Kiproy was making passes an instant before they were necessary. In another five minutes of hard play, with the ball rushed from one end of the court to the other a dozen times, the lessening of snap and rush on Lakeville's part was becoming hideously apparent. Elkana had scored twice more, making the count six all.

Bunny knew the turn of the tide was at hand. The Elkana cheerers knew it, too, and yelled and tooted horns and rang bells and swung into a mighty rhythmical roar of, "One, two, will do!" It was a silly thing, Bunny thought; but it wasn't half as bad as the tag of, "Three, four, five, six; all scored on tricks!" when the goals reached that figure; nor the jubilant, "Seven, eight; just you wait!" when the Elkana team added another basket. Lakeville's total was still six.

With the first half nearly over, the visiting team was playing with its back against the wall, strictly on the defensive. Sheffield was still alert and dangerous, but he could not shoot goals when the other players failed to feed him the ball. A dozen times, it seemed to Bunny, the captain broke up threatening formations of Elkana's almost single-handed; and once, just at the end, he shot a clean basket from near the center of the floor, looping the ball upward in a great arc and dropping it like a plummet within the iron ring that supported the net. But Elkana scored again, too; and when the pistol shot signaled the end of the half, the blackboard showed: Lakeville, 8; Elkana, 10.

It meant defeat, Bunny knew, inglorious defeat. Lakeville was slowing and weakening; Elkana was only warming to the final onslaught. In a way, too, his conscience told him, the fault was his; he might have gone straight to the tank that afternoon and begged the fellows to come out before they tired themselves. He wished now that he had.

Between halves, while the four exhausted players lay stretched on benches, Sheffield wandered down the aisle between the rows of lockers for a glass of water. Bunny took quick advantage of his absence.

"Bring a drink of water for each of them, won't you?" he said querulously to the three substitutes. He waited till they were out of earshot. "Look here, you fellows!" he began grimly, spreading his legs and leaning toward them in his earnestness. "You're ready to drop, every last one of you, because of that long swim this afternoon. Does Sheffield know about it?"

"Didn't mention it to him," said Kiproy carelessly. "Why?"

"Somebody should!" snapped Bunny. "Not one of you is fit to play another minute, and he ought to know the reason."

Collins sat up. "Are you going to snitch?"

"No, I'm not. I'm no tattletale. But I'm going to ask you not to start this next half."

"So the substitutes can go in, eh?" It was Turner's slur.

"Maybe they can't hold that Elkana five," flashed Bunny, "but they're fresh, anyhow, and not half dead. Will you drop out, Kiproy?"

"No, I won't!"

"You, Collins? Turner? Barrett?"

In each case, the reply was a curt refusal. Barrett added doubtfully, "We'll be in shape by the time play starts again."

"After swimming in the tank for nearly an hour!" Bunny cried scornfully. "You know better than that, all of you. Once more—"

"Time's up! Come on!" It was Sheffield's cool voice. The captain stood at the end of the long bench.

With a sigh, Bunny brought his feet together and straightened up. "I can't do a single thing," he told himself bitterly. "I won't snitch, and I can't force them to quit playing. We're beaten, that's all."

Up the winding stairway marched the five members of the team; up and through the doorway at the top, and out upon the main floor of the gymnasium, to certain, inevitable defeat. On the bottom step, unconscious that he was blocking the way for the other three substitutes, Bunny watched till the last foot lifted and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST GOAL

The second half began. A blast from the referee's whistle sent the two teams scurrying to their positions. Again Sheffield and the Elkana center faced each other in the middle of the floor; again the official tossed the ball high into the air; again he blew his warning signal as it reached the top of its flight.

But here the repetition of the first play of the game ended. As Sheffield raised his right arm for the tap, his elbow jabbed against the breast of his opponent, topping the boy off-balance. With a desperate effort, the latter tried to straighten and swing for the falling ball; but he was an instant too late. Sheffield whanged it straight and hard into Kiproy's waiting arms.

"Oh!" gasped Bunny, on the substitutes' bench. It was like the cry from some hurt.

No shrill of the referee's whistle marked the foul. Clearly, the official had been watching the flight of the ball, rather than the two opposing players who had leaped for it as it fell, and had thus failed to detect any unfair interference.

But the spectators had seen. A little hiss of disapproval grew to a buzzing growl, like a tiny breeze that nods the daisies in a distant field and snarls through the bushes as it comes close.

Kiproy bent to make a pass. Sheffield held up a staying hand.

"Wait!" he called. In the tense silence that followed, Bunny could hear him clearly. "I interfered with that toss-up—unintentionally; jabbed the Elkana center with my elbow. Call a foul, Referee!"

The noise broke anew, but it was the clapping of hands this time, and the stamping of feet and little shouts of approval, like a rollicking gale at play. Bunny looked out at Sheffield, through what seemed queerly like a fog, and said, "Oh, that's fine!" And even when some Elkana fellow was given a free trial for goal and netted a basket, he repeated, "Yes, that's fine!" At that moment, he liked Sheffield more than he ever had before.

Over at the blackboard, the boy rubbed out the ten under Elkana's name and traced an eleven in its place. Lakeville's total was still eight.

Sheffield outjumped the opposing center on the next toss-up, which was free of any semblance of foul, and whacked the ball to Barrett. Peter whirled completely around, to throw off the guard hovering in front of him, and started a dribble. But just as he was ready to make the pass, some Elkana player stepped in and captured the ball. It was not an unusual incident, but it made Bunny squirm. Peter had been just the tick of a watch too slow.

After that, things began steadily to go wrong. The four players who had been in the tank started to shrink when they should have charged, to submit weakly to an opponent's making a pass when they should have scrimmaged for a toss-up, to be always the tiny fraction of a second too late in catching, shooting, dodging. Elkana scored. It scored again. After perhaps three minutes of play in the second half, the figures on the blackboard read: Lakeville, 8; Elkana, 15.

"We're licked," Bunny muttered, digging his finger tips into moist palms, "unless—"

It was like a cue for Sheffield's action. Before the ball could be put into play again, the Lakeville captain stepped to the referee's side and said something in a quick, decisive manner. The man nodded. Then Sheffield lifted a beckoning finger toward the substitutes' bench.

Bunny looked at the other three, as if expecting one of them to rise at the signal, and the other three looked at Bunny the same way. None of them seemed to know which substitute he wanted.

"Come on!" called Sheffield gruffly; then, after one heart-breaking instant of hesitation, "All of you!"

At that, of course, they dropped the single blanket they had thrown over their shoulders and scampered out upon the floor. They tried to look unconcerned during the little journey, but nobody was much deceived. Barrett, Kiproy, Collins and Turner, walking wearily and dejectedly toward the bench, passed them without speaking.

There was no time for Sheffield to coach them in the style of game he wanted them to play. Possibly, too, he thought any instructions of his would be so much wasted breath. All he could do was to hope for the best, in a forlorn sort of way, and trust to their natural ability to net a basket when the opportunity offered. They knew the formations and the signals; individually, he admitted, they were crack players. Well—

Lakeville had practiced its deceptive forward crisscross at least one hundred times. When Sheffield hit the ball on the toss-up, he sent it directly across the floor to S. S., playing left guard, on the double hope that this unexpected maneuver would fool Elkana again and that young Zane would be ready for the catch.

Never had Bob Collins played it better. With a deceptive lunge, S. S. shook off the player hovering about him, dashed forward, took the pass, dribbled the ball till the very last safe moment, and then shot it across to Bi, at right guard. From him it zigzagged back to the opposite side, into Jump's waiting hands, and, with just enough delay to pull in the baffled Elkana players, on to Bunny, playing in one corner of the court, within easy looping distance of the basket.

All this time, of course, Sheffield had been racing down the middle, till he was now squarely in front of the goal, with only one negligent guard anywhere near him. But Bunny was also clear for the moment.

"Shoot it!" shouted the captain, eyes already raised to the basket for the try.

Bunny poised the ball in his hands. Sheffield's guard shuffled toward the danger zone. But

even as he drew back his arms, Bunny whirled and made an overhand pass to his captain. So unexpected was this play, and so rapid the throw, that Sheffield came near being taken unawares.

But he set himself in time. Hard and true came the ball, zipping against his open palms, with every last Elkana player temporarily paralyzed by surprise. With something very like a smile, Sheffield balanced himself, taking plenty of time, and nonchalantly looped it upward for the gaping basket in front of him. It was a perfect goal.

Score: Lakeville, 10; Elkana, 15.

"Nice work!" Sheffield grunted to Bunny.

He wasn't sure—yet. But a minute later, when Jump, in the very shadow of the goal, lifted the ball high above his head and then flicked it back to his captain, six feet behind him, Sheffield knew for certain. He made that basket, too, and he ran laughing for the next toss-up, as if all the people in Elkana couldn't stop his team now. The Scouts were doing just what he had trained those others to do, just what he had declared the Scouts would never agree to do. They were feeding him the ball; they were playing, not for the applause and glory of shooting goals, but for the bigger thing, for the team itself.

Score: Lakeville, 12; Elkana, 15.

Neither side scored during the next few minutes. But that worried Bunny not one whit, and he guessed Sheffield felt the same about it. For Lakeville had come into her own at last, as if her five players were a single body with ten arms and ten legs. They rushed the ball toward their goal, tapping, tossing, dribbling, shooting it from boy to boy, looping it for the basket, scrambling after misses, and turning from offense to defense when Elkana took possession of it and began a march, with many side trips, in the other direction.

Elkana had not fought victoriously throughout the season without sound cause. Its team answered this new challenge like thoroughbreds. Put upon their mettle, the five players rose to a skill they had never shown before, and swept down the floor to the climax of another basket.

"Never mind that!" grinned Bunny, passing a grimy hand over his streaked face. "We'll beat 'em yet!"

"You bet we will!" Sheffield flashed back.

Hard on the heels of this stiffening determination, Lakeville scored again, and yet again. Sheffield shot both goals, but Bunny knew he was ready enough to give credit to the machine behind him.

Elkana led now by a single point. The score board read: Lakeville, 16; Elkana, 17.

Sixty seconds later, in a most peculiar manner, came the chance to tie the score. Lakeville had already failed on a direct side-center pass formation and on a single side cross-forward play that had counted in other games. Wisely, Sheffield called for the forward crisscross that had twice baffled Elkana.

It looked as if the play were to go through. Backward and forward across the floor, the ball wove its way, till it was time for the final pass to Sheffield, already in a favorable position to shoot the basket. But just at the last, an Elkana player sensed the trick. With flying arms, like a Holland windmill adrift, he swept down upon the Lakeville captain.

Sheffield dodged. So did the Elkana boy. Sheffield dodged back again, to confuse his opponent. The result was a semi-success. The other player had guessed wrong, and what happened was as much a surprise to one as the other.

With a crash, the two collided solidly. Sheffield fell flat on his back, the Elkana boy piled on top of him, and the referee's whistle shrilled.

"Foul for charging!" the official announced. "Free trial for goal for Lakeville!"

Bunny Payton fairly wriggled with eagerness. "Tie score if you make this goal!" he exulted, as Sheffield clambered to his feet dabbing at his eye with an open hand. "Not hurt, are you?"

"No. Where's the ball? Everybody ready?"

Bracing himself, feet apart, directly behind the foul line, Sheffield took the ball in both hands, raised it suddenly in an overhand loop shot—and missed the basket by a good six inches!

Nobody spoke. Nobody told him it didn't matter; for it did, mightily. Nobody even asked what the trouble was. But that wide miss, by a center who could net a goal nine times out of ten on free throws, was like a dash of cold water to the Lakeville team.

"But we won't quit," Bunny told himself, trotting into position for the next toss-up. "He'll have another chance in a minute."

It came even sooner than he expected. Scurrying here and there over the floor, apparently without aim or purpose, but in reality dodging and running with preconceived plan, the Lakeville five edged closer and closer to the basket, till in the end Sheffield caught a long pass almost in front of the goal. With a quick leap to one side, he shook off the Elkana guard; with the precision born of much practice, he looped the ball up and over.

The shot was long. Hitting the backboard a full foot above the net, the ball bounced back against the outer edge of the metal ring, hung uncertainly a moment, and then trickled free to the floor. For the second time in as many minutes, Sheffield had failed.

"Three minutes to play!" the timekeeper called, as they raced back to their positions.

Three minutes! And Lakeville one point behind! Bunny balled his nervous hands into hard fists and tried to swallow the lump that kept coming up in his throat. There was a chance yet, of course, but with Sheffield shooting wildly—

For the third time in succession, a little later, the Lakeville captain missed the basket. This

throw was the worst of the three; a blind man, Bunny told himself bitterly, might have come as close. What was the good of feeding Sheffield the ball, if he chucked away his chances like that?

There couldn't be much more than a minute to play now. When Sheffield lined up against the Elkana center once more, he spat out a curt, "Everybody in it this time," and jumped and batted the ball to S. S. That *in* was the signal for the old forward crisscross. Bunny shook his head doubtfully, but ran to his place.

The ball darted to and fro, like a swallow winging for safety: from S. S. to Bi, from Bi to Jump, from Jump to Bunny. Everybody was running and shouting, quite as if each player had gone suddenly insane. "Here you are!" somebody would call. "Shoot it!" "Watch out!" "Careful!" "Plenty of time!" "Plenty of time!" And then, having tantalized some opposing rusher, "Come on!" "Shoot it!"

By now, Sheffield was down the floor, in front of the basket and a little to the left. But Bunny was as close on the other side and less carefully guarded. Elkana, you see, had discovered that Lakeville's captain was usually the final link between the last pass and the try for goal. As a result, its players were beginning to watch him like hawks.

"Shoot it!" yelled Sheffield, trying vainly to shake off the Elkana guard.

Bunny bounced the ball long enough to give this order time to register in his brain. "He means for me to try for a basket," he decided happily. He tapped the ball to the floor again. "And I can make it, too; I know I can."

None of the Elkana players seemed to be worrying about him in the least. Bunny dribbled the ball a little nearer the goal, keeping a wary eye on Sheffield, who was twisting and doubling and flopping about, like a—like a chicken with its head off.

"That's just what he looks like," Bunny grinned to himself. "Shucks! If I did pass him the ball, he'd throw it wild. He's done it three times now."

"Shoot it!" ordered Sheffield, in a frenzy of excitement. He ran back a few steps and threw up his hands. Bunny wanted to think he was pointing toward the goal, but some curious prick of his conscience suggested that he might be motioning for a catch.

There was only a second or two to decide now. Down in his heart, Bunny was sure—absolutely sure—that he could make the goal. He could already see himself holding the ball with both hands in front of his chest, pushing it upward till his arms were straight from shoulders to fingertips, and launching it, straight and true, upward and over and down, in a great looping shot that would nestle it in the swaying net below the iron hoop. He knew, just as certainly as he knew he was standing there, that he could score that goal.

"And I don't think Sheffield can," he argued stubbornly. "He—he's like a chicken with its head off."

Out of the corner of his eye, as he dribbled the ball, he saw an Elkana boy sweeping toward him. It must be now or never. With a quick lunge ahead, he diverted the other's straight line of charge; then, stepping backward abruptly, he found himself clear for the moment. The ball bounded from the floor and plumped upon the open palm of his right hand.

But something stayed the left hand from clapping upon that side of the leather, preliminary to the try for goal. Instead, turning a little, he swung his right arm in a circle, shouted a warning to Sheffield, now temporarily free of heckling guards, and shot the ball to him.

"It's playing the game," he said to himself in a half-whisper. Just the same, it hurt, even more than he cared to admit, to make that sacrifice.

The Lakeville captain seemed to catch the ball exactly in position for looping it toward the basket. In the twinkling of an eye, Sheffield had tossed it upward, using the same overhand shot Bunny had partially begun.

Up and up sped the ball, with ten open-mouthed players following its course with twenty popping eyes; up and up, till it seemed it would never stop, and then, after a languid pause in mid-air, down and down, going faster every instant, till it plopped squarely within the metal rim of the basket and swished on into the hanging net.

The goal was scored. Lakeville now led, 18-17.

In the midst of a scrimmage, directly after the next toss-up, a sudden crack from the timekeeper's pistol signaled the end of the game. Lakeville had won. The road to the championship would be easy traveling now.

Sheffield took his honors without any display of emotion; he was that sort of winner. To the four substitutes who had made possible the victory, he merely said, "Good work, fellows!" But Bunny guessed he meant a good deal more than the words expressed.

"Why didn't you try for that last basket yourself?" he asked Bunny, as they piled downstairs to the dressing room. "You could have scored."

"Yes, I think I could," Bunny admitted honestly. "I was afraid of you, too, after you had missed those others, but—"

"Something in my eye," explained Sheffield; "got it in when I took that tumble. That's why those shots went wild. But it was out before your last pass."

"I gave you the ball," Bunny went on doggedly, "because I knew that was the kind of game you had planned—feeding it to you and letting you shoot the baskets. You didn't exactly tell us, of course, but we knew. And a Scout is supposed to be obedient to his leader and—"

"I see," nodded Sheffield, and let the matter drop. "By the way, why didn't you fellows go swimming with the rest this afternoon?"

"How—how did you know about that?"

"Heard you talking to Barrett and Kiproy and Collins and Turner just before I called them for the second half. But I don't see why—Yes, I guess I do, too. Your Scouts asked you if they could, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"And you wouldn't let them, I suppose. Right!" He turned to Bunny with a smile in his eyes. "Obedience to the leader again, eh? Sort of apron strings. H'm!"

Bunny couldn't make out whether Sheffield was sneering or just turning the matter over in his mind. But when he began a stumbling explanation, the captain cut him short with a question.

"Would you Scouts object," he asked, "to being tied—well, say loosely—to my apron strings in basketball?"

"Why—"

"Because if you wouldn't mind accepting me as a leader in the game," Sheffield went on evenly, "I have an idea we might show those other high schools quite a nifty little team."

In view of the fact that Lakeville simply romped through the balance of the schedule to the championship, it is to be supposed that the Scouts didn't object to obeying the captain. In any event, after another week of strenuous practice, the notice on the bulletin board of the high school read:

NOTICE!

The following basketball players will report at 12:30 Saturday afternoon, ready for the trip to Harrison City:

Left Forward	Payton
Right Forward	Henderson
Center	Sheffield
Left Guard	Zane
Right Guard	Jones
Substitutes	Kiproy, Barrett, Collins, Turner

(Signed) ROYAL SHEFFIELD,
Captain.

CHAPTER XV

AN ALARM OF FIRE

Palms propping his chin, elbows braced on knees, Specs McGrew squatted on the family's front steps, staring out at the street.

"I wish it was over," he grumbled. "Why don't Roundy and Jump come? Say, Bunny, if I had a five-dollar bill in my pocket, I'd give it to anybody who could pick me up right out of this morning and set me down somewhere to-morrow morning."

Bunny laughed. "Oh, the game won't be as bad as all that. Still, if you don't want to play, I guess we can persuade S. S. to take your place at short."

"Huh?" Specs twisted his head round. "Let S. S. play against Belden instead of me! Not if I know it! Just the same, I wish it was over, and down in your heart I bet you do, too."

The peace of a June morning hung over Lakeville, a quiet that was even deeper than usual; for not only was this the day when the Lakeville High baseball team went to Belden to play the last game of the season, but it was also the day of Dunkirk's great Home Coming Picnic; and a long excursion train, crowded to the platforms, had left the village at 7:30. The town was deserted. As Specs put it, "A cyclone or a fire could walk right down Main Street without having a chance to say 'hello' to anybody." In spite of the quiet, though, there were at least a generous baker's dozen of boys in and around Lakeville whose hearts beat hippety-hop whenever they stopped to think of the game that afternoon.

For the baseball season had gone well. The whole school year, indeed, had been a procession of athletic triumphs, first in football, then in basketball, and finally in baseball. Best of all, every last boy and girl in Lakeville High was ready to admit that the Black Eagle Scouts had done their share and more. In the beginning, of course, the patrol was a target for scorn; but gradually, as its members proved that the Scout way of doing things was a good way, and made for harmony and loyalty and the pull-together spirit that won victories, sentiment began to swing toward the organization until, in the end, it was pretty generally agreed that to be a Boy Scout was to be somebody worth while in high school.

With two championships stowed safely away, it was only natural that the baseball season should have begun with a hip-hip-hurray. With but two exceptions, every boy in school had tried for the team, and the lucky candidates had won their places only after the hardest kind of struggle. Of the Scouts, Roundy was at first base, Jump at second, and Specs at short. Bunny and Bi alternated in the pitcher's box. For the rest of the school, Barrett caught, Sheffield held down third base, and the outfield was made up of Collins, Kiproy and Turner.

Professor Leland had proved a most enthusiastic coach, and the lively competition for places on the team had kept all the players on tiptoe. The nine, moreover, had run on greased rollers. Buck Claxton himself had nominated Bunny for captaincy of the team, and by the best sort of example had shown that the leader's orders were law. With this spirit and discipline, the team had progressed steadily from victory to victory. Its one setback had come from a semi-professional outfit of Dunkirk, and that score had been only seven to four against Lakeville. They had beaten Dunkirk High, Grant City, Deerfield, Mason, Harrison City and Elkana. Belden, slated for the last game of the season, was not only the one team in the district that remained undefeated, but also it could and did lay claim to the championship of the State. To beat Belden, therefore, meant to round out the school year with pennants in three major sports.

"Why didn't Bonfire try for the baseball team?" Specs asked suddenly. "I've never understood that. He tried for everything else."

Bunny peered down the street for the expected Scouts before he answered. "I don't know. Bonfire's hard to understand. But he had some good reason; it wasn't because he was afraid to try."

"He's seen all the games and been at all the practices," said Specs, stretching his legs. "He has eyes like—like a fox. Do you remember that tip he gave me about the Dunkirk pitcher with his funny inshoot? But he hasn't even handled a baseball, not since Molly's picnic."

Specs was still chuckling over the memory when the appearance of Jump and Roundy changed the subject. Bunny hopped to his feet.

"Now we can start. We meet the rest of them at the schoolhouse at nine-fifteen."

"By to-night we'll be State champs," said the placid and confident Roundy. "I saw Molly and Mr. Sefton and Horace Hibbs scooting down the street in the Sefton automobile early this morning. They had streamers and pennants enough to open a store. I'm glad they are going to be there to cheer for us."

Carrying their uniforms in bulky suit cases and telescopes, the four Scouts started down the street.

"Everybody's gone," observed Jump, as they strolled down Maple Avenue toward the high school. "Seems a shame to leave the town like this."

"Oh, there are some chickens and a couple of dogs and about a thousand pet cats left behind," Specs retorted. "They can take care of things." He looked up the street. "Hello! Prof. and the others are waiting for us at the corner."

On the high-school lawn, opposite Grady's barn, the remainder of the team, with substitutes and a few others, were gathered. Professor Leland was looking at his watch.

"How about Sheffield?" queried Bunny, joining the coach. "Has he come yet?"

The man shook his head. "Sheffield's always two minutes late. He has seven miles to cover in that machine of his, but he generally waits till the last second." He glanced about anxiously. "We have nearly the entire squad here, and Ferris can play third if he has to, but I want Sheffield."

"I might wait here," Bunny suggested, "say, for ten minutes. Roy always leaves his car in Grady's barn, so he's sure to pass this way. When he does come, I'll get him to the station on the run."

The coach breathed a sigh of relief. "That's the plan, Payton. I'll leave the uniforms and bat bag with you, too, and you can pile them on Ernie Langer's dray when he comes. Then you can ride with him to the station and keep him from going to sleep."

Since the entire patrol had voted to go to Laurel, Bunny ventured another suggestion. "There are eight of us here who have worked together; nine altogether, counting Prissler, who is training to be a tenderfoot. If we all stay with the baggage, we can carry it to the station, in case Langer should be late."

Professor Leland considered. "Langer is coming, all right. But if I thought there was a chance of his being behind time, I'd let the squad carry the baggage to the station now. Still, your way keeps us from taking any chances at all." He paused to study his watch. "Remember, the train stops at 9:40 only to let off and take on passengers. You *must* be there on time. At three o'clock this afternoon, when the game is called, I don't want to play with four or five substitutes."

"We'll be there," chorused the Scouts, while Bunny and Bi carefully set their watches with that of the coach.

It was eighteen minutes past nine when Professor Leland and his players, minus the Scouts, started up the street toward the station.

"We can wait till nine-thirty if we have to," Bunny decided, "and then make the train by the skin of our teeth. But I hope old Slowpoke Langer and his dray come along before that. Roy Sheffield ought to be here now."

It was Mr. Langer, however, who arrived first, sleepily jogging his horses toward the corner. At exactly twenty-six minutes past nine he drew up beside the pile of baggage.

"Whoa, there! Whoa! Ain't been waiting for me, have you?" he inquired genially, as he removed his straw hat to wipe his forehead.

"I've been waiting for you ever since I've known you," answered Specs. "What are those horses of yours—one cylinder or two?"

Mr. Langer smiled contentedly. "You might not think it," he observed, "but these here horses used to be fire horses in Elkana when they was young. And they're just as good a team to-day as that pair of plugs they got in our fire station." He climbed laboriously from his seat, with some intention of assisting the Scouts in loading the bags and baseball apparatus into the dray. But as the boys were tidily finishing the job before Mr. Langer fully made up his mind about the best way to begin, he thought better of his ambition, and leaned one arm on the wagon and went on with his conversation.

"Take that fire department in this here town," he ruminated, picking a spear of grass to chew between words. "Why, it ain't run like a fire department any more than it's run like a church." He squinted thoughtfully at a pebble in the road. "Come to think of it, there ain't much difference between that fire department and a church. There's just one man of the Second Reformed Church left in Lakeville to-day, and that's Pete Mullett, the janitor; and there's just one man left in the fire department, and that's Dave Hendershot, the driver."

Bunny pricked up his ears. "You don't mean there's only one man to hitch up the hose cart and put out the fire?"

Mr. Langer nodded. "Yep. Dave was left in charge, with three helpers, and they told him they wanted to go to Dunkirk. And Dave was good-natured, and they was just volunteers, anyhow, and he let 'em go. Of course, I'll be around to give Dave a hand, but that ain't no way to fight fires." Mr. Langer nodded more decisively than before and plucked a second blade of grass.

"Coming late, the way Royal Sheffield does, isn't playing the game either," said Specs suddenly. "We have just one minute more to wait. It's 9:29 already."

Bunny verified the time. As Specs said, the missing player had but a single minute of grace before the procession started toward the station.

"He may get here on time, even if we don't hustle him up," suggested S. S.

Bonfire Cree laughed. "He'd have missed the Harrison City game if the train hadn't been held up on account of a hot box."

"He's a dandy, he is!" commented Specs. "Back before you fellows won that basketball game for him, I heard him say once that we Scouts weren't interested in anything except ourselves, but I notice he never puts himself out for anybody."

"Give him a fair show, Specs," Bunny suggested gently. "Remember, he isn't here to speak for himself."

"He'll be speaking for himself in two seconds," said Bonfire, pointing down the street toward a scarlet motor car which at that moment was tearing along near the corner.

Barely braking enough to turn without skidding, Royal Sheffield drove the automobile up the driveway to the barn; then, a moment later, lounged down the path to the Scouts.

"Make it fast, Sheff," warned Bunny. "We have just time to catch the train, not a second more. Throw your stuff on the dray. All right, we 're off. How about it, Mr. Langer? Can we all pile on your wagon?"

Mr. Langer nodded. Promptly, without waiting for the captain of the team to decide the matter, Sheffield scrambled up to the driver's seat.

"I notice you're making yourself comfortable!" snapped Specs, balancing uneasily on the side of the dray.

"Is that so!" Sheffield flung back carelessly. "Well, I'm following your lead. I notice you fellows have been hanging around to ride to the station."

"Hanging around!" Specs raised his voice angrily. "Why, the only reason we stayed behind was to—"

"Better cut it, Specs!" Bunny said decisively.

A silence followed. With much slapping of lines and verbal encouragement, Mr. Langer waked his fire horses and set them in motion. In time, even, they broke into an unwieldy trot, jolting and jouncing the stiff-springed dray over the ruts.

"Too much luxury for me!" groaned Bonfire. "I'd rather run alongside than be shaken to pieces."

He dropped from the dray, glancing back down the street.

"Bunny! Oh, Bunny! Look!"

He was standing in the middle of the road, jaw dropped, eyes bulging, forefinger pointed toward the corner from which they had come.

"What's the matter, Bonfire?"

"It's a fire—back there—by the corner! There's a house on fire!"

CHAPTER XVI

ALONG THE FLOOR

Placing both hands on the sideboard of the dray, Bunny vaulted lightly to the ground. From where Bonfire stood, the thin eddy of smoke could be seen looping over the tree tops at the corner.

"It's Peterson's house!"

Bonfire shook his head. "The smoke shows too far north for that. It's either Crawford's or some shed near there."

For a long moment Bunny watched the white wreath tail up above the highest leaves; then, abruptly, he raced after the jogging dray.

"Stop that team!" he shouted.

Mr. Langer pulled up deliberately, hastened a little in the process, perhaps, by Roundy, who seemed on the point of taking the reins into his own hands.

"Everybody out! We can't leave a fire like that with nobody in town."

"Oh, rats!" snapped Sheffield. "We'll turn in an alarm at the station. What's the fire department for? Let it burn!"

Mr. Langer seemed in doubt. "Wal, I dunno." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "I dunno. Mebbe, now—"

"You're hired to get us down to the station," Sheffield reminded him. "The best thing for you to do is to hurry up and make that train."

Bunny hesitated. The welfare of the baseball team which he captained demanded that no time be lost. On the other hand, if a serious fire had started, it was more important to check it than to play any game.

"If there is a real blaze—" he began.

"It doesn't matter whether it's a real blaze or not," Sheffield interrupted. "We are on our way to play for the high-school championship of the State. That's more important than anything else."

"No, Sheff," disagreed Bunny; "no, it isn't. Winning a baseball championship wouldn't be as important as saving Lakeville from a bad fire. Now, would it?"

"Oh, it's probably only a smudge," urged Sheffield. "How about it, Langer? Didn't you see a bonfire over there?"

Mr. Langer scratched his head again. "I dunno if I did and I dunno if I didn't. But—"

Bunny made up his mind. "Drive ahead, Langer. Sheffield, you see that the stuff gets to the station on time and tell Professor Leland that we will catch the 11:30 train. That will bring us to the Belden field by just three o'clock. Scouts over here!"

Almost before Mr. Langer could get under way, his dray was lightened of its load of Black Eagles, who scrambled to the ground, following Bunny and Bonfire at a dead run.

"It's not a little blaze," panted the observant Bonfire. "Look how that smoke hangs in a cloud over the trees. It's coming from the top of some building."

"It's the Crawford house!" Specs urged, as he sprinted up to the two leaders. "You can tell it's the Crawfords', because—No, it isn't either. It's—"

Bunny, Bonfire and Specs came to a paralyzed halt. In one voice, they finished the sentence:

"—Grady's barn!"

Already that building had loomed into sight. From an opening near the peak of the roof, smoke was leisurely twining into the air, as if it had a perfect right to be doing that sort of thing in that sort of a place. No one else in town seemed to have noticed the warning, and a thicker puff of smoke brought no answering cry of "Fire!"

"Let her go!" said Specs spitefully. "We will turn in an alarm and keep it from burning anything else, but we might just as well let the old shack go up in smoke. Grady has it insured."

"But Sheffield's automobile is in there," protested Bonfire, "and that isn't insured. I heard Roy say so."

"That's what I thought," Specs agreed calmly. "But Mister Royal Sheffield thinks we haven't any business monkeying with fires this morning, and I vote we go back to the station and tell him that we were mistaken and that he was right."

Bunny frowned. "We'll go right on being Scouts and living up to the Scout law, just as we did before we ever knew Sheffield. Jump and S. S., you two pike down to the fire department and hustle Dave Hendershot up here with the hose cart. Prissler, you chase downtown and rouse people. Roundy, break into the schoolhouse and ring the bell for all you're worth. Nap, you take the school telephone and call Central and the fire department. The rest of us will do what we can right here."

However much the Scouts would have preferred to stay at the scene of action, they hesitated not at all in obeying these necessarily curt orders. Three runners scurried away toward Main Street; two others made a bee line for the janitor's entrance of the high school.

"Oh, all right!" grunted Specs. "Now we can go ahead and be heroes and save dear old Roy's car for him. I'd certainly like to see the blamed thing saved—that is, all except the tires and the motor and the tool box and the lights and a few other things."

Whenever Specs reached this particular mood, it was best to let him talk his way out of it.

Bunny ignored him completely and ran toward the burning building.

Grady's barn was the usual two-story structure, its peaked roof topped by an old-fashioned cupola. At the front, two swinging doors were locked by a wooden bar within, a smaller side entrance being used for ordinary comings and goings.

"Locked with a big padlock," said Bunny, testing the side door while Bonfire and Specs hurried to the west side of the building.

Bi returned from an excursion to the rear. "Back door's nailed fast," he reported. "There are iron bars across the inside of that back window, too."

Through this latter opening, Bi had seen the smoke thickening inside, but he had failed to discover any way of breaking through to smother it. It was evident that when Mr. Grady had turned over his horseless barn to Royal Sheffield, he had made it thoroughly burglar proof.

"If I had an ax," Bi muttered wistfully, "I'd smash through that door in a hurry."

With a common impulse, Bunny and Bi picked up a long board, to use as a battering-ram against the sagging double door. Under the blows, the barn resounded, but the doors remained as tightly shut as before.

"Got to break through pretty soon or stop trying," Bunny gasped, as they halted the attack to regain wind. "If we once get inside anywhere, we can open those double doors and roll out the car. After that, we might save the barn. But if the gasoline ever explodes—well, that will finish everything."

"Let's try it again!" Bi lunged against the door with fierce energy. "Maybe the big wooden bar that holds across the middle will jump loose if we jar it enough. Ugh!" He grunted as the board struck the door.

"All together, Bi! Once more! I think I felt it move." They hammered the wood home, but in spite of the whirlwind of blows the door did nothing but sag a little and stick fast.

"Thank goodness!" ejaculated Bunny, as they halted after this assault. "Roundy's found the bell, anyhow."

"*Dang! Bang! Dang! Bang!*" The clapper of the high-school bell was swinging wilder and harder against the metal sides than ever before in its short life.

"Now, if that brings help, and if Nap gets a little action over the telephone, and if Jump and S. S. bring up the hose cart, we have a chance even yet. Where's Bonfire? And where's Specs?"

As if in answer to his name, Bonfire appeared, red-faced and breathless, holding a short two-by-four in his hand.

"Looked all over Peterson's woodshed for an ax, but couldn't find a thing except this. You can see the fire through the little stall window. It's just beginning to wake up. Didn't Specs find anything?"

"Specs! Isn't he with you?"

"With me? No!" Bonfire's eyes opened wide.

"He started with me. He was going to the Crawfords' and—let's see—he turned and—" The boy stopped speaking. Fumbling the plank in his hand, he dropped it and then scooped it from the ground in a rush toward the door.

"Come on!" he shouted, attacking the barn in a wild burst of frenzy. "We've got to break in! We've got to! Specs is inside!"

Bunny caught him by the arm. "We can't break through here. It's solid. How do you know Specs is inside?"

The other Scout was quivering with excitement. "I know it. I looked through the stall window. There was a board loose in the floor, near the fire. I pointed it out to him. For a joke, I told him a thin fellow might crawl underneath the barn, pry it loose, and come up inside. And he's done it! We've got to get him out!"

The school bell still clanged at top speed. Far down the street, Bunny could see two men running. He fancied he could hear galloping hoofs and the rumble of the hose cart. But if Specs was wallowing in that smother of smoke, all this help would come too late. He pounded on the side of the barn with his futile fist.

"Specs! Specs!" he shouted.

Bi ground his fingers into his palms. "If he can only get to the door, he can open it, but—"

There was no answering sound from within.

Bonfire, who had disappeared, darted suddenly from one side of the barn.

"He's in there," he said. His face was white, and he spoke jerkily. "You can see his tracks. I crawled under. The board has been lifted up, but the blaze is all over the hole and I couldn't get through."

Something cried to be done. Something must be done. As Bunny tried to collect his thoughts, his eye glimpsed a tiny gap between the base of the door on the right and the top of the ramp. It stretched near the hinge side, high enough to take the end of a plank. With a shout of relief, he slapped the end of the board into the crevice. Using the two-by-four as a fulcrum, he began levering the door upward and outward.

"All together now! Smash that hinge!" he gulped, choking from a whiff of smoke that puffed into his face from the crack.

This command was unnecessary. Already the other two were throwing all their weight and strength on the long end of the lever.

"Hard! Everybody, hard!"

Came a creaking, groaning, splintering of the wood. It was the signal of the break to come. The Scouts were bracing for a last effort when, quite without warning or effort on their part, the bar stretched across the inside of the double door swung upward, the sides flew open, and out stumbled Specs. Himself, he had unloosed the holding bar and opened the doors.

"I'm all right!" he gagged. "Not burned! Get the car out quick! Leave me alone! I'll be O. K. in a minute, I tell you!" He staggered over to a plot of grass.

While Specs lay flung on the ground, blinking his smoke-reddened eyes and breathing heavily, the other three wheeled the car into the open just as the hose cart, carrying S. S. and Jump and a crew of four others, drew up at the hydrant.

"Prissler ran down the street and yelled 'Fire!' at the top of his voice," explained S. S. "That's how these men happened to know about it and run to the fire house. He—There he comes now, with another bunch he's roused."

Fortunately, except for a little scorched paint, the car was undamaged. As for the fire itself, within ten minutes the volunteer workers gathered by bell and telephone and little Prissler's Paul Revere race through the village had the flames changing into a welter of thick, white smoke. The barn had suffered, but it was not beyond repair.

"I got in all right," Specs explained to the boys, "and I had a wet handkerchief tied over my face, and I crawled along the floor as if I was looking for a needle, and I generally acted the way a fireman ought to act. I'd been all right, too, if I hadn't bumped my elbow and then stuck my head up to see what did it. I must have swallowed some smoke or something, because I had to lie quiet till I could get enough strength back to finish the job. That was when I heard you calling to me."

"But I thought you didn't care about saving Sheffield's car," teased Roundy, who had come back from his bell ringing.

"I don't!" Specs flared indignantly. "But if I hadn't tried to help, I'd have been breaking about half the Scout laws. Just the same," he added a little viciously, "I'm going to tell Royal Sheffield that I wish it had been somebody else's car."

At this characteristic fling, the Black Eagles rolled merrily on the grass, winding up in an informal pyramid, of which Specs was the bottom layer.

"Look here!" said Bunny, suddenly piling off. "We had better find out about that later train."

It was Nap, arriving on the scene from his telephoning, who capped this remark.

"I called up the station," he said. "That's what kept me. The team was gone. The second train—the one we thought we were going on—was taken off this week. There isn't another on the schedule that will get us to Belden in time for the baseball game!"

CHAPTER XVII

TOUCH AND GO

The Black Eagle Patrol stared blankly at Nap.

"No train!" S. S. repeated dully.

"Not a sign of one." Nap had an irritating air of being pleased to act as bearer of bad news. "And the only possible automobile road on this side of the hills makes it a six-hour trip. That's why the Seftons started at seven this morning."

"I suppose," suggested Jump, somewhat nettled, "I suppose you are going to say you're Waterlooed."

Nap shook his head with a superior smile.

"If you remember—I mean, if you've ever read about that campaign of Napoleon's when he crossed the Alps—"

"No, I don't remember it and I never read about it," Bi said bluntly, "and I don't expect to read about it, either, unless some teacher makes me; but if you have an idea up your sleeve, shake it out."

"What's the plan, Nap?" Bunny queried patiently.

"Just this." Nap hid his disappointment at being cut short. "The R. A. & S. railroad runs through Harrison City, and the station is only about a mile from the other side of the lake. I have telephoned all over, and here's what I found out: There's a train over there, leaving Harrison City at 10:50. Of course, the R. A. & S. doesn't run to Belden, but you can get to Deerfield on it, where there is a bus line to Belden, sort of doubling back a ways, you see. If we make that 10:50 train, we'll be at the ball park by two o'clock."

Bunny nodded. "Good work, Nap; that fixes us. Now, if Roundy can borrow the launch—"

Roundy was sure he could.

"—we'll scoot across the lake, leave the boat at the yacht club there, hike the mile to the Harrison City station, and catch the train. Come on; we haven't any time to spare."

It took only a few seconds to make sure that their services at the deceased fire were no longer needed, and that Royal Sheffield's automobile would be safely stowed in the garage on Main Street. Once assured on these points, the patrol struck out, at an alternate walk and trot they often practiced, by the shortest of short cuts to the boathouse.

It was astonishing how well things went, so far as getting started was concerned. The boathouse key was hanging conveniently in its place; the launch's gasoline tank was filled to the brim; the engine started off as promptly as if it were accustomed to acting that way, instead of having what Roundy aptly called "cranky fits."

"We'll make it in a walk," announced Nap, consulting his watch. "It's just 9:57 now. We'll cover those four miles of lake in thirty minutes. That's 10:27. Maybe we'll waste five minutes landing and getting the boat taken care of; that will bring it to 10:32. And if we can't cover the mile to Harrison City and get on the train in eighteen minutes more, we ought to turn in our Scout badges."

The others nodded agreement.

"Somebody camping on Shadow Island," broke in Bonfire from his post of lookout in the bow of the boat.

"I don't see any smoke," Bi commented. "I don't see any tents, either. There's somebody standing on the shore, but there's a boat there, too. Chances are it's just a fisherman."

Bonfire pointed to a little gap in a maple grove.

"Do you see that line of washing to the left, hung between those two trees? Did you ever hear of any fisherman who went over to Shadow Island to do his washing?"

"I'm licked," Bi admitted. "Who is it? Are you enough of a Sherlock Holmes to tell us from here?"

"I know who it is." S. S. joined the conversation. "It's two families from Harrison City, cousins of Marion Genevieve Chester. She told me so, and she's over there visiting them to-day."

Specs snorted. "I guess it won't break her heart if we pass right by without calling on her. She has about as much to do with us as she has with a bunch of rattlesnakes, and that's not a whole lot."

"She thinks we still dislike her for being president of the student association," Bunny observed mildly. "And she hasn't forgotten how Bi allowed her to get scared at Molly's picnic. She just thinks we haven't any use for her and wouldn't lift a finger to get her out of any trouble."

"Marion Genevieve Chester! Wow, what a name!" mocked Specs.

The laughter that followed was a little uncertain. Seating arrangements at school had made the girl, Bunny and S. S. all next door neighbors. To the surprise of these two Scouts, at least, they had found her snobbishness mainly the outcome of a solitary childhood, a thin veneer that was slowly but surely wearing off. Though her fancied superiority to the other pupils had not yet vanished, the give and take of school life was gradually rubbing it away.

Smoothly, purringly, the launch clove its way toward the yacht club on the far side of the lake, while Shadow Island, the scene of Bunny's initiation into the Black Eagle Patrol,[2] dropped astern.

"On the home stretch and running like a watch," Roundy declared. "We'll have time to get there and play an inning of baseball before the train starts. We can—"

"Shipwreck ahead!"

It was Bonfire's cry that brought the passengers of the boat to a sudden alertness.

"Tipped just now! Two of them in it! One of them stood up! There they are!"

The little craft ahead was keel up, with two heads bobbing alongside and two arms hugging tightly the side. Faintly, the light breeze brought cries of distress.

"One of them's a girl!"

"They're both girls!"

"What are they hollering for? They're all right if they just hang on. They can see us coming."

"You mean they're all right if they don't get panicky."

"Turn the engine loose, Roundy."

Roundy wiped a perspiring forehead. "The engine's doing all it can right now."

Bunny gave rapid-fire directions. "Roundy, if there's any rescuing to do, you're the prize swimmer; so you'll do it. S. S., you handle the engine and the steering gear. Everybody else, stand ready to help. Bring our starboard up as close to the boat as you can and hold it there."

Shoes and stockings kicked off, Roundy leaned over the side. "If they are all right, we can just pull them in; but if they are too scared, I'll jump in after them." He broke off to chuckle.

"What is it?"

"I'll eat my hat if the girl on the right isn't Marion Genevieve Chester!"

There was an eager second of straining.

"It's Marion Genevieve, all right, and she's so scared she doesn't know her stylish name."

"Bring us up close, S. S. Graze it if you can."

No doubt remained that one of the two girls clinging to the upturned boat was Marion Genevieve Chester. But while her companion saved strength by holding quietly and allowing the water to support as much of her weight as possible, Marion Genevieve not only exhausted herself by screaming, but in addition wasted her muscle reserve by striving vainly to pull herself higher out of the water.

The launch was now within twenty feet. It slowed down.

"Better be ready to go overboard, Roundy. Always the chance of an accident, you know."

Bunny had hardly given the warning when, with a last frantic cry, the girl threw up two wild arms and splashed back into the water.

"Go over, Roundy!"

Before her head could sink beneath the surface, the Scouts realized that something had happened to Roundy Magoon. Kicking wildly with his left leg, he had drawn back from the rail to the cockpit.

"Roundy!"

Marion Genevieve's pale face, washed over by a tiny ripple, slipped beneath the water.

Snarling as though a wild beast had attacked him, Roundy snatched at the coil of rope that Nap had accidentally kicked into his path. With his fingers, he tore at the hemp line that had snarled about his ankle.

The girl was above water again, coughing and spluttering and groping for some tangible support.

"*Roundy!*"

And then, quite without command or plan, the balance of the Black Eagle Patrol, plus little Prissler, took his place.

Bunny was over first, with Bi, Jump and Specs close seconds. Nap followed, hard pressed by Bonfire. Then S. S. and Prissler, and, last of all, the freed Roundy.

Swiftly, surely, they cut their way to the helpless girl, with Bunny in the lead. Catching her dress near the back of her neck, he held her face clear of the water till, by clasping both hands under her chin, he was able to swim slowly on his back and tow her to safety.

Jump and Nap swam alongside; Bonfire was lending a hand to the other shipwrecked miss; Prissler, who was obviously not as much at home in the water as the others, wisely put back for the launch; while S. S., ploughing through the water like a fish, was already clambering aboard, ready to start the engine. Bi, Roundy and Specs joined forces in towing the upturned craft toward the power boat.

The rest was comparatively simple. The Scouts made no work at all of climbing back into the launch; and, with feet well braced, Bi and Specs easily lifted the two girls over the side. Marion Genevieve sank down on the leather cushions, weak and faint, though frightened rather than harmed. The other girl, who introduced herself as Marion Genevieve's cousin, was able to laugh good-naturedly.

"We stood up in the boat," she said, "because we wanted to change seats. And—well, that's all!"

"It may be all as far as you are concerned," thought more than one Scout, "but we're going somewhere in a hurry, and now we'll have to take you back to Shadow Island and tow that capsized boat, to boot."

But nobody was impolite enough to say this aloud.

Whatever Bunny wished to do, it was plain that he had no choice in the matter. Though

Marion Genevieve was not dangerously ill or faint, she kept up a moaning for her mother that could not be disregarded. Roundy, still a little disgruntled over his mishap, turned to the patrol leader, who nodded toward Shadow Island. With a line fast to the swamped boat, the launch engine started and they began to move slowly toward the shore line. It seemed to every boy that hours were being wasted, but nobody complained.

Not till she was once more on dry land did Marion Genevieve seem to come fully to herself. Then, while her relatives were still trying to thank the patrol, she suddenly remarked, "Why—why *all* of you are wet!"

"Couldn't help it," said the cheerful Specs. "We all dove off the boat and forgot to take our umbrellas."

There were several emotions trying to express themselves on Marion Genevieve's face, but all she managed to say was, "I—I thank you—all of you! I'm very, very grateful."

"Oh, that's all right, Marion Genevieve," Specs laughed.

The girl's glance wavered. She picked at her wet dress. "I—Please!" she said imploringly. And then it came out, as if it wrenched her very soul. "My name isn't Marion Genevieve," she told them. "It's Mary; my middle name is Jennie. I was called after two aunts of mine."

She was staring straight at Bunny now. He felt his cheeks redden. It was a hard position in which to put a fellow, he told himself, and probably he'd say the wrong thing. But when he spoke, it was honestly and naturally.

"I think Mary is a nice name," he said.

The girl's low "Thank you!" meant a good deal more to the Scouts than they were able to understand just then. Afterward, Specs tried to put it into words.

"She said it," he told the others, "as if she was sorry she had been so—so snippish to us, and as if she wanted us to forget and make up and—and everything. I'll bet you Mary's going to be a regular girl after this. I like her about twice as much as I ever did before."

But this was afterward. At the moment, the Scouts merely nodded in an embarrassed manner and set about the task of shoving the launch into deep water, despite an almost irresistible appeal from the campers to wait for a treat of strawberries and cake and lemonade.

"Well," remarked Roundy, when Shadow Island once more lay astern, "I'm glad we were there when we were needed. Just the same, I'm afraid we've lost out. I'll talk to the engine, but we can't go any faster than just so fast."

"There's time yet," Bunny insisted; "there must be time yet."

Far and faint across the two-mile stretch of water came the sound of a bell. It pealed from the tower of Harrison City's big church: four chimes—half-past ten.

Two miles of water and a mile of land to cover in twenty minutes! The Scouts looked despairingly at the steadily throbbing engine.

"It can't be done!" muttered Roundy. "It can't be done!"

FOOTNOTE:

[2] See "The Boy Scouts of Black Eagle Patrol."

CHAPTER XVIII

DEAD WIRES

"We must have a chance yet," S. S. insisted weakly.

"About as much of a chance as a dish of ice cream at a Sunday-School picnic," grinned Specs.

Bunny cleared his throat. "I know how you fellows feel about this, and I know just what we are up against. Twenty minutes isn't much time for the distance we have to cover. Just the same, I've made up my mind that we are going to be at the ball park in Belden by three o'clock this afternoon, even if we have to build a toboggan and slide there. But we're not going to give up, not if I know anything about this patrol. We've never quit yet when something had to be done."

There was a general murmur of agreement. Little Prissler said primly, "That's the spirit that moves mountains!"

"And if it should turn out, at five minutes of three," added Bunny, "that we are still trying to cross this lake, I'd vote for keeping right on toward Belden till we reached there."

"That's what we all say!" shouted Bi enthusiastically; "that is, if some near-sighted laundry doesn't catch us and hang us up on a line to dry."

In the laughter that followed, the nine boys began to take stock of their soaked clothing, wringing and pressing out as much of the water as they could.

"The bullgine's picking up a little," said Roundy hopefully, squirting a little oil on the exposed running parts and tightening the grease cups. "If we don't touch shore ahead of time, I'm a tenderfoot."

With freshened courage, they waited the landing. And because neither breakdowns nor stoppages came their way, they climbed upon the yacht pier at exactly 10:39. While Roundy arranged with the keeper to look after the launch, Bunny interviewed a fisherman on the best way to get to Harrison City.

"The main road is that macadamized pike right there," the man informed him. "It's a good mile and a quarter to the Charles City station."

Bunny gasped. The situation was even worse than he had imagined.

"But if you are in a hurry—"

"We are, Mister; we're in a mighty big hurry."

"Then take the old wagon road to the right," advised the fisherman. "It's a short cut over a couple of little hills. A bad stretch of road, I'm telling you, but only three quarters of a mile to Harrison City that way. On foot, you'll get there a lot sooner than if you follow the main highway."

"We want to catch the 10:50 train."

"You'll make it if you keep your legs moving."

A series of short blasts on the patrol leader's whistle gathered the eight boys about him. In a few quick words, Bunny explained the lay of the roads.

"We'll take up the Scout's pace, and keep at it till we reach the station. We have almost ten minutes to make three quarters of a mile. I'll lead, and I want each fellow to hang close to the heels of the one ahead."

"I'll be rearguard," said Specs, as the nine boys broke into a trot. "Remember, Roundy, if you drop back, I'll—I'll pick you up and carry you into Harrison City."

There was nothing about the road to hinder people on foot. Deep ruts and gullies made it practically impassable for finicky automobiles, but the nine boys strung out in single file and thus avoided bad places and fallen branches that had toppled upon the trail. Less than a quarter mile from the lake, they skimmed the crest of the first hill with every fellow hanging close to his pace-setter.

"It's like taking candy from a baby," Specs grinned, as the group dropped into a walk. "What do you say, Bunny, if we make the run a hundred yards and the walk fifty? We can do it easy enough."

Bunny was unwilling. "Yes, we could," he admitted, "but we have a ball game to play this afternoon, and I guess we'll need all our strength to win it."

The road was a little better now. Trees that met overhead threw a grateful shade upon the hikers. There were even clumps of wild flowers waiting to be appreciated by anybody in the mood to look at them. But the Scouts and the Scout-trained Prissler had their minds set upon catching that train, and the most beautiful flowers in the world could have bloomed their heads off without getting more than a passing glance.

"Off again!" Bunny announced, giving the signal for the jog.

They wound past a clump of trees and around a turn to the left. Without warning, Bunny slowed and halted. Behind him, Scout bumped Scout, like a row of dominoes that is set falling.

A man with a cane faced Bunny. "I—it's—" He stammered incoherently before he loosed a flood of words. "Boys, I must have help! I must have it! I must ask you to help me!"

"What's the matter?" called Specs, who had not heard the request. He was rubbing an affronted nose that had collided with Roundy's back.

It was now evident to Bunny that the stranger was older than he had seemed at first. His face was lined with wrinkles. His back was twisted and bent, as if from rheumatism. When he spoke, his voice quavered uncertainly.

"My wife and I, we live back there in that little frame house. She's just getting over a long spell of sickness, and it is necessary for me to be in touch with the Harrison City doctor night and day. But now my telephone won't work; it's gone dead."

"We'll leave word at Harrison City."

The old man shook his head despairingly. "It's a bad time of week to get anything done. This is Saturday, you know, and they might not come—they might not come till Monday."

"Well, what do you expect us to do, anyhow?" demanded the irritated Specs.

The old gentleman's hand trembled as he gestured. "I—I don't know. Perhaps one of you could go to the telephone office and maybe stay right there and explain how much we needed the 'phone fixed and not give up till they started somebody out here to fix it."

There were five seconds of uncomfortable silence, broken by Bunny. "We might do better than that. If Handy were here—"

"Roundy knows a lot about telephones," suggested Jump.

"Not very much," Roundy admitted slowly. "But I can tell if any of the wires are disconnected, or if the battery is dead, or if anything big is the matter with the instrument."

"That's enough; that's plenty!" Bunny was thinking hard and fast. "We all know a little something about electricity. Roundy, you go to the telephone and look it over. I'll meet you there." Roundy was off on a run. The old gentleman, staring in blank surprise, suddenly comprehended and shouted that the telephone was in the hall, just inside the front door.

"Now for the insulators," Bunny said briskly. "You notice how the wires run from the house along those trees, with the insulators on the limbs. If somebody shinnies up each tree, we'll soon discover whether the trouble's between here and the regular poles."

There was no time to discuss matters with the aged cottager, who seemed still dazed and wondering. Like so many squirrels, the boys scattered and began squirming their way up the proper trunks.

Eight trees carried the glass insulators. Fortunately, however, the one nearest the house could be examined with the aid of a friendly stepladder. Bunny was up and down in the twinkling of an eye. With the other volunteer repairmen fairly started, he now made his way to Roundy, already deep in his labors of examining the telephone.

"I can't see anything wrong here," Roundy grunted, squinting at the wire coiled in the box. He tested the poles of the battery with a wet finger. "Plenty of juice in that. Everything tightly connected, and transmitter and receiver in good shape."

Bunny flung open the nearest window.

"Find anything wrong, Bi?"

"Nothing here. How about you, Specs?"

"Right as a trivet on this tree."

Down the line the Scouts reported, each to the effect that his wire and insulator were in prime condition. From the last tree, Prissler shouted a confident, "O. K. here."

Puzzled and disappointed, Bunny turned again to Roundy, who was making a last effort to call Central. Almost two minutes had passed in this determination to live up to the Scout law that says a Scout must be helpful and prepared at all times to give aid to those in need. If they hoped to catch the train—

"Oh, Bi!" It was the voice of Bonfire Cree calling from the fourth tree, that roused Bunny from his slump of depression. "Look back where the wire leaves the house. It doesn't come out from the corner; it turns through that vine. Take a look at the vine."

With a shout, Bi swung from the lowest limb of his perch, and ran to the spot Bonfire had pointed out. Along the side of the house, a vine had wrapped its heavy creepers around a little segment of the wire between the insulator on the corner and the holes where the wire turned in to connect with the instrument.

Slapping open his knife, Bi slashed away the green foliage, to expose a tiny patch of wire, hard against a tin rain trough, where faulty insulation had rubbed or rotted free, forming a short circuit. By bending out the copper strands, the trouble was eliminated.

At that moment, a smile creased Roundy's cheeks into joyous wrinkles.

"Listen to this!" he said, handing the receiver to Bunny.

Faintly, but distinctly, the patrol leader could hear the voice of Central. "Number, please?"

"Get 'em together, Roundy, and have Bi start on a slow jog and keep it up. I'll catch you. And hustle, because we have a fighting chance yet." As Roundy picked up his cap, Bunny turned his attention to the telephone. "The R. A. & S. station, please. No, I don't know the number, and there isn't a book here. But it's important."

A moment later, a gruff voice answered. "R. A. & S."

"Nine of us want to catch that 10:50 train. We must make it. Can't you hold it sixty seconds for us? Yes, we'll be there surely by 10:51; by 10:50, I hope. Just sixty seconds?"

The answer made his heart leap. "Thank you! Thank you! You've done us the biggest favor anybody could!"

Working with all possible speed, Bunny hooked the front of the telephone box in place, warned the old gentleman to tape the exposed wire outside the house, and dashed after the others, without getting more than the first part of the thanks which were being showered upon him.

Already the other boys had rounded the next bend in the road, and it took stiff running for almost three hundred yards to catch them.

"Just heard the whistle of the train," Specs confided, as Bunny came even.

"We'll make it," said Bunny confidently. "Why, we're not much behind schedule. There are over seventy seconds of our regular time left, and they have promised to hold the train an extra minute for us."

As they trotted down the last hill, the railroad station came into sight. Already slowing down, the train was just pulling in.

"Safe at last!" Nap shouted. "I knew we could catch it."

But even while they were still running, a most unexpected thing happened.

The train braked to a stop. But it wasn't a real stop. As Specs said, it seemed as though the engineer just "hesitated." Almost before the big driving wheels had ceased revolving, and with the nine boys still a good two hundred yards from the track, the engine puffed, the piston rods spun the wheels till the friction caught, and the train, under gathering speed, pounded out of sight.

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE HANDCAR

"Waterloo!" exclaimed Nap.

"There's a chance yet," Bunny urged. "Maybe she's just moving up to the switch to get on another track."

"A fat chance!" said the cynical Specs. "That other track runs to New York or San Francisco or somewhere. No, siree, that train isn't coming back to Harrison City again to-day."

As the boys watched the fading black smoke, it grew more and more evident that Specs was right. The train which was to have been their salvation had gone without them.

Bunny shook his head stubbornly. "I don't know how we are going to get there, but I mean to keep on trying. Nobody is licked till he gives up, and we are a long way from giving up. Does anybody want to quit?"

The "no" that answered was not full-throated, but it satisfied the patrol leader.

"All right, then; we'll take up the Scout's pace again till we reach the station."

It was a few seconds past 10:49 when the boys crossed the tracks; it still lacked a little of 10:50 when Bunny found the young man in charge of the station puttering over a trunk in the baggage room.

"Oh, you're the one who telephoned about that train?" he said, smiling pleasantly. "Well, she left ahead of time; there's no doubt about that. I don't know why she did any more than you do. She came puffing in, and Mr. Gillen—he's the station master here—hopped on board to speak to the conductor, and the train carried him off, too. Never left before like that, and I don't understand it. Nobody told me a word about it."

"Where's the next stop?"

"Wells Junction. That's just three miles away. They wait there till 11:05 to make connections with the B. & X."

"Three miles." Bunny did a little mental arithmetic. "Why, we could catch it there, then, if we just had some way of getting there."

The young man became interested. "Did you say there were nine of you? Well, here's a hand car that I was going to send up to the Junction sometime this afternoon. It would be perfectly safe, because there aren't any freights coming, and there isn't another passenger due till midnight. Let's see. You want to go to Deerfield, where you take the 'bus for Belden. Now, you buy tickets for Deerfield, and I will let you take the hand car. If you miss the train for any reason, you can turn in your tickets and get your money back."

To Bunny, it seemed altogether too good to be true; but there was no time to waste rejoicing over the news.

"All right," commented Bi a little heavily, "but I never thought I should have to pay for my own ticket. Still, of course, there's no way out of it."

It required the greater portion of the Scouts' ready cash to pay for the thirty-eight-mile trip to Deerfield. Roundy had disappeared, so his ticket had to be purchased out of the common fund; but they had barely worked the hand car to the main track before he hove in sight, his arms full of sandwiches and boxes of crackers.

"Getting along toward dinner time," he explained, "and nobody knows when we'll get anything to eat, if we don't stock up when we have the chance."

The young man at the station gave them a parting word of advice. "You may think the hand car works hard at first, but after you get going it will pretty nearly run itself. Don't waste any time, but roll 'er along as fast as you can. Turn it over to the agent at the Junction and tell him that Jensen sent you. By-by!"

The young man was right. The hand car did run loggily at first; but with four hardy Scouts on each handlebar, it slowly gained headway.

"It's not exactly an automobile," said Specs, between strokes, "but it goes."

"You can't puncture the tires, either," added Jump.

"Somebody punctured this right forward one," suggested S. S., as by jolt and jar the wheel proved that it was no longer as round as it had been.

Nap had the solution. "Keep your eyes open, Mr. Sherlock Holmes Bonfire, and when you see a 'Free Air' sign we'll stop."

For the first time since the fire, the Black Eagles were actually growing cheerful. They seemed no longer chasing a will-o'-the-wisp hope; at last, they were substantially on their way to victory. The handles fairly flew.

"I guess old Professor Leland will be glad to see us," chuckled Roundy.

"And I guess the Belden team won't like it so well," observed Specs.

"And that party they are going to give us after the game," Bi said, smacking his lips. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

They spun along up a little grade, through a deep cut, and out upon a high trestle.

"If we were inside the car of a train," Bunny said, "we wouldn't notice a little thing like this." He looked down at a cottage nestling upon the slope below. "I hope there's somebody there with a blanket to catch us if we go over the edge."

"Somebody on the path at this side," called Bonfire. "It's a railroad man, too."

"How do you know? Is he wearing overalls and carrying an oil can?"

Above the clatter-clatter of the hand car, a voice shouted from below. ***Page 207.***

"No, he has on a blue uniform. Might be a conductor; or he may work around a station, or—"

Raspingly and distinctly above the clatter-clatter of the hand car, a voice shouted from below.

"Stop!"

"He's calling to us."

"Let him call. Maybe he's just making a speech to the trestle." Thus Specs.

"Stop that hand car!"

They had already spanned the tiny bridge and were upon the solid track beyond. Just ahead, the rails curved around a steep bank.

"Let him yell," said Bi defiantly. "He hasn't any way of stopping us, has he? Probably thinks we are stealing this old pushcart. Well, we aren't."

"What's he got to do with it, anyhow?" spluttered Nap, plunging harder than ever on the handle. "We had permission to do this, and we're going to do it, Mr. Blue Uniform or not."

It was Bunny who settled the matter. Throwing his weight on the bar as it came up, and holding it back as it swung down, he issued his orders as patrol leader. "Everybody hold fast. We're going to stop and find out what he wants."

There was a grunt of indignant protest from Specs, but the others obeyed first and talked afterwards.

"Look here, Bunny," Bi objected, as the car slowed down, "you are running this party and I'm not; so what you say goes. But I don't see any use of stopping. We aren't doing anything wrong. We've been given permission to operate the car. He hasn't any right to tell us we can't, and if he tells us we can—why, we know that already. There he comes now up over the bank. I say, start up again and explain when we get to Wells Junction."

Specs chimed in. "We're not going anywhere on our own account; we're going to play baseball for the school. All we're doing by stopping now is asking for trouble."

The wheels ground to a dead center.

Bunny's lips were set. "I know how you feel. I feel that way myself. But I know we can't do that sort of thing. This man isn't a section hand: he's wearing a uniform; he has a cap; it looks as if he had some right to tell us to stop. I'll put it up to him just as strong as I can, and he may let us go on. If he won't—"

The man was within fifty yards of them, running at a clumsy gait up the track. Though puffing and out of wind, he did his best to shout.

"Take—that—hand car—off the—track!"

"Like fun we will!" muttered Specs.

The man came on, repeating his command. "Take it off—yank it off—right away!"

Bunny stiffened. "I don't think you understand—"

"You young rascals stole this car. Yes, you did. You can't tell me any different." He was with them now; he placed protecting hands on the property of the R. A. & S. Railroad. "If you don't yank it off the track, right on the dot, I'll—"

Bunny's eyes narrowed. His hands, quite without any effort on his part, became fists. But he kept his voice level, though it had what Specs called later "a sort of grindstone sound."

"We are Boy Scouts," explained Bunny, "and we have been given permission to use the car. We stopped because we thought you had the right to tell us to stop; not because we are afraid of you. We are going to Wells Junction, and if you have nothing better to do than call us names, Mister, we'll keep right on going there."

When they talked it over afterward, everybody but Specs agreed that the man changed his style of remarks, not because he was afraid, but because he had begun to understand. However this might be, his next speech was much milder.

"Permission or not, you will have to yank this car off the track; we can talk about it later."

"But why?"

"Why! Because, if you don't, you're going to be smashed into a million pieces. There is a big special coming through any minute. It's on its way. Now, get that hand car off where it won't be responsible for an accident."

Though not trained section hands, the Black Eagles came near making a record in tipping, levering and hoisting the unwieldy hand car to a safe place along the right of way. Once it was safely there, the man in uniform seated himself on it and wiped his forehead.

"I haven't had such a turn since the bad wreck in '96. Why, when I saw you boys going lickety-split along the track, I was ready to curl up and quit. How did you happen to have the car, anyhow?"

As rapidly as possible, Bunny told him the story of the morning's adventures, including the acquisition of the hand car.

"So Jensen said that, did he? Well, he has been working there about a week, and what he doesn't know about railroading would fill a library. Letting a lot of boys come up the track in a hand car! I never heard of such a thing."

"Is your name Gillen?" asked Bonfire suddenly.

"My name's Gillen. I am the station master at Harrison City. I am responsible for whatever happens around here. There was something the matter with the wires this morning, and the last half-hour every message we received was chopped up like so much sausage. We did not get a word about the special. I hopped on the 11:50—it rolled in at 11:48—to find out what they knew, and they carried me right along. They had orders to run right through to Wells Junction unless they had passengers waiting. They dropped me here at the trestle, and I had just telephoned Jensen about it when I heard you coming. Since I stopped that hand car, I feel about ten years younger."

The minutes were ticking away, but there was nothing to be done. With the news of the special on its way, it was plain that any thought of going ahead must be put aside until they could count on a clear track. Already a mile had been covered, but the remaining distance was too great to walk in the limited time left them. No, there was nothing to do but wait.

Mr. Gillen went to the house below, to finish his talk over the telephone with Jensen, while the boys fumed to no purpose. It was after eleven o'clock when he returned, and it was almost five minutes later when the special, with its private car, rumbled by with a swish of dust and cinders.

"I am sorry, boys," said the station master, "but it is against the rules of the road to allow any outsider to take chances like those you were taking. If the special had come nine minutes ago, I should have gone on with you myself; but it's too late now even for that."

Bunny looked at his watch. At that very moment, the train which they had tried so desperately to catch must be pulling out of Wells Junction. They had lost their last chance of continuing their trip to Belden in one of its coaches.

CHAPTER XX

BUSTED!

Bi broke the silence. "I'm getting mad," he said. "It's almost as though somebody was trying to keep us from playing that Belden game. Well, I'm going to Belden, even if I have to walk."

"Walking is cheap, anyhow," sympathized Specs. "By the way, Mr. Gillen, don't you think you might loan us the hand car just this once, so we can get to Deerpark—or whatever its name is?"

The station master laughed "You couldn't pump it there on time if I did let you try, and I won't. But I will tell you boys what you can do."

"What's that?" queried Bunny, feeling very much as if a spark of sunshine had just shoved its way through some particularly black clouds.

"Some of the farmers around here own automobiles. Now, a motor car would get you to Belden just as quick as going on the R. A. & S. to Deerfield and then waiting for a 'bus. Why don't you try? They can't do any more than say 'no' to you."

"It's the only thing we can do now," agreed Bunny.

"No, it isn't," Roundy interrupted. "There's one other thing we can do, and that is—eat! We don't know when we'll be ready to tuck our legs under a table. So if nobody wants any of this truck I bought at Harrison City, I'll take care of it myself."

But the Scouts, with something like an Indian war-whoop, made it clear that they had no intention of being left out when it came to sandwiches and sweet crackers. Even Mr. Gillen, after some urging, ate a handful of ginger snaps and told them the story of the big wreck in '96. When the lunch ended, indeed, the boys were rather sorry to part with the station master, whose last words were a promise to let them all ride in an engine cab the next time they reached Harrison City.

"You will find the road just beyond that little hill," he said. "There is at least one farmhouse not more than a half mile from here. Now, don't forget that I am going to take you all riding on one of the R. A. & S.'s biggest engines when I see you again."

It was 11:25 when the boys struck the wagon road, paralleling the track, and 11:28 when they encountered a small boy with a fishing pole over his shoulder.

Was this the road to Belden? The small boy couldn't be sure; Belden was "a awful long ways"; maybe the road ran to Belden and maybe it didn't.

"We'll find out soon enough," said Bunny. "How about motor cars? Does anybody around here own an automobile?"

The small boy nodded vigorously. "You see that peddler's wagon up the road there, where the horse is standing under the tree? Well, right on the other side of the road, up a piece, there's Mr. Jenkins' house. He's got an automobile—a awful big one."

"Does he ever rent it?"

"Hold on," Bi protested; "it takes real money to rent a car, and I'll bet there isn't more than three dollars in the crowd."

"We can pay for the gas and oil, anyhow, and when we get to Belden Horace Hibbs will lend us the rest. The question is, does he rent it?"

"He takes people out sometimes," admitted the small boy.

"Then the next stop is Jenkins'," Bunny announced. "Bi, you had better act as treasurer and handle the money. Here's twenty-eight cents; that leaves me without anything."

"Better say 'busted'," put in slangy Specs, "so we'll know what you mean."

As they hurried down the road, the boys turned over to Bi all the stray dimes, nickels and coppers from their pockets, totaling altogether two dollars and one cent.

"Enough to buy the car!" commented Specs.

"At that, we are better off than our friend, the peddler," observed Bonfire. "Something has happened to his right front wheel, and he doesn't seem to know what to do."

"And something has happened to him," S. S. remarked. "Judging from his looks, he might have been run through a wringer."

The peddler was a lean, hollow-cheeked man, whose black moustache only made his pale face the whiter. As the boys came up, he was squinting ruefully at the broken wheel; its tire and splintered spokes seemed to be almost beyond repair. But when they halted by the side of the wagon, he turned and smiled good-naturedly.

"It's busted," he said, "and the more I see of it, the more busted it looks."

The boys surveyed the wheel critically.

"I don't think you can go on with that till you've done business with a blacksmith," decided Bi.

"That's just what I think, too. It's a second-hand wagon and about a fifth-hand horse." He patted the animal's lean flank. "But I hoped they would both hold together till I was fairly started. You see, I was working in the factory over at Charles City till a cleated belt and I came together in a clinch. After the doctor was through patching me up, he said I would have to stay outdoors. So I bought this outfit and was just starting my new business when the wheel busted."

"There is a good blacksmith shop back in Harrison City," Bunny suggested. "You can prop up the wagon and carry the wheel there on horseback."

The peddler nodded. "That's all right up to the point where I have to pay for fixing the wheel,

and then—" He stopped with a little laugh. "Flat busted," he confessed. "Why, if I didn't figure that my luck was going to change, I should go right up and knock on the front door of the poorhouse. The wheel's busted; I'm busted. What's more, the stuff I have on the wagon won't sell until I get past Harrison City, because they tell me that three peddlers have been along here in the last week."

An uncomfortable silence followed, which was finally broken by Bunny's saying awkwardly that it was time to move on.

"Good luck, boys, wherever you're going!" The peddler waved his hand in friendly farewell. "And if you see a stray wheel rolling down the pike, I wish you would steer it my way."

The patrol had gone less than one hundred yards when Bunny broke out with an abrupt, "Wait a minute!"

For some reason, the eight Scouts and the attached Prissler were all ready and willing to stop.

"He can't fix that wheel."

"Of course, he can't."

"He'll have to go to some blacksmith shop."

"He's not any too well, either, and chances are he has a family to support."

"Well?" said Nap. He repeated the word, "Well?"

"It's no use," sighed Jump. "I don't want to do it, but there's no way out. I'd feel a lot better, Bi, if you'd take my share of the money and give it to him."

"Same here," agreed S. S. Without any sort of hesitation or argument, the patrol commissioned Bi to carry the two dollars and the one cent to the unfortunate peddler.

Bi raced down the road, while the other eight jogged slowly, awaiting his return. When he rejoined them, he was breathless but wore a satisfied smile.

"What happened? What did he say?" They were eager for the news.

"Well, he didn't understand at first; thought I was trying to buy something. When he did understand, though, that we wanted to give him the money, he bent down and began looking at the wheel, and something got in his eyes. I didn't wait to hear all his story, but he told me enough to give a pretty good idea. He has a family in Charles City, and he left every cent with them, to keep things going. But he wouldn't take our money as a gift; wanted to know where he should send it when he could repay the loan. So I gave him Bunny's name and address."

Specs was the first to speak. "I'm glad we helped him out," he said, "but now we'd better think about ourselves. What are we going to do, now that the whole outfit's—busted?"

Bunny shrugged his shoulders. "It would be better to have money, of course, but if we haven't any, we can manage somehow without it."

They were opposite the Jenkins farm. Through the pines, the house was visible, set far back from the highway. Specs halted.

"You mean that farmer there will pay any attention to us if we can't show him our money first?"

"That's just what I do mean. We are not the only people in the world who do good turns. A lot of folks get fun out of good turns who never heard of the Boy Scouts."

Specs frowned. "And you think this farmer will take us to Belden, when all we can do is to promise him that we will pay him after we get there and borrow the money?"

"We'll find out. We'll tell him just the fix we're in and how we expect to get the money to pay him; and if he is any kind of a judge of people, he will know we are speaking the truth."

"He may know we're speaking the truth," said Specs decisively, "but when you ask him to risk his gasoline and his car, he'll say he has something else to do. But come along; you'll see I'm right."

They turned into the driveway; it led to a little lawn just in front of a white house with green blinds.

"There's the car," said Nap, pointing to a bulky automobile visible through the open door of a homemade garage.

"And back there is the man who owns it," said Bonfire. "Hear that? He's behind the house, hoeing."

"You don't know whether it's a man, woman or child," answered Specs. He stooped and picked up a stone. "I suppose if I chuck this over here, you can tell me whether it lights on an ant hill or on a yellow dandelion."

Jerking his arm, he shot the stone in the direction of the corner of the house. From the rear, a second later, came the crash and jingle of breaking glass.

"Yes, I can tell you where it lit," said Bonfire cheerfully. "It lit on a cold frame. You sent the stone right through it. And here comes the man I was telling you about. If you had kept your eyes open, you would have noticed that his coat and hat are lying over there in the grass."

From behind the house, hoe in hand, stalked a tall, big-fisted farmer, whose beetling eyebrows and scraggly beard gave him a most forbidding appearance.

"Who busted that pane of glass?" he called angrily.

"Busted!" whispered Specs. "The peddler was busted, the wagon was busted, we're busted, and now the cold frame is busted. Is there anything anywhere that isn't busted?" Aloud he said, "I did it; I threw the stone."

Bunny interposed hurriedly. "It was a mistake. We didn't know the cold frame was there."

"Mistake, huh?" His frown deepened. "Well, I suppose you can pay for your mistakes?"

Bunny shook his head. "We can't pay for it now; we haven't a cent. But the nine of us must be in Belden by three o'clock this afternoon. If you will take us there in your car we will see that you get paid for the trip and for the broken glass, too."

The farmer stared angrily. "Is that all you have to say?"

Bunny took a step forward. "No," he said mildly. "If you don't care to take us, I will leave my watch with you until I can send you the money for the broken glass. It is a five-dollar watch, so you can be sure it's worth more to me than the price of one pane of glass. And if you will let us use your telephone, while we try to rent an automobile somewhere, I'll be glad to send you the money for every call."

It is not easy for an angry man to remain angry when the person with whom he wishes to quarrel keeps his temper. For a solid ten seconds the farmer frowned; then his eyebrows raised and his balled fists unclenched.

"Look here," he began awkwardly, "I'm not such a hard man as all that. I don't want your watch. Tell me why you are all bent on getting to Belden by three o'clock."

As briefly as possible, Bunny related the misadventures of their trip.

"You're a plucky lot," commented the farmer when the boy had finished. "And I should be glad to take you, for nothing, because I counted on driving to Belden myself this afternoon. But I can't go, and I can't take you, because—"

Tense and eager, the nine boys listened for the reason.

"—because the car is busted."

"Busted!" repeated Specs dolefully. "I knew it all the time. Everybody and everything is busted!"

CHAPTER XXI

BORROWERS' LUCK

With something of an effort, Bunny wrenched his gaze from the back of the disappointing automobile and turned to Specs.

"No, not everybody," he said, striving hard to be cheerful. "There's the peddler, you know; he isn't busted any more—quite!"

"What peddler?" The farmer lifted an inquiring head.

Everybody squirmed uncomfortably. It was the code of the Black Eagle Patrol not to talk about the good turns it did, because that sounded like bragging. But the farmer was persistent. Bit by bit, with question and guess and prompting, he pieced out the story: how the boys had found the peddler on the road, with his second-hand wagon that had come to grief; how he had confessed he had no money for the necessary repairs; how the boys, because they were Scouts and it was their duty to do a good turn when they could, had given him their last cent and sped him on his way rejoicing. When the last scrap of confession had been dragged from them, the farmer held out his hand to Bunny.

"So you are the patrol leader, are you, Payton? Well, I am glad to know a boy like you. Jenkins is my name; Alfred Jenkins."

Gravely, Bunny introduced the other Scouts. "And this is young Prissler," he concluded. "He is training to be a tenderfoot, and just as soon as there is a vacancy in the patrol he will be taken in."

"So?" Mr. Jenkins nodded understandingly. He scratched at his beard. "I reckon," he added, "you get a lot of satisfaction doing good turns like that. By ginger, I'd like to have that feeling myself. If the old 'bus would only run—"

"What's the matter with it?" demanded the practical Specs.

Mr. Jenkins spread his hands helplessly. "I wish I knew. But I'm no mechanic. She's just dead; dead on her feet, you might say. Won't go. Won't even start."

"Gas line clogged, maybe."

"Loose connections."

"Carburetor float stuck."

"Magneto points burned off."

The farmer's eyes kindled before this volley of suggestions. "Say," he exclaimed, "do you boys know anything about a car?"

"A little," Bunny nodded. "Specs here is trying for a merit badge for automobiling, and we all got sort of interested in his studying. You have to know a good deal about a car to get that badge."

"Well, say!" Mr. Jenkins was as eager as a youngster. "Say, let's trundle her out here and look her over. You might find out what's wrong."

Because Specs had honestly devoted a great deal of his spare time to his ambition of qualifying for a merit badge in automobiling, Bunny put him in charge. It was no trick at all, of course, to release the brake and roll the car out of the homemade garage. Once in the open, Specs hopped into the front seat.

"No, that self-starter hasn't worked for a long time," Mr. Jenkins confessed, as the Scout pressed a tentative foot against it and cocked his ear expectantly for the hum of the motor. "Batteries dead, I 'spose. You'll have to crank her."

"All right, Bi!" called Specs; "you're the boy to wind her up."

Bi grimaced. He might need his good right arm for pitching that afternoon. But at a nod from Bunny, he sprang readily enough to the crank. Unless the car started, it looked like there wouldn't be any baseball game to play.

Balancing the crank once or twice against the compression, he lifted it suddenly and spun it with all his might. But no explosion signaled the success of his effort. Bi straightened up to catch his breath and wipe off the perspiration that was trickling down his face.

"Try her again," Specs ordered. "I'll work the spark when you get going."

Bi bent to his task for the second time. Round and round whirled the crank. But, as before, the motor refused to "catch."

"Prime her," suggested Bonfire.

Once more Bi cranked till he was ready to drop. In the meantime, Bonfire began prowling about and muttering to himself: "Tank full. Gas flows all right. Carburetor float not stuck. Must be the ignition." He tested with a long-bladed screwdriver. "Yep; no spark. Sure you've—Hello! Why, you muckle-headed McGrew, do you expect to get a merit badge for trying to start a motor without throwing on the switch?"

"What!" Bi threw himself on the ground and kicked feebly. "Do you mean to say I've been cranking my head off when you didn't even throw over the switch? Help!"

Specs grinned sheepishly. "I thought you needed the exercise," he said. "All right; she'll start now."

But she wouldn't. Bi cranked till he was red in the face, without the reward of even one feeble puff from the exhaust. With a last spin of the handle, for good measure, he stepped back disgustedly.

"If anybody else thinks he can twist her tail any better than that," he announced, "let him step up and try. I'm through; postilutely through."

By this time, even Specs was ready to admit that the motor was "busted." "It's the ignition," he explained. "As soon as we find out why she doesn't get a spark, we can fix her in a jiffy."

But discovering the nub of the trouble proved no easy job. The spark plugs were taken out; all connections were examined; each wire was traced to coil and magneto; the magneto itself came in for critical inspection. But no break or short circuit revealed itself. Already, the first glowing enthusiasm of the boys was blowing cold and dead.

Bonfire snapped the switch backward and forward. "Feels loose," he said. "Let me have that screwdriver, Specs." With deft hands, he removed the face of the switch-box. "Here's the little nigger in the woodpile, fellows!" he called exultingly. "See, those loose nuts allow the contact plate to drop down. The circuit is not completed even when you throw on the switch. No wonder she won't run!" He twirled the nuts with his fingers and clamped them tight with a wrench. "Now try her."

"Not me!" jeered Bi. "I've cranked her from here to Belden already. Let somebody else crank her home again." But even while he talked, he was walking toward the front of the car. Roundy reached for the swinging handle, only to be pushed aside by Bi. With scarcely an effort, the strongest Scout in the patrol turned her over again—and the motor sprang into life with a roar.

"Throttle her down!" Bi shouted to Specs. "Wake up there! Don't let her race! If ever you win a merit badge for automobiling, I'll eat it for breakfast. Isn't he rotten, Mr. Jenkins?"

The farmer smiled. "Oh, he'll pass, I reckon. Now, let me see. Five of you on the back seat, two on the collapsible chairs—that's seven—and two of you on the front seat here with me. Wait just a minute till I get my coat and tell my wife I'm going, and we'll start."

"With any kind of luck at all," Bunny promised happily, looking at his watch, "we should be at the Belden ball park a little after one o'clock. It's 11:42 right now, and we have about thirty-seven miles to cover."

Specs held up his hand. "I've got my fingers crossed," he said. "Don't forget all the things that have happened to us so far to-day. Touch wood when you say that, Bunny."

But luck seemed at last to be roosting with the Black Eagle Patrol. Once out upon the main highway, the motor settled down to a contented purr, with never a miss or hint of trouble, and the big car rolled placidly toward Belden, piling the miles behind it quite as if it were shod with seven-league boots instead of rubber tires. Mr. Jenkins admitted that he was "no great shucks at driving", but he more than made up for any lack of technical skill by his careful and common-sense handling of wheel and accelerator. An hour before, Belden had seemed to the Scouts some far spot on the rim of the world; now, as everybody felt, it lay just over the hill.

There is no denying that the boys enjoyed the ride. More than once, they had watched enviously as Royal Sheffield dashed into Lakeville with his trim roadster; more than once, too, if the truth be known, they had lingered hungrily as he backed it out of Grady's barn after school and made ready for the homeward trip. But Sheffield lived in Charlesboro, and his motoring was done largely in the roads about that village. True, the Sefton automobile never had a vacant seat when any boy could be found to fit it; but Mr. Sefton used the car for business, and it was also frequently out of town. This was different, too; this was a cross-country jaunt, over unfamiliar roads, mile upon mile, with every turn and rise revealing new wonders.

"Like it?" asked Mr. Jenkins, without turning his head.

There was no adequate way of expressing their gratitude and pleasure, but the farmer seemed well content with Specs' explosive, "You bet we do!" It was curious about Mr. Jenkins. He owned the car, and he must have ridden thousands of miles in it; yet he seemed to be getting just as much fun out of this trip as any of his guests. "Haven't felt so young in thirty years," he said once, with a chuckle, as he swung wide to avoid a bump.

On and on sang the car: uphill, biting on second speed; across a bit of tableland, feeling its oats on high; down a long incline, pulsing with such eagerness that it had to be restrained; through wood roads, bowered with cool, overhanging trees; into the bright sunshine again; past farmhouses, with barking dogs and waving people; over long stretches of concrete, that gave back never a jounce or jolt; through sleepy little villages, waking and nodding a single welcome and good-by in one; out into the country once more, between green fields of sprouting corn and wheat; and on and on, motor humming drowsily and rubber-tired wheels crisping their chorus. It was good just to be outdoors on such a day in June.

They climbed a long, winding hill. At the top was a little cottage, bordered by a trim lawn, which was splashed here and there with gay flower plots. In the background loomed a barn, more than twice the size of the house, with a silo at one side and a windmill just beyond. Mr. Jenkins squinted meditatively from the spout of his radiator, steaming a bit, to the windmill.

"Reckon we'd better stop for water," he announced.

A gray, bent wisp of a man answered his knock on the door and listened gravely to his request for the loan of a pail. He seemed to be looking, not at Mr. Jenkins, but through him, as if he were only vaguely aware of the other's presence. But he said, "Oh, yes," and brought the pail.

It took only a minute to fill the radiator. Mr. Jenkins began to screw on the cap, while the boys piled back into the car. Bunny picked up the pail and carried it to the house. As he lifted his hand to knock on the door, he heard something that made him hesitate.

Inside the house, a woman was crying softly, and a man's voice was soothing, over and over, "Now, Ma! Now, Ma! Don't take on so! It can't be helped! Now, Ma! Now, Ma!"

After a moment of indecision, Bunny rapped. The sobbing stopped. Footsteps approached the

door, and presently it was opened, a little hesitatingly, by the man from whom Mr. Jenkins had borrowed the pail. Bunny extended it to him, with a word of thanks. He had meant to turn away at once, but something seemed to hold him.

"Is—is anything wrong there?" he asked, jerking his thumb toward the darkened room within.

"It's just Ma," the little man told him. He spoke meekly, almost apologetically, but his high-pitched voice carried clearly to the other boys. "She's all broke up over not seein' John."

"John?" Bunny put a question in the word; then, when it brought no reply, he added, at a hazard, "He's your son, sir?"

"Yes, John's our boy. He's a good boy, John is. But he's been away a long time, and now—"

"Is he coming home?"

The man raised his hand as if to ward off a blow. "No," he said in a wavering voice. "He's going away, mebbe for years; going away to China. He's an engineer, John is; works for a big construction company in New York City. This spring he wrote that he would come home to visit Ma and me. So we tidied up all about for him." The little man waved an expressive hand, and Bunny understood, all at once, why the grass was so neatly cropped, and why the flowers studded the lawn, and why the pathway to the door was made of clean, white pebbles. It had all been done for their son. "But to-day we got a telegram—delayed, they said over the 'phone. He can't come. He's ordered to China, right away, to help build a new railroad. His boat leaves San Francisco on the sixth, and he can't even stop on his way across the country. But he said—"

"Yes?" Bunny encouraged.

"He wired to meet his train at Middletown on the third—that's to-day. It stops there twenty minutes. But the telegram just came, and we haven't any way of getting there. That's why Ma is all broke up. She won't see him for years more, mebbe."

"Oh!" said Bunny. A queer, numb feeling seemed to be gripping him. "How far is Middletown?"

"Eighteen mile; nearer nineteen, mebbe."

"And Belden?" Perhaps Mr. Jenkins could come back.

"Nine mile and a half."

"When does that train get to Middletown?"

"Goin' on two o'clock, I think."

"Oh!" said Bunny again. He looked at his watch: 12:51. No, even if Mr. Jenkins were willing, it would be out of the question for him to come back to Laurel in time to take the old couple to Middletown. There was just one way out of the difficulty.

The man's wistful eyes were staring again, looking straight through him, just as they had been when he answered Mr. Jenkins' knock. Bunny understood now what they were straining to see. It was another boy, this little man's boy, bound for a foreign country. And inside the house, striving bravely to stifle her sobs, was the mother.

Bunny made up his own mind quickly enough. He knew what he wanted to do. But there were the other fellows to consider. They wouldn't agree to his plan; no, not in a thousand years. They had a right to—

Behind him, he caught the murmur of a low question and answer. Then a voice called, "Oh, Bunny!"

"Yes?" He turned to the car. Save for Mr. Jenkins, it was quite empty. All the boys had climbed to the ground.

"Mr. Jenkins will take them to Middletown." It was Bi speaking. "He says he will be glad to do it. Tell her to hurry."

Bunny's heart gave a glad leap. It wasn't wholly because of the sacrifice they were all making, although that counted, of course, but because of the way in which they had decided the matter, unanimously and without a single objection. He wondered if anywhere else in the world there were fellows like that!

"All right," he said, fighting hard to keep the catch out of his voice. Then to the man in the doorway: "Mr. Jenkins will take you and your wife to Middletown, sir, so you can see your boy. Oh, no, we'll be glad to stretch our legs and walk a bit. That's nothing. Good-by, sir."

"Good-by," said the little man. His eyes were shining now. He held out a trembling hand. "Good-by and God bless you!"

And with this benediction ringing in their ears, the nine boys waved to Mr. Jenkins, who was fussing with something on the dash, and began the hike down the long hill toward the wooded valley at the bottom.

CHAPTER XXII

ONE CAR AND THREE COWS

The young man looked worried. He was capless and coatless, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the elbows. When he saw the nine boys approaching, he stopped and waited for them.

"I'll bet you," said Specs, "that's George W. Trouble's youngest son. About half the world seems to be needing help to-day. Shall we walk right past without seeing him?"

"Shall we?" asked Bonfire slyly. "We can pretend, of course, that we don't notice his car, on ahead a bit."

"Whose car? Where? How do you know?" Specs was twisting his head and straining his eyes for some glimpse of an automobile. "What makes you think he has a car?"

Bonfire grinned. "Well, maybe he carries those goggles in his shirt pocket just to look like a driver, but—"

"Anybody could guess after seeing them," sniffed Specs, unimpressed. He caught the snicker that was going around the patrol. "Oh, all right! All right! Maybe I did overlook 'em. If you're so smart, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, tell me where the car is and why he isn't riding in it."

Bonfire bowed mockingly. "Certainly. The car is down there in the hollow, off to one side of the road. It is stuck in the mud. The man has tried chains on the rear wheels, but it won't pull itself free, even with them. He wants us to give him a lift."

"Rats!" said Specs. He dismissed the statements as careless banter. "But if that fellow has a car able to run to Belden, and needs something like a loose switch tightened—" A heavy wink completed the sentence.

Bunny frowned. There were times when Specs simply could not and would not remember the Scout law about taking pay for good turns. But it was too late to thresh out the question with him. By this time, they were abreast the young man.

"Good afternoon, fellows!" he said to them. "I'm in a bit of a mess, with my car stuck in the mud there in the hollow. I swerved off the road, to avoid running down a dog, and plumped into the soft creek-bed. She won't pull out, even with chains."

Bunny nodded his willingness to help. He was afraid Specs would blurt out something about pushing out the car in return for a ride to Belden but he need not have worried. Specs was wholly beyond speech. The absolute confirmation of Bonfire's guesses, detail by detail, had left him stunned and dumb.

"Say," he gasped to that Scout, as they turned to follow the young man to a point where the road dipped into a broad gulley, "how did you figure it all out, anyhow? What did you see that made you know about the mired car?"

"Nothing," smiled Bonfire good-naturedly. "I didn't see a thing except the goggles; they connected the man with a car. But I did use my ears. Halfway down the hill, when everybody was pretty glum and not saying much, I heard a motor racing, then the clutch thrown in, then a sort of churning, with the motor slowing till it almost stalled. Once or twice it did. So I knew a car was stuck. It was off the road a ways, of course, because this is a state highway, with a rock bottom. And the only place a car would mire is in some low hollow, where the sun never has a chance to shine through the trees and dry the mud. That's all."

"But you said the car had chains on."

"Oh, yes, the chains. I did use my eyes there. It was the mud on the man's shirt sleeves, where he reached around the tires putting them on, that told me he had tried chains. Anything else you want to know?"

"What color are his grandmother's eyes?" Specs demanded fiercely. "Tell me that, you bunk detective. What's his sister's middle name? What make of car is it?"

"Saybrook touring," answered Bonfire, picking up the last question. When Specs, completely dazed by this new flash of information, looked up with awestruck eyes, the other Scout pointed a gleeful finger at the car beside the road. "All you have to do, my boy, is to keep your eyes and ears open. Come on; Bunny's calling."

Getting the car out of the mud was neither a long nor a difficult job. All it required was a little knowledge and common sense. The wheels had evidently sunk a few inches at the outset, and their useless whirling had furrowed a nasty rut, made deeper by the use of chains. But when the boys had helped jack up the rear end and filled the holes with branches, against which the chains could bite, and had made a path of the same material to the solid road, the car pulled itself clear without any trouble at all.

"Well," said the young man, wiping his forehead, "I might have done all that by myself. Just the same, I'm much obliged." He drew a purse from his pocket. "How much do I owe you?"

The "busted" patrol gasped. It was as if they feared their leader might falter before this temptation. But Bunny waved back the bill the young man was offering.

"Nothing at all," he said. "We are Boy Scouts, and we are not allowed to take pay for doing good turns."

"But if you are going to Belden—" Specs began insinuatingly.

"I'm not," said the young man.

"If you are," Specs persisted, "or if you could go there, we'd like to be taken along."

"Well, I'm not," said the young man again, "and I can't." He said it very decisively. "I'm much

obliged for your help, but I can't pay for it—that way." He smiled a little derisively, stepped on the self-starter, and shot the car at the long hill down which the boys had just come.

"I hope he gets stuck again," snorted Specs, looking at the swirl of dust that marked the young man's going. "I hope he breaks a steering knuckle and six spokes, and has nineteen punctures."

"No, you don't, either," Bunny put in. "You're wrong and he's right. Do you realize, Specs, that this is the first time in all our trip we have given a wrong impression of the Boy Scouts? That man thinks we did him a good turn in the hope of a reward; he'll think we always want some kind of pay when we help somebody out. Well, we don't; and what's more, we're going to stop making people think we do."

In the face of this gentle reproof, Specs had nothing to say. When they resumed their hike, he fell in at the rear and seemed to be pondering the matter. Opposite the next farmhouse, he drew up to the patrol leader and said, in a nonchalant way. "All right, Bunny; I'm cured." Then, to prove it, he raced into the yard and pumped a trough full of water for an old lady, and raced out again to the Scouts before she had time to thank him.

With this minor worry off his mind, Bunny faced the greater problem of getting to Belden in time for the ball game.

"It's a good nine miles yet," he told the others, "and we have less than two hours to make it. At the Scout pace, we might possibly cover the distance in time, but it would leave us all played out. I guess we'll have to turn in somewhere and—and find another Mr. Jenkins."

They were in the lowlands now. The road stretched ahead, as far as the eye could reach, between lush fields of corn and wheat and oats. Grimly, without talking, the boys plodded on, pressing ahead as steadily as if Belden were just around the next corner. But it wasn't, of course, and something had to be done to revive their drooping spirits. At the worst, a halt at some house would serve to break the monotony of the hike.

Bunny chose a prosperous looking place on the right. The house was big and freshly painted. The barns and granaries were in good repair. Up-to-date farm implements nearly filled the yard. Everywhere was an air of success.

A shaggy shepherd dog ran to meet them, barking uncertainly and wagging its tail, as if divided between a desire to be courteous and yet to serve its master at the same time. Bunny called to the animal, and it came close and sniffed at his legs, and was satisfied. He hoped its owner would prove as friendly.

But when he knocked at the door, there were no answering footsteps. He knocked again. A third time. Convinced at last that they were merely wasting precious time, he turned to the others with a little gesture of disappointment.

"There's nobody home," he said.

"I can tell you something else," added Bonfire. "The man who lives here doesn't own an automobile; there's no garage. And he has only two horse stalls in that big barn, both empty. Even if he wanted to help us get to Laurel, he couldn't."

Bunny nodded gloomily. "We might as well hike on."

Fifty yards down the road, Bonfire lifted a pointing hand.

"Look there!" he shouted. "Three cows in that cornfield, gobbling up those little stalks as if they were prairie grass. I don't believe—Ah, I thought so! See that gap in the fence on the far side. They have broken in."

"And nobody around to chase them out," said Specs briskly. "I guess it's a job for us."

"What good would it do us?" Bunny tested him. "There isn't a soul about to thank us or to give us a lift on our way."

Specs hung his head. "Aw, Bunny!" he protested; "forget it, won't you?"

And then everybody laughed, as if it were a great joke, and finally Specs laughed, too. After that, there was no question about what they meant to do. Nine boys climbed through the barbed-wire fence along the road and went whooping toward the astonished trio of cows. Tender and juicy as the cornstalks were, the animals realized that their stolen meal must end. They turned and galloped awkwardly through the gap in the fence, back into their own field.

"Sorry, old girls!" shouted Specs, quite himself again, "but you can't eat up a crop just for the sake of one square meal. Besides, you'd get an awful, awful tummy-ache."

"Now let's patch up the break," urged Bunny. "We can prop up this broken post and restring these wires. It won't take ten minutes."

In something like half that time, the fence was as good as new for all practical purposes. While they were winding the last loose strand about the bolstered post, a voice from the cornfield said pleasantly:

"When the boss's away, the cows will play. Thank you, boys; thank you!"

The minute Bunny looked at the man, he knew he was going to like him. He stood just beyond the dividing fence, his lean, brown face crinkling into an irresistible smile.

"Are those your cows, sir?" Bunny asked.

"I own them," the man admitted, "and I still own the sprouting corn in this field—thanks to you boys. I came up the road just in time to see what you did for me. But I am curious to learn how you happened to be passing, and why you stopped to save my crop from serious damage. Suppose we all adjourn to my house yonder, where we can talk things over. There is a crock of cold milk there, and a jar of cookies and doughnuts. If you will do me the honor—" He broke short the sentence with another of his big, fine smiles, and turned to lead the way. The Scouts fell in behind him.

Over the doughnuts and milk, Bunny fell ready victim to the stranger's warming personality; and somehow, without being able to tell exactly how the conversation started, he was revealing the troubles of the Black Eagle Patrol in getting to the baseball game at Belden, and explaining the mishaps it had encountered. Bonfire's previous assurance that there were no cars or horses on the place made it easier. The man couldn't possibly misunderstand.

Nor did he. He knew all about Boy Scouts and good turns without hope of reward, and he nodded and smiled and said, "Exactly!" when Specs remarked that they knew he hadn't any means of taking them to Belden.

"And I am afraid," the man added, "there isn't a thing on wheels or four legs in this country that hasn't trundled or trotted to the farmers' institute at Middletown this afternoon. That's where my own team went, and I do not own an automobile." He looked quizzically at the boys. "You are ready to admit, I suppose, that you have come to the point in your trip where, if it were a story, the author would write 'The End.' It isn't even 'To Be Continued.'"

"But it is, sir," Bunny denied sturdily. "We're going on to Belden. I know we can't make it afoot in time now; but even if we reach the ball park during the ninth inning, and even if we get there so tired we can hardly move, we're going to make it. We—we aren't quitters, I guess."

"Good!" said the man. "I like that spirit. It moves mountains and—hearts." He walked to the window and stared toward a distant field. "Then you boys could not help me on the farm this afternoon, I suppose?"

"No," Bunny confessed reluctantly, "I'm afraid not."

"I did not expect you could," the man said, with his understanding smile. "Anyhow, my machinery needs overhauling by some expert."

The nine boys smiled back. A Scout must be cheerful. But it was hard to smile, very hard, with the clock on the wall striking half past one and Belden nine miles away.

CHAPTER XXIII

LOST: ONE BASEBALL TEAM

In choice seats of the Belden bleachers, opposite first base, sat two men and one girl. Anybody with half an eye could see that the girl was in charge of the party. For instance, every time the gathering fans in the stands chorused the staccato Belden High School yell, she sprang up, like a cheer leader, with her black eyes snapping, and said: "Right back at them now! We'll show them! Ready! One—two—three!" And Mr. Sefton and Mr. Hibbs and Molly Sefton roared defiantly:

"U Rah! U Rah!
U Rah! Yi!
Lakeville! Lakeville!
Lakeville High!"

Out on the diamond, the Belden team practiced in a desultory fashion, keeping one eye on the ball and the other on the gate of the park—which, it may be remarked in passing, was all right so far as the gate was concerned, but not particularly helpful in batting, throwing, or catching. In fact, the nine was displaying a brand of baseball that would have shamed a bunch of kindergartners; and the boys knew it and were consequently irritated. But the fault was not wholly theirs.

The trouble was that even at two-thirty with the stands rapidly filling, with the Belden team warming up, and with the umpire waiting patiently and pretending not to see or hear anything that was going on (as all good umpires must pretend before they slip on their chest protectors and fill the pockets of their navy-blue serge coats with balls and go out behind the pitcher and raise their right hands and yell, "Pla-a-ay ba-a-al!")—with everything and everybody apparently ready for the game that was scheduled to begin half an hour later, the opposing Lakeville players had not yet arrived.

"But they'll come," declared Molly Sefton for the hundredth time. "If they don't"—she stamped her foot angrily—"if they don't come, why—why, we'll just go out there and play that Belden team ourselves." Whereat the portly Mr. Sefton and the gray-haired Mr. Hibbs winced perceptibly.

"I don't understand it," said the Scout Master of the Black Eagle Patrol, also for the hundredth time. "The train should have arrived long ago."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Sefton, speaking as if it were a lesson he was learning by heart. "It's late, that's all. Nothing to worry about. Give them time."

Molly saw the man first. He was shouldering his way up the rows of seats from the ground toward them, and he was doing it with an officiousness that marked him as a person of importance. He wore a black suit, almost ministerial in cut, a stiff white shirt, and a black bow tie of the sort that is put on by tucking two stiff ends underneath the flaps of a turn-down collar.

"Gentlemen," he said, halting before the two Lakeville men and ignoring Miss Molly altogether, "where is your baseball team?"

Mr. Sefton held him eye to eye. "It's coming," he announced confidently.

"Are you the Belden coach?" Horace Hibbs asked mildly.

"No, gentlemen, I am not the coach. I am, you might say, the man behind the team. Throughout the season, I have been its supporter, its mainstay, its benefactor. Allow me to offer an illustration of what I mean. Do you see that flagstaff?"

"Yes."

"I contributed that. When Belden has won this game, I shall run up the pennant with my own hands, and I shall, at the request of my friends, say—ahem, a few words of congratulation to the team and the assembled crowd."

"Indeed!" remarked Mr. Sefton, without any great show of enthusiasm.

"But I am digressing," the great one stated. "I came here to warn you gentlemen that if, on the stroke of three o'clock, the Lakeville team is still missing, I shall instruct the umpire to forfeit the game by the usual score of nine to nothing. Immediately, I shall award the pennant to Belden and begin—ahem, my speech. I thank you, gentlemen."

"For what?" gasped Mr. Sefton, watching the man push his way to the bottom of the stand. "Look here, Horace, they can't do that, can they?"

Mr. Hibbs shook a worried head. "I don't know," he confessed. "In golf or tennis, of course, if a player does not report, he forfeits his contest. And there is a baseball rule to the effect that if a team refuses to play—"

A boy stalked along the ground at the foot of the bleachers. He was waving a paper and shouting: "Horace Hibbs! Message for Horace Hibbs! Horace Hibbs! Message for—"

"Up here, boy!" Molly sprang to her feet, waving wildly. "Right up here!—Let him pass, *please*! Thank *you*!—This is Mr. Hibbs—Quick! What is it?"

With nervous haste, Horace Hibbs unfolded the paper. The message was scrawled in a free, running hand, with several erasures, as if it had been taken over a telephone. He read it to the other two:

> Tell Horace Hibbs, Belden High School baseball park, that Lakeville team has been delayed by bad freight wreck on railroad ahead. May be very late in arriving. Hold game.—Leland.

"Oh!" gasped Molly. It was as if somebody had struck her a stinging blow on the cheek. She

felt the pain, the mental despair, and then, as the numbness passed, a tingling anger and unreasoning spleen against the world in general. "Oh!" she said again, crimsoning. "They are in trouble. It isn't fair. Why don't you men do something? Dad, how can you sit quietly when the boys need help?"

Mr. Sefton took the message from Horace Hibbs and smoothed it upon his knee. "H'm! No time mentioned; no name of the place where they are stranded. But they will know at the Belden station. I will get in touch with the team by telephone; then we will see what can be done." And with a final admonition not to worry, he was gone.

With troubled eyes, Molly Sefton and Horace Hibbs followed his course across the park. Once, near the ball players on the diamond, he seemed to hesitate, as if to offer them some explanation; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he marched on without stopping. Again, near home plate, he turned his head at the call of the pompous man who meant to award the pennant to Belden. Even from where they sat, the girl and the Scout Master could see Mr. Sefton smile and nod confidently. He believed the Lakeville team would yet arrive safely, and he meant to make the important person believe it, too.

"Good old Dad!" beamed Molly. She squirmed sideways on her seat. "Talk to me, Horace Hibbs. Tell me the team will come. Tell me it will be here in time. It must, you know; it just must!"

"Of course," said Horace Hibbs simply, "it will come." There was something so earnest in the boyish way he said it, and in the plausible reasons he gave later for expecting the missing team, that Molly felt her courage warming again. The twin worried lines from the top of her nose to the middle of her forehead ironed out; the corners of her mouth quirked into the forerunner of an honest smile.

In the meantime, though, the minutes had been ticking away. It was a quarter of three now. Up and down the stands, impatient fans, who could not understand why the Lakeville nine did not take the field for practice, were shuffling their feet uneasily, and calling, "Play ball! Play ball!"

The messenger came a second time. He knew now where to find Horace Hibbs, and he was holding out the scribbled paper before either Molly or the Scout Master saw him. It read:

> We are leaving to walk around wreck to Elkana, where conductor tells us they may start another train for Belden, to take place of one held up by blocked track.—Leland.

"Wait!" Molly called to the boy as he was turning away. "Where did you get this?"

"Long-distance telephone to the grand-stand over there."

Molly dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Then Dad won't know where to reach the team," she said, puckering her mouth as she thought rapidly. "You must find him here at the station, Horace Hibbs, and tell him to call up Elkana. Run along. Don't waste a minute. If they are really coming, I will keep this game from starting till they get here."

Obediently, the man rose. Whatever doubts he may have entertained as to her ability to handle the situation at the ball park vanished before the determination expressed by her pursed lips and clenched fists. She was competent, Horace told himself; yes, as competent as any Scout in the Black Eagle Patrol.

With both her father and Horace Hibbs gone, Molly realized that she was now the single Lakeville representative in all that crowd. The thought sent little prickles down her rigid back, and she caught herself plucking nervously at her skirt. The discovery wounded her pride.

"Now, Molly Sefton," she admonished herself severely, clasping the errant hands in her lap, "don't be a good-for-nothing, sniveling little coward!"

More time passed. More fans stamped their feet and yelled, "Play ball!" The important person who was going to have the umpire forfeit the game strutted to the bottom of the rows of seats. There, watch in hand, he looked up near-sightedly, without discovering that two thirds of his former audience had disappeared, and said, in a voice like fate, "Five minutes more, gentlemen; five minutes!"

Molly was having a good deal of trouble keeping herself in leash. She wavered between a desire to shriek at the top of her voice and another to get out the little lace-fringed handkerchief Aunt Ella had given her, and have a good cry. It took courage to fight back both temptations. Instead, she plucked at the sleeve of the high-school boy at her side.

"Will you do me a favor, *please*?"

The high-school boy would.

"Run down there to the diamond, then," Molly commanded, "and ask the captain of the Belden team to come here a minute, *please*!"

She liked the boy in uniform who responded to her call. He had round blue eyes, lots of freckles, and a smile that came without coaxing. It was easy to tell him the troubles Lakeville's team was encountering.

"So they are coming, you understand," she finished breathlessly. "If you will just hold the game a few minutes, till they get here—"

"Why sure!" The boy fumbled with his cap and spoke awkwardly, but there was no doubting his sincerity. "We meant to postpone the start till your team came, of course."

"But that—that man—" Molly halted until she had spied the important person and pointed him out to the Belden captain. "That man said he would tell the umpire to forfeit the game at three o'clock if our boys weren't here."

"So he could make a speech, huh?" The boy's smile revealed two rows of gleaming white teeth. "That's old Senator Cannon, who used to be in the State legislature; he'd rather make a speech, I

guess, than eat. Regular talking machine, that man. But he isn't running our ball team. Why, he wanted to award the pennant last week, after we licked Elkana—so's he could make a speech, you see."

"The idea!" sniffed Miss Sefton in her most grown-up manner.

"But we fellows voted 'no' on his little scheme. Said we had Lakeville to trim for a clear title to the State championship. That's why we are so keen to play to-day, even if we start a bit late. You know, it's this afternoon or never, because school ended yesterday, and we can't very well postpone the game."

"Oh, you won't have to worry that way," Molly assured the Belden captain. "Our team is surely coming. It—it—" She faltered at sight of the messenger, on his third trip that day. Some inkling of impending disaster gripped her. Before she spoke again, she moistened her lips. "Well, what is it now?"

"Message for Horace Hibbs."

Molly reached for the paper. She had meant to ask for it, but the words would not come. All at once, she was afraid of what those scrawled words might reveal. The Belden captain watched her curiously.

But she was no coward. She would prove that much. So, calling upon every ounce of her will power to steady her fingers, she calmly unfolded the paper and read the message. There was not even the flicker of an eyebrow to suggest its import. When she had deciphered the final blur that stood for "Leland", she looked up at the boy.

"I am sorry," she said in a low, hurt voice, "but I am afraid we can't play the game, after all. The team is—is not coming."

For the message read:

> Tell Horace Hibbs, baseball park, that no train will leave Elkana for Belden before night. Too far and too late to use automobile. We are getting ready to start back home.—Leland.

If the Belden boy spoke to her, Molly did not hear him. For a time, indeed, the measured *pound-pound-pound* of her heart tolled so loudly that it deafened her to all else. Not till her quickening ears counted the three strokes of some belled clock in town did she become conscious of the babel about her.

It was time for the game to begin. To the rhythm of thousands of stamping feet, the fans were dinning, "Start the game! Start the game!" Off down the road, outside the park, a muffled roar grew and doubled in volume, like distant thunder coming closer and closer. It rumbled to the very gate; it died to a faint putter. As the great swinging doors flung wide, it belched forth once more, nerve-racking, ear-rending.

Then Molly gasped and stared.

Into the ball park rolled the queerest contrivance she had ever seen—a great engine, running on broad, endless belts instead of wheels, and towing behind it a half-loaded hayrack.

"It's a farm tractor!" said a startled voice below her.

"It's the Lakeville baseball team!" screamed Molly watching Bunny Payton and Bi Jones jump from the hayrack, with at least seven other boys ready to spill over the sides.

She experienced a sudden absurd pity for the man who wanted to forfeit the game, that he might make a speech, and for the blue-eyed, freckled Belden captain who was about to lead his team to defeat, and for all those fans who counted confidently on a Belden victory.

They were very still now, very apprehensive. In a little while, she guessed, they would be sorry the Lakeville nine had ever come. She laughed hysterically and sprang to her feet. With a Lakeville High banner streaming in the wind, she shrieked at the top of her voice:

"Play ball!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MOLLY INSISTS

As he leaped from the hayrack, Bunny glanced apprehensively toward the diamond. It was a little after three, he knew, and he was afraid the game had already begun. Even with the substitutes, Lakeville might be holding her own; but he guessed shrewdly that Buck and Barrett and Sheffield and the others would be pretty glad to see the remaining members of the regular nine.

But something was clearly wrong. The Belden players were batting and fielding fungoes and grounders, with not a single Lakeville fellow in sight. Even the Lakeville bench was empty. And now, for the first time, he became aware that no spontaneous cheer had greeted the arrival of the Scouts. The scattering applause had come from the Belden fans; it was no more than polite interest in their appearance at this eleventh hour. Yes, something was decidedly wrong.

The patter of running feet and the flutter of swishing skirts spun him around as abruptly as if some drillmaster had commanded, "About face!"

"Hello, Molly!" he said to the flushed girl who stood before him. "Where are the other players?"

"They aren't coming," cried Molly Sefton breathlessly. "A wreck blocked the track. And, oh, Bunny, they want to forfeit the game, and a mean old man is going to make a speech and award the pennant to Belden, and they can't postpone it till some other day because it's the end of the season, and everybody thinks you are afraid to play for the championship—afraid, Bunny! But you aren't, are you? And there are nine of you boys here now, and—"

Bunny stopped her with a bewildered gesture. "Just a moment, Molly. Let's understand all this." And he began to ply her with questions, till the whole story was told. At its end, he nodded dubiously.

"And now you're here, at last," the girl said triumphantly, as if their presence righted the universe.

"Yes, we 're here," Bunny admitted. "An hour or so ago, we didn't think there was a chance of making it, either. You see, we were talking to a farmer who didn't own an automobile and whose horses were all out. He said that he didn't belong to any patrol, so far as he knew, but that he guessed he must be a Boy Scout at heart, because he tried to live up to all the laws of the organization. And then, all at once, he remembered something, and slapped his knee, and said, 'Boys, I haven't done my good turn to-day, and I've just thought of a way. My farm tractor needs overhauling by the agency in Belden. I'll hitch it up to a hayrack and haul you all there.' So he did."

"Wasn't that splendid!" said Molly, clapping her hands. "And just think, there are exactly nine of you boys—enough for a baseball team!"

"Nine of us, yes," agreed Bunny, "but only three of the regular Lakeville team, not counting Bi and myself, who are pitchers. Too many substitutes, Molly. Still—" He paused doubtfully.

"Play them!" urged the girl. "Beat them! I just know you can do it—you Scouts!"

Bunny considered. "I might use Bi behind the bat," he said, weakening, "and I could pitch. With Roundy and Jump and Specs and—and S. S., we would have a fairly good infield. Nap might do for center field, too." He felt this was stretching the facts a bit, but he couldn't very well say Nap was merely better than nobody. "Only—well, at the start of the season, there were just two fellows in school who didn't try for the team—Bonfire Cree and Prissy Prissler. I'd have to play them in right and left fields."

"But Bonfire can bat," Molly declared loyally. "Don't you remember that home run he knocked the first day of school?"

"It was an accident; he says so himself. You saw him fan on three straight balls at your picnic afterward."

"He can bat," Molly insisted stubbornly. "I just know he can, if he really has to. And Prissler will do his best to help you win. Besides, Bunny, there's that mean old man who wants to give Belden the pennant, and all those fans who will think you are afraid to play."

Bunny smiled at her. She was only a girl, of course, and she could not be expected to understand the difficulties such a patched-up team must encounter. But she believed in the Scouts; she had faith in them. After all, however the game might go, they could not afford to sacrifice Molly's friendship. And they might—just *might*—win!

"We'll play," he told her quietly. "Now, where's the Belden captain? I wonder if he will allow us to practice for a few minutes."

The blue-eyed, freckle-faced leader of the home team came quickly at Molly's call. "How are you, Payton?" he said, shaking hands with the Lakeville captain. "Practice? Sure; as long as you like. Got any uniforms or bats or gloves or balls? H'm! We can fix you up on everything except uniforms, but—"

"Never mind them," Bunny interrupted. "We've walked and ridden forty miles or so in these clothes we're wearing, and I guess we can play baseball in them. Hi, fellows!"

The practice was disquieting. The infield might have been reasonably air-tight except for the leak at third base. On that difficult corner of the diamond, Substitute S. S. Zane speedily proved that stopping sizzling grounders demanded more skill than he possessed. Out in the field, Substitute Nap Meeker missed and snared flies for an average of about .500, Substitute Bonfire Cree eventually managed to catch one soaring fungo hit, and Substitute Prissy Prissler divided

his busy moments between muffing every ball that touched his hands and misjudging all the rest.

The fans jeered openly. On the bench, the watchful Belden players tried honestly to hide the pleased grins that kept curling their mouths. Their blue-eyed, freckle-faced captain strode out to where Bunny was warming up by pitching to Bi.

"If your team needs more time for practice," he offered generously, "don't be afraid to ask for it."

Bunny plumped a singing inshoot into Bi's big pad before he answered.

"Thank you," he said. "We are ready to start the game any time now." He watched a black-garbed man walk past, muttering to himself as if he were rehearsing some speech. "And don't be too sure," he flung over his shoulder at the Belden captain, "that you are going to win that championship, either. You have to beat us first."

CHAPTER XXV

SUBSTITUTES' DAY

A gong clanged. The umpire brushed off home plate with his little whisk broom. When he turned to face the stands, the fans stilled expectantly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "the batteries for to-day's game are: for Lakeville, Payton and Jones; for Belden, Bonner and Clark."

Substitute No. 1

Out in center field, Nap Meeker looked up at the blue sky and said, very solemnly, "This is my lucky day." More than one hundred years before, history has it, the little Corsican for whom Nap was nicknamed went forth to battle with these same words on his lips. To both boy and soldier, perhaps, they marked the summoning of courage for what was to come.

For Nap dreaded the impending game. He had little skill as a player, and none knew it better than himself. This afternoon, for example, he would much have preferred to bury his nose in some unread biography of Napoleon, and live for an hour or more in those stirring times when ambition and accomplishment vaulted straight to a throne.

But he had accepted the challenge to play. As a Boy Scout, he could do no less. Loyalty to his leader, to the team, and to the school, were in his mind as inflexible as must have been the loyalty of Napoleon's soldiers to their leader in those other days. Nor was that the limit of Nap's resolution. If he were to play at all, he must actually help to make victory possible. He must offset his lack of technical skill with strategy. He must out-guess, out-plan, out-general the opposing team. For hadn't his hero once said that most battles were won in the council room, before a shot was fired?

As a result of the toss, which Bunny had won, Belden batted first. Nap shuffled about nervously as the Lakeville captain took his three practice pitches and Bi shot the last ball to Jump, on second, who swooped low to tag an imaginary runner. Then the umpire lifted his hand. "Play ball!" he said; and the game was on.

It was hard for Nap to remain inactive during the first half of that initial inning. He wished he were a star pitcher, like Bunny, with the balance of each play hinging upon his delivery; failing that, he even found himself hoping a fly ball might come sailing to him. But nothing happened to test his mettle. The first Belden batter fanned on three pitched balls; the second fouled to Bi, who calmly slipped off his mask and smothered the little pop-up without moving from his tracks; the third grounded out to Roundy, who made the play unassisted. Then Nap trotted in from the field, only to watch Specs, Jump and Bunny retired in one-two-three order. He trotted back to center field again. In a way, he began to understand what Napoleon meant when, with the war raging elsewhere, he chafed in the city and said, "Paris weighs on me like a leaden mantle."

But in the second inning, opportunity beckoned to Nap. A Belden batter shot a stinging grass-clipper straight at S. S., and that youth allowed it to trickle between his legs. The next batter flied over second. With the cry, "Let me have it!" Nap came charging in for the catch.

It was not a difficult ball to handle. Jump might have backed under it easily. But Jump's play just then, with a runner on first, was to guard the keystone sack. All this Nap sensed in an instant; all this—and something more.

The batter was merely trotting toward first. He had no hope of an error; he could already see the play reported, "Flied out to center field." But Nap, racing toward the falling ball, was fairly quivering with the hope of a strategy that filled his heart to bursting.

He was under the fly now. He lifted his hands for the catch, stealing a final glance to assure himself that the batter was still only half way to first; then, abruptly, he took one backward step, allowed the ball to hit the ground, caught it as it bounced, and shot it unerringly to Jump.

There was no need of shouting a warning to Jump. He was baseball wise. He knew what to do. Plumping one foot on the bag, and thus forcing the runner who had been on first, he whipped the ball to Roundy for the second put-out, before the astonished batter could galvanize his legs enough to beat the throw. Nap had out-witted batter and runner. There were now two out, with nobody on base.

All the Scouts cheered. Bunny shouted some unintelligible word of thanks and congratulation, accompanied by a broad grin. Stalking back to his position in deep center field, Nap said softly to himself, "I'm glad I did it if it pleases him." Perhaps this was some hazy recollection of Napoleon's message to Josephine. "I prize victory," he had written, "since it pleases you."

The last Belden batter that inning swung at three wide balls without ticking a foul.

For Lakeville, the last half of the second began well. Bi laced a clean single over short. Roundy laid down a perfect bunt, and beat out the throw to first. S. S. walked on four balls. And it was in this tense situation, bases full and nobody out, that Nap came to bat for the first time.

Just at that moment, he would have given a million dollars for the skill to lash out a long hit. But he knew, deep down in his heart, that he could never do it. Agonizing recollections of his usual attempts, resulting in feeble grounders to some waiting fielder, seared his mind. Already he could foresee the havoc he might create. In all probability, he would bat into a double or even a triple play, that would wipe clean the bases, like some remorseless scythe.

His hands slipped up on the handle of the bat. Bonner, the Belden pitcher, wound up and threw. Before Nap's worried eyes, a little swish of white catapulted over the plate. The umpire

jerked a thumb over his right shoulder. "Strike one!" he said. And Nap had barely seen that ball. No, he could never hit it out.

Bonner pitched again. It was a ball this time, purposely wide of the plate—a coaxer. Nap stood like a statue.

"Ball one!"

A third time the pitcher wound up and threw. A third time Nap did not offer at the ball.

"Strike two!"

On the bases, the runners took swift leads with each lift of the pitcher's arm, scurrying back like scared rats as the ball thudded into the catcher's glove. They were curiously silent. Nobody shouted for him to hit it; each of the three, Nap knew, was afraid he would. Like him, they feared a double or triple play might result. After all, if he stood there and allowed the third strike to be called, it would be better than forcing some runner.

He shook himself angrily. How far would Napoleon have gone if he had chosen to wait impotently? His first rule of warfare was, "Time is everything." At the thought, Nap gripped the bat more firmly, edging closer to the plate. And then, quite accidentally, he caught the signal that passed from runner to runner—the quick lifting of a finger that meant "Steal!"

Almost before he could realize that Bunny and the rest had conceded his inability to help in this crisis, and had determined on the desperate expedient of a triple steal, the Belden pitcher was preparing for his last delivery. Nap watched the wind-up with set, fascinated eyes. It was like a snake coiling to strike.

Before the circling arm had completed its queer gyrations, each runner was in action. Nap saw the pitcher's smile freeze suddenly. Like a gun discharged at half-cock, the ball leaped from his hand and came whistling toward the batter. In that tick of a second before it reached the plate, Nap found himself.

He could not swing and hit it. To try that would be utterly futile. Moreover, Bi could never reach home before the catcher had clamped the ball on him. But there was one thing Nap could do. Gripping his bat loosely, he held it stiffly before him, squarely in the path of the pitch. Ball sogged against wood and bounced back into the diamond. At the sound of the impact, Nap raced for first.

Not till he had reached the base safely, and run beyond it and turned to the right to come back, did he know what had happened. The little bunt had proved so totally unexpected that the Belden players were caught flat-footed. Bi scored. The pitcher, scooping up the ball, shot it toward third, in an attempt to catch Bunny. It was a bad throw, low and to one side, and the guardian of that sack did well to cuff it as it passed, checking its momentum enough to stop it a dozen feet beyond the base line.

Without hesitating, Bunny followed Bi to the plate, scoring on his very heels. S. S. quick to take advantage of the break of luck, scampered to third. The runs were over, and there were still two on bases, with nobody out.

But here, unfortunately, Lakeville reached the hopeless end of its batting list. Bonfire popped up an easy foul. Prissler—well, Prissler fanned ignominiously, just as everybody expected he would. Prissler was no ball player. And Specs' best was a liner straight to the shortstop.

In spite of these minor mishaps, Nap sauntered out to center field with a song on his lips. Twice in that one inning, by tactics comparable to Napoleon's best strategy, he had helped the team. What was it the little Corsican had said after recapturing Italy? "A few more events"—yes, that was it—"a few more events like this campaign, and I shall perhaps go down to posterity." Nap crimsoned guilty at the inference; just the same, his chin shot out pugnaciously. Give him another chance, and he would wind up this ball game "with a clap of thunder."

But with that one big inning ended Nap's opportunities. Not another ball was batted to center field; not once, in the innings that followed, was Nap on base. It was hard to remain inactive, like—like being weighed down by a leaden mantle; but the memory of the trapped ball and the squeeze play was quite enough to warrant his remarking occasionally to himself, "This is my lucky day."

The score:

Innings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Belden	0	0							
Lakeville	0	2							

Substitute No. 2

S. S. Zane wanted to help win that game. In the last half of the third inning, when Jump dumped a Texas-leaguer into the outfield and perched proudly on first, S. S. ran out to the coaching line.

"Take a lead!" he called shrilly. "Down with his arm, ol' boy! Watch him! Watch him!—*Slide!*—Nice work! He'll throw it away yet. He's no pitcher! See, he's scared green! Make him pitch, Mr. Umpire! Cowardy-calf! I tell you, Jump, he's got a yellow streak! He—"

"S. S.!" It was Bunny's crisp voice.

The coacher turned. At the crooking of his captain's finger, he walked back to the bench. "What's the matter?"

"You are supposed to be coaching the runner," Bunny told him quietly. "That doesn't mean jeering at the pitcher. We don't play that kind of game."

S. S. hung his head. "I—I'm sorry, Bunny. I wasn't trying to rattle him. I just forgot what I was saying, I guess."

There the incident ended. Bunny went out to the coaching box himself, and devoted his attention wholly to Jump. Back on the bench, S. S. swallowed hard.

"I didn't mean anything," he told himself gloomily. "But Bunny's right, of course. Coaching that way isn't good sportsmanship." He eyed the Belden pitcher. "Wonder how I can make it up to Bonner."

The opportunity came in the very next inning. Lakeville failed to score in the third, and the Belden team came piling in for the first of the fourth.

It began disastrously for Lakeville. There was a patter of hits and an appalling total of errors. The first batter shot a stinging liner just inside third, which eluded S. S. altogether. The next flied to short right field, and Prissler lost the ball in the sun. Then Bonfire allowed a grounder to escape between his legs. Jump bobbled an easy chance. Roundy dropped a perfect throw. Specs sailed a ball ten feet over first on an attempted put-out. Before Lakeville could settle down to the grim business of retiring the side, three runs were over the plate, and the bases were still full.

When Bunny fanned the next two batters, S. S. was elated, but not particularly surprised. He knew his captain was at his best in a pinch, and he said as much to the Belden runner on third, who happened to be Bonner, the opposing pitcher.

If this were a diplomatic effort to make friends with Bonner by starting a conversation, it failed dismally. The boy merely nodded, without saying anything at all, and immediately proceeded to edge his way off the base toward home. S. S. covered his embarrassment by slapping his bare hand into the palm of his glove.

What happened next was wholly unplanned.

There was no guile in the heart of the neatest Scout of the Black Eagle Patrol. When he saw that the Belden pitcher's shoestring was loose and dangling, he called attention to it in the most matter-of-fact, good-turn way in the world; and when Bonner glanced down, standing a few feet off third base, and Bunny suddenly snapped the ball to S. S., the latter caught it mechanically and tagged the runner before he could scramble back to safety, solely and simply because baseball instinct told him that was the thing to do.

But it was the third out. It nipped a promising rally. And it had all the earmarks of a carefully planned trick. Bonner looked at S. S. just once, with such scorn in his steel-blue eyes that S. S. wished with all his heart the earth might open up then and there and swallow him from sight.

But he did not abandon his ambition. Sooner or later, he would prove to that fellow that he could play real ball, and that he was not the kind who resorted to questionable tactics to win a point.

The last half of the fourth inning was uneventful. Only three Lakeville batters faced the pitcher —Nap, Bonfire, and Prissler; and, as S. S. confided to Bi, nobody could expect them to do anything. They justified his expectations in every way by fanning unanimously.

Belden threatened again in the fifth inning. With runners on second and first, and one out, the Lakeville infield played close, to shut off a run at home. As luck would have it, the batter lashed a stinging grounder toward S. S.

It was a hard hit ball, that even Sheffield, Lakeville's regular third baseman, would have done well to knock down, much less to field cleanly for an out. S. S. missed it altogether. Under the circumstances, this was a pardonable error. But his sudden leap, backward and to one side, which threatened a collision with the Belden runner coming from second, made the play look bad.

The runner halted instinctively for a fatal moment. S. S., now between him and the plate, lunged awkwardly for the ball, without getting his hands anywhere near it, and it shot between his legs against the Belden boy.

"Out!" boomed the umpire; "hit by batted ball."

The Belden coacher on third clucked, just clucked. He did not say a single word. But when S. S. identified him as Bonner, whom he had already twice offended, he realized what the boy was thinking. And it was ridiculously wrong! S. S. had not missed the grounder deliberately; he had tried with all his scant skill to get his hands on the ball.

What was the use, anyhow?

S. S. did not bat in the last half of the fifth, which proved a quick inning. There was a caught fly, a screaming single that kindled hope, and a fast double play that snuffed it as abruptly as it had flamed. Then Belden came to bat again.

Bunny disposed of the first two batters by forcing them to hit weak flies to the infield, but the third lined far out to right, and pulled up at third before Prissler retrieved the ball. Playing deep for the next batter, S. S. saw the Belden captain stroll up to the plate, grinning cheerfully. He hoped with all his heart that Bunny would fan him; if he did, S. S. resolved to take revenge for Bonner's implied insults by making some casual remark about the way not to hit 'em out. He was beginning to hate that complacent, smiling youngster.

As S. S. waited for Bunny to pitch, his keen eyes, trained to observe by scoutcraft, detected something that made him chuckle outright. The bat which Bonner was waving belligerently over the plate was the same one Bunny had used in the preceding inning, when he hit into a double play. At the time, S. S. had marveled at the weak grounder his usually reliable captain dribbled to the shortstop's waiting hands, and he had found the answer in the broken bat, which had cracked in its impact against the ball. And now, blissfully ignorant of the defect, Mister Blue Eyes expected to drive in a run with that decrepit bit of ash. Why, he couldn't hit it out of the diamond in a thousand years!

Bunny pitched a ball just wide of the plate. The batter eyed it without swinging.

S. S. chuckled again. But suddenly, without any reason at all, the gurgle died in his throat. Something stronger than his own desire seemed to yank him out of himself, and words that came quite without bidding formed on his lips and were spoken.

"Hi, Bonner!" they said to the boy at the plate. "That bat's busted."

The Belden captain lifted a wary head. He was clearly suspicious of some fresh trick, and he never took his eyes off Bunny. S. S. guessed he expected a strike might be sneaked over if he turned away. But when Bunny waited politely, the boy banged the end of the bat against the plate. It rang hollowly, and he promptly discarded it for another.

In another minute, when S. S. saw the grounder come zipping toward him, he wondered why on earth he had warned the batter. This hit ball was going to be hard to handle. But he set himself, with legs close together this time, and waited for it to reach him. He even had time to judge its speed, and to follow its course through grass and dust, and to decide that he could get the runner at home. He glowed with confidence.

Just at the last, though, the ball hit a pebble and bounced high over his head. With a frantic upward fling of his gloved hand, S. S. speared it neatly. But the unbraced feet and the chug of the ball were too much for his balance. He toppled over backward, and sat down with a pronounced thump.

It was clearly too late to throw across the diamond to first. If the play were to be made at all, it must be at home; and S. S. realized in a flash that by the time he came to his feet and threw, the runner would have scored. There was just one thing to do, and he did it. Still sitting awkwardly on the ground, he drew back his arm and shot the ball with all his might to the waiting Bi.

The runner slid. But good, old reliable Bi Jones, straddling the plate, took the perfect throw and clamped the ball on him a long ways from the rubber—oh, a good three or four inches, S. S. decided. He nodded at the umpire's decision. The fellow was out, of course; S. S. knew it all the time.

Coming in to the bench, he passed Bonner, who was grinning a little wryly. "Thanks," the Belden captain said to S. S.

"For what?" snapped Zane, quickly on the defensive.

"Why, for telling me the bat was broken. I liked that. You didn't suppose I was thanking you for throwing out Clark at home, did you? That was a dandy play, let me tell you, even if it was against us; yes, sir, as pretty a stop and throw as I ever saw."

S. S.'s face glowed like a full moon. "Oh, it wasn't much," he said carelessly.

But it was. He knew it was. So was the warning about the bat. He had helped save the game, and he had proved to the doubting Bonner that he was a good sportsman. He liked that laughing, blue-eyed, freckle-faced boy; he wished he would move to Lakeville.

The score:

Innings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Belden	0	0	0	3	0	0			
Lakeville	0	2	0	0	0				

Substitute No. 3

Prissler, at the tail-end of the batting list, had already struck out twice, and he expected to do it again when he faced the Belden pitcher in the last half of the sixth inning. Instead, he walked on four balls.

Somehow, it did not seem quite fair. He had done nothing to deserve the honor of being a base runner, and he felt a little sorry that the rules permitted him to profit by the pitcher's wildness. He was on first, precisely as he would have been after hitting safely. Yet he had made no hit; had not the skill, indeed, to make one. In some unaccountable manner, he had gained an advantage he did not deserve.

Prissler had batted first in that inning. Specs, up next, flied out. Jump fanned. There were now two out, with Bunny at bat.

After allowing the first pitched ball to sing past without offering at it, Bunny met the second squarely. At the crack of the bat, Prissler dashed for second.

"It's a homer!" shrieked Specs excitedly. He was coaching off third. "Come on, Prissy! Come on!"

Both the shortstop and the second baseman were facing the outfield, watching the soaring ball. Prissler touched the bag and wheeled toward third. At that corner of the diamond, Specs was executing a war-dance, with wildly swinging arms.

"Go on in, Prissy!" he yelled, waving him toward home. "Come on, Bunny! Come on!"

Prissler crossed the plate standing up. Bunny, close behind, flung himself toward the white rubber in a headlong slide. It was nip and tuck between ball and runner, but the latter beat the throw by inches.

"—safe!" came the tag of the umpire's decision. At the word, Prissler experienced an irresistible desire to turn a somersault; and did it, moreover, to the profound amazement of the Lakeville team, which had never seen him so undignified before.

But it was excusable. Not only had the Lakeville boys tied the score, but they were now leading by one run.

After the decision, the Belden catcher straightened up, with the ball resting in his big glove. He wrapped the fingers of his right hand about it, and drew back his arm for the throw to his pitcher. Then, as if changing his mind, he shot it to the third baseman, who caught it and stamped a decisive foot upon the sack.

The umpire shook his head. Prissler, watching the pantomime, wrinkled his brow. He wondered what it all meant.

"But I tell you he didn't," the third baseman said angrily. "That first runner didn't touch the bag at all. He cut across 'way out there."

Again the umpire shook his head.

Now Prissler began to understand. They were claiming he had failed to touch third before starting for home. He tried to remember. He had been running from second, toward Specs, who had waved him to keep on. He had answered the signal by turning in the direction of the plate and—

"He is right," Prissler told the umpire suddenly. "I *did* cut across the corner of the diamond without touching third."

He could not understand the stunned silence that followed. Specs' jaw dropped in consternation. One of the other fellows coughed unnaturally. In the eyes of the two or three Belden players within hearing grew a queer light of grudging admiration. With an effort, the umpire found his voice.

"Runner is out at third," he ruled.

So, after all, the two runs did not count. Technically, Bunny's long hit could be scored as only a two-bagger, although he had circled the bases before the ball could be relayed home. Moreover, the inning was over.

The seventh began badly. Perhaps Bunny was still winded; perhaps the disappointment kept him from pitching his best. Whatever the reason, the first two batters hit safely, the third advanced them with a neat sacrifice bunt, and only Jump's bare-handed catch of a liner prevented immediate scoring. Then, in his eagerness to keep the ball out of the groove, Bunny walked another, filling the bases, with two out.

In right field, Prissler stooped nervously and plucked a blade of grass. Without quite understanding why, he felt he was indirectly to blame for the threatening situation. It dated back to that play at third, upon which the umpire had reversed his decision.

"But I was out fairly," Prissler told himself wonderingly, kicking at a tuft of roots. "I couldn't say anything else, could I?"

He looked up just in time to see the Belden batter swing viciously against a pitched ball. It was a low fly, and it lifted straight toward right field.

In his first flurry of indecision, Prissler stood stock-still, thereby proving himself a poor fielder. Any expert player would have been upon his toes and away before the crash of meeting bat and ball had dwindled to an echo; for it was obvious that the fly must fall in short right field, just beyond reach of the second baseman.

But Prissler's tardy recognition of this fact was only momentary. In another instant, he was in action, racing with all his might toward the falling ball, and noting, out of the corner of his eye, that the Belden runners were circling the bases like some human merry-go-round. If he missed the catch, at least three runs would score.

But it looked impossible. The ball was falling like a plummet, well out of reach of his extended hands. He pumped his legs desperately. Bunny might have made it in time, or Specs, or some of those other fellows who had the knack of sprinting. He was afraid he couldn't.

With only a tantalizing step or two to cover, Prissler saw that the ball was nearly level with his eyes. He threw himself forward, in a very frenzy of determination. He felt himself falling. But he never took his eyes from that white comet. As he plunged to the earth, in a great welter of dust, his hands thrust forth spasmodically.

Something drove hard against his glove, slapping it to the ground. Instinctively, his left hand leaped to cover the precious ball. A shoulder hit wrenchingly, toppling him over in a curious tumble, from which he recovered with astonishing agility, coming to his feet like some jack-in-the-box, and trotting on into the diamond, with the ball held proudly aloft.

Instantly, there grew a confusion of shouts.

"He didn't catch it!"

"Trapped it; that's what he did!"

"No, he didn't, either!"

"Certainly, he did!"

Prissler smiled. He knew. He looked at the umpire for confirmation. But the official was standing there motionless, with a questioning expression on his face that said, as plainly as words, "I don't know whether the ball was trapped or caught." Prissler seemed to go cold all over.

But the umpire was a very wise man. He looked the boy straight in the eyes.

"Did you catch it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Prissler, "I did. I caught it fair and square."

"Batter is out!" declared the umpire, with just a hint of defiance in his voice. He expected a volley of protest.

The Belden third baseman looked at the Belden catcher, and they both looked at their blue-eyed, freckle-faced captain. Each one remembered the other play in which Prissler had figured. To their credit, be it said all three smiled bravely in the face of their bitter disappointment.

"If he says he caught it," the Belden captain nodded soberly, "we know he did." The catcher and the third baseman agreed. Not a single Belden player questioned the evidence.

This decision, when you come to think it over, was about as splendid a tribute to the honesty of a player as baseball history records. But Prissler saw nothing remarkable about it. He had caught the ball, and it was no more than fair that the batter should be called out. What pleased him most was the fact that the runs which had crowded over the plate did not count.

The score:

INNINGS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Belden	0	0	0	3	0	0	0		
Lakeville	0	2	0	0	0	0			

Substitute No. 4

Long before the spectacular ninth inning, you might have thought Bonfire Cree had done his share. To him Bunny was indebted for many pitching hints: this Belden batter could not hit a ball around his knees; this one was dazed by speed; this one crowded the plate and must be driven back by in-curves; this one swung awkwardly at shoulder-high pitches. Moreover, he had solved a certain sequence of deliveries by the Belden twirler. Perhaps Bonner himself was unconscious of any order in his pitches, but he began always with a coaxer, a little wide of the plate, following it with a straight, fast ball, squarely in the groove, and then with either an out or an in curve. Quite naturally, this knowledge gave the batter an advantage.

All this aided greatly; but still Bonfire was not satisfied. He might have observed and tabulated these facts from the bench. They had nothing to do with his own playing; and through eight long innings, he had failed to distinguish himself at bat or in the field.

Just before the ninth inning began, with the score still 3-2 in Belden's favor, he turned to Bunny. "I am like a coach who never made the team," he said, smiling a little wistfully. "I tell the others what to do and how to do it; but I can't seem to use the information for my own good."

"Never mind," consoled Bunny. "You've helped as much as the best player on the team. It looks bad now, I'll admit, but maybe we can stage a rally in the last of the ninth."

Now, accidents will happen with the best of regulated batters. After Bunny had fanned the boy who could not hit a ball around his knees by feeding him nothing else, and added a second strike-out to his credit by scorching three sizzling pitches to the one who was not on batting terms with speed, the next fellow, who crowded the plate, upset all precedent by taking one backward step and meeting an inshoot flush on the nose.

The minute the ball was hit, Bonfire groaned. "That's good for three bases," he said positively, without even turning to watch its flight over right field.

Prissler chased dutifully after the ball, but it was far over his head. The best fielder in the world could never have reached it in time, and Prissler laid no claims to that title. Before he could pick it up, after it had rolled nearly to the fence, and line it to Jump, via a relay to S. S., the runner was squatting comfortably on third.

"Well! Well!" shouted some Belden fan who thought he was funny. "There goes your old ball game. Look who's up now—'Home-run' Hogan!"

The batter was squat and broad of shoulder. Already he was credited with three hits in this game, and Bonfire had confessed to Bunny that he seemed to have no weakness.

"You just pitch to him," he had laughed, "and then throw up your hands to keep from getting hit by what he slams back at you."

Bunny measured this dangerous opponent a long time before he pitched. But when he finally shot over the first delivery, it was a clean strike. Out in left field, Bonfire nodded approvingly.

"No use to pass him," he agreed. "That Belden captain, Bonner, who is up next, is nearly as dangerous. No, the play is to make Hogan hit to save fielder." Aloud he called, "Get him, Bunny!"

Hogan watched disdainfully as the second pitch zipped past, wide of the plate. You couldn't fool that fellow. But the third, waist-high, straight over, was exactly to his liking. With a hunch of his powerful shoulders, he swung his mighty bludgeon of a bat hard against the ball.

It was a fly to left field, as long as the one that had baffled Prissler a moment before, but much higher. At the crack of the bat, Bonfire wheeled abruptly and began to run, picking a little tuft of grass, yards and yards away, as the target toward which the ball was speeding.

Head down, arms chugging, he ran as he had never run before. Even so, his hope of smothering the fly seemed utterly forlorn. In the first place, he was not a great sprinter; he probably could not reach it in time. But granting that his legs carried him over the ground fast enough, he had not gauged the course of the ball with his eyes; he could never hope to turn at the last instant, and find the falling ball in his very path. The Belden fans jeered his amateurish efforts, and shouted encouragement to the circling Hogan.

As he lifted a foot to plump it down on the little tuft of grass, Bonfire jerked his head around and flung up his hands. Into them, as accurately as if he had been watching it from the first, dropped the ball. He had made the catch over his left shoulder, almost at his neck.

At first, the Belden fans were disgruntled. "Horseshoes!" yelled one in disgust; and, "You lucky fish!" wailed another. But, in the end, they applauded the wonderful play.

In a way, of course, as Bonfire readily admitted to himself, it was luck: the same type of luck that makes a pitcher fling up a gloved hand to shield his face from a screaming liner, only to have

the ball hit his palm and stick there. But it was something more than mere luck in Bonfire's case; it was the result of a whole season of observation and experiment.

The secret of the catch was buried deep in the boy's peculiarly inquisitive and analytic mind.

Big-league fielders did not wait till the ball was high in the air before running to get under it. At the crack of the bat, they were off. In the few professional games Bonfire had seen, he decided these star fielders estimated the force of the drive from the sound of crashing wood and horsehide, and the direction from the first glimpse of the rising ball. It was a knack of determining the spot where the fly would land; a kind of baseball instinct that could be developed only by infinite patience and observation.

At the beginning of the Lakeville season, Bonfire set himself the stint of training his eyes and ears. Day after day, while the nine practiced or played games, he tested his own powers. Sometimes he sat on the bench, alert to hear and see; sometimes he wandered out toward the fielders. But always, when a fly was hit, his ear registered the crack of the flailing bat, and his eye followed the ascending ball. Then, abruptly, he turned away. It would fall on that spot, he guessed, picking a target in the outfield; or there; or there. At first, naturally, he was often yards and yards astray in his calculations; but as the season waned, with no lessening of his tense study, he came gradually to guessing closer and closer, till finally the accuracy of his snap decisions was almost uncanny.

"Bonfire," beamed Bunny happily, slapping the hero of the play on his back, after the Lakeville team had come in for the last of the ninth inning, "that was the most wonderful catch I ever saw. Honest, it was. I didn't know you had it in you. Why didn't you try for the team this spring?"

Bonfire stared at him quizzically. "Too big a coward, maybe," he said. "I was such a dub in track events and football and basketball and in baseball, too—last fall, I mean—that I didn't want to run the risk of being jeered and laughed at any more. Next season—" He allowed the sentence to remain unfinished, but his quick smile was more a promise than any words could have been.

With Belden leading by one run, and the game almost over, Lakeville began the ninth inning with a do-or-die energy. Roundy, up first, singled cleanly. Ordinarily, that hit would have stirred the team into ecstasies; now it called forth only a few half-hearted cheers. For Roundy was the last regular player on the batting list. After him, as Specs put it tersely, came nothing. "Nothing", in this case, meant the four substitutes.

Nap fouled out to the catcher. S. S. fanned; he always fanned, it seemed; if he had done anything else, the others would have thought it the end of the world. This brought Bonfire to bat, which is only another way of saying that the game was apparently lost; for every player on the Lakeville bench recalled his ludicrous attempts to connect with the ball when they had tested him at Molly's picnic.

But Bonfire was undismayed. Accidents might happen. Hadn't he knocked a home run that first day of school? And hadn't he studied batting as assiduously as he had studied fielding through the long season?

He knew how to grip his bat, six or eight inches from the knob, and how to take a choppy swing with his wrists, body and arms, stepping forward and sidewise to meet the ball. His older brother, who was something of a celebrity in college baseball, had drilled him in these technical points. During almost the whole of the Christmas holidays, when Bonfire had visited him, the two had repaired to the baseball cage of the college gymnasium; big brother pitching and explaining, little brother batting and—more and more frequently as they progressed—hitting. Later in the spring, two other loyal friends, sworn to secrecy, had thrown and thrown to him in the seclusion of the Cree backyard. At the outset, as in the fielding stunt, he had been chagrined over his failures. Little Jimmy White had fanned him; Molly Sefton had fanned him. But the time came when neither could fool him, when his bat lashed hard and true against their best offerings.

It was with these memories in mind that Bonfire stood facing the Belden pitcher. In the earlier innings, he had flied out once, walked twice, and missed a twisting third strike on his other trip to the plate. Bonner had him tabbed as a weakling with the bat; even his own team mates did not expect him to hit. Bonfire's lips set in a straight, firm line.

He waited unmoving as the first ball sped past. It was the usual coaxer, a bit wide of the plate. But when the pitcher wound up again, Bonfire braced himself, breathing quickly. The straight, fast ball was due.

"I'm going to hit it," he told himself in a matter-of-fact way. "I'm going to hit it—hard."

The pitch began. From the coil of whirling arms, the ball leaped toward the plate. At the same instant, Bonfire tensed the muscles of his arms and began the swing of his body. Ball and bat met exactly above the center of the plate.

"Over left-fielder's head," Bonfire exulted, trained ears and eyes determining the end of that parabola to be marked by the soaring ball, half liner, half fly. "Two-bagger, sure; maybe three."

He rounded first at full speed. Ahead of him somewhere, Roundy was tearing around the bases. A coacher waved excited arms to Bonfire. "Go on!" he shrieked. "Keep going!"

Just before his leg hit the sack at second, Bonfire stole a glance toward left field. The ball was rolling along the ground now, far beyond a youth who was frantically chasing after it. Bonfire swept on to third.

Roundy scored. Bunny, coaching off third, was threshing his arms wildly toward home, as if he were intent upon sweeping the runner over the plate. "Go on, Bonfire!" he yelled. "You can make it!"

Legs pounding like flying piston rods, Bonfire began the last lap of his race against the ball. For half the distance between third and home, he ran without hearing a sound from the Belden fans. The silence spurred him on. But suddenly they waked into rustling hope. The ball was

coming in. They murmured. They rumbled. They roared. They thundered like madmen. High above the din, Bonfire caught Specs' excited treble.

"Slide!" the voice vibrated. "Slide!"

Bonfire threw himself forward in a magnificent headlong dive. His hand ploughed toward the plate. Pebbles scratched his palm. Dust swirled up in clouds. And then, as his groping fingers found the cool rubber, he heard a thud above him, and the catcher clamped the ball hard on his protruding arm.

Bonfire leaped to his feet. The play had been close, very close. For an instant, he could see nothing but a cloud of dust. But as it cleared, his eyes found the umpire.

The man was leaning forward, arms flung wide, palms down. And he was saying, "Runner is safe!"

Lakeville had won the game and the State interscholastic baseball championship,—Lakeville and its substitutes.

The score:

Innings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		Total
Belden	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0		3
Lakeville	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2		4

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TWENTY-FIFTH BOY

Bunny was sure the young man who shared his seat on the train must be mistaken.

"You see," he told him, "there are only eight Boy Scouts in a patrol, and there is only one patrol in Lakeville. Besides, I am one of those eight. That leaves only seven you could have seen, because I have been visiting my uncle in Elkana for a week."

The young man was stubborn. "I know what I saw with my own eyes," he insisted. "Last Thursday afternoon, when I was in Lakeville, there were at least twenty kids around town in Boy Scout uniforms."

Bunny nodded politely. "Maybe some patrols from other places were there," he suggested, beginning to wish he had postponed his visit to Uncle George, instead of stopping over on the trip back from the Belden baseball game. Perhaps the Black Eagles had been entertaining, and he had missed some fun.

"That may be," agreed the young man, ready to dismiss the subject. He glanced impatiently at his watch, and clutched the sleeve of the passing conductor. "How late is this train, anyhow?"

The conductor looked out the car window. "We are just coming into Lakeville," he said. "We are due there at 6:03, and it is now 7:08; call it an hour behind time. Those two hot-boxes—" He passed on, leaving the balance of the sentence dangling apologetically in the air.

As familiar objects swept into view, several passengers rose from their seats. The train passed the Fair Play Factory at full speed, began to brake opposite Horace Hibbs' modest home in the outskirts, and ground to a stop at the station. The very first person to alight was Bunny Payton.

Peter Hinkle, the station master, waved him a welcome. Since the Black Eagles had parked the former barren spot on the other side of the tracks with green sod and a border of gay flowers, spelling out the name of the town with whitewashed stones, Peter had been their sturdy champion.

"Well! Well!" he said. "Here's another Boy Scout. The town's full of them now."

There it was again. Bunny stepped forward eagerly to ask questions; but the station master was too busy with the incoming baggage to stop for a talk. Moreover, the sight of a familiar blue hat and blue-and-white dress down the platform drew Bunny like a magnet. It was spring, and he was growing up.

"Hello, Mary Chester," he said, extending his hand.

The girl shook hands shyly. It was the first time the two had met since the memorable rescue on the lake.

"Father and I came down to mail a letter on the train," she explained. A smile lighted her face so glowingly that Bunny wondered why he had never before realized what a pretty girl Mary Jennie Chester really was. "Oh, Bunny, I'm so glad!"

"About our winning that baseball game?"

"No-o. Oh, yes, I am glad about that, too. But I meant about what's happened to you Boy Scouts. I think—"

"Mary!" called Mr. Chester from the light runabout drawn up by the platform.

With an embarrassed, "Good-by, Bunny," the girl hurried away to join her father, leaving him standing there with open mouth, looking, if the truth must be confessed, very confused and very foolish. What on earth had Mary Chester meant? What was the mystery about the Boy Scouts?

Across the road from the station, on the sidewalk, Bunny met Molly Sefton.

"Look here," he demanded shortly, "what's all this talk about something happening to the Boy Scouts?"

Molly eyed him a little coldly. She must have witnessed his meeting with Mary Chester. He wondered uncertainly if that could account for her lack of cordial greeting; and all at once, without exactly understanding why, he blushed like a silly schoolgirl. He was sixteen years old now; almost a man.

"Oh, how are you, Bunny?" said Molly, in a listless, aloof tone that sounded like the snobbish Marion Genevieve Chester in her snobbishest days. "The Boy Scouts? Oh, they're doing wonderfully well, I hear."

The tiniest wedge of a misunderstanding drove home. Bewildered, offended, unwilling to allow the doubt to remain unchallenged, yet helpless before its baffling vagueness, Bunny made some perfunctory remark. They discussed the weather; they wondered if the trains were always going to be late; they hoped the fire in Grady's barn had taught Royal Sheffield not to throw lighted matches on the floor, after he had examined cuts in the tires of his car; they spoke of the spring election that had transferred the county seat from Dunkirk to Lakeville. And then, both of them very miserable, they parted.

Opposite the Magoon residence, Felix came galloping out, tail wagging, and intimated that he was ready to run after a thrown stick. But Bunny was in no mood for the game. Twisting faithful Felix's ear in apologetic recognition, the boy plodded on toward home, where his Aunt Emma was probably keeping supper hot for him. He wondered how he was going to eat anything—now.

"All I know about the Boy Scouts," said Aunt Emma, bringing him steaming dishes from the oven, "is that there have been some new patrols formed here in Lakeville. They were organized early this week, and presidents elected—"

"Patrol leaders?"

"Yes, that's it. Let me see if I can recall who the presidents—patrol leaders, I mean—are." She checked them off on her fingers. "Royal Sheffield; that's one. And Arthur Claxton; that's two. And —and Rodman Cree; that's three."

Halfway to his mouth, Bunny halted the fork that had speared a juicy bite of roast beef. Striving hard to keep his hand from trembling, he put it back on his plate. When he spoke, it was with forced carelessness.

"How many new patrols are there?" he asked.

"Two, I think. Gracious me, Bunny Payton, how can you expect me to keep posted on the Boy Scouts, with you away? But I understand there were two new patrols, in addition to the Black Eagles. That's three altogether. I counted three pres—leaders, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's right. Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you. There is to be a big meeting in the clubhouse to-night at seven o'clock. It's after seven now, but—Why, Bunny! You aren't going to run off without finishing your supper, are you? You haven't eaten enough to keep a sparrow alive. I do hope you aren't coming down with anything. Did Uncle George look after—"

But Bunny was gone. Snatching his cap from the hall rack, he dashed out the door while she was still speaking. Aunt Emma sighed. She wondered if she would ever understand boys.

The clubhouse of the Black Eagles was ablaze with light. At the door, Bunny hesitated, uncertain of his welcome. While he was summoning courage to enter, he placed an affectionate hand on one of the rough logs that formed the wall, and stared with winking eyes at the jutting roof overhead. It was not a showy house, but it was staunch and honest from peak to foundation. He remembered the sacrifices he had made to help build it for the old patrol.

The doorway was in the shadow of one of the middle pillars. Under cover of this half-light, Bunny edged cautiously into the big room. All the boys in town seemed to be there, from Buck Claxton, sitting on the front bench, to Prissy Prissler, conspicuous in a new Scout uniform. Bunny counted them with nervous haste. Twenty-four. He counted again, hoping against hope that he had miscalculated. But the result was the same. Twenty-four boys; twenty-four Scouts. A patrol was eight; three times eight was twenty-four. The twenty-fifth—well, there was no use dodging the plain facts. There were three full patrols, with one boy over. He sucked in his breath with a curious whistling sound.

On the platform at the far end of the room, Horace Hibbs rose to his feet. He had a paper in his hand.

"First of all, boys," he began, beaming upon them with his fatherly smile, "I shall read you the roster of the Scouts of the Lakeville Troop. It is composed, as you all know, of three patrols—the Kangaroos, the Buffaloes, and the Black Eagles. The membership of the Kangaroo Patrol is as follows: Leader, Sheffield; Assistant Leader, Kiproy; No. 3, Collins—"

Bunny did not hear the other names. He was waiting with fast-beating heart for the roll call of the Black Eagles. But when Scout Master Hibbs finished with the Kangaroos, he began reading the names of those who had formed the Buffalo Patrol:

"Leader, Claxton; Assistant Leader, Barrett; No. 3, Turner—"

It seemed to Bunny he would never come to the end of the list. When he did finally, the boy at the door shrank deeper into the enshrouding gloom.

"The present organization of the Black Eagles," droned Horace Hibbs, "is as follows: Leader, Cree; Assistant Leader, Jones; No. 3, Meeker; No. 4, McGrew; No. 5, Zane; No. 6, Magoon; No. 7, Henderson; No. 8, Prissler."

Well, it was over at last. Bunny knew now who that twenty-fifth boy was—himself. What had happened? Why had he been dropped? He groped his way toward the door of the clubhouse,—the house that he had planned and helped to build. It was wrong! It couldn't be true! Surely, his ears had played him some hideous trick.

"It has been voted," Horace Hibbs went on, "that I act as Scout Master for the Lakeville Troop. In accepting the office—" The voice halted weakly. Before Bunny looked up, he knew what he would see: the gray-haired man wiping his glasses and smiling, half proudly, because to him the position was a very real honor, and half wistfully, because the snow on his head marked the years since he had been a boy himself in more than heart. In spite of his own hurt, Bunny understood and sympathized.

"I shall try," Horace Hibbs promised, after a pause, "to live up to your trust in me, boys. If you will just try to like me as well as I like all of you now, I think we shall get along together."

There came another moment of silence. Bunny stiffened apprehensively. Almost any time now, the meeting might be adjourned. If they found him there—

"And finally," continued Horace Hibbs, striving to cover his emotion by resuming his businesslike tone, "I wish to thank you, in behalf of our absent member, for the trust and confidence you have placed in him by electing him troop leader. If Bunny Payton were here, I might properly hesitate to praise him to his face; but now I feel that I may speak freely of his—"

The old adage has it that eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves. On this particular occasion, it bade fair to be shattered and laid on the shelf. It would have been, too, but for one saving incident.

Before Horace Hibbs could launch into his eulogy, Bunny slipped quietly out the door into the gathering darkness. For a long moment, he stood just beyond the threshold, breathing hard and trying to still the mad thumping of his heart. Then, without rhyme or reason, he threw up his heels and began to run at the top of his speed. The rising moon winked at him. Felix joined noisily

in the wild chase. The swaying tree tops bent and laughed in the breeze. After all, it was June, and he was only sixteen, and the world was young.

Aunt Emma looked up with startled eyes as he burst into the house.

"Please!" he panted incoherently. "Will you—If it isn't too late—I'm troop leader—A little something to eat—hungry."

The puckered lines on Aunt Emma's forehead smoothed magically. The boy could not be sick or troubled if he wanted food. A hungry boy was altogether normal. She bustled happily into the kitchen.

Bunny went straight to the telephone. When the connection had been made, he said:

"Hello! Is Molly there?—Oh, is this you, Molly? There's something I wanted to tell you. I couldn't wait. I've been elected troop leader of all the Lakeville Scouts—three whole patrols of them."

He waited a breathless second for her reply. But when it came, he laughed aloud from sheer joy of living. The Molly he had always known was talking to him now. In one ecstatic sentence, she said she was glad, and proud of him, and sure he would be the most wonderful troop leader in the whole United States, or anywhere else, for that matter; and wouldn't he go riding in the car in the morning?

His last trouble vanished into thin air, Bunny hung up the receiver and faced Aunt Emma, who was heaping the table with the most appetizing food he had ever seen.

"I guess," he grinned, "I'm about the luckiest boy in all the world."

"Why shouldn't you be?" asked practical Aunt Emma.

THE END

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