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Down in Dixie; or, The
Strange Secret of Alligator
Swamp, by active 1909-1917
Herbert Carter**

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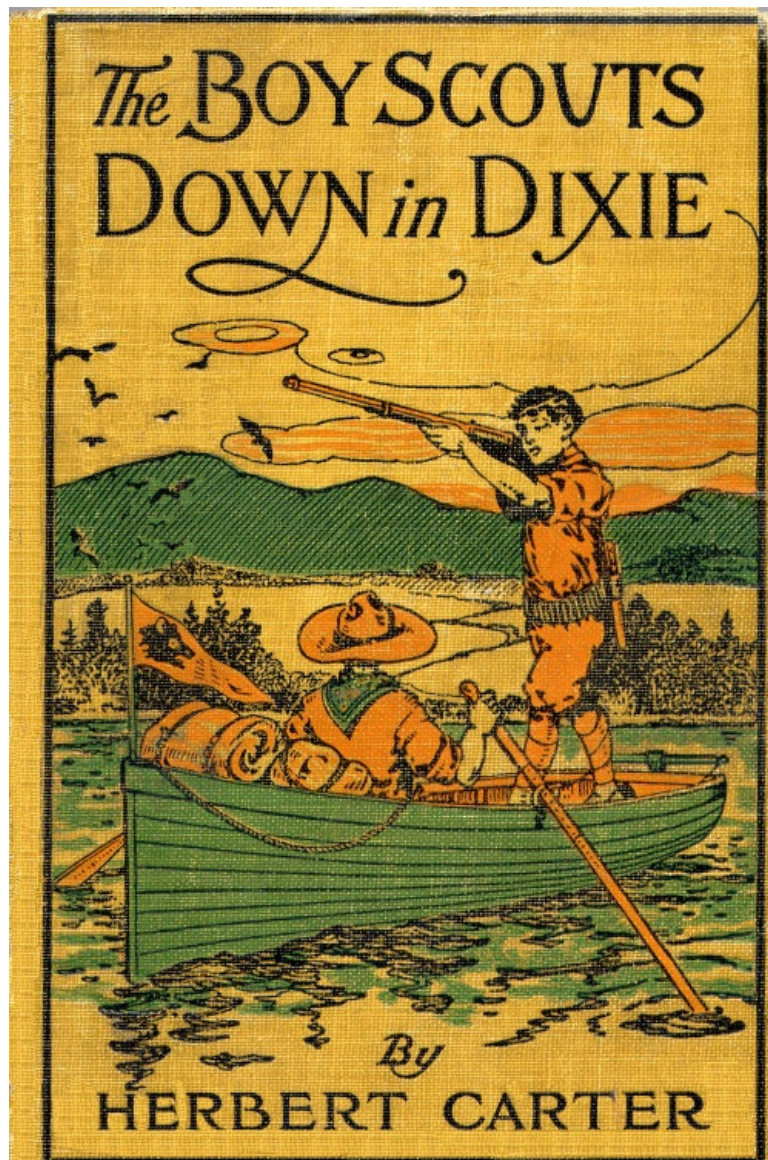
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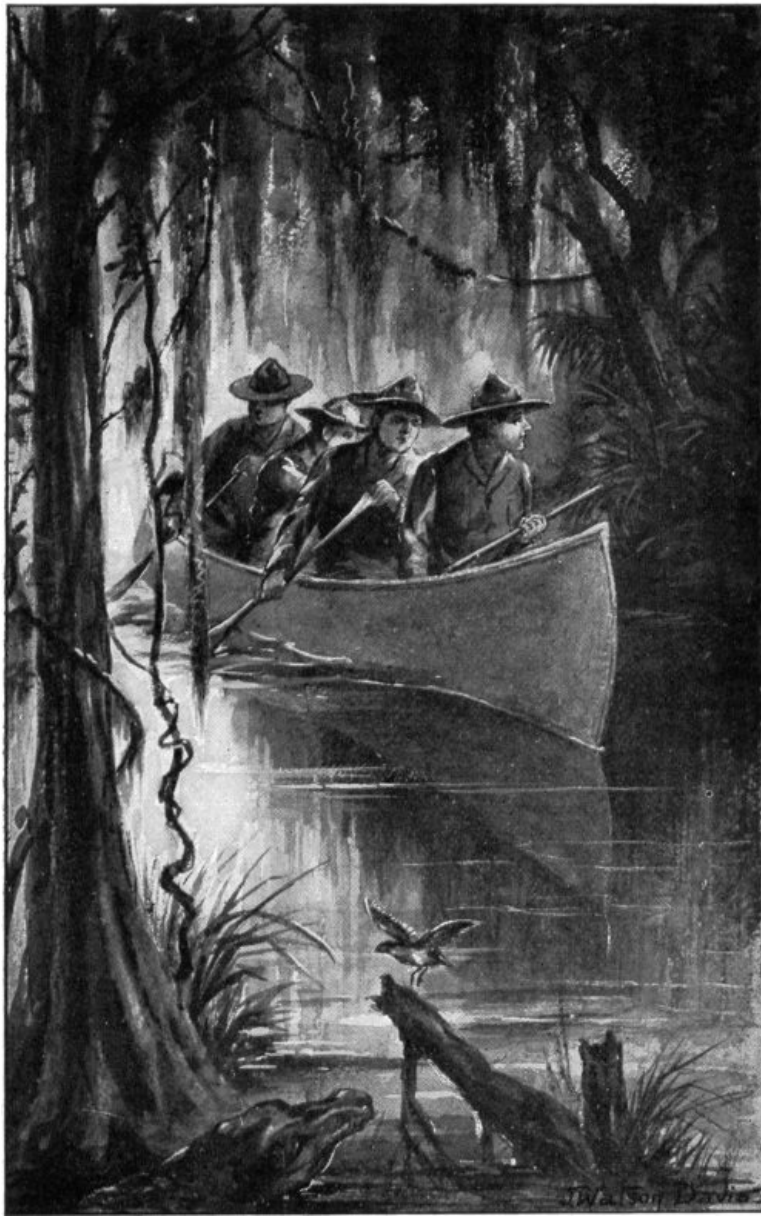
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS DOWN IN DIXIE; OR, THE STRANGE SECRET OF ALLIGATOR SWAMP ***





"Back water, fellows," called out Step Hen;—"What's up?" asked Giraffe. [Page 119](#).

—*The Boy Scouts Down in Dixie.*

The Boy Scouts DOWN IN DIXIE

OR

The Strange Secret of Alligator Swamp.

By HERBERT CARTER

Author of

"The Boy Scouts at the Battle of Saratoga."

"The Boy Scouts Through the Big Timber."

"The Boy Scouts On Sturgeon Island."

"The Boy Scouts In the Blue Ridge."

"The Boy Scouts' First Camp Fire."

"The Boy Scouts In the Rockies."

"The Boy Scouts On the Trail."



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CHAPTER I.

KHAKI BOYS IN THE SUNNY SOUTHLAND.

"That's always the way it goes!"

"Why, what's the matter with you now, Step Hen; you seem in a peck of trouble?"

"Who wouldn't be, when some fellow went and hid his hat away? Didn't you all see me hang the same on this peg sticking out from the trunk of the pine tree, when we-all came ashore to eat lunch; because that's what I did, as sure as anything?"

"Oh! you think so, do you?"

"I know it as well as I know my name. Think because I've got a stuffy cold in my head just like Bumpus here says he has, and can't smell, that I don't know beans, do you? Well, you can see for yourself, Davy Jones, my nice new campaign hat ain't on the peg right now."

"Do you know why that's true, Step Hen? Because a thing never yet was known to be in two places at the same time. And unless my eyes are telling me what ain't so, you've got your hat on right at this minute, pushed back on your head! Told you, boys, Step Hen ought to get a pair of specs; now I'm dead sure of it."

4

The boy who seemed to answer to the queer name of Step Hen threw up a hand, and on discovering that he did have his hat perched away back on his bushy head of hair, made out to be quite indignant.

"Now, that's the way you play tricks on travelers, is it? I'd just like to know who put that hat on my head so sly like! Mr. Scout-master, I wish you'd tell the fellows who love to play pranks to let me alone."

"I'd be glad to, Step Hen, only in this case I happened to see you take your hat down, and clap it on your own head, though I reckon you did it without thinking what you were doing; so the sooner you forget it the better."

A general laugh arose at this, and Step Hen, subsiding, continued to munch away at the sandwich he gripped in one hand. There were just eight lads, dressed in the khaki suits of Boy Scouts, some of which were new, and others rather seedy, as though they had seen many a campaign. But those who wore the brightest uniforms did so because their others had become almost disreputable, and fit only to be carried along for use in case of absolute necessity.

While they sit there, enjoying their midday meal, with two pretty good-sized paddling boats tied up, showing just how they managed to reach this lonely place on the border of one of the almost impenetrable swamps in Southern Louisiana, let us take advantage of the stop to say a few words concerning these lively lads.

5

Of course the boy reader who has had the pleasure of possessing any or all of the previous

volumes in this series, will readily recognize these sturdy fellows as the full membership of the Silver Fox Patrol connected with Cranford Troop of Boy Scouts.

Under the leadership of Assistant Scout-master Thad Brewster they had been having some pretty lively outings for the last two years; at one time in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina; then up in Maine; afterwards finding a chance to pay a hunting and exploring trip to the far distant Rocky Mountains, and finally on the preceding summer cruising upon the vast stretches of Lake Superior.

Besides the patrol leader, Thad, there were Allan Hollister, who had seen much actual life in the woods, and was perfectly at home there; a tall lanky fellow, with such a long neck that his chums had long ago named him "Giraffe;" a dumpy, fat scout, whose jolly red face was almost the color of his hair, and who came when any one called "Bumpus;" a very neat and handsome boy who had been christened Edmund Maurice Travers Smith, but who did not object when all that was shortened to just plain, everyday "Smithy;" an acrobatic chap who loved to stand on his head, and play monkey, Davy Jones by name; Step Hen himself, otherwise Stephen Bingham; and last but not least one Robert Quail White, a native of the South, and whose rather odd name was soon happily changed among his mates to plain "Bob White," which, as all boys know, is the popular way a quail is designated in the country.

6

It might as well be said right here in the start that Bumpus was also occasionally at school and at home addressed as Cornelius Hawtree; and that Giraffe would come to a meal if some one called softly "Conrad Stedman;" because he was very, very fond of responding to any sort of a summons that had something to eat along with it.

These eight boys did not constitute the whole of Cranford Troop, for there was another full patrol enlisted, and part of a third; but they were all boon companions; and chancing to have a snug amount of hard cash in the treasury of the patrol, separate from the troop amount, they were enabled to take advantage of a golden opportunity to visit the far South in the dead of winter.

It chanced that they were talking about this right then and there, so that by listening for a bit we may learn what unusual circumstances had arisen to give the scouts this wonderful chance to take a vacation, when they apparently should be industriously working at their books in the Cranford High School, to which all of them belonged.

7

"You can say what you like," Giraffe was remarking, as he carefully drained the coffee-pot into his tin cup, that being his third allowance; "I think the Silver Fox Patrol was hatched out under a lucky star. We've had heaps and heaps of good things happen to us in times past; and now just to think that the old frame building we've been using for a high school for years, should go and take fire and burn to the ground, a month or six weeks before the new brick schoolhouse could be furnished and heated, compelling the Board to dismiss school for that

time. Let me tell you it's a mighty bad wind that blows good to nobody."

"But that's only a part of our great good luck, and you forget that, Giraffe," insisted Davy Jones, nodding his head, eagerly, as he looked around at the live oak trees, in the crooked and wide spreading branches of which he expected to soon be sporting, holding on with his toes, and swinging from limb to limb with the abandon of an ape.

"Why, to be sure, I had ought to enumerate the rest!" declared the lanky member of the patrol. "Think of it, how just after that sad catastrophe—excuse me, boys, while I wipe a tear away in memory of that poor old schoolhouse—there was that strange letter came to Thad's bully old guardian, Daddy Caleb Cushman Brewster, from a man he used to know years ago. It was written from down here in Southern Louisiana, and told how the writer had seen one Felix Jasper, with a very pretty if ragged little girl in his company, hurrying along a lonely trail that led into old Alligator Swamp, and acting like he had recognized the gentleman, and was afraid to let him come any closer."

"Yes," spoke up Thad, who in the absence of the regular scout-master, Dr. Philander Hobbs, always acted as the leader of the troop, "and all of you chance to know that years ago, when I was much smaller, and lived in another town, that man Felix Jasper was the manager of my mother's estate, and was found to be stealing from her, so he was discharged. Later on my only little sister, Pauline, strangely disappeared, and could never be found. It was believed at the time that Jasper in a spirit of revenge had stolen the little child, but he could not be located; and the grief of that loss I really believe hastened the death of my dear mother."

Thad was so overcome with emotion that he could not go on. His chums cast sympathetic looks at him, for they were very fond of their leader; then Allan Hollister took up the narrative by saying:

"And his gentleman who happened to glimpse the man and girl, and who had known of the circumstances in the past, wrote that he felt almost certain he had been looking on the face of the long-lost little Brewster girl. Daddy was laid up with one of his attacks of rheumatism; and besides, he could never have stood such a trip. So he put up an unlimited amount of spending money, enough to allow the whole patrol to make the trip by rail; and here we are, determined to stand by our chum, and penetrate this dismal Louisiana swamp to find out whether it is Thad's sister and Felix Jasper who are living somewhere about here; or if the gentleman made a bad mistake."

"Yes," went on Bob White, impulsively, for he was a true, warm-hearted Southern boy, a little touchy with regard to his "honor," but a splendid and loyal comrade for all that, "and we're bound to do it, I reckon, suh, or know the reason why."

"The first thing we did when we got down here," Giraffe went on to say, "was to pick up all the information connected with this swamp we could, which was not a great lot, because they seem to think it's a terrible place, and few

persons ever dream of penetrating its unexplored depths, except now and then a muskrat trapper, or an alligator-skin collector; though they do say it's been an asylum for occasional negro convicts who broke away from the turpentine camps and were pursued by the dogs."

"Huh! looks some like we might be up against the toughest proposition we ever tackled, believe me," Step Hen observed.

10

"Well," remarked Bumpus, composedly, "we've pretty nearly always come out on top, haven't we; and according to my notion we're strong enough to do it again."

"There's something pretty strong around here, and that's a fact," spoke up Giraffe as he changed his seat. "I wonder, now, if the decaying vegetation in these here old Louisiana swamps always tone up the air like that. Smells to me kind of like rank onions that have got past the useful and respectable stage. I can see how we're bound to have a high old time if this is a specimen of swamp air, and we expect to breathe it for mebbe two whole weeks."

"Oh! say, that ain't hardly fair!" remarked Davy Jones; "alaying it all on the poor old swamp, when, honest Injun, I've been asniffing that same queer odor all day."

He looked straight and hard at Bumpus as he said this. The fat scout immediately frowned as though he felt hurt.

"I know what you're ahinting at, Davy Jones," he remarked, hotly; "just because I choose to continue wearing my old suit, and keep the new one for another day you like to make out this outfit ain't all right. I admit she looks a mite greasy, because I've helped cook many a fine meal while wearing the same. There's *associations* wrapped up with every inch of this faded cloth, and you can laugh all you want to, but I decline to throw it away while on this trip. What's a swamp but a muddy hole, and I don't choose to spoil my brand new suit, if you do. Besides, Step Hen and me, we've got such stuffy colds in our heads we can't smell a single thing."

11

"Then for goodness sake, change places with me, and be a chum of Step Hen's during the remainder of this whole trip. Besides," added Giraffe, as he saw Bumpus getting as red as a turkey gobbler with indignation, "it'll balance the two boats better, I'm thinking. How about that, Mr. Scout-master?"

"I was figuring that we could do better than we have so far; and if Bumpus is willing to change with you, let him," replied Thad. "That will bring him in my boat with Davy and Step Hen. They say colds like that are catching, so perhaps both Davy and myself will soon have one."

"Huh! I hope so," muttered the Jones boy, sniffing the air suspiciously when poor Bumpus happened to move to windward of him; but the usually good-natured fat boy pretended not to notice the slur.

"Well, as we're all through lunch, let's make a start, for we expect to be deep in Alligator swamp long before night comes on," said Allan,

12

who had the second paddling boat, fashioned somewhat after the pattern of the old-fashioned dug-out canoe made from a log, in his charge, being the assistant patrol leader of the Silver Fox band.

Ten minutes later, and having packed all their stuff away, the boys were ready to continue their journey into the depths of the thickening wilderness where the hanging Spanish moss that draped the trees proved such a strange sight to them all, and gave such a graveyard look to their surroundings that more than one of them felt a little shiver of apprehension, as though they fancied all manner of mysteries must presently arise to confront them.

The boat containing Giraffe, Allan, Bob White and Smithy happened to be ahead when they came to where their progress was hindered somewhat by floating logs and other stuff; so Giraffe, without being told to do the same, stood up in the bow to punch his way clear. He made a vicious stab at what he thought was a floating log, but had no sooner struck his paddle against it than the seemingly harmless object made a sudden lunge, splashed water all over the boat, and disappeared from sight; while the astonished boy, losing his balance as his paddle slipped off the scaly armor of the old mossback alligator that had been sleeping so placidly on the surface of the lagoon that it had not noticed their approach, fell in with a tremendous splurge.

CHAPTER II.

AMONG THE PUZZLING SWAMP WATER TRAILS.

"Alligator!" shrieked Smithy; and as this was the very first saurian he had ever set eyes on, not in confinement, his excitement was hardly to be wondered at.

"Lookout, Giraffe, he's after you!" cried Bumpus, from the other boat, close by.

There was no need of spurring the lanky scout on to any further exertions; for he had comprehended that the living log was a scaly reptile, even before he took that involuntary bath; and the instant that his head came above the surface again he made frantic haste to clamber back into the boat.

Allan had instantly stooped, and possessed himself of a repeating Marlin rifle, which he kept handy at all times now; and had that 'gator attempted anything like hostile action, the chances were that he must speedily have made the acquaintance of a soft-nosed bullet that would probably have finished his earthly career in a hurry.

No doubt the denizen of the swamp was even more badly frightened than Giraffe, for after that one whirl and splash nobody ever saw him more. But then, how was the lanky scout to know that? Imagination peopled that dark waters with a myriad of twelve-foot 'gators, all plunging

toward the spot where he was struggling to drag himself back into the boat, though his soaked garments seemed to weigh very nearly a whole ton.

"Lookout, Giraffe, or you'll upset us all!" shouted Bob White, who probably did not see any great reason for all this haste, because conditions always color such things differently.

"Help me in, somebody, can't you?" gasped the clinging boy. "Want to see me bit in half, do you? Thad, you lend me a hand, since these other fellows won't? Oh! what was that?" as a great splash was heard; but of course it was only Bumpus playfully striking at the water with the flat of his paddle, on pretense of "shooing" away the sportive and hungry alligator, though no doubt he had also in mind the idea of hastening Giraffe's getting over the gunwale on wings of fear.

They managed to pull him aboard, where he stood looking all around, as though in the end a trifle disappointed not to see a few monsters showing their keen regret at being cheated out of a meal; for that would have always added flavor to the story when he came to tell it.

"Guess he's gone down to the bottom!" suggested Giraffe; "I kicked with all my might all the time I was in the water, and that's the only way to scare a 'gator, a coon told me. But you can laugh all you've a mind to, Step Hen and Bumpus, I reckon you'd a done as much as I did if it'd been you fell in. Why, I saw him open his jaws, and I declare to goodness, he had a mouth big enough to swallow a sugar barrel, and that's the honest truth, fellows."

15

"I see plain enough that we're due for some rattling lively times while we're down in old Louisiana," remarked Smithy. "But if you don't mind, Thad, please paddle your craft a little more to the left, because the breeze is blowing straight from you to us, and, well, you know what I mean."

Bumpus was feeling so hilarious over seeing that great splash taken by his persecutor, Giraffe, that he did not pay the slightest attention to what Smithy said.

"You know, fellows," the fat scout went on to remark, "up to now it's been poor old Bumpus who's generally gone overboard, or got in trouble like that; but seems as if times have changed, and now Giraffe, he wants to take his turn. If I'd been close enough, and had a boat-hook handy, sure I'd a got it fast in the collar of your jacket, Giraffe. And I'd a considered it a pleasure, too."

"That's right, I reckon you would, Bumpus; you're an awful accommodating chum, ain't you?" the tall scout sneered. "But see here, whatever am I to do now, Thad?"

16

"Sit in the sun, and let your duds dry on you!" suggested one comrade.

"The only trouble is, we have to bail out the boat, because he's nearly flooded us right now," Bob White asserted, beginning to get busy with a big sponge.

"Had I ought to make a change, Thad?" demanded Giraffe, ignoring these side thrusts, and appealing to the fountain head.

"Just suit yourself," replied the scout-master.

"That's what I mean to do, only this is my new suit, and I kinder hate to put it up to dry, for fear it'll shrink on me, and I can't get out of it again," the lanky one went on to say.

Presently, as the air under the trees was not so warm as if they had had more sunshine, and Giraffe commenced to shiver, Thad told him he had better make the change.

"You can wear your old suit right along, if you have to," he remarked; "and even if you have to throw away the other, better do that than get a heavy cold from trying to let it dry on you. That's all very well in hot August weather; but there's a little tang in the air, even away down South here, along in December. So strip to the skin, and make yourself comfortable."

Giraffe concluded that after all this was the best policy; and so he set to work, paying little heed to the jests of his chums, who, like all boys, could never let so good a chance to joke an unlucky companion pass by.

17

"Next time you see a log, Giraffe," Bumpus told him, "take a second look before you go to punch it with your paddle. They say logs down here have got *teeth*, and can take a big bite right out of an oar. We don't want to lose any of our paddles; and let me warn you that it's risky jumping overboard after one when you do drop it in the drink. We'd hate to see you make a meal for a hungry 'gator; though for that matter it'd be a pretty slim dinner he'd get!"

"Well, one thing sure," retorted the tall scout, who was now fully dressed, and feeling in readiness to do battle again; "I wouldn't blame any old 'gator if he declined to gobble *you* for a relish right now, and that's what."

"There you go again, but on account of your recent trouble I'll let it pass. A fellow that has just been nearly scared to death ain't responsible for half he says," and the fat boy waved his hand toward the other as though he really meant it.

"From the way you've been pestering us lately about that stuff you forgot to take home to your mother from the drug store, I'd think you had troubles of your own to bother about," retorted Giraffe. "I never saw such a fellow to keep thinking of little things that don't amount to a row of beans. Why, you admit it only cost five cents, and yet to hear you let out a howl about it every little while, you'd think it was worth a whole dollar."

18

"It ain't that," said Bumpus, with dignity, "but I'm so built that when anything gets on my nerves like that has, I just can't sleep till I've solved the puzzle. Did I take that little package home and give it to my mother, or did I leave it anywhere on the way? That's the question I'd like to have solved; and I mean it shall be, if I have to write to three separate boys whose houses I stopped in on my way home, to tell 'em what a ge-lorious time I expected to have down

here."

"But you did write to your mother from Memphis, to ask her about it; and when we got letters back at that last town you nearly took a fit because there wasn't any for you," Davy Jones went on to say, taking a hand in the affair, though he was as far away from Bumpus in the other end of the boat as he could possibly get.

"That's all very true," replied the fat scout, composedly; "and now I've got to just hold in, and wait a long time till we get more mail. It bothers me more'n words can tell you. A scout should never fail in his duty; and my mother said she wanted what she wrote on that paper the worst kind. What if it was only five cents; I'm not thinking of the amount, but the fulfilling of my duty. Thad always says that's the main thing to consider. Faithful in little things, is my motto."

"Hear! hear!" cheered Bob White, from the other boat.

19

"Good boy, Bumpus! them's our sentiments, too!" declared Step Hen, hilariously.

"Huh! little things, hey?" sniffed Giraffe; "please get busy fellows, and draw ahead of our friends in the other boat once more. Seems to me the air is better up ahead."

"But make him beware of the logs, mind you," called Bumpus, as a parting shot.

They proceeded carefully along for some time. The channel they were following seemed to be very winding, and yet there could be no reasonable doubt but that it was constantly taking the expedition deeper into the great Alligator Swamp all the time.

Thad had tried to get all the information possible about the strange place he intended to visit, but few people could assist him. One man gladly allowed him to have a very rude chart that he said "Alligator" Smith, who made a practice of hunting the denizens of the swamp for their skins, had once drawn for him, with a bit of charcoal, and a piece of wrapping paper. This was when the "cracker" had lost a heifer which he suspected had either strayed into the fastnesses of the swamp; or else been killed, and eaten by some "hideout" escaped convicts, who found a refuge from pursuit within the almost impenetrable depths of the extensive morass.

There were things about this chart which none of them could fully grasp. Thad had some hopes of being fortunate enough to come upon the man who had drawn it, as he was said to be somewhere about, pursuing his queer vocation of acquiring a living from securing the skins of alligators he managed to shoot or trap.

20

And it was in this way that the eight chums had actually dared to start into one of the least known places in the whole State of Louisiana. Some of those with whom they had spoken about their intended trip had warned them not to attempt such a risky thing without a guide. But Thad was fairly wild to learn whether there could be any truth in the strange story that had come to his guardian in that letter; and he just felt that he could not stand the suspense another day.

Inquiry had developed the fact that inside of the last few months a man and a little girl had really been seen several times, though nobody knew where he stayed; and some said they had seen him paddling out of the swamp in a pirogue, which had evidently been fashioned from the trunk of a big tree with considerable skill.

As the afternoon advanced, and they found themselves getting deeper and deeper in the gloomy swamp, the boys began to realize that this singular expedition might not turn out to be such a pleasant picnic after all. There was always a peril hovering over them that must not be lightly treated; and this was the danger of losing themselves in those winding channels; for they had been told that more than once men had gone into Alligator Swamp never to be seen again by their fellows.

Thad and Allan had arranged a plan whereby they might mark their way; and if it came to the worst they would stand a chance of returning over the same passages that they were following in entering the place.

They did this first by attaching a small white piece of cloth to a bush while still in sight of the last one that had been marked. When these finally gave out they proceeded to break a branch, and allow it to hang in a certain way that was bound to catch their eye, and tell them how to paddle in order to keep passing along the chain.

This was a well-known method among woodsmen in these great swamps, where one can be turned around so easily, and all things look so much alike that even the best of experienced paddlers may make mistakes that are apt to cost dearly.

The boys fell quiet as the shadows lengthened. To tell the truth all of them were growing a bit tired from this constant paddling, and twisting their heads in trying to see so many sights at once; and when Giraffe hinted broadly that in his opinion he thought it might be high time they picked out some nice spot for stopping over, so that the fire could be started, and supper gotten underway, nearly all the rest gave him a smile of encouragement.

"Just what I was thinking about myself," said Thad; "and unless I'm mistaken, right now I glimpse the place we're looking for; because, you understand, we ought to have a good high and dry spot for a camp."

"Do you know whether these here 'gators can climb, Thad?" asked the fat scout, a little nervously.

"Not a tree, certain sure, Bumpus, so you're safe, if you only show enough speed in getting up among the branches; but they just *love* to slide down banks, they say, and don't you go to depending on any such to keep your scaly friends from sharing your blanket," Davy remarked, maliciously.

"Oh! who's afraid; not me?" sang out Bumpus, puffing out his chest as he spoke; "besides, haven't I got a gun along with me this trip; and some of you happen to know that I can use the same. I've got a few crack shots to my credit,

ain't I, Thad?"

Before the scout-master could either affirm or deny this assertion, Giraffe gave a loud yell, and was seen to be standing up in his boat, pointing wildly ahead.

"Looky there, would you, boys!" he cried; "that's a coon in the boat, seems like to me, and he's paddling like everything to get away from us. What say, shall we give chase, and see if four pair of arms are better than one? Maybe, now, it's only a hideout darky, scared nigh to death athinking we're the soldiers come hunting after him. And then again, how d'we know that it mightn't be Felix himself; because, you remember, they did say he was burnt as brown as mahogany! Whoop! see him make that paddle fairly burn the air; and ain't he flying to beat the band, though? Thad, why *don't* you give the word to chase after him, when you can see we're all crazy to let out top-notch speed."

23

CHAPTER III. CAMP-FARE.

"Hold up!" called out Thad.

Of course, as the scout-master, his word had to be recognized as law by the members of Cranford Troop. Several of the boys manifested signs of disappointment, and impulsive Giraffe seemed to be the chief offender.

As a rule they were not averse to giving vent to their feelings; for besides being Boy Scouts, they had long been school chums.

"Oh! that's too bad, now, Thad," Giraffe remarked, dejectedly; "you didn't want us to chase after that fellow. Four of us ought to've been able to beat him in a furious dash; and how d'we know but what it isn't the very man we've come all the way from Cranford to see?"

24

"It's too late now, anyway!" observed Bumpus.

"Yes, he's disappearing among the shadows yonder," said Davy, who had sharp eyesight; "and I saw him turn to look back at us just when he was passing through that bar of sunlight that crosses the water."

"Did you think he was a negro, or a white man, Davy?" asked Thad, quietly.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Thad, I guess now he *was* a coon, all right. He didn't have any hat on, and his hair seemed woolly enough," Davy admitted, frankly.

"I thought as much all along," Thad told them, "and that was one of the reasons I wouldn't give the word to pursue him. There were plenty of others, though."

"Name a few, Mr. Scout-master," requested Giraffe, still unconvinced.

"Oh! well, for instance, we're all pretty tired as it is, and to make that dash would wear us out."

25

Then we'd lose the chance for camping on this spot here that I picked out, and we might go a long way without running across as good a one. And if it was a black outlaw, one of those desperate escaped convicts from the turpentine camps, if they have them in Louisiana, even should we manage to overtake him he might happen to have a gun of some kind. You could hardly blame him for showing fight, Giraffe."

"Not when you remember that we're wearing uniforms pretty much like the National Guard, and chances are he believed we were real soldiers, not tin ones," was the contribution of Step Hen, easily convinced, after he had given the subject a little reflection.

"Besides," added Bumpus, as a clincher that he knew would catch the lanky scout; "it's nearly time we're thinking of having supper; and sure, it would be too bad if we had to postpone trying that delicious home-cured ham we fetched along."

The frown left the forehead of Giraffe like magic, and in its place came a most heavenly smile.

"I surrender, boys!" he announced. "I throw up my hands, and give in. Seems like everybody's against me, and seven to one is big odds. Must be I'm mistaken. If it was a genuine coon after all, why, sure we'd a been silly to waste our precious muscle achasing after him. Besides, looks like the shadows are acreeeping out along there, and we'd as like as not get lost somehow. Oh! you're right, as usual, Mr. Scout-master. I'm always letting my ambition run away with my horse sense. Seems like I never open my mouth but I put my foot in it, somehow."

"Then why don't you get a button, and keep it shut?" asked Bumpus, promptly.

"I would, if it was the size of some I've known," responded Giraffe.

"I hope now, you ain't making wicked comparisons?" the fat scout demanded.

"Why, you don't think I'd be guilty of such unbrotherly kindness, do you?" was Giraffe's perplexing rejoinder; and knowing that he could not get the better of the tall scout Bumpus gave a grunt, and stopped short.

They were soon busily engaged in making preparations for camping. Having come all the way from home with the idea of spending some time in the Southern swamp, looking for those whom Thad so earnestly wished to meet face to face, the lads had of course made ample preparations for having at least a fair degree of comfort.

None of them had ever been in the Far South, so all they knew about the country, its animals, and the habits of its people, must come through reading, and observation as they went along.

But they did know the comfort of a tight waterproof canvas tent in case of a heavy rain storm; and consequently a good part of the luggage they carried in the three trunks had been a couple of such coverings, besides the usual camp outfit about which many happy associations of the past were clinging.

These trunks had of course been left in the small town where they had obtained the roughly made canoes, to be picked up on their return later.

Long experience had made every one of them clever hands at tent-raising; and from the way Smithy and Davy undertook to get one up in advance of Step Hen and Bob White, it was plain to see that the old-time spirit of rivalry still held good.

Giraffe as usual took it upon himself to start the cooking fire. He was what the other boys called a "crank" at fire-building, and had long ago demonstrated his ability to start a blaze without a single match, by any one of several ancient methods, such as using a little bow that twirled a sharp-pointed stick so rapidly in a wooden socket that a spark was generated, which in turn quickly communicated to a minute amount of inflammable material, and was then coaxed along until a fire resulted.

Bumpus always stood ready to assist in the cooking operations; because there were so many other things coming along that required dexterity and agility, and from which his size and clumsiness debarred him, that he just felt as though he must be doing something in order to shoulder his share of the work.

As the twilight quickly deepened into night—for in the South there is not a very long interval between the going down of the sun, and the pinning of the curtains of darkness—the scene became quite an animated one, with eight lively lads moving around, each fulfilling some self-imposed duty that would add to the comfort and happiness of the patrol in camp.

And when that "delicious home-cured ham" that Bumpus had spoken of, and which had really come from his own house, so that he knew what he was saying when thus describing it, began to turn a rich brown in the pair of generous frying-pans, giving out a most appetizing odor; together with the coffee that Bumpus himself had kept charge of, well, the healthy boy who could keep from counting the minutes until summoned to that glorious feast would have been a strange combination.

Bumpus was trying a new way with his coffee. Heretofore he had simply placed it in the cold water, and brought this to a boil, keeping it going for five minutes or more. Now he had the water boiling, and just poured in the coffee, previously wetted, and with an egg broken into the same; after which he gave it about a minute to boil, then let it steep alongside the fire for the rest of the time.

"Better than anything we ever had, isn't it, fellows?" he demanded, after he had tested the contents of his big tin cup, and nearly scalded his mouth in his eagerness. "Ketch me going back to the old way again. Coffee boiled is coffee spoiled, I read in our cook book at home."

It was good, but all the same Giraffe, as well as several others, declared they preferred the old way, because it was such fun to see if the cook was caught napping, and allowed the pot to boil over; besides, the aroma as it sent out clouds of steam was worth a whole lot to hungry lads.

"Bumpus, I've got a favor to ask you," said Davy, as they started to settle down around the fire, each in a picked position.

"Go ahead, Davy, you know I'm the most accommodating fellow in the bunch. Tell me what I can do for you," replied the fat scout, immediately; and every word he spoke was actual truth, too, as his comrades would have willingly testified if put on the witness stand.

"I wish you'd let me sit over there, and you take my seat, which, I reckon is much more comfortable than yours; and besides, you complained of a pain in your back, and I'm afraid of the chilly night wind taking you there. You'll face it here instead."

"Don't you budge, Bumpus!" exclaimed Giraffe; "he's only giving you a little taffy, don't you see? Thinks he'll have a better chance to enjoy his grub if the wind don't blow *from* you, to him. I wouldn't stand for it, Bumpus; you just stay where you are. Reckon you look comfortable enough, and what's the use dodging all around?"

"Huh! guess you're thinking of your own comfort now, Giraffe," grunted Davy in disgust.

Bumpus eyed them both in distrust.

"I remember we learned in school that it was best policy to keep an eye on the Greeks that come bearing gifts," he wheezed; "and so I'll just stay where I am. If you don't like it, Davy, why, there's plenty of space all around. As if I'm to blame because this old swamp isn't the sweetest place agoing."

30

The conversation soon became animated and general, so that the three disputants forgot the cause of their trouble. Bumpus was the bugler of the troop, and always insisted on carrying the silver-tongued emblem of his office along with him; he had it by his side now; but Thad had given peremptory orders that he should not make any use of the instrument except by special order; or under conditions that might arise, whereby they would need to be called together, like a scattered covey of "pa'tridges," as quail are universally designated in the South.

"We must remember," Thad went on to say, "that this isn't just an ordinary jaunt, or an outing for fun. It means a whole lot to me that I manage to find the man and the little girl. Either it will turn out to be Felix Jasper and my lost sister; or else we'll prove that the gentleman was terribly mistaken. And you can understand, fellows, what a load I'm laboring under all the time that puzzle remains unsolved. But I want you to remember that we ought to keep as quiet as we can. Bumpus, you understand the situation, and why we don't ask you to amuse us with some of your fine songs?"

Bumpus had a very good voice, and often did entertain his chums while in camp by singing certain songs they were particularly fond of. He was a sensible fellow, and did not take offense easily. Moreover, even though he might feel huffed over some action on the part of his mates, he never "let the sun go down on his wrath," but was quick to extend the olive branch of peace.

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"Sure I understand, Thad!" he declared; "and

I'm going to bottle up my voice on this occasion, so's to have it in fine trim, to let loose in a hallelujah when we find that it *is* your little sister Pauline—"

Bumpus said no more, and for a very good reason; because, just at that particular moment there arose the strangest sort of sound from some point close by, such as none of the scouts could ever remember hearing before.

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CHAPTER IV. SOME WOODS LORE.

"What d'ye call that, now?" exclaimed Step Hen.

Giraffe assumed a superior air, as he hastened to remark:

"Next time you hear an old alligator bull bellow, you'll recognize the same; but to tell the truth, I'm kind of disappointed, myself, because I expected to get something bigger'n that."

"Was it an alligator, Thad?" demanded Davy; while Bumpus was seen to involuntarily move a little closer to the tree under which the camp-fire had been made, and the twin, khaki-colored, waterproof tents erected.

The scout-master shook his head in the negative.

"Giraffe's got another guess coming to him this time," he said. "From all I've picked up, I reckon we'll not be disappointed when we do hear some old scaly bull bellow. But they tell me this happens generally along toward dawn. And the sound is more like the roaring of a lion, than what a regular bull gives out."

"But what was that we heard, then, Thad?" persisted Step Hen; for long ago these boys had taken it for granted that a scout-master should be in the nature of a "walking encyclopedia," as Bumpus called it, filled to the brim with general information on every known topic, and ready and willing to impart the same to the balance of the patrol on request; and truth to tell they seldom caught Thad Brewster in a hole.

33

"Well, now, there are a lot of things in a Southern swamp, any one of which might make a noise like that. If you asked me my plain opinion I'd guess it might have been a wandering night heron, which has a hoarse cry, some of you happen to know, because we struck them up in Maine that time we spent a vacation there."

"What other creatures are we likely to run across here, besides snakes and alligators, runaway coons and the like?" pursued Davy, always wanting to know.

"Of course there are muskrats, because you can find them in every swamp east and west, north and south," Giraffe ventured.

"Yes, muskrats are found, though not so many as in the north, and the skins are sometimes hardly worth taking. But there are plenty of raccoons

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and 'possums: and I'm told they get quite some otter down here, the most valuable pelt that comes up from the South, selling at something like seven dollars a skin."

"Whew! that's talking some," muttered the interested Bumpus. "Did I ever tell you fellows that I once had a great notion of starting in to be a trapper? Yes, I even read up a whole lot about it, but kinder got twisted in the directions of how to go about things, so as not to let the cunning little varmints get the human odor."

At that there was a general laugh, causing the fat scout to look around indignantly; whereupon the others, notably Step Hen, Davy and Giraffe exchanged winks.

"Ain't that so, Thad?" demanded Bumpus, turning to the scout-master.

"You're right about that, Bumpus," came the reply. "Allan here, who has had lots of experience, will tell you that the most successful trapper is the man who manages somehow to keep from alarming his intended game, both by making few if any tracks around the place where he's put his trap; and by eliminating the human odor that their sensitive noses detect."

"There, didn't I tell you?" demanded Bumpus, triumphantly. "Think you're smart to just sit there and chuckle; but you've all got heaps and heaps to learn about the secrets of the woods. I know my own weakness, and I'm studying hard, trying to remedy it. You'd never guess what a lot of cute things them pelt-takers have to put up, in order to fool the woods folks; ain't that a fact, Thad?"

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Bumpus knew that so long as he could get the scout-master to corroborate all of his statements he was sure of having his opponents in a hole; and it was amusing to see how he managed to accomplish this same thing.

"Yes, it's all mighty interesting," Thad assured them. "Nowadays nearly every up-to-date trapper makes use of a prepared scent which he places on the trap, even if he baits the same. It is sold by dealers in skins; and they say a trapper can get much better results by using this, to attract the little fur-bearing animals."

"What's that, Thad; you tell us they sell this scent to trappers, or such as think they have a call in that direction?" demanded Giraffe, suddenly.

"Of course any one can buy any quantity, if he's got the price," Thad assured him. "You seem interested, Giraffe; perhaps, now, you're thinking of embarking in the game?"

But the lanky one only shook his head, and turning on Bumpus he demanded severely:

"Looky here, Bumpus, did you, when you read up about all these here interesting things connected with trapping the fur-bearing animals of the wilderness, ever go so far as to invest a dollar in buying any of this wonderful stuff that they say is so fetching that the silly little beasts just can't resist it?" and as he said this Giraffe tried to hold the fat boy transfixed with his piercing gaze—some of them had at one time

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even called Giraffe "Old Eagle Eye," earlier readers of these stories may remember.

"No, I didn't, if you want to know, Giraffe!" Bumpus broke out with; "and I ain't a-going to tell you any more about what I learned; because you're all the time apicking on me, and accusing me of things. I know I make mistakes sometimes, and that one about not remembering whether I fetched my mother back the medicine she wanted is a-bothering me like everything right now; but the rest of you are in the same boat, ain't you? Here was Giraffe just a little while back a-wanting to rush after that runaway convict, just as if we had lost anything like that. Course it was a mistake and chances are we'd got in no end of trouble if he'd had his way. Oh! everybody blunders sometimes; to-day it may be poor old Bumpus; but to-morrow one of the rest of you is in the soup. Forget it, now."

"What about these swamp animals, Thad, or Allan; and why do you say the skins don't bring as good prices when they're taken down here, as in the North?" Step Hen wanted to know.

"Don't it stand to reason that the colder the country the thicker the fur Nature gives to the animals that bear it?" asked Allan.

"Why, yes, seems like that ought to be so; and I guess that must be the reason Canada skins bring the best prices of all," Giraffe admitted.

37

"Sometimes three times as much as ones taken far South," Allan told him.

"I've no doubt that sooner or later we'll find chances to examine the tracks of 'coons, 'possums, foxes, muskrats, and even otter, while we're looking around," Thad remarked; "and it'll be interesting to notice what difference there is between the various animals, as well as between the same breed up in Maine and down here in Louisiana; for they grow smaller, as a rule, the further south you go. A Florida deer can be toted back to camp on the back of the average hunter, while one up in Michigan or the Adirondacks would need two men and a pole to carry it any distance."

"This sure is mighty interesting," observed Step Hen. "I'm always ready to soak in information connected with the woods. I'm like a big sponge, you might say; ready to give it out again on being squeezed."

"On my part," Giraffe mentioned, "I don't seem able to get that coon out of my head; because, if he was what we think, a hideout escaped convict, chances are he must want a whole lot of things, from a blanket, gun and clothes, to grub."

"That's unkind of you, Giraffe, to bother us with such gloomy thoughts just as we are thinking of soon going to bed," remarked Bumpus, uneasily.

38

"But there's some horse sense in what he says, don't you forget it, Bumpus," pursued Davy.

"That's a fact," added Step Hen. "Just put yourself in his place for a while, and try to imagine what your feelings'd be like, asneaking around a camp of boys, nearly half starved at the same time, and scenting the good smells that fill

the air all around—of course I mean cooking meat, coffee and the like. Say, wouldn't it nearly set you crazy; and honest now, Bumpus, don't you think you'd take some risks to try and hook what you wanted so bad?"

Bumpus, upon being thus deliberately appealed to, nodded his head in the affirmative, and remarked:

"I sure would, and that's a fact, fellows. Then you kinder look for a visitor in camp to-night, do you? And that means everybody's just got to sit up and stand guard, don't it? all right, you'll find me as willing and ready as ever to sacrifice my comfort for the public welfare. I'm always there with the goods."

"Hear! hear! Bumpus, we all know you like a book!" declared Step Hen, pretending to clap his hands in enthusiasm, though no sound resulted from the action.

"Yes, and if the will was father to the deed, there'd be nothing left undone while Bumpus was around; for he's always ready to try his best," Allan went on to say, while the object of all this praise turned rosy red with embarrassment.

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"Mebbe you're only joshing me, boys," he remarked uneasily, "but I'm taking it for granted that you mean all you say, and believe me, I'm grateful. If I wasn't so full of supper I'd get on my feet, put my hand on my stomach this way, and make you the best bow I knew how. Like a lot more of things you'll have to take the intention for the deed there, too. It's a case of the spirit being willing, but the flesh weak."

"Well," said Giraffe, "I didn't know that there was anything weak about you, Bumpus; but never mind starting an argument about it now. We'll just arrange things so that two scouts are on duty all the time through the night. How would that suit you, Mr. Scout-master?"

"Just about right," replied Thad; "because we are now eight, all told, and that would allow us to divide up into four watches. And as Bumpus is so anxious to do his whole duty by the camp, I'll promise to take him on as my side partner when my turn comes."

"Well," mused Giraffe, "it's mighty nice to have a fellow along who isn't afraid of anything, and will even make a martyr of himself in order to keep peace in the camp."

"P'raps you wouldn't mind explaining just what you mean by that, Giraffe?" the stout scout quickly remarked, suspiciously.

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"Oh! you're as touchy as wildfire, to-night, Bumpus," retorted the other, with a chuckle, as though he felt that he had attained his object, which was to excite the curiosity of the fat boy. "Just turn your mind on what may happen while we sleep, and you'll be happier. But here's hoping that breeze keeps acoming from that same quarter all the night, because then we can plan better."

Davy snickered audibly at this, but Bumpus assumed a lofty air, and would not pay any further attention to those who were evidently

bent on badgering him.

CHAPTER V. BUMPUS ON GUARD.

"How will we pair off for the tents?" asked Bob White, presently.

"I think it would be just as well to keep the formation we already have in the boats," the scoutmaster immediately replied, as though he might have already figured this out.

Davy Jones was heard to give a disappointed grunt, though just why he should be the only one to do so must remain a mystery; but at any rate Bumpus refused to let himself show that he took it as personally directed toward him.

41

"That means Giraffe, Bob White and Smithy sleep in Number Two along with me, does it, Mr. Scout-master?" Allan inquired.

"Yes, and let Smithy pair off with you, while Bob White and Giraffe are pards on guard. I'll take the first stage, with Bumpus, because that'll let him have a longer uninterrupted sleep, and he's more apt to stay awake in the earlier part of the night than later on. When the time is up we'll arouse Giraffe, who'll take charge of his watch. That's understood, is it?"

All of them declared it was very simple; and that surely a spell of less than two hours could not turn out to be a very hard task. Even Bumpus was apparently grimly resolved to show his mates that he had "reformed," and would never, never again be guilty of such a crime as going to sleep while playing the part of sentry.

"You've got me so worked up atalking all about that black escaped jail bird," he stoutly affirmed, "that chances are my eyes won't go shut the whole night long. You see, I'm sensitive by nature, and when I hear dreadful things, like that poor fellow nearly starving while he's hiding out in the swamp, with the dogs trying to get on his trail all the time, it makes my flesh creep. So please, Giraffe, don't say anything more about it. You get on my nerves."

"Huh! that ain't a circumstance to some things —" began the tall scout; and then as though suddenly thinking better of it, he cut his sentence off short, so that no one ever knew what he had meant to say, though there was Davy chuckling again, just as if he might have a strong suspicion.

42

They had soon arranged their blankets in the two dun-colored tents. The canvas had been prepared by tanning in some manner, so that its former white hue was altered; and at the same time it had been rendered impregnable to water. This is a fine thing about these prepared tents; because the ordinary covering, while it is capable of shedding rain for some time, once it gets soaked, if you simply touch it on the inside with your finger, you are apt to start a dripping that nothing can stop as long as the rain comes

down.

Giraffe, who was very angular, and always complained of feeling every little pebble or root under his blanket, when out camping, at once started to gather some of the hanging Spanish moss, to "pad his bed with."

"They tell me it makes fine mattresses, after it's dried," he remarked; "so p'raps it'll keep me from wearing a hole in my skin while I rest here. Say, it's simply great, let me tell you," he added, as he sank down to test his puffy couch, "so I'd advise every one of you to get busy, and lay in a supply."

"How about insects of all kinds, from red bugs to ticks?" asked Step Hen, who already had a few fiery spots on his lower limbs, marking the places where some of the former invisible guests had buried themselves, and started to create an intolerable itching and burning that made him scratch frequently, without much alleviation of the trouble.

"Oh! who cares about such small pests as them?" remarked Giraffe, loftily.

"Not much danger, if you select clean moss, Step Hen," Thad told him; and as the scout-master was himself following the example set by the inventive Giraffe, of course all the others copied after him.

"Misery likes company, they say," Step Hen was heard to mutter; "and p'raps now to-morrow there'll be the greatest old scratching bee you ever did see. As I'm in for it anyway, guess I'll take the chances of mixin' the breed," with which he flung prudence to the winds, and started making a collection for himself.

Now, Thad did not mean to neglect any precaution looking to making sure that if a visitor came to the camp during the night, in the shape of a human black thief, he would find it difficult to carry off any of their possessions.

First of all, he paid particular attention to the boats, the paddles of which he himself carried into the middle of the camp, and finally hid away in the tents, so that they could not easily be run across.

Then he had some of the boys assist him, while he ran the two canoes far up on the shore. Even then he secured the painters in such fashion that any one would have great difficulty in unfastening the same.

"I should think that would make us feel secure about our boats, Thad?" Allan remarked, after all this had been carried out with scrupulous care; for the scout-master believed that what was worth doing at all was worth doing well, and he applied this principle to his every-day life, often to his great advantage.

"If we know what's good for us we want to always guard the boats above all things," Thad went on to tell them.

"I should say so," Bumpus admitted; "just think what a nice pickle we'd find ourselves in, fellows, if we suddenly lost both boats while we were right in the middle of the swamp. We could

lose lots of things better than them.”

“Bumpus,” observed Giraffe, solemnly, “you never said truer words—we could; and there might even be some things we’d be *glad* to part with, but which seem to hang on to us just everlastingly.”

Davy seemed amused at hearing the tall scout say this; but Bumpus either mistook it for a compliment, or else chose to act as if he did; for he grinned, and nodded, and wandered back to the tents to get his gun; for Thad had selected the first watch for himself and his partner.

45

“I’ll just show ‘em that I can stay awake these days,” he was saying to himself in his positive way. “Time may have been when I was just a little mite weak that way; but I’ve reformed, so I have. Huh! what’s two hours to me, I’d like to know?”

Some of the other scouts might, had they chosen, have recalled numerous instances where Bumpus, being set on guard, had later on been found “dead to the world,” committing the most heinous crime known to soldiers in war-time, that of sleeping on post, and thus putting the whole army in peril.

When one fellow started to crawl inside the tent others followed his example, until only Thad and Bumpus remained. The fat scout had to take a firm grip on himself, when he saw them going to their inviting blankets, buoyed up so temptingly by those armfuls of soft gray moss; but he proved equal to the test, for he shouldered his gun, and bade Thad station him in his place.

“You’ll have to stay right here, Bumpus,” the other told him. “I know it isn’t the most inviting spot going, for the ground is wet, and you can hardly find a place to stand on; but those things are good for a sentry, because they help keep him awake.”

“Oh! never mind about me, Thad; I’ll prove true blue every time. But where will you hold forth? I ought to know, so I could find you, in case anything suspicious came along.”

46

So Thad pointed out where he expected to stay, and then went on to warn the other once more:

“Be very careful about using your gun, Bumpus,” he said.

“Oh! I will, sure, Thad,” declared the fat scout, hastily. “I hope now you don’t think I want to have any poor fellow’s blood on my hands, do you? I ain’t half so ferocious as Giraffe, now. You heard what he said about thinking the coon’d get what he deserved, if he came aprowling around here in the night, and somebody filled him chuck full of shot? I don’t look at it that way. Fact is, I’m sorry for the poor wretch; and I’d share my dinner with him, if I had a chance, laugh at me for a silly if you want to.”

“But you don’t hear me laughing at all, Bumpus,” Thad told him; “and I understand just how you feel about it. Nature gave you a tender heart, and made Giraffe on different lines; but I tell you plainly, I’ve often wished some of the other fellows were more like Cornelius Hawtree!”

"Oh! have you, Thad?" said the fat boy, with a suspicious tremor in his voice. "Thank you, thank you ever so much for saying that. I'd rather have your good opinion, than that of any other fellow I ever knew."

And somehow he felt so light-hearted after receiving that little sincere compliment from the watchful scout-master, that he really found no great difficulty in keeping wide-awake during the entire term of his vigil; for there is nothing equal to a little praise to set a boy thinking, and therefore remaining vigilant.

47

When the time came to make a change he spoke to Thad as soon as the other drew near his position.

"Never batted an eye once, Thad, and that's a fact," he announced, proudly. "Oh! I'm on the road to better things, I tell you. And while I heard lots of queer old grunting and groaning deep in the swamp, I didn't see a suspicious thing. Will you get Giraffe and Bob White out now?"

"Yes, because they come tailing after us, according to the programme;" and while Thad crept into the second tent to arouse the boys, Bumpus hung around so as to inform Giraffe that he had fulfilled his duties as sentry to the letter.

However, the tall scout seemed to want to hurry past him, and only gave a grunt in reply when Bumpus launched forth on an elaborate account of how he had proved himself equal to the test. In fact, one might have thought that Giraffe was holding his breath as though he feared to take cold by breathing the cool night air too suddenly, after coming out from his snug blanket.

When Thad and Bumpus had also crawled under the flap of the first tent, all immediately became quiet again, the new sentries having taken up their positions as marked out by the patrol leader, in whose hands such things must lie, as he is always in charge of the camp.

48

Bumpus heard a little restless moving about when he tried to settle down, as if at least one of the other occupants of the tent might be trying to change his position. But the fat scout was too tired and sleepy to bother his head about any trifle like this; besides his cold seemed to get no better, and he was apt to give a loud sneeze at any time.

He distinctly remembered allowing his head to drop on the rude pillow he had fashioned out of his shoes, covered with his clothes-bag; and then seemed to be carried away on the wings of dreams.

His waking up was very sudden, for it seemed to Bumpus that a cannon had been discharged close to his ears, after which came all sorts of loud calling.

CHAPTER VI. THE NIGHT PROWLER.

When the alarmed Bumpus came crawling hastily out of the tent, he trailed after the other three who had been sleeping near him; for of course, not being forced to carry such a weight around with them as fortune decreed the fat scout should possess, Thad, Step Hen and Davy Jones were much more spry in their movements.

Bumpus found a scene of more or less excitement when he reached the open air.

49

"I tell you I did shoot the thief, Thad, because I heard him kicking and grunting over there in the bushes," Giraffe was crying, in excited tones; and no doubt he was shivering all over at the very thought of having done such a thing as fire directly at a human being.

"What was he doing at the time?" demanded the scout-master, who did not altogether like the idea of hearing what the sentry declared was the truth; for his little talk with Bumpus told how Thad felt about the matter.

"Just sneaking right into the camp!" declared Giraffe, who seemed to feel that his act might need bolstering up the best he knew how. "Why, from his actions I just made up my mind the ferocious convict was bent on murdering the lot of us in our sleep, and getting away with everything we had. I tell you it served him right, Thad, and you must know it. I tried to hit him in the leg; but the light was that uncertain a fellow couldn't just make sure. I hope myself I haven't done any worse than give him a wound, which you can bandage up."

Already it seemed, Giraffe's bold heart was failing him.

"We ought to see about it," said Allan, who, when there was any unpleasant duty to be performed, never allowed himself to shirk.

50

"Giraffe, show us where you think he keeled over," demanded Thad.

"Why, over there where you see them bushes waving in the night wind, whenever the fire picks up. I'll foller after you, as soon as I can; I'm afraid I sorter sprained my ankle turning so sudden-like after I shot, and it hurts like anything, let me tell you. Go ahead, Thad, and take a light along. If you haven't got that handy little electric torch, why, just snatch up a stick from the fire. And look out everybody, that he ain't playing possum, and meaning to shoot when you come close up."

Of course Thad understood. It was not that Giraffe was growing timid, for he had always been accounted the boldest of the boys in the Silver Fox Patrol; but a sudden sickening realization that by his incautious shot he may have taken a human life, however worthless, made him feel weak about the knees; that talk of a possible sprain of his ankle was a pure fabrication to cover his hesitation about, looking on his work.

Thad, however, would not hold back on that account. If there was a wretched human outcast lying there in pain, the quicker they found this out the better, because, as scouts they had a plain duty to perform.

So Thad sprang over to the smouldering fire. As Giraffe had said, the flames occasionally leaped up as they found new places to eat into the brands; and quickly selecting a promising torch he waved it several times around his head until he had coaxed it to flame forth, when he led the way in the quarter mentioned by Giraffe.

The latter came limping after, no doubt all of a quiver as to what he would hear said in another minute.

"There he is now, lying over yonder!" suddenly gasped Step Hen, pointing; and Bumpus gripped his gun nervously as he tried to crane his fat neck in order to see.

"Yes, there is something lying there!" announced Allan; "and I saw it move just a little then, so I reckon that it's pretty nearly gone!"

"Oh, that would be tough on the poor critter!" said Bumpus, sympathizingly.

"Yes, and on our chum Giraffe!" echoed Davy, with something about his voice as though he meant to imply that he would not envy the one who had been so hasty about firing at an intruder.

Thad kept right on advancing, and suddenly he was heard to give a queer little hysterical laugh of relief; which proved that the scout-master must have also been laboring under quite a strain.

"Cheer up, Giraffe!" he called out.

"Ain't he dead, then?" cried the tall scout, forgetting to limp any longer as he started to hurry toward the spot.

"Oh! I guess he's a goner, as far as that goes," Thad went on to say; "but it isn't a man after all, only a runt of a razorback pig!"

"Well, what d'ye think about that, now?" remarked Smithy, as they gathered about the dun-colored victim of Giraffe's deadly shot; and which had evidently given its last kick, for it was stiffening out even then.

Giraffe was heard to draw several long breaths. He could not say a word at first, emotion so nearly overcame him; but then Thad was glad this had taken place, because he believed it might teach the impulsive one a much needed lesson. Already had Giraffe learned that he had a heart, which was not so callous as he made out. And he would hardly be apt to pull trigger so quickly at another time, when there seemed to be a good chance that it might be a fellow human being at whom his bullet, or load of shot, was to be sent.

"I thought I heard a grunting when I shot," he finally admitted; "but there were all sorts of sounds breaking out around me. And then you fellows started to yelp like everything, so no wonder I got mixed up some. But see here, Thad, this porker belongs to somebody, don't he?"

"He certainly must have, when he was alive," answered the other, with a smile; "and if we can ever learn who his owner was, we'll be only too glad to settle the bill with him. That may prove to be a dear snap shot you took, Giraffe; because

of course the cracker will put a high valuation on his property. They always do when a train kills a cow on the track."

"Well, it would be a shame to waste such juicy meat, wouldn't it?" pursued the lanky scout, insinuatingly, as he made his jaws move in a way that carried out the idea of feasting.

"Don't worry, it isn't going to be wasted," said Thad. "If we get the name we're bound to have the game, too. So hang up your victim by the hind legs, Giraffe, and in the morning we'll see that we get two fresh hams, some shoulders, and spare ribs in the bargain."

"Yum! yum! how's that for high? Nut-fed pork for me every time, fellows. Haven't I read heaps about the same being so fine down in Old Virginia. Here, give me a hand, will you, Bumpus—no, never mind, one of the others will do as well. Smithy, you take hold, because you're nearly as tall as I am; and we'll tie the pig's hind legs together, so he can hang nicely."

This was soon accomplished, and all of the scouts felt that the adventure, though giving them something of a shock at first, was not fated to be without its compensating features.

Once more those whose privilege it was to be occupying the twin tents while their comrades remained on guard without, again sought their blankets, and the soft couches fashioned from the yielding gray Spanish moss.

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Giraffe, had, however, so far yielded to the dictates of his better nature to say to Thad before the scout-master crept out of sight:

"I want to tell you that I'm awful glad that was only a shoat of a razorback instead of a poor black coon," which was as good as admitting that he had learned his lesson, and would be much more careful after that how he pulled trigger when he did not exactly know what species of intruder had invaded the camp.

Thad was more than satisfied with the result. He believed that he would not mind being given a frequent shock, if by its means the rest of the boys under his charge might see their way clear to better things.

At the proper time Giraffe came and woke up Step Hen and Davy, who were to take a turn outside. The latter was heard to express himself the very first thing he crawled beyond the flap of the tent that "the night air was quite cool, and likewise very sweet."

Morning came at last, and there had been no further alarm; but for all that the boys were glad when Thad called them forth, and said it was high time they got breakfast started, as they had a long day's work before them.

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Giraffe begged that Allan cut up the dead pig; and as the Maine boy had had considerable experience along that line, he consented to act as butcher for the occasion. Nothing would do the lanky scout but that they must have some of the razorback in the pan for breakfast, in the shape of chops, for he could not wait until another whole day had passed before tasting, to see if "nut-fed" pork was so very fine after all.

Some of them said they thought it was "peculiar," others did not fancy it very much; but as for Giraffe, he fairly raved over it; although Davy hinted that he was just "making believe," so that he could come back three more times for the portions of those who shook their heads, and said it was a little too "piggy" for them.

Bumpus was strangely quiet this morning. He could be seen frowning occasionally, as though his thoughts might not be very pleasant; but then they knew what a great fellow he was to worry over small things; and they took it for granted that he must be again trying to puzzle out the answer to that mystery concerning the little package of medicine—whether he had really delivered it to his mother, or left it at some house on the way home.

No doubt he even pictured that mother as suffering all sorts of agonies just because he had been so careless; for he often declared it was going to be a terrible lesson to him, and break him of some of his bad habits.

But then he also eyed Giraffe and Davy suspiciously whenever they came near him, as though he rather expected to hear them once more make disparaging remarks about the odors they claimed came from the old and greasy suit he insisted on wearing while in the swamp, instead of soiling his brand new one; but they failed to do anything to stir him up, from one reason or another.

"There's Thad beckoning to us to all come over," said Step Hen.

"He's found something or other, I warrant you," Davy remarked; "because I could see him nosing around. Tracks, chances are ten to one, you mark what I say."

For once Davy proved a true prophet, for as they came up to where the young scout-master was standing, Thad pointed to the ground, and then went on to remark:

"When you fired that shot, and knocked over the shoat, Giraffe, you builded better than you knew. Look right here, and you'll see where a man was crawling along on his hands and knees, bent on entering our camp. He must have thought you'd taken a shot at him, for here's where he whirled around behind this tree, and then made off in a stooping posture as fast as he could move, always trying to keep a clump of bushes between himself and the camp. And the man your shot scared off, Giraffe, was a barefooted escaped convict too, as the signs seem to prove!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE HEART OF A SCOUT.

"That's interesting news, Thad!" Step Hen declared.

"The way you say that makes me think you mean 'interesting, if true,'" Thad remarked, with a little laugh. "In other words, you want me to

prove it.”

“Oh! well, we’re all such a lot of slow-witted scouts that we have to be shown; just like we’d come from Missouri,” admitted the other, in a tone that was meant to serve as an apology.

“And I’m always ready to explain as far as I can,” the scout-master told him. “At the same time I have to keep an eye on Allan here, for you all know that when it comes to reading the signs of the woods I sit at his feet. What I pick up just by figuring out, he knows from past experience. So I want him to pull me in just as quick as he sees I’m on the wrong track; promise that, Allan.”

“Go ahead,” remarked the Maine boy, but his manner told plainly enough that he was very little afraid he would have to do anything of the kind.

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“Of course,” Thad began, “all of you can see by the marks here that something was moving along toward our camp; and if you look a little closer you’ll notice that it was a man on his hands and knees; for here are the plain impressions of both his hands; while his shuffling knees made that mark, and that, and here is where his toes dragged along. Plain enough, eh, fellows?”

“As easy to read as A B C!” declared Giraffe, eagerly.

“Another thing is that he had just reached this spot behind the bushes at the time Giraffe let fly with his gun, and then we all started to shout; for you can see the tracks go no further. On the contrary, the man became suddenly frightened, under the belief that he had been discovered; for here he scrambled to his feet, as you can plainly see each impression of a bare foot, and as he hurried away he kept back of the low bushes, from which I deduce the idea that he must have stooped over in order not to be seen and fired on.”

“Well, it goes right along like a book, don’t it?” said Bumpus, looking at the young scout-master in admiration and wonder; for he could not imagine how any one, and a mere boy at that, could discover so much just from observation, and using his common sense at the same time.

Allan nodded his head approvingly.

“But chances are that isn’t near all you noticed, Thad?” he said, questioningly.

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“You’re right, it isn’t,” said the other, promptly. “I can see from the signs that the man is barefooted, and consequently in great need; so I am compelled to believe that he must be an escaped convict who has been trying to keep life in his wretched body, perhaps for months, in this swamp, eating roots or berries, trapping birds, or catching fish, muskrats, turtles, anything that he can find. And as nearly all those who are held in these camps are blacks, I find it easy to guess that this is a negro.”

“Ain’t that a great way of finding out things, though?” marveled Bumpus. “Why, Thad, you talk just like you’d been watching that poor old chap every second of the time. I don’t reckon,

now, that you could tell us anything else about him—how big he was, and all that?”

“He was a good-sized fellow, for you can see that the track of his bare foot is really tremendous; and if you look here you’ll notice where he lay flat on his face, so that it is possible to roughly measure his length—all of six feet, too. And his left hand is lacking one finger!” added the scoutmaster.

“What’s that?” gasped Step Hen. “You’re only joshing us now, Thad; for how under the sun could you tell such a thing as that?”

Allan chuckled, and looked immensely pleased.

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“I thought so!” he was heard to mutter to himself.

“Well, it’s the old story of keeping your eyes about you,” remarked Thad, “and using your head as you go. Three separate times, now, I saw where he had placed his left hand spread out on the ground where it was soft enough to take a pretty good impression; and in every instance the *third* finger was missing; so with all that proof I thought I was safe in assuming that this man was marked. And let me say, that later on when we get the chance I mean to ask a lot of questions just to satisfy myself about it. If a convict escaped from jail, or some camp, who has no third finger on his left hand I’ll consider that I’ve proved my case.”

Some of the boys were still a little skeptical, and asked to be shown those wonderful imprints of the hand that told Thad such an interesting story; but after they too had examined them they admitted that it was even so.

“It sure beats the Dutch how these things stick up with some fellows,” Bumpus frankly admitted, as he scratched his frowsy head in wonder, and almost awe. “Now, the rest of us looked right at them impressions in the mud. We saw they’d been made by a human hand, of course, cause there ain’t any monkeys around here besides Davy; but not one of us went any deeper. Why, after you’ve been shown, it stands out there like a mountain, and you see it as plain as you see your nose when you shut one eye. I wisht I could discover things that way; there’d be heaps of things I’d find out, let me tell you.”

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“Yes,” said Giraffe, severely, as he moved away from the vicinity of Bumpus, his nose elevated at an angle of forty-five degrees; “but what we’re all hoping most for now is that you’ll hurry and get over that cold in your head, so that your natural sense of smell will come back; for then you’d certain sure duck out of that grimy old suit that’s just greased from top to bottom, and give us a chance to breathe the pure air.”

Bumpus looked at him pityingly.

“You do love to carry on a joke to the limit, Giraffe,” he said, simply.

“Joke?” burst out the other in a vociferous voice; “let me tell you, this is a mighty serious matter; and if it keeps along, some of us in desperation may be tempted to jump on you while you sleep, and make the change ourselves. We’re getting to a point where self-preservation is the first law of

Nature."

"Bah! who's afraid?" retorted Bumpus, with a shrug of his plump shoulders; "but you want to keep your hands off me, for I'll kick and bite like fun if set on. I know you're just trying to see if you can't convince me against my own good sense. This atmosphere seems all right to me; though I admit I don't just like the looks of this black swamp water, and the ooze we meet up with sometimes."

Giraffe gave him a last piercing look; then as if making up his mind that the case was utterly hopeless, he shook his head and turned away; while Bumpus went back to his camp duties as blithely as though care sat lightly on his head.

After they had finished breakfast the tents were struck, folded in as small a compass as possible, and one stowed away in each of the boats. Afterwards they cleaned up the camp, and made sure that nothing worth while was left.

There had been certain portions of the razorback that they did not mean to take along with them. Seeing Bumpus busily engaged Thad approached, asking:

"What are you up to here, old fellow? Just as I thought, trying to do a little favor for that wretch of a three-fingered coon, by tying up this meat where the animals will have a hard time getting at it. Yes, you guessed right that time, for the chances are he'll come back here as soon as he knows we've gone, in the hopes of picking up some scraps we've tossed aside. Bumpus, you're improving, because that shows you figured it all out, and hit the bull's-eye in the bargain."

The fat scout looked immensely pleased to hear Thad talk in this strain.

"Well, after eating such a jolly breakfast myself, it struck me as pretty sad we should be so near a miserable human being who was almost starved. No matter if he is a bad man, and deserves all he's getting, he's made like us, and I just reckon the lot of us would be quite as tough as he is if we'd never had the benefit of a nice home and education and full stomachs. And so I thought, as he'd be likely to come here, I'd save these pieces from the cats and skunks for him."

"It sure does your big heart credit, Bumpus, and that is the way a true scout ought to feel pretty much all the time," Thad went on to say, looking affectionately at his stout chum. "Now, if he only gets here soon enough, there'll be red ashes in the bed of our fire, and he can start it up again, so as to do his cooking."

"Oh!" said Bumpus, with a happy gurgle, "I thought all that out, too, Thad. See, here in this paper is half of my matches. I can spare 'em easy enough; and every one will be worth a heap to him, I guess."

At that evidence of thoughtfulness Thad clapped his hand on the shoulder of Bumpus, and as he turned away remarked:

"They can talk about you all they please, Bumpus, and make fun of the onion odor about your old suit with more or less truth; but you're

certainly making better progress along the lines of scout lore than most of the boys who think themselves your superiors."

And that sort of earnest praise made Bumpus beam with happiness all morning long.

The camp spot was deserted shortly after this little talk between Bumpus and Thad. And for some hours they continued to press slowly along, following such channels as Thad believed to be most promising.

All the time he kept in mind that they were trying to come across a man and a girl who were supposed to have a place of hiding somewhere in this swamp; and so he considered this fact every time he had to make any sort of choice concerning taking one channel or another, invariably selecting that which he fancied had been used more than the other.

He had to decide from mute evidence. It might be only a broken branch that told him a boat had possibly scraped against a bush in making a short turn; or the fact that he believed he could see a sort of regular line of marked places, as though some one besides themselves had resorted to the same means of blazing their trail in order to be able to go out whenever they felt inclined, without running the danger of losing their way among all those endless channels, and never being able to leave the confines of that horrible swamp.

All this while it had been getting worse and worse, the heavy growth enclosing them in a narrow canal at times, so that they had serious doubts as to whether they were doing the right thing, or had wandered far from the proper channel.

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It was while they were pushing steadily onward that Bumpus, who was nodding as he lazily paddled, suddenly heard Thad in the stern cry in thrilling tones:

"Lookout, Bumpus, there's a water moccasin just over your head on that limb, and acting like he'd drop in the boat. There! throw yourself back, Bumpus, quick now, I tell you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

LOOKING BACKWARD.

Now, if there was anything in the wide world that could give the fat scout a real hard scare, it had to do with snakes. Had he been told that there was a yellow-eyed wildcat crouching on a limb, and evidently planning to spring straight at him, Bumpus might have exhibited a certain degree of courage, and at least have tried to reach around in search of his gun; but a hideous, squirming snake was quite a different proposition.

And only that morning he had heard Thad tell about how venomous these numerous water moccasins were; how indeed, in some places, their bite is feared only second to that of a

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rattler; for while immediate death does not as a rule take place, often the wound will turn into an open running sore, and create no end of bother.

And so doubtless that brain of Bumpus' instantly sent a "wireless" to other parts of his body, giving the alarm. Certain it is that at the very same instant the squirming object flashed before his eyes, falling in the boat directly ahead of Bumpus, who was in the bow, he made one magnificent backward splurge, his feet kicking violently every-which way, as in imagination he felt the fangs of the intruder fastened in his leg.

It was a sight never to be forgotten by those other scouts; though had not the canoe been very staunch the chances were that Bumpus in his frantic zeal to part company with the moccasin must have tipped the craft over, and deposited himself as well as his three companions in the water.

Even as he kept both legs working like the piston rods of an engine Bumpus was letting out roars that would have done credit to an angry bull. He afterwards confessed that it seems to be the one prominent feature in his mind that Thad had told them to make all the splash and noise they could if ever they were threatened by these contemptible water moccasins, as that would frighten them away. And as Giraffe afterwards avowed, the noise that Bumpus created would have given his comrades the one grand scare of their lives, had they not known the origin of it all. Bumpus actually took that as a compliment, too, mind you.

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"Keep still, Bumpus, or you'll upset the boat!" shouted Thad, sternly; and he had to exert himself to be heard above all the row.

"You're safe enough, silly; he won't jump at you!" cried Davy Jones, who had all he could manage with the head of the fat scout in his lap, and those legs going like the arms of a windmill in a stiff gale.

"Gimme just one chance to whack the beggar!" demanded Step Hen, who had managed to pick up the push pole, which was carried in case they became fast in the mud at any time, and must depend on brawn and muscle to get clear.

As the result of all these objurgations Bumpus recovered enough sense to slightly raise his head, so that he could take a peep. He discovered that the moccasin had coiled in the very bow, and was acting as though intending to retain possession of the canoe; for it kept thrusting venomously with its head, and showed a nasty disposition in the way it opened its mouth.

But Step Hen poised the push pole as though he meant business.

"Duck your head, Bumpus!" he called out; at which the other hastened to obey, not in the least inclined to feel the heft of that stout pole.

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He heard a crash, and gave a yelp.

"Hey! that was my left foot you hit! Quit knocking me!" was his plaint.

"Well, you wouldn't give me enough room!"

declared Step Hen, complacently; "but it's all right, Bumpus, you suffered in a good cause, and that ought to repay you. I got him, and he isn't agoing to jab you this trip, mark my words!"

So Bumpus, despite his pain, raised his head again far enough to see that Step Hen had indeed settled the snake; for it was wriggling aimlessly this way and that, trying to strike even in its death throes, such was its venomous nature.

"Toss it overboard, Step Hen!" ordered the scout-master.

Managing to get the point of the pole under its folds, the other hastened to do so, and the struggling reptile floated off, much to the relief of all those who had been menaced, especially poor Bumpus, who was nursing his toes, and grumbling that he had "to pay the fiddler even if he didn't dance."

"I hope now that pesky thing didn't go and get a bite at me unbeknown," he said, as though a new feeling of alarm had suddenly taken possession of him; and though the rest laughed at the idea, nothing would ease the mind of the stout boy until he had taken off his leggings and closely examined both shins; when he felt relieved of his anxiety.

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Of course the talk among the boys for some time afterwards was in connection with these dangers that are ever present in Southern waters, especially those of the swamps.

And again Thad cautioned them to beware how they allowed a moccasin to become in any way familiar.

"I reckon," remarked Step Hen, after listening to these warnings, "that there ain't any place agoing where the watchwords of Boy Scouts come in better'n they do down here; because, seems to me a fellow's got to 'be prepared' about all the time. What with hungry alligators ready to make a meal off your feet; poisonous snakes dropping off slanting trees; bobcats waiting in the crotches above for a chance to scratch you into ribbons; escaped convicts atrying to steal about everything you own; and so-forth, it wouldn't be a bad scheme to own three pair of eyes and ears to keep on guard."

Thad was keeping up his watchful tactics of the preceding afternoon as they thus slowly advanced into the depths of Alligator Swamp. He did not wish to make an error of judgment, if it could possibly be avoided; for only too well did the boy know from past experiences how such a mistake can keep on swelling until the final consequences are simply tremendous.

So they kept on marking each bend that they turned, and Thad saw to it that he could pick up one "blaze," if it could be termed such, from another. He also broke a smaller branch, always on the side they came from; so that if in doubt later on, it would be easy to make sure which way to go, a very wise precaution indeed, and one that Allan highly commended when he saw what was being done.

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They did not hurry, since nothing was to be gained by making speed at the sacrifice of

safety. And as they thus journeyed, it was perhaps only natural that, with the two canoes close together, one of the scouts should ask Thad further questions in connection with this man who had apparently taken such a peculiar dislike to the Brewster family, in that he could be suspected of having kidnapped the little girl sister whom Thad remembered so well as a baby.

"I was only a small chap at the time, which was nearly ten years ago," Thad told them, as a strange look came over his young face, when thus recalling the past; "but I can remember him very well as a dashing looking man, smart enough too, but with a horrible temper, and some bad habits that finally got him into trouble; for he took things belonging to my folks, and was discharged from his position as manager of the property.

"That downfall he seemed to foolishly lay at the door of my mother, though to tell the truth she was only too lenient with the rascal, who should have been prosecuted, and sent to the penitentiary for a term of years. Then, later on, my baby sister strangely disappeared, and my mother never fully recovered from the shock; because although for some years she spent money like water, and had the best detectives in the country searching everywhere; but they never were able to find the least trace of poor little Pauline.

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"Of course, sooner or later suspicion fell upon this Felix Jasper, and as he was located in New Orleans a close watch was kept upon his movements; but they found no reason to cause his arrest; and so it went until my poor mother finally left me alone, and Daddy Brewster, a brother of my father's, came and brought me to his home in Cranford, where I met you fellows."

"Which, I take it, was a red letter day for old Cranford!" declared Step Hen; "because right from the first you managed to inject more ginger into the boys than they'd ever known before. When you went off that summer to visit some other relative, and came back filled chuck full with Boy Scout business, didn't you get every fellow in Cranford excited, and wasn't the Silver Fox Patrol formed as a result?"

"Yes," added Davy, for the subject was one that appealed to Thad's close chums very much, "and whenever we played baseball, or any other game, wasn't it you who took the lead, and made the name of Cranford respected through the whole county, where before it had always stood close to the bottom of the list? I should say we did strike it lucky when you came along the pike, Thad."

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"That'll be enough for you, Davy; and suppose we change the subject," remarked the scout-master; although his eyes snapped, and his cheeks grew red with pleasure to know that his comrades appreciated him so much.

"But do you reckon you'd ever be able to recognize this man if you set eyes on him again, Thad?" asked Bumpus, at this juncture.

"I am sure I would," came the positive reply; "because he couldn't have changed so much, only to look older. I'd never forget those

snapping black eyes, and the straight nose, as well as the firm mouth. As I remember him, Felix wasn't as cruel as he looked, but his temper often made him do things that perhaps he was sorry for afterwards, though he had a terribly stubborn disposition, and once started on a thing would carry it through, regardless of every consideration."

"Did you ever hear of him after he was in New Orleans?" asked Allan, from the other canoe close by.

"I believe he prospered there for several years," said Thad; "and then got into some sort of trouble. This same gentleman who wrote Daddy lately, used to keep him informed as to what Felix was doing, because somehow my uncle always believed that sooner or later something would be heard about my little sister through that man. Then came this letter stating that he had been seen near Alligator Swamp, and a girl in his company who might be some eleven years old; just what the age of Pauline must be if she is alive."

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"But when he was in New Orleans didn't he have the girl with him?" demanded Giraffe, who was generally pretty keen when it came to asking questions.

"No, but then the chances were that he knew he was being kept under observation, and that at the time he was smart enough to have her at some other place. He did marry while in the city, but there were no children, and his wife left him, so we were told by the one who had been employed to keep tabs on the man, perhaps on account of his villainous temper."

"Then you imagine that after he had to clear out from the city and hide, because of some crime he had done, this Felix Jasper may have gone and gotten the little girl, so that he would have company in his exile—is that it, Thad?" questioned Smithy, who had once known of a case something like that of the other, and could sympathize with his chum.

"That's what I'm hoping, and what seemed to strike Daddy as perhaps the truth," replied the other. "But if we have any decent kind of luck I'll know more about it all before we start back home to Cranford again; because I'm determined to comb this old swamp through and through, asking every one I meet, to get pointers until I run across the man who was seen with a little girl. And if it turns out that after all he isn't Felix, I'll be feeling pretty sick, let me tell you. But something seems to keep telling me here," and he laid a trembling hand in the region of his heart, "that there's glorious news waiting for me; and every night I lie down I just pray with all my soul that it's going to turn out that way."

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"So do we all, Thad, don't we, fellows?" exclaimed Bumpus, soberly; and there was not one among the other six but who instantly expressed himself in the affirmative.

Thad quickly changed the subject, for he was feeling very much excited and shaken because of the sad memories recalled by his talk; and the other scouts, realizing that he did not wish to continue along those lines, readily fell in with his wishes in the matter.

The morning passed, and all of them noticed that it seemed to warm up greatly as the day advanced, until they had stripped their coats off, and with sleeves rolled up to their elbows as in the good old summer-time up North, paddled along under the arches of the closely growing trees. These were cypress for the most part, since these seem to do better in the midst of water than any other species; and their expanded butts always several times as large in girth as the trunks were five feet from the roots, gave the boys no end of argument as to the cause of such a strange growth.

"There!" suddenly exclaimed Bumpus, "that was an alligator belling, Thad, wasn't it? You said they generally talked just before dawn, but still one lonely fellow might happen to break the rule."

"Wrong again, Bumpus, because that wasn't any sort of animal or reptile," the scout-master went on to say, with a smile.

"But you don't mean to tell me a *bird* could grumble like that, Thad?" continued the amazed Bumpus.

The rest set up a laugh.

"You sure have got snakes and 'gators on the brain, Bumpus!" declared Giraffe, scornfully. "Why, if you was up home right now, you'd agussed like the rest of us did, that what you heard was the grumble of thunder, that's all!"

CHAPTER IX. "COMBING" THE SWAMP LABYRINTH.

"Oh! you can't fool me that way, Giraffe!" chuckled Bumpus. "I may look green, but things ain't always what they seem. Thunder, eh? And this is mighty near the end of December, too. Try again, Giraffe."

"Yes, but don't forget, Bumpus, where you are," cautioned Thad. "This country in winter time can have anything we expect only in summer up North, and that stands for thunderstorms any month in the year. There, that was a louder peal; and now you'll understand we're not trying to make you swallow a tough yarn."

"It sure did sound like it," admitted the fat scout, "but I never thought we'd run up against a thunderstorm, or I'd have fetched my new raincoat along."

"Goodness knows you did bring more than your share, as it is," complained Step Hen. "You ought to have a boat all to yourself, because the rest of us don't get a chance for our lives. But I say, Thad, do we stand for a ducking?"

"If I could see a chance to go ashore I'd say we might get the tents up, and hold over till the storm had passed by," the scout-master replied.

"That's where it's agoing to be hard," ventured

Giraffe; "because right now there don't seem to be a piece of ground as big as a postage stamp in sight; nothing but the fat butts of these here old cypresses, and low-hanging vines around. Reckon we must just stand for wet jackets, boys."

"Wait, don't give it up so easily," said Thad. "Pull over to where those vines hang low, and see if you can't manage to fasten your tent up in some sort of style, so that it'll hang over the boat, and keep the rain off."

"But how about the wind, won't that blow her every which way?" asked Bob White.

"You'll find precious little wind with this rain," Thad assured him, "because it is so thick in the swamp here that we'll be protected. You may hear it humming in the cypress tops, but hardly a ripple below."

"Hurrah! that's the ticket, then!" cried Bumpus, who did dislike to get wet more than almost anything; yet who often managed to stumble, and fall into lakes and duck ponds in a way that was most exasperating. "Anyhow, if the worst does come, I've got my old duds on."

"Yes, we know you have, sure we do, Bumpus," Davy made sure to call out, as his face took on an expression of pain that made Giraffe laugh; for just then the latter being in the other boat, was separated from Thad's craft by a dozen yards of water, and to windward at the same time.

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It was found that the plan proposed by Thad was possible of execution. Happily the vines came down low enough for the boys to secure the tents in such a way that they could be spread out, and thus cover most all the boats' surface.

"This is what I call a boss scheme," Giraffe was heard to call out, from under the dun-colored canvas that was wobbling violently, as the boys made out to secure the ends the best they could, and in this way hold the boats steady.

"Did you ever know Thad to think up one that wasn't the best going?" demanded Smithy; who was really the latest recruit in the patrol, though he had learned a great many things since joining, and long ago ceased to merit the opprobrious title of "greenhorn" or "tenderfoot."

"Listen! I think I hear the rain!" called out Thad, more to break in upon this flattering line of talk than because it was necessary to draw attention to the pattering of the drops upon the canvas covers.

"That's right; and I tell you we didn't get fixed any too soon, fellows!" Bumpus exclaimed, as he snuggled down in comfort, holding on to his share of the tent as though half expecting, despite the reassuring words of Thad, to presently feel the same violently torn from his clutch by the gale unless he fastened to it with the tenacity of a bull terrier.

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Inside of three minutes the rain was coming down heavily, while the thunder proceeded to crash with all the vim of a real summer storm up home.

"One good thing," declared Giraffe, between outbursts, and when the rain seemed to let up a little, "we don't have to depend on the walking any; and after it's all over we can go right ahead as well as ever."

"Mebbe it'll raise the swamp level some," advanced Step Hen, "and we won't be apt to run on the mud banks, like we did more'n a few times."

"Getting lighter all the while, boys; and I guess she'll soon quit!" Giraffe went on to remark; and they all agreed with him.

"Did anybody get wet?" asked Allan, when it seemed as though the storm had passed over, and was rumbling away in the dim distance, having gone to the northeast.

"Nary a drop!" Bumpus triumphantly declared.

"Huh! there might be fellows mean enough to wish somebody *had* gone and got soaked through and through; for then he'd have to bring out his new suit, and wear the same," Davy growled.

Bumpus was seen to be glaring suspiciously at the speaker when the wet tent was taken down in the most careful manner possible.

"I really believe you wouldn't care a red cent, Davy Jones," he said, sternly, "if I happened to make a bad step, and walked overboard. Fact is, I'm agoing to keep my eye on you after this. Like to have me get my old suit wet, would you, so I'd just *have* to make the change; well, I wouldn't put it past you to give me a little shove, or trip me up, so I'd take a header. Better take care, because there's a limit to my good nature. Some fellows can be coaxed to do nearly anything, but they object to being driven."

"Listen to him talk, would you?" cried Davy, pretending to be hurt by the accusation of the other, though there was a gleam in his eyes that told he had been given an idea by Bumpus' remark. "You make me think of the traveler that the sun and the wind picked out as a victim, to see which was the stronger. He had a cloak on, and the one that managed to get it off was to be the victor. So the wind tried as hard as anything, but the traveler only wrapped his cloak tighter around him. Then the sun got hotter'n hotter, till he just couldn't hardly breathe; so what does he do but throw away his cloak; and of course the sun won, hands down."

"Chestnut!" gibed Giraffe, from the other boat; "ten to one even six suns couldn't force Bumpus to shed his coat when once he'd made up his mind to keep it on. Just like that stubborn will of his, it grows stronger and stronger all the time."

"Yes," added Davy, "and every little while you can see him sitting by the fire, with his chin held in his hand and a far-away look in his eyes; and then you know he's cracking his poor brain trying to remember what happened to that five cents' worth of medicine he can't remember what he did with."

"Didn't I tell you again and again that the money part don't enter into this matter at all?" demanded Bumpus. "It's just because I was so

wretchedly careless, that it keeps wearing on my mind. I ought to know what I did with that stuff; and I'm bound to figure it out, or bust a boiler at trying. Didn't Thad tell us that was a good trait in a scout? Ain't being determined what every good scout ought to try'n practice? Didn't he tell us about how the hungry wolf over in Siberia will set out on the track of a deer in the snow, and keep everlastingly after him, even if the chase seems silly to begin with; but nearly every time he'll get his game before he quits, just by his pertinacity. That's what I am, one of the stick-at-it kind."

"You never said truer words, Bumpus!" coughed Davy, toward the stern of the boat, "some things are like a rolling snowball, they keep on getting bigger'n bigger the longer they exist. But every dog has his day, and we live in hopes that something'll happen to make you change your mind about that same coat."

When the tents had been squeezed as dry as possible, the forward progress was resumed, all of them feeling rather light-hearted over the clever way in which they had cheated the storm. It always gives a boy a sense of superiority to feel that he has come out first best in a battle with Nature.

Some of the scouts doubtless began to wonder how they were ever going to locate the man and the girl, deep in the gloomy recesses of Alligator Swamp; but those who kept their wits about them, and watched what Thad was doing, must have ere this come to the conclusion that he had not been wandering aimlessly about all this time, but on the contrary had some definite plan of campaign in view, which he kept constantly following.

In fact, Thad was on the alert for any sort of sign that would tell him some other boat had been in the habit of passing along through these channels. Allan at times called his attention to certain indications along those lines. And it was in the hope that this other boat might be the one containing the man and the girl, whose presence here had drawn him from his faraway Northern home, that Thad continued to pursue his set course.

As the afternoon began to wear away, after they had partaken of a light cold lunch that was not at all satisfactory to Giraffe, who declared at its close he was nearly starved, all of them began to keep a bright look-out for some decent sort of dry land where they might camp for the coming night.

"Because," said Smithy, who liked plenty of room, "it would be manifestly next to impossible for four fellows to stretch out comfortably in such a narrow craft as this canoe,"—Smithy always liked to use big words, and was moreover very precise in his mode of speech, but a pretty good fellow all the same, a great change having come over him since he took up being a scout, and ceased to cater to his former "sissy" weaknesses along the line of extreme "dudishness," as Giraffe always called it.

"Well, I should say, yes," burst forth Davy Jones; "if you think you'd have a bad time, just cast your eye over this way and tell me what'd become of us, once Bumpus started stretching

himself out all over the boat. When he's sitting up it's bad enough, but lying down would make the situation er—er——"

"Intolerable, I suppose you mean, Davy," supplemented Smithy, promptly.

"Yes, in more ways than one it would be," declared the Jones boy, darkly.

"Well, don't worry," Bumpus told him, calmly; "because right now I guess Thad's got his eye on a real nice camp site, if that grin on his face stands for anything, and I think it does. How about it, Mr. Scout-master; have you struck solid land?"

"I see a place ahead that looks kind of good to me," Thad replied; "but because lots of things don't happen to turn out as well as they promise, we'll have to wait till we get there before we'll know for sure. And as we're all tired of prowling around in this way for one day, I think we'll hold up, providing the chance comes along."

"Even half a chance, Thad," urged Davy, hurriedly; "don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Beggars shouldn't be choosers, my ma always says, when I begin to hesitate about taking something that's offered. Half a loaf's some better'n no bread. And as for me, I'm fairly *wild* to get out and stretch my weary limbs, and also mingle with my other pards."

"Other pards, huh!" sniffed Bumpus, who knew very well that this was intended as another little fling at him, though it failed to make even a dent in his resolution not to give in to the requests of these complaining fellows.

They were soon alongside the patch of high ground discovered by Thad; and when they found that it offered a splendid site for a dry camp, all of them were pleased. The way they proceeded to tumble out of the boats told that their limbs had been more or less cramped by sitting so long, for as many as seven hours had elapsed since they embarked.

In spite of the time that had been spent in pushing along, they could not have made as great progress as might be expected; for on numerous occasions Thad was compelled to admit that he had taken a false channel; after which they had to go back over their course, destroying the marks that had been left, so they might not later on mislead them again, until a new start could be made.

First of all they jumped up and down on the land, and performed all manner of gymnastic feats, with the object of getting out the "kinks," as Giraffe explained it. Davy Jones was up a tree like a flash, and swinging there as jauntily as any Borneo gorilla could have done; in fact the Jones boy never seemed so happy as when he could hang with his head down, and his toes caught on a branch. If he chanced to slip, he was as agile as a cat, and would clutch some new hold. They say that it is seldom a squirrel misses connections when jumping from one tree to another; and surely no boy ever came nearer to being a human squirrel than did Davy Jones.

"Now, if you've got limbered up enough," said Thad presently, "come and help me get the

duffel ashore, so we can look after the boats, as usual."

Everybody was willing, and many hands make light work, so the tents and all other things came ashore at a lively rate.

Thad had just thrown down a package he had been carrying, when he was seen to stand and look down at it critically, and then shake his head, as though trying to figure something out.

"What ails you, Thad?" called out Giraffe, who happened to be near by, and noticed this queer action on the part of the scout-master. "I hope, now, we haven't been and lost anything?" for Giraffe was always in fear lest the food supply be cut short.

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"No, but perhaps there's a chance we may," replied the other, with a grin.

"You don't say; and what might it be?" demanded Davy, becoming interested.

"Why, a sudden idea struck me, that's all," replied Thad. "To tell you the truth fellows, perhaps you've been treating our chum Bumpus shamefully all the while, in accusing him as you have of wearing clothes that are greasy and loud; because I've got a notion that I've located the source of this bad odor we've been suffering from two whole days and nights."

CHAPTER X. WAS THE MYSTERY SOLVED?

"Oh! joy! joy!" cried Giraffe, upon hearing this great news.

"Thad, we all look on you as a public benefactor!" Bob White chipped in; though thus far he had said very little about the annoyance the strange odor was causing them; because he was a boy of few words as a rule; and then again, he had not been compelled to remain in the same boat, or sleep under the same canvas as the scout on whose soiled garments suspicion had fallen.

"The best news I've heard in many a long day!" declared Smithy.

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"Now!" was all Davy Jones gave utterance to, but the word was uttered with what seemed to be almost savage satisfaction; and his eyes at the time were turned full on poor Bumpus, who of course squirmed uneasily in his seat by the fire, where he was fixing the coffee, and looked unhappy, as well as anxious.

"Please go on and tell us, Mr. Scout-master!" called out Step Hen; "if this old stuffy cold in the head I've got from Bumpus has kept me from having the pleasure of enjoying the mystery with you all, I've sure heard enough grunting and complaining to excite my curiosity to the limit. What's the answer?"

"Gather around, then," said Thad; and they began to form a circle; "here, we want you too,

Bumpus, so leave your coffee-making, while you listen, and give your vote; for if the majority decides I'm right, we won't be bothered any more with an unpleasant neighbor."

"Say, I hope you don't mean to kill him?" remarked Davy, pretending to shoot a glance of brotherly commiseration in the direction of the fat scout; "or chase him out of the camp to herd by himself."

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But somehow Bumpus had taken new courage from what he heard Thad remark, and as he came shuffling up with the rest, he was saying to himself:

"Huh! think you're smart, don't you, Davy Jones, but just wait. Who's afraid, anyway?"

"All here, Thad!" sang out Allan, impatiently.

"And waiting to hear the explanation of the mystery that's been bothering the whole patrol—leastwise, all but Bumpus and Step Hen, who ain't any good just now at ferreting out things, because they do nothing but blow, blow all day long," and Giraffe loomed head and shoulders above the rest of his mates as he faced Thad.

"Well, I'm going to pass it along now, and I want every one to take a good whiff, after which he is to give his opinion whether this is the offending package or not."

Saying this the scout-master picked up a stout paper bag that had been lying at his feet, the top tied with a string, and handed it solemnly to Giraffe, who happened to be his next neighbor on the right.

"Our fine onions!" gasped Step Hen, as he recognized the shape of the bag.

Giraffe held the package up close to his nose, and seemed to draw in a long breath, after which he gave utterance to the one expressive word:

"Jerusalem!"

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"What do you say, Giraffe?" demanded the patrol leader, grimly, "guilty or not guilty?"

The elongated scout immediately wagged his head vigorously in the affirmative.

"About the same class of odor that's been bothering us right along, Thad, sure it is; and I just reckon you've been and run our trouble down. Them onions are getting old and soft, and everybody knows how rank they are when that happens. Whew! who's next?"

"Pass it along!" demanded Bob White at his right shoulder; "I'm a good judge of onions, and I'll soon settle this thing for you all."

He too held the offending bag up near his nose; it hardly needed words to tell what his verdict was, for his face became screwed up in a manner that could only stand for condemnation.

"Giraffe, I'm with you!" he observed, as he hastened to give the bag to Smithy, next in line.

And so it went the rounds, even the grinning Bumpus being allowed to have his chance at

declaring what he thought.

"Well, I should say it *was* bad," the fat boy remarked, as he held it close, and kept sniffing away vigorously. "If that's the stuff I don't wonder you fellows kept kicking up such a row about it. But it was mean to pick on me for nothing. I tell you these old clothes ain't so *very* tough after all. Maybe you'll get down on your ham-bones now, and tell me how sorry you all are. Maybe you'll be begging me to let you come back in the boat with you, Giraffe; but don't bother, because I'm agoing to stick with Thad. He never took a mean advantage of me like some or the rest did, just because I'm little and can't stand up for myself. Huh! who's so smart now, tell me?"

Giraffe and Davy answered him not a word. No doubt, just then they really felt humiliated, as though conscience stricken, in that they had accused and condemned poor Bumpus without a hearing.

"But what's going to be done about it?" asked Smithy. "We surely can't think of carrying those offensive onions along with us any more, after all the trouble they've gone and made for us."

"Course not, they've just got to go!" declared Davy, positively.

Giraffe looked unhappy.

"And me so fond of fried onions I always said I'd never be caught camping without some along," he whimpered, mournfully.

"But you're the one that made the biggest fuss of the whole lot!" cried Bumpus; "why, you even made *me* nervous, and I was afraid my fighting blood would be worked up soon, if things kept on like they were. Sure you couldn't vote to keep the old things, after Thad's found out what they stand for?"

"I s'pose not, boys," replied the tall scout, sadly; "we'll have to do without the appetizing onion after this; but it's going to be hard on me. My appetite'll fall away, and you'll see me getting thinner and thinner every day."

"Well, we can use you for a bread knife then," remarked Bumpus, composedly; "because if you grew much sharper than you are, that's about the only thing you'd be good for. But if them onions smell so rank, what's the use of throwing the same away, when we'll be apt to know they're around all night. They ought to be put underground, don't you think, Thad?"

"That's a good idea, Bumpus; give me the camp hatchet, and I'll dig a grave over here, so we can have a regular burial. Form in line, fellows, for the ceremony."

Entering into the spirit of the occasion the whole eight scouts formed into a procession, and with Thad in the lead, bearing the hatchet in one hand, and the condemned bag of soft onions in the other, held as far away from his nose as possible, they started to walk solemnly along, heading for a spot that the leader had picked out as suitable for the ceremony of burial.

And as they thus stalked along the boys began to

chant in unison that old song: "John Brown's body lies amouldering in the grave, as we go marching on!"

And so, with the hatchet a hole was speedily excavated, and the offending object placed therein; after which the earth was hastily scraped over, until six inches of soil rested upon the bag.

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"There, that's what I call a good job!" remarked Giraffe, with a relieved look on his face, as they started back to where the fire burned merrily. "It'll seem like another world, now that we won't have to keep sniffing around all the time."

"Yes, and saying all sorts of mean things about my bully old suit that's stood by me through thick and thin, until I've just come to love the same!" Bumpus up and told the chief offender.

"Oh! well, let it go at that, Bumpus," muttered the tall scout. "A fellow is apt to get on the wrong trail once in a while, you know; even Thad here will do that same. We thought we was right, and acted accordingly. And now we'll give you a little rest, though we'd all be glad if you did make up your mind to change that greasy old suit for your spic and span clean one. Guess you'll take a notion that way some fine day, won't you?"

"Huh! keep on guessing!" grunted Bumpus; though he appeared to be wearing a perpetual grin, now that his innocence seemed to have been so amply proven.

After this little incident preparations for passing the night were continued, the tents being raised, and the fire encouraged to reach that stage where Giraffe and his assistant might have all the red coals needed in order to properly carry out the cooking operations as usual.

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Davy was wandering around, still eying Bumpus suspiciously, as though not wholly satisfied in his mind that all the trouble was over; but the fat scout had been vindicated at the hands of Thad, so what cared he if Davy chose to show his poor judgment, when everybody else seemed satisfied.

Once Davy even wandered over to where the burial of the onions had taken place, and with his foot scraped even more soil over the spot, as though he wanted to be doubly sure they had confined everything in that hole.

When the supper was finally ready it was a merry group that squatted around, for Giraffe always felt particularly joyous when about to satisfy his acute hunger, and on this particular occasion he believed he had a double reason to rejoice, in that the food supply was bounteous, and a baffling mystery had been solved, so there would be no further reason for his keeping awake nights, trying to guess the answer, and making things unpleasant for poor Bumpus.

They chattered about nearly everything under the sun, as they sat there munching away at the repast; which consisted of breakfast bacon (as they had come to term the real stuff, since plain salt pork is called "bacon" in the South) fried potatoes, with just one onion cut up in the same, to give a flavor, and which Giraffe had saved

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from the wreck before the explosion came; some toast made from the last loaf of bread they had along; cheese for those who liked it; some pork chops; and last but not least, the usual coffee that did not seem to keep anybody awake, though a number were not in the habit of drinking it save at breakfast when at home; but then lots of things are done with impunity in camp that no one dares think of when under his own roof-tree.

"And after this, sweet balmy sleep!" said Smithy, who was somewhat given to spouting poetry, and showing a spirit of romance.

"Yes," added Giraffe, "and we're all of us tired enough to enjoy a good eight hour snooze, unless Thad wants us to keep watch and watch, which I hope he won't."

"And I do hope," remarked Bumpus, sweetly, "that I'll be able to crawl into my bully old blanket and hit the straw, without hearing any coarse remarks about it's being time old suits of khaki that have stood the wear of time were called in!"

CHAPTER XI.

ALLIGATOR SMITH, THE GUIDE.

"What's the matter, Thad?" asked Allan, some time later, while they were lounging around the jolly camp-fire, and taking things easy.

"Why, I thought I heard the splash of a paddle just then, when it was all still!" and the scout-master continued to cock his head on one side, in the act of straining his hearing, as though half expecting to catch a repetition of the sound.

Every scout remained mute, and an anxious look seemed to creep over not a few boyish faces; for they had been told such strange stories about the "hideout" people of Alligator Swamp that all sorts of fancies had taken possession of their young minds.

"You're right, I do believe, Thad," muttered Giraffe, who had splendid hearing, as well as wonderful eyesight.

"Then you caught the splash that time, too?" questioned the scout-master.

"Sure pop, and it wasn't the flap of a 'gator dropping in from a bank, or the sportive play of a muskrat, either. Nothing but a paddle would make that noise; and as sure as you live I can see the canoe acoming this way right now!"

This announcement created no end of excitement. Every fellow thought it was up to him to get in readiness to resist boarders, and when he could not have a gun because there were not enough to go around, at least a club, the camp hatchet, or in an emergency the long bread-knife seemed to offer some degree of comfort.

"I see him too!" remarked Step Hen; and others echoed the words; indeed it would have to be a

very dull fellow who could fail to distinguish the moving object that was approaching so boldly.

"He ain't afraid, anyway!" ventured Davy Jones.

"No more he ain't," added Giraffe; "which would seem to give the idea that he didn't mean us any harm; or else felt that one man was equal to a whole patrol of Boy Scouts, which don't seem possible."

"Well, he's got another guess coming if that's so," muttered Bumpus, who, with his gun in hand was not showing much alarm; for since he had seven chums to back him up, the fat scout could not see why he should tremble, save with excitement.

"There is only one man in the boat," remarked Thad, a little anxiously; "and as he's coming about over the course we did, I wonder now if it could be any messenger sent after us by that telegraph agent at the town?"

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"Oh!" gasped Smithy.

Instantly every fellow felt a queer sensation pass over him. The words uttered by Thad had conjured up all sorts of grave possibilities as connected with their various happy homes away up North; and doubtless they suffered tortures from that moment on.

Straight for the camp came the solitary paddler. He was seated in a roomy boat built after the prevailing type used around the neighborhood of the swamp, and from the dexterity with which he handled the paddle it was plain that he must be quite at home on the water.

"Hello! boys, I'm comin' ashore tuh jine yuh!" he called out; perhaps being a little dubious as to what sort of reception they were calculating on giving him; for the display of guns and hatchets and knives must have looked ominous indeed.

"All right, come along then!" Thad sang out in reply.

Two minutes later and the stranger's boat was drawn up on the sloping bank, and he strode toward the fire. Then the eager boys saw that he had a genial if wrinkled, sun-burned face, and a scraggy gray beard.

"I'm Alligator Smith," he announced, just as though that name might be known in all that section well enough to explain everything; and it was, too, for the reader may remember that it was this very man whom Thad had once wished he could come upon to try and engage him as a guide.

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Here was luck with a capital L. Thad immediately offered the other his hand.

"Glad to meet up with you, Mr. Smith," he said; "here's a namesake of yours with us, though we call him plain Smithy; and this next Boy Scout is Allan Hollister; the stout chap Bumpus Hawtree," and so he went on, introducing each chum, while the angular native proceeded to shake hands with them in rotation.

"We wanted to run across you, the worst kind, sir, and so we call this a happy meeting," Smithy remarked.

"What's thet yuh say?" asked the other, apparently puzzled.

"Why, we had need of a good guide for poking around in this swamp, and everybody seemed to fight shy of the job; but they all said that if we could only come on Alligator Smith, and he'd engage with us, we'd be all lovely," Giraffe observed.

"Oh! that's it, hey?" the alligator hunter went on to say, smiling broadly; "why if so be yuh wants me still, I ain't no 'jections tuh makin' arrangements lookin' thataways, 'cause the 'gator hide bizness ain't what it used tuh be; an' money's tight nowadays. But what under the sun be yuh awantin' tuh hunt around in this ole swamp fo', boys? They ain't near so much game in hyah as yuh cud find in the canebrake, or up on the high ground. Ducks don't come in much, an' yuh seldom stir up a deer or a bar nowadays."

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Plainly Alligator Smith had already had his curiosity aroused. And so Thad believed that it would be as well to tell him everything right in the start, since he must know the facts so that he could serve them to the best of his ability.

"We didn't come down here just to hunt," he started in to say, "though we thought it best to fetch a few guns along for an emergency. To tell the main thing right in the start, we're looking for a man."

"Yes, I reckons as how I ketch on tuh that same," observed the hunter, as he crossed his legs close to the fire, and made himself quite at home, with the scouts hovering around him.

"And a small girl!" continued Thad, watching the face of the other closely, so as to judge whether any flash of intelligence would pass over it that would serve as good news to the anxious lad.

"Oh! a gal too, yuh say? An' d'ye reckons as how they be somewhar near Alligator Swamp?" asked the man, quickly.

"A gentleman wrote my uncle that he had seen this man and girl go into this swamp," Thad continued. "It may have been ten days ago. They seemed to have a lot of provisions in the boat, as though they were laying in a month's supply. He had a gun, and looked ready to hold his own against any runaway black convict he might happen to meet. Do you know of any man and girl like that, Mr. Smith?"

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It seemed as though every boy ceased to breathe while waiting for the answer to come to this important question which Thad had asked. The swamp hunter nodded his tousled head slowly up and down. He appeared to be thinking intensely.

"Why, yas, 'twar about thet time I seen 'em," he finally remarked. "I 'member as how I'd jest got outen terbaccy, and nawthin'd do but I must make fo' the village store tuh lay in a new s'ply. Yas, an' I jest glimpsed thet boat as I kim outen a side bayou. Reckoned as how't must be a stranger, 'case I never seen the man afore as I knowed on. I waved a hand at him, but he never made out tuh notice. So I jest reckoned as how they must be some new settlers as'd took up a

cabin I knowed 'bout jest beyond the start o' the swamp. Never guv it another think, 'case I happened tuh hev troubles o' my own aplenty jest then, with my jaws rusty from not havin' any terbaccy fo' nigh on two days. So them be the pussons yuh want tuh find?"

"I think there's no doubt about it, Mr. Smith," replied Thad, his eyes shining brightly with renewed hope; "but do you really think they could be so near the edge of the swamp? We came on an old tumbled-down shack, with a mud and board chimney, and a door hanging by one hinge; but there wasn't a sign of life around it."

"Then I war mistaken when I reckoned thet way, son," admitted the hunter; "'case that's the on'y cabin around in the swamp wuth mentionin' anyway. They must agone deeper in. P'raps the man air like some others as I knows 'bout, an' don't want tuh meet up with a livin' soul, so he's buried hissself in thar sumwhar."

"If he's the man we think, his name is Felix Jasper!" Thad went on to say.

"Hey, Jasper, d'ye say? Well, now, thet's makin' me go away back sum. Yuh see, thar used tuh be a fambly by thet name alivin' 'round hyah yeahs an' yeahs ago; but the ole man he died and the rest cleared out."

"Then this might be one of the sons, mightn't it?" the boy asked.

"Tuh be sure it mout, and which wud account fo' his knowin' so much 'bout this hyah swamp; 'case yuh see, it'd be all a man's life was wuth tuh come in and git lost among all these bewilderin' waterways. More'n a few never kim out in yeahs gone by; an' them as hide hyah now knows every crook and bayou like yuh do the fingers of yuh hands."

"Then you would be willing to stay by us, and see us through, if we paid you the right sort of price?" Thad asked, determined to clinch the bargain at once.

"Glad tuh do thet same, son," replied Alligator Smith.

"How would three dollars a day and find suit you?" the scout-master went on.

"Fine," answered the other, readily.

"All right then," Thad continued, "let's call it five dollars a day. And I hope there's nothing in the way to prevent you sticking with us from now on?"

"Well, thet's what I calls handsome, an' yuh kin depend on Tom Smith astickin' tuh yuh like a plaster. We'll sure find the man, an' theh gal, too, if so be we hev tuh run through theh ole swamp like a fine tooth comb. An' I hopes as how they turn out tuh be the same as yuh want."

"You can understand how much I'm hoping that way, when I tell you that we think the girl may be my little sister, who was stolen when she was a baby," Thad went on to say; and upon the other evincing great interest in the matter, he thought it best to relate the whole story concerning the dismissal of the estate manager on account of his evil practices, and his

subsequent hatred for the Brewsters, which gradually led up to the mysterious disappearance of little Pauline ten years ago, and the inability of the best detectives in the country to find her.

Tom Smith was evidently a rough fellow, but he had a heart, and the way in which he pressed the hand of the young scout-master, after the whole story had been told, indicated very plainly that he sympathized greatly with him in his mission, and would do everything in his power to bring about a meeting with the strange man who had entered the swamp ten days before, with that pretty child.

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And Thad looked fully a hundred per cent brighter, now that the chances for accomplishing the end he had in view when he came South, seemed to have gained a new impetus. With such a man as Alligator Smith to lead them, knowing every part of the mysterious depths of the swamp as he did, from long years of hunting in its depths, it really looked as though they were now on the road to success; and that before long the truth would be made known. So that everybody, even Bumpus, seemed to be in a more jolly mood than had happened in some time.

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CHAPTER XII.

WHAT A SCOUT STANDS FOR.

Things were certainly looking much more rosy now. With an experienced swamp man to guide them, there would no longer be that danger of getting lost that had kept hovering over their heads.

Then there was the white winged dove of peace in the camp in connection with the solving of the dreadful mystery that had been bothering Giraffe and some of the others, all in fact but Bumpus and Step Hen, for so long.

They sat around the fire, which did not feel at all uncomfortable, enjoying the communion with this "unique character," as Smithy privately termed the alligator skin collector.

"I been hearin' a heap 'bout this Boy Scout bizness," the man finally remarked, after he had been observing many of the ways of the boys, that had more or less connection with their patrol teaching; "an' I jest don't git on tuh the objeck o' theh same. Be yuh agwine tuh grow up tuh be sogers, an' is them uniforms a sign o' the same?"

"Oh! no, like a good many other people you've got the wrong idea of this Boy Scout business, Mr. Smith," Thad told him. "In America, the movement hasn't anything whatever to do with the military spirit, except that it tries to make a boy follow out some of the rules that soldiers are bound by. He must try and be brave, obey when ordered by one in authority; be respectful to his superiors, and keep himself clean, both in mind and body."

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"Though they don't always do that last," interjected Davy Jones, as he cast a black look toward the lolling Bumpus; who only answered him by a derisive smile, and a good-natured nod.

"Tell me some more, son," said the guide, showing great interest. "If them ijees kin be kerried out, I sure reckons I knows sum boys what had orter jine the scout movement in a hurry."

"Oh! I couldn't begin to tell you a tenth of what scouts are supposed to do and know," Thad went on. "It's done the greatest lot of good for most of us right here. Where a boy was weak and timid it makes him healthy and self-reliant. Where he may have been silly he becomes thoughtful, learning to *do* things instead of having others do them for him. No boy can subscribe to the twelve rules that he does, without it making him better in every way."

"S'pose yuh tell me what them same rules be, son, 'case I'm thet int'rested I'd like tuh know," the guide went on to say.

It was a subject which Thad never wearied of talking about, because his whole heart was wrapped up in it.

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"Why, here they are then," he remarked. "When a boy joins a patrol he has to promise to observe what is called scout law. That is, he will do his level best to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

"Well, now, thet same sounds good tuh me, son," the guide went on to declare. "I jest don't know plumb all yuh mean by sum o' them words, but I git the ijee all right."

"And," continued Thad, "you can see that even in trying to do what he promises, a boy is bound to stop telling lies, taking things that belong to others, talking meanly about his companions and all such things."

"Especially that last!" broke in Bumpus, giving Davy and Giraffe an eloquent glance as he spoke.

"Say, seems tuh me as how they might be a heap o' good in this heah scout bizness," Tom Smith remarked. "But how about fightin', son; yuh didn't say anything on thet line."

"There's nothing said about it, except that a scout must keep the peace under all circumstances, unless as a last resort," Thad told him.

"Go on an' explain her some more, please; I don't jest ketch on tuh thet," the guide admitted.

"Why," said Thad, "there may be occasions when a scout could hardly be expected to keep the peace, because he's a real flesh and blood boy, you know, and not a saint."

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"Sure thing," Alligator Smith remarked, with a grin, as he swept his eyes around at the circle of eager boyish faces.

"If he should be set on by a superior force he would not be expected to stand and turn the other cheek, and be mauled," Giraffe broke in

with.

"Thet is, he kin defend hisself, yuh mean?" Tom Smith asked.

"Yes, in an emergency," Thad told him. "Then again, if he happened to see a big bully picking on a poor little chap, or a girl it might be, why, he'd be doing the right thing if he interfered."

"Even if he had to fight to get peace," chuckled Step Hen.

"But seems tuh me if this heah thing goes on it mout make the boys kinder timid. We needs brave men, such as kin go tuh war if need be. I jest don't know how thet'll turn out, son."

"Well, I do," said the young scout-master, firmly. "I've had considerable experience with boys who became scouts. I've known lots of them who waked up and became just the opposite to what they used to be. I've seen them stop going through the world as though they were wearing horse's blinders, and then they found a thousand things that had been around them all the while, but they hadn't known it before. I've started them on the way to studying the habits of the birds, fishes, animals and insects to be met with in the woods and waters until they seemed to live in a different world. I've watched sleepy, dull boys change into wide-awake, alert scouts, surprising their parents and teachers in school by the new interest they took in life. But Mr. Smith, I give you my word that I never yet knew of a true blue scout who was a coward!"

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"Hear! hear!" cried Bob White, clapping his hands with delight.

"In fact," continued Thad, enthusiastically, "I've watched more than a few boys who were known to be next door to cowards, change into resolute fellows, brave and self-reliant. One went into a burning house and saved an old man at the risk of his own life. Another stopped a runaway horse with as much skill as a policeman educated for the business might have shown.

"I knew of another who saved a drowning chum, and I could tell you about a boy who hung on to a thief who was robbing a woman on the street, taking a fearful pounding, yet keeping him from running away until help came, and then fainting. Yet that same boy was afraid of his own shadow up to the time he became a scout."

"I never heard theh like o' thet, son," declared the deeply interested guide.

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"Pears like they hain't nawthin' a scout ain't ekal tuh."

"Nothing that's worth while, and that's the truth," Thad told him. "They can win merit badges by excelling in certain lines. If you look around right now, you'll perceive that every boy in this Silver Fox Patrol of Cranford Troop wears at least one medal or badge. And let me tell you, sir, a scout is as proud of his badge as anybody could be."

"Wall, wall, but sure this heah is int'restin' tuh me," the hunter assured his new friends. "And I'm right glad I run across you-all like I done. Never wud a believed they was so much as was

good in this heah Boy Scout movement. Allers reckoned as how it mout be summat o' a lark, er else jest agittin' recruits fo' the sojer job. Tell me a heap mo', son. I kin listen tuh yuh talk fo' hours."

And so Thad, assisted from time to time by his chums, managed to explain many interesting details connected with Boy Scout lore.

It was a subject of which he never tired, and in which he believed, heart and soul.

Then in turn Thad asked questions, for he knew this man would be able to tell them many interesting facts connected with swamp life.

In turn they heard just how alligators were hunted, usually at night time, with a blazing pine knot in the bow of the dugout, by means of which "flare" their eyes could be "shined," so that a single shot would place a victim to the credit of the hide hunter; also how the skins were taken off, roughly cured, and what price they brought in the market.

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Then the willing guide told how he trapped all such animals as muskrats, raccoons, otter, foxes and others that possessed fur worth securing. Thad knew something about Northern methods along these lines, but he found quite a difference in the way things were done down in Dixie.

"And now," the scout-master went on to say, "you've told us all about the fur, fin and feather of this big swamp, how about the human beings who live in it? We've been told they're a queer lot."

"Reckon yuh heard 'bout right, son," admitted the guide, with a smile, "fust thar be quite a few runaway convicts, coons that dassent show themselves back whar they kim from. How they lives I jest don't know, but my traps is empty more'n a few times, an' when I sees tracks o' bare feet alongside I changes the location o' thet Victor in a hurry. I meet up with a black now an' then, but they knows old Alligator Smith ain't agwine tuh do 'em any hurt so they don't molest me none."

"Are there others besides?" asked Allan.

"Well, thar's a feller as I've seen right smart, an folks done say as he's a bad money maker, what they calls a counterfeiter, though I jest don't know how true that mout be."

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"Whew!" broke in Step Hen, "I'd think a location in the heart of Alligator Swamp would be a pretty safe place for such a mint to hold out. Not much danger of the detectives and revenue men dropping in on him unexpected like."

"Any more?" asked Bumpus, so deeply interested by all this narrative that he had been sitting there without moving for half an hour, his big head supported by his cupped hands, and his round eyes glued on Alligator Smith's face.

"Thar's another feller as I knows on wot makes moonshine whisky, but only in small lots, 'case he can't git the cawn he wants fo' his mash. Nobody ever bothers ole Pap Dody, an' he's done made his stuff yeahs and yeahs."

"Seems like this old swamp might hold a lot of

queer people and their secrets?" remarked Giraffe, yawning.

"It certain do, son," replied the other, as he helped himself for the third time to the strong coffee the boys had made for him. "But then yuh must 'member as how she kivers a heap o' territory. I never did know jest how many miles acrost from east to west this swamp is—anyway from ten to twenty, and nigh as far from no'th to south. But I forgot tuh tell yuh 'bout the voodoo doctor or medicine man."

"Oh! is there one of those horrible negro wizards around here?" and Smithy shuddered as he put the question, showing that he must have read more or less on the subject.

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"He holds out on the other side, so we ain't likely tuh run acrost him," Tom Smith went on. "They be heaps o' the blacks as goes regular tuh see him, an' I been told as how they hev a regular heathen fetish worship and dance like over in Afric. But they ain't never offered up any human sacrifice, as I heard tell on. If they knows what's good fo 'em they'll fight shy o' thet. The planters 'round hyah wouldn't stand fo' no sech goings on as thet, nohow."

As the boys were showing signs of weariness, and the hour had grown late, the scout-master decided they had talked themselves out for one evening.

And so he went around to make sure that everything was secure, the boats protected as on the preceding night, the paddles, as well as all else of value taken into the tents, and every object calculated to tempt a prowling negro looked after.

The guide declared that he had no need of shelter, but would lie on the ground. And woe to the thief, either on two legs or four, who attempted to invade the camp while he was around.

His presence gave the boys much comfort.

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They could lie down now and go to sleep without worrying about the possibility of unwelcome visitors. And as for Thad he shook hands with himself in imagination every time he stopped to think what a great thing the coming of Alligator Smith meant, connected with the carrying out of his plans.

All doubt could now be set aside. They were not going to be lost, as had on several occasions threatened to be the case. And when the mysterious man and girl were finally found, perhaps Thad's fondest hopes would be realized.

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE TROUBLE ALL AROUND.

"I tell you, Thad, it was all a mistake; we went and buried the wrong thing after all, and I don't care who knows it."

Davy looked fixedly at the back of Bumpus' head

while he was saying this, for they were once more in the boats, moving along, and Bumpus had the bow, then Step Hen, Davy and Thad the steersman, in the stern.

"Now what's ailing you, Davy?" demanded Step Hen; "seems like you're never happy any more."

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"Well, if you'd only shake off that cold Bumpus gave you, so you could get that onion scent, like I do this minute, chances are you wouldn't be feelin' any too happy either," lamented Davy.

"Well, I declare I thought that was all buried with the onions," said Bumpus, trying to twist his fat neck so he could look around, but failing.

"All right, but it wasn't, all the same," avowed the complaining one, "'cause it's just as rank as ever. Wait till I tell Giraffe when we go ashore at noon, and say, you'll see a mad fellow then, with all them onions sacrificed for nothing, and him that fond of them, too."

"You have got the greatest imagination of anybody I ever saw," declared Bumpus, indignantly. "To me the air is as sweet as anything."

"That's because you ain't got a big chump wearing a greasy old suit asitting right to windward of you," burst out Davy.

"Step Hen, ain't the air all right?" demanded the accused one.

"You'll have to pass me, boys; I'm out of the smelling class right now. I don't believe I could even smell a rat, as they say. Fight it out between you, but don't drag me in. Some other time I'll act as judge and jury, but not to-day."

"Well, I know what I know," Davy went on to say stubbornly, "and if me'n Giraffe can manage it there'll be a scout alookin' a hundred per cent cleaner than he is now, by to-morrow morning."

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"Better look out," warned Bumpus, belligerently.

"Lookout yourself, where you're running us," cried Davy.

Somehow or other the boat left its course and scraped into the overhanging branches. Perhaps this was only a clever little trick on the part of Thad, calculated to break up the dispute between the two scouts, which was rapidly becoming rather acrimonious.

It had the expected result, if this was Thad's design, for all of them found it necessary to scramble around, using both hands to protect their eyes from the intruding branches, so that when the boat finally came out into the open again, Davy forgot to resume his discussion, and just suffered in silence.

The alligator hunter, in his own boat, led the van of the procession. With so clever and reliable a guide to depend on Thad wasted no time in marking the way, for so long as Tom Smith stayed by them they did not anticipate having any further trouble in getting out of the swamp.

Nevertheless, it had become second nature for Thad and Allan to take mental notes of all things as they went along, a good habit that may often

prove valuable in the extreme.

No scout can afford to fail to keep all his senses on the alert when in the woods or on the waters. Besides seeing many interesting things that less observant lads would pass blindly by, he notices the lay of the land, the direction of his course, and a multitude of queer formations that may easily be recognized again in case of necessity.

116

Thad knew that they were going in a new direction, and had been ever since starting out immediately after breakfast.

Undoubtedly Tom Smith had been considering the whole matter, after learning all those important points connected with the case. He had settled upon the region where they would be most apt to come upon the man and girl whom Thad yearned to meet.

First of all the swamp hunter felt positive that those they sought could not be anywhere along his haunts, because he must have come upon traces of them while running his lines of traps.

In like manner he judged that they were not over at the other side of the swamp, where the voodoo doctor had his cabin, and the strange shed where the ignorant blacks gathered in the dark of the moon to carry on their strange and uncouth religious ceremonies.

Having eliminated at least half of the flooded tract in this way Alligator Smith knew just what territory he had to cover. And as Thad more than suspected, he had undoubtedly laid a plan of campaign in his mind, the first move in which he was even now carrying out.

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Not knowing how soon they might find themselves in the neighborhood of the parties they hoped to meet, the scout-master had given strict orders that for the time being all manner of levity must be laid aside.

That meant Davy must not attempt to climb, monkey fashion, any trees when they came to land; that Giraffe must tone down his loud voice; Bumpus give up all thought of using his bugle, or even warbling a strain of some favorite song—in fact a subdued air must take the place of the boyish hilarity that as a rule reigned in their midst.

And had not his other little plan held good, no doubt Thad would have speedily given Davy to know that he was making entirely too much noise.

After the little episode of the encounter with the branches, the forward movement was continued for a while in almost absolute silence.

The dip of paddles, the drip of water as they were raised monotonously, the gurgle of the boats' passage—these were nearly the only faint sounds heard in the swamp, which in places seems almost devoid of life.

Some noisy fish crows cawed at them while flying over, their sharp eyes discovering the creeping canoes. A couple of buzzards sitting on a branch of a dead tree, jumped into the air and went flapping away at their near approach. There were always water moccasins, either

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gliding down from the exposed roots of trees where they had been sunning themselves, or coiling up in the water aggressively, until struck by the sharp edge of a paddle blade, when they would writhe in agony, and sink.

It was getting more and more gruesome all the time, and Thad took notice of numerous things that he had not seen before, in the other section of the swamp.

Evidently the alligator hunter believed Thad was following the wrong track for he had turned in another direction entirely. Perhaps the boat that had made the numerous signs Thad was searching for and using as a trail, had been that of Alligator Smith himself on his way in and out, and not the one containing the mysterious man and girl.

But Thad was quite satisfied with what they had done. He believed that in the end the hide hunter would take them where they wanted to go; and more than that they could hardly ask.

The three boats were very close together as the midday hour drew near when, without the least warning there sounded the report of a rifle from some point not far away.

And the scouts not accustomed to being under fire, experienced a thrill in the region of their hearts when every one heard the strange zip-zip of a bullet cutting through the air just above their heads.

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CHAPTER XIV. SWAMP TACTICS.

"Back water, fellows!" called out Step Hen, who could be cautious at times, as well as bold.

It was ludicrous to see how quickly the scouts did dip their paddles in again, and not only stay the forward progress of the two canoes, but cause them to retrograde so that almost like magic they had succeeded in putting a tongue of land, on which trees grew densely, between themselves and the danger zone.

This did not apply so much to the alligator hunter, who still sat there in his boat, fingering his heavy rifle, and with bent head eying the distance, as though it would please him exceedingly to just catch a single glimpse of something moving, at which he might discharge his weapon.

If Tom Smith were anything like the sharpshooter he made out to be, the result must certainly have proved disastrous to that unknown party who had just given the little expedition such a start.

"Do you see the coward, Mr. Smith?" called out Bumpus, who was highly indignant at their receiving such a warm reception; just as though this unknown person meant to claim the whole swamp as his preserves, and intended to serve warning on the scouts that they had better clear out, if they knew what was good for their health.

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"Sorry tuh say I don't seem tuh git the least sign o' the measly critter!" came the reply, in a tone that told of mingled disgust and disappointment.

Saying which the alligator hunter picked up his paddle in one hand, and still holding on to his gun, as if hope were not quite extinct, he urged his canoe backward, as though meaning to join the boys.

Thad understood that this was not done from the same motives of caution that had caused them to retreat under fire. Tom Smith must have some other object in view, which would presently be made apparent.

And as it turned out Thad's guess was pretty close to the bull's-eye; for hardly had the guide joined them than he was saying hurriedly:

"I'm gwine tuh leave you fo' a leetle time, boys; but make shuah tuh stay right hyah till I comes back agin, which I calc'late ain't meanin' mo'n harf an hour at theh most."

"What's up, Tom?" asked Giraffe, who had easily become familiar with the lanky hide hunter; just as though the fact that both were tall and thin had served to draw them closer together than was the case with Bumpus, who, being built on an altogether different plan, could not be expected to sympathize with one who was all bone and muscle.

121

And as like draws like, Tom had even come to calling Giraffe by his nick-name, because he heard the others doing so; though possibly the man did not know what such an animal looked like, as most of his life had been spent in the swamps; and while Louisiana boasts many queer animals and birds within her borders, no one ever yet ran across a giraffe running wild there.

"Why, yuh see, Giraffe, I'm ameanin' tuh slip 'round back thar, an' see now if I couldn't git a squint at thet sneak. So-long, boys, an' don't take snap judgment on me, if yuh sees the bushes amovin' when I kim back."

He immediately bent to his paddle, and the rough boat started away at a furious pace, showing that Tom Smith was deeply in earnest in his desire to pay back the unseen marksman who had given warning of his hostile intentions by that shot over their heads.

They watched him for the space of about a minute, and then boat and paddler had vanished amidst the thick green screen of bushes.

"Whew! but didn't he send her along like fun, though?" Bumpus wanted to know.

"Well, he's been using the paddle for a good many years, and knows every little wrinkle of the business," returned Thad.

122

"Yes," added Allan, "I'm never through watching the way he manages that clumsy canoe of his. I've seen Penobscot Indians up in Maine who could do wonders with their boats, but they weren't in the same class with him; because in the first place their canoes were either made of light birch-bark, or else canvas, painted and varnished until the sides were as smooth as glass; whereas, look at the tub he handles like a

flash. He's sure a wonder; and while I thought I could do a few stunts along the line of canoe work, I take off my hat to Tom Smith."

"But what did he mean by saying like he did, that he hoped we wouldn't take snap judgment on him?" Bumpus asked. "That sounded mighty funny to me, because of course we ain't thinking of doing the least thing to annoy our own guide. Why, whatever could we do without him now, I wonder?"

Giraffe chuckled, as he often did in his aggravating way whenever Bumpus exposed his ignorance; but all the same, in spite of his affected superiority, the lanky scout was seen to pay particular attention when Thad started in to explain; just as though he might after all not be quite so sure himself what Tom Smith did mean by that expression.

123

"Why, it's this way, Bumpus," said the scoutmaster, always willing to enlighten the other, "he knows that we are more or less excited over this unexpected happening; and as boys are apt to act first, and think afterwards, Tom Smith wanted to kindly request us not to shoot at the moving of a branch, and look up the cause later on. The chances are that it would be him coming back, and he didn't feel like being peppered by our fire."

"Huh! he ought to have known that all scouts learn never to shoot until they're good and sure of what they're firing at," grunted Step Hen.

"Well, lots of people you'd think ought to know better, allow themselves to get so flustered when deer hunting, that they're ready to bang away if they see anything brown moving among the bushes. And every year dozens of hunters are killed up in the Adirondacks, in Maine, and Wisconsin, by just such fool actions; so that they're even talking of making every hunter wear either a white or a red suit, so he can't be mistaken for a deer."

"That's a fact, this dun-colored khaki cloth is mighty near like a deer, and the dead leaves too!" declared Bumpus.

"It may have been when it was new and *clean*," interjected Davy, bitterly; "but it's anything but brown now. I'd call it a pretty fair shade of dirt color approaching black."

124

"P'raps, now, that's why the sportsmen in Old England wear red coats when they go into the brush?" suggested Smithy.

"Oh! that's only the fox hunters, and they carry no firearms, so they're in no danger," Thad informed him; "their grouse shooters wear just the same kind of togs our hunters do over here; but they shoot in the open, and so you seldom hear of an accident over across the ocean."

All this conversation was carried on in low tones, and while the boys were constantly peeping out from their leafy covert, as though expecting to catch a glimpse of either the mysterious marksman, or else Tom Smith searching for him beyond.

But there was not a single sign of either. The trailing Spanish moss continued to wave

majestically to and fro in the light air; a gray squirrel ran down the trunk of an oak tree close by, to bark saucily, as though questioning their right in his quiet domain; a bittern flew past with winnowing wing, and quickened its flight when discovering the presence of human beings in that retreat; but there did not seem to be the first indication that either enemy or friend could be hidden beyond that other tongue of land.

Thad had figured it all out in his mind, and fancied that he knew about what the quickly-formed plan of the alligator hunter might be.

125

Of course Tom Smith knew every rod of this place, and he realized that by taking a certain channel leading back of the point that now screened the boys, he could manage to come up behind the place where that rifle had sounded.

If the marksman had remained in his bushy retreat there was a chance of his being surprised; but Thad hardly hoped for any such result; because it stood to reason that the hidden man must be keen-witted, and he would naturally suspect some such move on the part of the swamp hunter, whom he undoubtedly knew.

The minutes dragged along, with the boys exchanging opinions every little while, and then looking around again. They felt under something of a strain, because of this singular happening; and many were the conjectures as to who the party could be back of that gun.

Some were inclined to believe that he might turn out to be a desperate escaped convict who had managed in some fashion to get possession of firearms; and seeing those deceptive khaki suits of the scouts, at once jumped to the conclusion that they must belong to the State militia, and were even then looking for a fellow answering his description.

Others declared that if this had been the case he would surely have sent his whistling lead lower, and not stopped at simply warning them to clear out. And it was even hinted by Giraffe that the unseen party might be the counterfeiter of whom they had heard Tom Smith speak, and who would naturally believe the Government had sent an expedition after him at last, tired of his persistent efforts to inflate the currency of the country at the expense of his fellows.

126

"Why, Thad, don't you know, over half an hour's gone already, and not a sign of our guide coming back?" observed Bumpus, who had remained quiet for a long stretch of time, for him, because the fat scout dearly loved to express his opinions on every subject. "I only hope nothing can have happened to Mr. Smith, because we would be up a tree then. I just know even you haven't kept track of how we got here; and if there ain't no trail, however would we get out again?"

"There you go again, Bumpus," asserted Step Hen, "borrowing trouble. Why don't you wait till you get to a bridge before you start crossing over? Now, as for me, I'm ready to just take things easy-like, till Tom shows up."

"There he is now, and beckoning to us to come along!" asserted Old Eagle Eye, who had kept on the alert all the while, so that he might be the first to announce a pleasing discovery.

When Giraffe had thus announced his discovery, the two canoes were immediately put in motion, and the boys hastened to paddle along until they arrived alongside the boat of the guide, which was close to the spot where that mysterious shot had sprung from.

"Reckon you didn't find our friend, Tom?" remarked Giraffe, familiarly.

The old alligator-skin collector shook his head grimly in the negative.

"He slipped out all right," he observed, "an' so slick thet I never did git even a look-in at him. But I found his blank brass shell on the ground, whar he tossed the same outen his gun, which I knows real well. It war Ricky, the moonshiner, as guv yuh thet warnin' not tuh bother with him; an' I reckons as how he means hit, too."

CHAPTER XV. STILL BUMPING BUMPUS.

Various were the expressions of disgust when the scouts heard this piece of intelligence from the guide.

"Well, what d'ye think of that now, for a piece of nerve?" exclaimed Step Hen.

"Seems just like this here Ricky, whose first name must be Gin, I reckon, thinks he owns pretty much all Alligator Swamp, because he's held out here so long, and nobody ever bothered him before!" Bumpus lamented.

"But what's the use talking that way, fellows?" said Giraffe, almost fiercely; "none of us expect to clear out just because Mr. Ricky says we've got to go. If he expects that he's given us the worst scare of our lives, he's got another think acoming to him, that's all."

"Giraffe, you never spoke truer words than that," cried Davy Jones, suddenly firing up, and showing unexpected zeal in the matter; he had a way of stretching his eyes when under any sort of excitement, and in this way made the other boys laugh at his looks; but just then, somehow, no one even smiled, for they were too much taken up with the seriousness of the conditions confronting them.

"Well, it strikes me about the same way," spoke up Bob White, with his customary Southern eagerness, "the Silver Fox Patrol has gone through with too many adventures in its time to get scared off, just because one old moonshiner chances to feel ugly that we've had to come into this swamp."

"He'd better take care," warned Smithy, who seemed fully as much worked up as any of the rest of them; "or we might make up our minds to kill two birds with one stone."

"That's what!" echoed Bumpus, aggressively; "while we're alooking up this here Felix, why, if we're forced to show our hand without a glove, p'raps we'll take a notion to pull old Ricky in,

and hand him over to the revenue officers. Maybe there might be some sort of reward out for him; and we've made our expenses before now in helping the hands of justice. Remember what we did up in Maine, boys?"

"Yes, and please move our boat a little to the right, will you, Allan, because somehow I think the air comes a mite finer from that quarter," and Giraffe as he said this almost glared at Bumpus; who returned his look with one of pretended indifference, as he fondly stroked his dingy old khaki jacket that was so discolored from long and hard use that one could hardly tell what the original color may have been.

"Well, I hope now we ain't going back, anyhow?" the fat scout remarked, calmly.

All eyes were turned upon the scout-master, as though the decision must rest entirely with him; but then they knew Thad well enough to feel sure he never backed down in anything he attempted until the very last word had been said.

And then again they must have found more or less consolation in the fact that it was his particular business that had brought them all the way into Dixieland; the possibility of finding his long lost little sister would spur Thad on to reaching his goal, if there were a dozen Ricky moonshiners in the way.

Just as they hoped and expected, he lost no time in settling the matter, at least as far as he was concerned.

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"We're here to find that man with the little girl, boys, and we're bound to do it, by hook or by crook," he said, quietly, but in that firm tone they knew so well. "If this man who makes the moonshine stuff chooses to get in our way and show himself disagreeable, why, we may have to turn aside for a little while, and teach him that it isn't always safe to interfere with other people's business, even if they do happen to be Boy Scouts. And I'm sure our guide here, Tom Smith, will stand by us through it all, won't you, Tom?"

Now, the swamp hunter was having his eyes opened right along to the possibilities of boys under the new way of making them think for themselves, and the more he saw of Thad and his seven chums, the higher his admiration arose. So when the young scout-master thus appealed to him, he was quick to assure them of his constancy.

"I've lived around hyah fo' a good many yeahs, an' minded my own bizness right along so 'at Ricky an' me we-all never hed any fallin' out; but I sez right now, thet if he thinks he kin chase you boys outen Alligator Swamp, jest 'cause yuh happens tuh be wearin' them uniforms as makes him 'spicious like, he's beatin' up the wrong tree, thet's all. I'll stick tuh yuh through thick an' thin; and Ricky, he bettah go slow, thet's all."

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"Of course," put in Thad, hastily, as with a movement of the hand he checked the cheer that arose to the lips of several of the more enthusiastic scouts; "we'd rather not have the least trouble with the man, because, you understand, we never even knew of his being

here until we started in to try and find the others; but if he's as obstinate as a mule—"

"Or Bumpus here," interjected Davy, as quick as a flash.

"Why," Thad went on to say, "we'll have to pay attention to him first of all, because it's unpleasant to think that at any minute you're apt to be shot at from ambush, by some one who is hidden behind a tree."

"I never did sot any store by this hyah bushwhackin' bizness," declared their guide, frowning. "And Ricky, he's bound tuh git hisself intuh a heap o' trouble if so be he tries thet same on, many more times."

"I was thinking," resumed Thad, "that perhaps, now, there might be some way for you to get in touch with Ricky, or leave a communication for him somewhere. In that way you could tell him who we were, and that we haven't any notion of doing him any harm. In fact, so far as we're concerned, it doesn't matter if he keeps on with his little still in the swamp till doomsday, does it, boys?"

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"No, if only he keeps his hands off, and don't bother the Silver Fox Patrol in the line of their duty," asserted Giraffe. "Some other people, just about like this same old Ricky, learned that it was as safe to monkey with a buzz-saw as to fool with scouts when they're bent on minding their own affairs. I could mention more'n a few who got their fingers pinched, and pinched bad too."

"Well, don't bother going into details now, Giraffe," remarked Allan; "all that will keep for some time when we're sitting around the fire, and you happen to feel like telling our guide a few things about what we've done in the past. Just now we've got to settle on our plans for work. How about what Thad asked you, Tom Smith; can you manage to get word to this Ricky, do you think?"

The swamp hunter had been thinking while the boys exchanged these few remarks; and now he nodded his head in the affirmative.

"I kinder reckons as how I mout do thet same, son," he went on to say, as though his mind were made up. "In the fust place, I knows jest whar Ricky he holds out, an' hes his ole still; an' I wants tuh say thet I don't reckon tuh find them parties yuh be alookin' fo' in thet ere quarter. So, yuh see, we's soon gwine tuh head in a diff'rent way, so Ricky, if so be he's a watchin' on us frum the bushes'll make out thet we don't mean tuh disturb him yet awhile."

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"Still, he might think we were only going around to come up on him from another quarter?" ventured Allan.

"Yes," added the scout-master, "and if you can let him know what I said about our being only Boy Scouts; and that we've hired you, not to find him, but another party altogether, it might be best."

"They's a chanct tuh do thet same," returned Tom Smith; "an' this is theh way o' hit. Yuh see, Ricky he don't never show hisself outen the swamp, leastways not in daytime, 'cause he

reckons as how thar be a marshal behind every tree, jest awaitin' tuh nab him fo' moonshinin'. But he sells his mountain dew, as they calls it up in Georgia an' Tennessee tuh sum o' theh natives, an' when they wants a supply they leaves word at his post office like."

"Oh! I see, Ricky isn't only trying to beat the United States Government out of its revenue on the stuff he distills, but he's set up a rival establishment for sending letters through the mails without paying a cent of postage?" and Giraffe chuckled at his own wit, which Bumpus thought very bad taste; but then Bumpus was provoked at the lanky scout just then, and could not see anything good in whatever Giraffe said or did.

"And can you get a note into that private post office without too much trouble?" Thad asked, quite interested, and ready to carry out the little scheme with all the speed possible.

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"Why," resumed the swamp hunter, "hit happens thisaway, yuh see; we's bound tuh pass right neah thet holler tree, whar Ricky allers looks fo' letters; an' if so be yuh guv me a note tuh stick in the hole, chances are he'd see me do hit, an' be ahookin' theh same out arter I quits."

"Then Ricky can read?" queried Allan, as though surprised.

"Him?" ejaculated Tom Smith, as though surprised at the question; "sure he kin, an' write too. Why, I 'members him atellin' as how he went tuh school an' got book larnin' a whole winter, long time ago."

"What d'ye think of that?" ejaculated Step Hen. "Suppose, now, Ricky had had half the chances of us fellows, wouldn't he set the world on fire, though? Only went to school one winter when he was a boy, and learned to read and write at that. I'm ashamed to say it, but there are some chaps I know that have been agoing to school all their lives, and don't know much more'n how to read and write."

"Speak for yourself, Step Hen," said Bumpus, who seemed unusually touchy these days, and resented the significant way in which the other looked in his direction.

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"I'll write a few lines then," said Thad, "and make it as plain as I can that we don't mean Ricky any harm, and would rather than not he helped us find that strange man with the little girl; for I suppose he must have noticed him around in the swamp, and has wondered what they were doing here."

"Oh! as fo' thet," chuckled the guide, "nobody ever questions what a feller is after when he hides in ole Alligator Swamp; 'case, yuh see, it's allers been a safe retreat fo' every escaped convict, and sech others as want tuh keep outen sight. I hev heard as how in theh ole days o' slavery many a black took tuh this place arter runnin' away from the sugar plantations; and they used tuh hunt 'em with bloodhounds. Fack is, right in these hyah days I've heard the bayin' o' hounds more'n a few times; and I done larn on'y yesterday as how the sheriff, he went an' fotched a brace o' dorgs down from another parish, tuh use the same hyah'bouts."

Thad was already busily engaged, having secured a page from a pocket notebook, and with the stub of a pencil he was writing a few lines as plainly as he could accomplish it.

Giraffe and Davy were whispering together as their boats happened to drift close together, and from the fact that they allowed their eyes to turn toward Bumpus from time to time, it seemed probable that some new scheme was being hatched looking to the further annoyance of the fat scout.

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Bumpus saw what was going on, and moved uneasily, as though he suspected that some species of bomb were being prepared to explode under him; but he did not say anything, however much he may have thought.

Thad had just folded the note, and handed the same to Tom Smith, so that he could place it in the tree post office as they came to it; when Giraffe caught the attention of the scout-master.

"Me'n Davy here been conferring on a certain matter, you see, Thad," he went on to say, apparently half in earnest, yet with his eyes twinkling as though a wicked sense of humor bubbled up within; "an' while we hope you won't think we're atrying to start a mutiny of any sort, we would like to get your opinion to a certain scheme to keep peace in the family, and let the rest of us get our share of good sweet air."

"Well, hurry up and state your case, Giraffe," remarked Thad, who possibly could more than half guess what was coming; "because we've lost time enough already, and should be on the move."

"Why, it's just this way," continued Giraffe, after exchanging winks with Davy, as though looking for encouragement there; "we've tried our level best to coax a certain member of this expedition to be faithful to his vows, and stow away the greasy old fishy suit he keeps on awearing; and he's just that like a mule he won't do the first thing to accommodate us. Now, we all feel that we've got rights, and Davy here thought up a plan whereby Bumpus can keep on wearing his cast-offs if he wants to, and have all the fun to himself."

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"Oh! is that so?" sneered the object of all this tender solicitude; "how kind of Davy, and you too, Giraffe. Maybe, now, you'll go right along, and explain how this same miracle's agoing to be fixed? This suit is an old friend of mine, and I just love it. Course, if Thad lets you, and the whole bunch pile on, I can't hold out against seven; but that ain't the way to treat a fellow scout. Go right along and explain what Davy's plan is."

"Why, here's the scheme, and I must say it's a grand good one," Giraffe continued, bracing up to make the explanation. "Since Bumpus must save his good suit, let him, if only he don't bother the rest of us so furiously. Now, there's the boat of our guide; let him change places with Tom Smith, and follow away behind the balance of the expedition. We could wave him back whenever we thought he was getting too close, you know. And I want to say the plan has my unqualified endorsement, and does our chum Davy great credit. Now, what's the verdict.

Thad? Does Bumpus either have to agree to throw away that old suit of his; or get in the guide's canoe, and go away back and sit down? We're content to abide by your decision in the matter; and here's hoping you fix it to suit the majority!"

CHAPTER XVI. RICKY'S POST OFFICE.

Something like a snicker ran around the other scouts when Giraffe proposed to punish the obstinate Bumpus in this queer fashion. But there was one among them who did not see anything so comical in the idea, and this was the proposed victim himself.

Bumpus looked daggers at Giraffe. Why, he even picked up his gun, which chanced to be lying near his position in the bow of the other canoe; though of course he did not have the least idea of resisting to that extent, should the decision be averse to him.

"Guess I can see through a board that's got a knot-hole in it, Giraffe Stedman!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "Fact of the matter is, you're just jealous of my figger, that's what, and all the while you lie awake nights atrying to think up schemes that'll make me have trouble, and in the end reduce my flesh so fast that you won't be the only living skeleton in the bunch. Right now you want to make me paddle all by myself; and there ain't anything calculated to thin a fellow more'n that kind of business. Thad, don't you see what he's after? And I certainly do hope you won't let him crow over me. I'm losing enough weight as it is, aworrying over that silly job of not remembering what I did with my mother's medicine she sent me to fetch home; let alone having to paddle ever and ever so many weary miles. Tell him to get in Tom Smith's canoe himself, and go on ahead, if so be he thinks he's going to feel any better. You ain't once complained about my dear old suit, Thad, neither has Step Hen here."

"Well, go slow about me there, Bumpus," spoke up the last mentioned party; "for you see my cold's agetting just a *little* bit better; and seems to me at times I do notice something queer about the air of this swamp. Tell you more later on, if I keep improving like I am."

"That'll be enough for you, Giraffe," said Thad, with an assumption of authority that announced his belief that the time for levity was past; "we'll not bother about such a little thing right now; but wait until we get in camp after we've settled the matter of the man and the girl. Let's move along."

"Little thing—huh!" grunted Davy, while Giraffe and Bumpus exchanged grins, the one being founded on triumph, in that Thad had decided in his favor, while the elongated scout showed that he had only been jesting after all, though pretending to be so serious.

The guide had listened to all this side talk, and

seemed to be more or less amused, though like as not he failed to catch the true essence of the joke. But he had already grown to like these quick-witted lads more than a little, and was trying hard to enter into their way of looking at things.

He paddled on slowly, always keeping a bright lookout ahead and around. Giraffe took occasion to remark, after noticing how careful the swamp hunter seemed to be, that according to his notion Tom Smith was half expecting to hear that rifle of the moonshiner bark again.

"Whee!" Bumpus was heard to say, half to himself; and they noticed that after that the fat scout managed to squat a little lower in his place, doubtless thinking it the part of discretion to make himself less of a shining mark, calculated to draw the attention of any would-be marksman.

Not that Bumpus would have acknowledged feeling *afraid*; but he might have declared that he did not see why he should loom up there like a target, while lucky fellows like Giraffe, who were as thin as a knife blade, stood little chance of being hit.

All went smoothly for some little time, and as no ugly sound like the report of a gun annoyed them, the scouts began to get their full amount of courage back again. But Bumpus apparently found his new position of lolling in the bottom of the bow of the canoe comfortable enough to please him, for he made no attempt to sit up pompously again, as had been his habit before.

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The guide had kept just a little in the van, and presently he turned to beckon, as though desirous of having them join him; which those in the other two boats immediately did.

"Heah's theh post office, suh!" remarked Tom Smith, as he pointed toward a big half-rotten stump of a tree that must have been broken off short in some storm of years gone by.

"What, that poor old thing?" ejaculated Bumpus, just as though visions of a post office conjured up in his mind all sorts of elaborate buildings, with crowds of country people gathering around as the mail was being sorted.

"Theh heah is theh place, as sure as anything," asserted the other; "an' jest hole on long enuff tuh 'low me tuh slip yuh lettah in theh same, Thad."

As he said this Tom Smith paddled his canoe alongside the bank, jumped out, and strode over to the remnant of a once proud sentinel oak.

He seemed to know what he was about; perhaps in times gone by he may himself have communicated with old Ricky through means of this letter box. At any rate the boys saw him reach up to a break in the surface of the stump, and put his hand inside. When he drew it out he no longer held the little note that the scout-master had written, and given into his charge.

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Then Tom Smith once more embarked, and joined them in his canoe.

"That's what I call a slick way to send letters,"

Davy remarked.

"Saves a heap of postage, for a fact," Bob White chuckled; "but then I've seen the same done more than a few times befo', suh, so it's nothing new to me."

"Say, do you really and truly think old Ricky might be awatching us right now, and see you put something in his post office?" Bumpus questioned.

"Course I don't jest know fo' sure," replied the swamp hunter; "but I'm summat 'quainted with his ways, an' I reckons as how it's likely he be."

Bumpus looked all around, and then went on to remark again:

"But he wouldn't feel just like letting loose on us because you went and stuffed his ballot-box, would he? If he's as smart a man as you said, after having been to school, he'd guess that we had some good reason for wanting to communicate with him in this way; ain't that so, Thad?"

"Just as you say, Bumpus; and make your mind easy, we'll not be bothered again by Ricky," the scout-master assured him. "He'll get my letter, and understand that we are not here to do him any injury."

"And Bumpus," remarked Smithy, "I just want to say that I couldn't have put that remark in better English than you did, even if I tried my best. They say that associations will tell in the long run."

"Don't plume yourself so much, Smithy," jeered Davy; "don't we also learn at school how 'evil communications corrupt good manners?' First thing you know we'll be finding that you use slang; and maybe won't change *your* old suit when it's just so rank of onions and fishy odors from cooking, that all your mates are groaning to beat the band. Some things are as ketching as the measles, they say."

"Then when the fever strikes you, Giraffe," ventured Bumpus quickly, seeing his chance, "maybe you'll give me a rest, and turn on Davy here."

"Huh!" was all Giraffe returned to this sly dig; but he grinned as though satisfied to have made the fat scout speak out.

"It's on again now, I suppose, Tom Smith?" remarked Allan.

"Yep, an' right heah we makes summat o' a turn, so that from now on we don't reckon tuh keep headin' in ther direction o' Ricky's still. He'll foller us arter he gits yuh letter, suh; till he sees as how we ain't calc'latin' tuh close in on his leetle island still in the heart o' theh swamp. Then like as not he'll make up his mind they beant anythin' tuh skeer 'bout long o' we-uns, an' quit botherin'."

"And I say a good riddance of bad rubbish when he takes that same notion," declared Bob White.

"Same here!" echoed Smithy; while the others contented themselves with giving sundry nods, as though their minds ran along the same

channels.

So the swamp guide again started ahead, picking his way through intricate channels that none of the scouts believed they could ever recognize again; though it was plain to be seen from the manner in which Thad and Allan kept keenly observing all their surroundings that they were trying to impress the general run of things upon their minds, so that in case it became necessary for them to take the lead, through losing their guide in some fashion, they might not be wholly unprepared.

And it was in this manner that the scout-master constantly showed those who were under his charge the necessity for constant watchfulness at all times, when in the open. The boy who is "prepared" has a great advantage over the one who never takes note of what is transpiring around him. Not only that, but he discovers a thousand splendid things in the woods and waters about him that remain unknown forever to the lad who will not arouse himself, and do his own thinking.

They had been going for some little time in this fashion, and already there were heard slight murmurs from the place where Giraffe was seated concerning what a light breakfast they had taken, and that it must surely be getting on toward noon, when Thad began to notice that the guide was acting queerly.

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"Watch Tom Smith, Allan!" he remarked to the other, as the canoes were close together; and of course every one of the other six scouts immediately sat up and began to take notice.

"You're right, Thad, there is something bothering him," admitted Allan, after he had used his eyes for a brief time to observe what the guide was doing.

The alligator-hide hunter had stopped paddling, although his canoe still continued to glide along under the impetus it had received from his last few vigorous strokes. He had raised his head, and cocked it on side, as though listening to some sound that caught his ear.

"Maybe after all the old moonshiner didn't get your message, Thad," suggested Step Hen; and immediately Bumpus ceased trying to stretch his thick neck in the endeavor to see over the heads of those nearest him, and who were more or less interfering with his view; "p'raps right now he's atrailing after us, and meaning to give us heaps and heaps of trouble?"

Step Hen often made remarks like this that proved how he failed to use a due regard for reason. And the scout-master immediately showed him how unlikely his suggestion was.

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"In the first place, Step Hen," Thad remarked, "if you look closer you'll see how he keeps looking away ahead of us, and not behind. If old Ricky had followed us, the chances are we'd hear of him back there somewhere, and not in advance."

"Guess you're right, Thad," muttered Step Hen, who at least was never so hard to convince as Bumpus; and quick to see the point at the same time.

"Then again," resumed the other, pushing his advantage vigorously, as every wide-awake scout should always do; "from the fact that none of us seem to have sensed what Tom Smith has plainly heard; it shows, not only that his hearing is better than ours, but that the sounds, whatever they may be, come from a distance."

Hardly had Thad said this than some of the boys, upon straining their hearing to the utmost, believed they caught certain sounds; or else the wind happened to pick up a little just then, bringing them closer.

"Oh! Thad, was that a wolf; and do they have such things down here in Louisiana?" burst out Bumpus, before any one else could speak.

Giraffe laughed harshly.

"Tell the poor little innocent, Thad, the difference between a baying hound and his first cousin *lupus*, the wolf," he observed, with a lofty air that was calculated to quite crush the fat scout, but did nothing of the kind.

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"That's what it is, boys, a baying hound!" Thad told them; "and there, you can hear it louder than before, which would seem to indicate either that the breeze is getting stronger right along, or else the dog is heading this way."

"What was that the guide was saying a while ago about the sheriff borrowing a couple of hounds from some other parish to use down here?" Davy wanted to know.

"Bloodhounds, more'n likely," added Step Hen, with his eyes widening, as though the possibilities conjured up by this suggestion thrilled him to the core.

"Well, here's our good guide waiting for us to join him," said Thad; "and just as like as not he may have something to tell us, for there seems to be a puzzled look on his face."

Paddles were dipped in the water, and before half a minute passed both canoe-loads of scouts had come alongside the pilot boat in which Tom Smith sat, rubbing his bearded chin thoughtfully with one hand, while he continued to hold his head, as though still listening to the rapidly growing baying of that hound.

"What's the answer, Tom?" demanded Giraffe, bluntly. "We've been hearing that dog give tongue, and wondered what there was about it to make you look so sober. Is it a coon dog, and has he got a bushy-tail up a tree? I've heard 'em break loose like that more'n once."

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"Wall, younker," said the other, gravely, "yuh hain't never heard a coon dorg yap like that, let me tell yuh. Ther dorg as gives them clar notes ain't agwine tuh tuhn his head tuh look at a coon, 'cept it be a two-legged un. I reckons I knows the breed right well; an' I wants tuh state thet yuh listenin' tuh a hound now as hes ben trained never to run on any trail, deer, bar or coon, but a human un. Thet's a bloodhound acomin' thisaways; and like as not thet sheriff hes picked out Alligator Swamp tuh try out his new dorgs. An' let me tell yuh, thar must be sumthin' in theh wind tuh make him fotch his posse along whar no sheriff ever did cotch his

game up tuh this day. Times is achangin' down in old Louisiana, they be."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHERIFF'S ROUND-UP POSSE.

"How will that affect your game, Thad, do you think?" asked Allan, anxiously, after the alligator hunter had spoken so seriously about the possible scouring of the big swamp by this energetic sheriff, bound to clean it up at last, after it had borne such a bad name for years and years as a harboring place for desperate characters, voodoo worshippers and all such.

"I don't know," replied the scout-master, with a line across his forehead, showing that the master was already beginning to loom up in his mind as something that must yet be experienced. "Perhaps we'll profit by his coming; and then again it may be just the other way. But one thing sure, no matter what we wish, it isn't going to change things any. So we'll have to move along, and take them as they come."

"But they're heading this way, all right," said Giraffe, "because the yelps are getting louder all the while."

"Tell me, please," broke in Bumpus at this interesting juncture, "however can a dog follow a trail through the water? I don't know a great deal of woodcraft, and tracking, and all that stuff, but I reckon I've read about fellows that were being chased by dogs, throwing 'em off the scent by wading down a stream half a mile."

"And you're right there, Bumpus," replied Allan, immediately; "that's a trick as old as the hills, and one that's been practiced from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers. Nothing like water to upset the keenest-nosed dog that ever lived."

"Yes," added Smithy, also anxious to air his scanty knowledge along this line; "and you can read about just such a happening in one of Cooper's old Leatherstocking tales. I remember distinctly that such a thing occurred."

"But hold on, don't everybody butt in, and keep me waiting so long," Bumpus interrupted again. "I asked Thad a question."

"Well, we'll have to turn to Tom Smith here for an answer," said the scout-master; "though of course it goes without saying that dogs would be worth mighty little in case the fugitives were in canoes."

"Dogs can swim, all right, but water leaves no trail, they say," Step Hen ventured to remark, wanting to be counted as having also placed his opinion on record.

"How about this, Mr. Smith?" asked Davy.

"Wall, it mout be thisaway," the swamp hunter told them; "yuh kin see thet thar be a heap o' land in ridges 'round heah, an' the dorgs is a runnin' o' 'em out. Mebbe they be men in boats

along wid the rest; so day arter day they kin kiver a new section, an' jest clean up ther hull swamp in ther end."

"But why d'ye reckon, suh, they'd want to be doing this same right now?" came from Bob White, in his soft Southern tones.

"Yuh gits me thar, younker," replied the guide. "I dunno as how this heah sheriff he done been set on tuh 'tempt this big job by the way people kept anaggin' o' him. Yuh see, ever sense I kin remember they been agwine tuh do this same thing, an' clean up Alligator Swamp; but as ther yeahs slipped by it hain't neveh been 'tempted up tuh now. I shore jest clean 'spected ole Tom Smith'd neveh live tuh see thet day. It looks like a miracle war agwine tuh be kerried out, thet's what it does tuh me. But we'll soon know all 'bout thet same."

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"Yes, because the dogs are certainly heading this way," Thad added.

"I knows every foot o' ther ground, suh," continued Tom; "an' guv yuh my word them hounds air jest a follerin' thet ridge yuh see right heah. Thar's a brace o' ther critters too, 'case I heard ther second un jest now."

"Then the chances are that if we just lie on our oars as we're doing now, we'll see the dogs, and of course the sheriff's posse too, before long?" Allan observed.

"Hain't got tuh move a yard, suh; jest wait," the other declared.

"What would we do if they just took a notion to swim out to us, and climb aboard?" Bumpus wanted to know; as though that notion might be causing him not a small amount of concern; doubtless in imagination he could see a pair of ferocious tan colored bloodhounds forcing their way into the canoes, and snapping at the occupants most savagely.

"Oh! we could poke the paddles down their throats, and gag them both that way!" Giraffe gaily told him; for the tall scout did not take to forebodings the same way as Bumpus, to whom small things often looked serious.

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"I'm not bothering my head about what the dogs may do," Thad spoke up; "but it is a matter of some importance as to what their masters may attempt. They're on the hunt for tough characters, and of course hardly expect to run across a party of Boy Scouts in the swamp. We must find out some way to let them know we're friends, before they start shooting at us."

"Oh! I hope we can do that same!" muttered Bumpus, much concerned. "Even if they didn't hit any of us, they might make the boats leak like sieves; and I just know this black looking water must be awful deep right here. Besides, who wants to have to swim for it, with his clothes on, and all them nasty wiggling moccasin snakes awaiting to bite a fellow? Excuse me!"

As usual no one paid much attention to his wailing, for they were accustomed to hearing Bumpus suggest all sorts of queer happenings that were hardly likely to come to pass.

"Do you happen to know the name of this sheriff, Tom Smith?" Thad inquired.

"I reckons as how I voted fo' the same, an' orter know Hawkins Badgely," the other replied, promptly.

"That sounds good to me," Thad went on to say. "I always like to know the name of the man I'm up against; it often saves lots of time. Now, when they get close up, you must call out at the top of your voice, and address him as Sheriff Badgely. Get that, Tom?"

"Yes, suh, I does."

"When he answers you," Thad continued, deliberately, "tell him to order his men not to shoot; that you are with a party of boys exploring the swamp, and would like him to come and join us. Until we know more about what brings the sheriff in here, perhaps we'd be wise not to tell him too much of our private business."

"I ketches on tuh what yuh mean, suh; an' I shore thinks hit a smart dodge. Arter we-uns finds out what fetches this heah posse 'round these diggin's, we kin open up an' tell what we thinks best."

"How long will it be before they reach us, Tom?" asked Giraffe, always impatient.

"Yuh see the dorgs, they jest hes got tuh foller ther ridges tuh we-uns, an' I reckon as how it mout be ten minits er so," the guide informed him, after what seemed to be a rapid mental calculation.

"And say, perhaps now, when this old moonshiner hears the hounds, maybe he won't sit up and take notice!" exclaimed Davy, chuckling, as though he had a personal grievance against Ricky, because at the time the other fired that warning shot Davy had been so quick to draw in his head, like a tortoise, that he felt a stinging pain in the muscles of his neck, which spot he had been rubbing ever since.

"He'll think the world is going to come to an end, with seeing uniformed scouts in two boats, and then the sheriff's posse coming. Listen, and you can hear the men calling out to each other right now, fellows!" Step Hen observed.

Somehow the sounds seemed unusually strange; for conditions go to make things loom up; and with those weird surroundings on every hand the boys could certainly find enough to imagine a mighty thrilling spectacle.

Yes, the members of the big posse which the energetic sheriff had summoned to make a clean sweep of this pestiferous swamp hole, the hiding place of every rascal for generations, were exchanging calls, possibly between the boats and those who followed the hounds on shore.

"Sounds like there might be a lot of the same?" remarked Bumpus, after they had been listening for several minutes; and without doubt the noisy parties were coming nearer all the while.

"I shore reckons as how the sheriff he wants tuh make a clean sweep o' hit this time," the guide commented.

"If he's been brought up in this parish he must know Alligator Swamp is a pretty big affair, and that if he wants to comb it all over, he's got to have a little army of helpers," Thad went on to say.

"I wonder now, how they work them dogs?" Bumpus was heard to say, half to himself.

"Oh! sometimes they keep the animals fast in the leash," Allan told him, knowing what was still worrying the fat scout; "though there are occasions when they have to let them run free. They are trained to make a coon take to a tree; and there they keep him until the posse comes along."

"But if he just *won't* get up in a tree, or happens to be too heavy to jump?" inquired Bumpus.

"Why, then he has to fight for it, because the hounds will surely attack him, as they are pretty savage," Giraffe hastened to say.

"Well, there are only two of 'em anyhow; an' I shot a great big grizzly onct, maybe you remember, Giraffe," the other remarked, grimly. "I've got a gun that can be depended on every time. All you've got to do is to aim straight, and pull the trigger, and it does the rest," and Bumpus was seen to be gripping his weapon while making these truly ferocious remarks.

"Look here," spoke up Thad, severely, "none of that, Bumpus. These dogs are on land, and they'll not be apt to bother us one whit. No matter what happens, don't you dare to think of firing a single shot without I give the order. It would be rank mutiny, and you know the penalty of that. If a scout is alone, and has to act on his own initiative, it's all very well; but when the scout-master is along, every member of the patrol must look to him for orders. Understand that?"

"Sure I do, Thad; and I wasn't thinking of doing anything to get us in a peck of trouble with this old sheriff; only, if I saw a dog trying to grab Giraffe here, or Davy, by the neck, I'd feel like shoeing him off, wouldn't I? Well, after he'd give 'em a little scare I would, that's all."

Bumpus relapsed into silence after that, though it could be seen that he was very nervous, for he kept bobbing up and down every little while.

Closer came the loud calls, until it became evident that the sheriff's posse must be almost upon them; for the hounds were now giving tongue just beyond that fringe of scrub ashore, and they could hear both the crackling of bushes and the splash of several paddles.

"I think it's about time you hailed the sheriff, Tom Smith," remarked Thad, when he was convinced that further delay might cause them trouble.

"Jest as yuh sez, suh," replied the swamp guide, as he raised his hands to his mouth to serve as a megaphone.

A SURPRISE.

"Hello! Sheriff Badgely! Hello!"

When Tom Smith, the alligator-hide hunter, sent this hail out at the top of his voice, it seemed as though every other sound ceased like magic. Why, even the hounds stopped yelping, and seemed as though they might be standing there, sniffing the air in their endeavor to locate the one who had shouted.

"Who's that callin' me?" a voice was heard to say.

"It's me, Sheriff, Alligator Tom Smith; I didn't want yuh tuh be a takin' a crack et me fust, an' then beggin' my pardon arterwards."

"Oh! that's it, hey? Whar are ye at, Tom?" came the sheriff's voice.

"Out heah a space, in a boat. I done got a party o' No'the'n boys along with me, as wanted tuh see what ole Alligator Swamp she looked like. Ef yuh kim right 'long ther ridge, Sheriff, yuh cain't miss us. We-uns'd like tuh meet up with yuh right smart. These heah boys they hain't never seen dawgs like them yuh got."

"All right, Tom, we'll be 'long thar in a jiffy. Glad ye spoke out when ye did, 'case some o' my men they like as not air ready to shoot at the sight o' a hat. Move along, Carson; hello, Mobbs, shove the boats on, and jine us t'other side o' the p'int."

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Again the sound of voices, and also the fretting of the hounds, could be heard, as the advance was resumed. Then moving figures began to be seen amidst the bushes ashore; while at the same time several boats appeared in sight, turning the point which had been mentioned by the energetic sheriff.

Each boat had a number of men aboard, and all of them seemed to be heavily armed, as though they had not started out upon this undertaking without recognizing the fact that they might run across desperate characters, and be compelled to show their teeth in armed conflict.

As the guide paddled in a little closer to the shore so as to meet the officer when he arrived, those in the other canoes did likewise; although Bumpus viewed this movement with concern, doubtless not being able to get those dogs out of his mind.

"They've got the hounds in leash right now," he heard Thad remark presently; possibly the considerate scout-master said this on purpose to ease the minds of those who might be feeling a bit nervous; at any rate it did comfort the fat member of the patrol not a little, for he was immediately heard to give vent to a sigh of tremendous volume, and allow his rigid clutch upon the pistol-grip of his gun to relax.

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Thad had been prepared to see quite a numerous retinue following the sheriff; but even he was surprised at the multitude of men and boys who had gladly accepted of the chance to have a hand in the final cleaning up of the pest

hole of the parish, that had been postponed year after year until this late day.

"Say, looks like a regular rag-tag army!" Bumpus was heard to mutter, as he stared at the Southern planters, business men from near-by towns and clerks in stores, all carrying guns of every possible description, from the ancient musket, handed down from Civil War times, to the modern repeating pump-gun.

And if Bumpus and his mates stared hard at the strange collection of butternut-clad natives, fancy the way they were in turn gaped at by these men and lads, most of whom had doubtless never even heard of a Boy Scout, and knew not what to make of their uniforms.

A small, nervous man came bustling forward, and Thad, noting his air of authority, rightly guessed that this must be the sheriff. And sure enough, he wore a long coat just as the boys had noticed so many of those wonderful Western sheriffs did in the moving pictures they had watched, of stirring scenes on the plains; while a wide-brimmed soft hat sat jauntily upon his bushy head of red hair.

"Hello! Tom Smith!" he called out, as he advanced; "I kinder expected to meet up with you befo' we got through with this job, but not so soon. And, Great Jehosophat! what d'ye call them boys you've got along? Is the militia been called out to do my work fo' me? I'd like to know what all this means, Tom Smith?"

The sheriff was really showing signs of being indignant, since he was supposed to be the peace officer of the parish; and according to law, the soldiers could not be called on duty until he had exhausted his powers, and made a demand upon the governor.

Of course the swamp hunter made haste to explain.

"Yuh see, suh, these is a party o' No'the'n boys as belong to the scouts. They kim down thisaway on a matter o' bizness, an' wanted tuh see what a reg'lar Louisiana swamp she looked like. So I 'grees tuh pilot 'em round a bit."

"Do you mean the Boy Scouts, Tom?" demanded the sheriff, eagerly; "because, while we ain't got so far along down heah as to have a troop o' the same, I know what they stand fo', an' I surely am glad to meet up with some o' the lot. If so be ye come ashore, I'd like to shake hands with ye, boys."

"And we'll count it a great honor, Mr. Sheriff," said Giraffe, just as quick as he could speak, and taking the words right out of Thad's mouth as it were; but then it was an old trick with Giraffe, and one he never could be cured of.

No one offered the slightest objection to paddling close up to the land, and going ashore. Bumpus was heard to mutter something to himself, however, and might be expected to keep an anxious eye on the two hounds that were straining at their rope leashes, as though wanting to either go on, or else make a closer acquaintance with these newcomers.

So the friendly sheriff proceeded to shake hands

all around.

"Even down in this neck o' the woods we done heah more or less about what's goin' on all over," he remarked, as he came to Thad, in whom he seemed to recognize the leader of the little band; "and I often thought I'd like to meet up with some o' these heah Boy Scouts. I got the manual they drill by, an' it meets with my unqualified approval, I wants to say right heah. I hain't got nary a boy, but if my five gals was sech, I'd want to start a patrol right away in my town. An' meetin' you chaps thisaway gets me more'n ever in the notion to try an' see if we cain't have a troop o' our own."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Mr. Sheriff," declared Thad; "if you'd care to take my address, and I could do anything at all to help you in the matter, you can depend upon it I will. You're in something of a hurry just now, but perhaps later on we may happen to meet again when things are a little more quiet; and I'd like to tell you dozens of things that have happened to the Silver Fox Patrol, that you'd like to hear; and also what a big difference it's made with some of our members."

"That's sure kind of you, my boy," said the sheriff, while the crowd listened eagerly to all that was being said, and some of the younger elements began poking each other in the ribs, as though they saw good times coming should the officer ever put his contemplated plan into operation; for things must have been pretty dull for boys down in that region so far removed from the hurly burly of metropolitan life. "I hope now I'll meet up with that chant, beca'se there's a heap o' things I'd like to ask you. But jest as you say, I'm up to my ears in business right now, and it wouldn't be just the thing to pull up before this old swamp has been run over east and west, no'th and south, with a fine-tooth comb, till we gits every law-breaker it hides, or else chases 'em into the open, where they'll be easy to corral."

"Tom Smith has been telling us considerable about the way this place has been used for years and years to hide runaway slaves, escaped convicts from the camps, and all sorts of bad men; and it'll be a blessing to the whole community, sir, if you succeed in exterminating the vicious breed," said Smithy, assuming his most important air.

Sheriff Badgely looked curiously at the speaker, as though he did not exactly sense all that he said in his pedagogue way; for Smithy was as exact in his manner of speech as long ago he used to be dudish in his dress, until the rougher element among the scouts cured him of that fault.

"Thank ye, son," the officer finally remarked, thinking that this ought to cover the bill, and not expose his ignorance concerning fine language.

"It certainly does you credit, Mr. Sheriff, that you've undertaken a job which all your predecessors seemed to have shirked," Allan went on to say; for he had somehow taken a sort of sudden fancy for the small man, who seemed to be as lively as a cricket, and full of vim and go.

"Oh! I might as well confess to ye, son," remarked the sheriff with a chuckle; "that p'raps I might a kept aputtin' the raid off right along, jest like Sheriff Zeb Coles done fo' nigh on eleven yeahs, till he turned up his toes and was put under ground, only fo' a certain thing happenin'. Fact is, they has been a big robbery up-country a bit, an' only two days back we got word as how the man suspected o' doin' the same was a lyin' low in ole Alligator Swamp. Co'se, after that thar wa'n't no excuse fo' me not to raise a big posse, and try to just clean things out down heah; 'case you see, the man that had been robbed he offered to pay the wages of every man and boy that'd go along, and put five thousand dollahs in my hand in addition, if so be I was lucky enough to ketch thet slick thief, an' recover the stuff as had been taken from him."

"I can see how that was a spur, just as you say, sir," Thad remarked, smiling at the naive way in which the officer admitted that the chances of a fat reward made an alluring bait at any time.

"Well, it gave me a chanct to collect the greatest posse ever seen in these heah parts; an' we're just bound to have the biggest lot of fun afoah we quits the game ever heard tell of," the sheriff went on to say; "but sorry to tell you, boys, we'll likely have to part company right now, and take up our hunt."

"Have you come across anything in the way of game so far?" asked Giraffe.

"Oh! we done sent that ole voodoo man to town under guard," replied the other, carelessly; "you see, he's been makin' heaps o' trouble lately, gettin' some o' the hands on the sugar plantations to throwin' up their jobs in the busy season, an' fillin' 'em full o' horrible notions sech as the voodoo practices. And we kim to the conclusion that it had to stop. He'll get sent where he won't do no more damage in ignorant minds. Afore we-uns are through with our job we calculate to pick up a number o' convicts that's been hidin' out in this region; but we'll try to devote most of our time and attention to findin' this heah slick Jasper."

When the sheriff happened to casually mention the man for whom all this remarkable preparation had been made, Thad exchanged a quick glance with his closest chum, Allan; for the officer who was sworn to carry out the mandates of the law had spoken the name of the party of whom the scouts were in search, and who was believed by Thad to be the kidnapper of his little baby sister, Pauline, years before.

CHAPTER XIX. JOINING FORCES.

"Oh! Thad, did you hear what he said?" whispered Giraffe, in the ear of the scout-master.

"Keep still, Giraffe, and let me manage this affair, please!" was what Thad replied; and accordingly the tall scout, quickly grasping the

situation, relapsed into silence; for he had the utmost faith in the ability of the patrol leader to whip things into shape.

"What was that you were telling us, Mr. Sheriff, about this man robbing some one?" Thad asked, before the other could turn fully away.

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"It's this way, son," came the obliging officer's reply; "a very wealthy planter by the name of Richmond had occasion to employ a secretary to conduct some literary work he was head oveh ears interested in. So in New Orleans he comes across a smart gentlemanly fellow who gives the name of Jasper. Fo' a long time they seem to get on right well. Then all of a sudden the kunnel he finds that his secretary suh, done disappeah, as also the contents of his safe, includin' some family jewels that had been fetched oveh from France two hundred yeahs ago by his ancestors, and which he values above anything he possesses."

"Oh! and that is why he is willing to put up so much money to try and recover these things, I suppose?" Thad went on, for the purpose of drawing out still more information rather than because he failed to understand.

"That accounts fo' the milk in the cocoanut, son," the officer admitted. "He then and there calls me in fo' a consultation, and immediately afterwards issues that offer of reward, as also the promise to pay every man and boy who would join my posse, and hunt fo' the thief."

"And then word came to you that some one had seen a man answering the description of this Jasper down here—was that it, sir?" Allan asked.

"You have described it to the lettah, suh. And as the thief must be hiding in Alligator Swamp, you can understand how we've made up our minds to clean the old pest hole out, once fo' all."

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"But we are told that a stranger never could make his way in and out of here, because there are so many treacherous passages; and that more than a few men have met their death trying to escape from the endless succession of watery trails?" the scout-master continued, still trying to pick up information without betraying his side of the case to the other.

"Perfectly correct, suh," the sheriff told him; "but that fact only made me look deeper into the case. What do you think I discovered, but that yeahs ago a family by the name of Jasper lived close by this region. If that is so, then we sorter reckons this heah thief might be a son of the ole man; and in that case don't ye see, he'd know every part of the swamp as well as Tom Smith heah?"

It gave Thad a strange thrill to hear this spoken; because had he not actually covered the identical ground himself when figuring out just how the man with the girl should be able to go and come with such little concern?

"Why," he exclaimed, suddenly meaning to go further, and learn more, if possible; "seems to me we heard something about a strange white man who had been seen going into the swamp here, Mr. Sheriff; and perhaps now it may have been the same Jasper. But this party had a little

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girl about ten years old with him. Was the Jasper you wanted the father of such a child, sir?"

"He done told the kunnel that he had a daughter in a school in New Orleans; so p'raps now he went an' took her out, so she could cook his meals fo' him all the time he was ahidin', till the trail got cold, an' it was safe fo' him to head no'th," was what the sheriff told him.

Meanwhile Thad had been quickly figuring in his mind whether it would not be best for him to take the officer wholly into his confidence; and being a boy who could cut the Gordian knot, and decide quickly on his plan of campaign, he immediately settled this matter in the affirmative.

If the objective point of the sheriff's posse was the retreat where Felix Jasper was supposed by Tom Smith to be hidden, how foolish it would be for them to try and attain their object while there was a rival expedition in the field that might in some way interfere with the successful carrying out of their plans.

Yes, far better to combine, and pool their issues. Besides, with such a formidable backing would not success be more apt to perch upon their banners than should they keep on trying it alone?

"I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Sheriff," he said, hastily; "and while it may hold you up a few minutes, in the end you'll admit that the time has been profitably spent; because we might as well join forces with you. Fact is, sir, we have come all the way down from the North in the hope of rounding up this same Jasper you're looking for; because the girl he has with him, I have great reason to believe, is my own little sister, stolen away from my mother's home years ago by a man named Felix Jasper, once from New Orleans, and who wanted to have revenge upon the Brewster family on account of some fancied wrong done him."

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Of course upon hearing this remarkable statement the sheriff no longer evinced a nervous desire to be on the go. He seemed to realize that his interests were bound up with those of the manly leader of the scouts, who had just thrilled him with so strange a story.

And as for his posse, they were crowding around so densely, anxious not to lose a single word of what was said, that, as Giraffe afterwards declared, they looked like "sardines packed in a can;" every face filled with eagerness, and many of them seeming hardly to breathe lest they lose some of the story.

Thad, knowing that now he had broken the ice it would be better to explain more fully, started in to tell how his guardian received the news, and could not himself undertake the long journey, but had readily agreed that the scouts should come, because they had shown themselves so capable on many other occasions.

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"We entered the swamp by ourselves, though I understood it was a dangerous thing to attempt," Thad concluded; "but we were lucky enough to run across a guide in Tom Smith here. He thinks he can give a pretty good guess where this Jasper will be apt to hold out, Mr. Sheriff;

and now that we're all on the same business, why not combine forces, and let him show us the way?"

A number of the planters and others exchanged knowing glances.

"Best thing that ever happened for us, Mr. Sheriff!" one man declared stoutly.

"Truer words never were spoken," observed another. "I've heard that Alligator Tom Smith knows more things about this same swamp than any man living. I told you in the beginning that we had ought to hunt him up, and make him join the posse. Luck is playing your way, Sheriff, believe me."

The officer of the law seemed to think the same way, for he immediately turned upon the scouts' guide and demanded:

"Are ye willin' to come in with us, Tom, and trust to me to make it right with ye, when I gets that reward in my hands? 'Case if ye ain't, I'm agoin' to draft ye in the posse all the same, an' ye just cain't hold back. The State gives me that power, ye understand!"

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"Oh! I'll let yuh set the price accordin' tuh how yuh sees fit," remarked the wise and far-seeing Tom, quickly; if he had the name he might as well have the game too, he undoubtedly thought; "but I hopes as how my employer heah, Mr. Scoutmaster, won't go fo' tuh think I purposely deserted him."

"Why, you're working for us just the same, Tom," observed Thad, quickly; "and your wages will be going on all the time, no matter what you get from our friend the sheriff. And so we may call it settled; is that so, sir?"

"Just as ye say, son; and I consider that I've certain got the best part o' the bargain as it is," the other replied.

"We won't quarrel over the proceeds, for you want to get the man and the stuff he stole; while all we're after is the little girl," Thad went on to say.

"I sure hopes it may turn out all right to you, son, and the gal be thet same little sister you lost long ago," the sympathetic sheriff went on to say; "I done got five gals, an' I understand just what it must have been fo' your mammy to a lost her on'y one. Yes, we-all hopes as how you'll find it ain't a mistake. But since these matters are fixed, let's figure on headin' that way, Tom Smith. Now, what might ye advise, to begin with?"

"Hit's thisaway, Sheriff," began the swamp-hunter; "dawgs is good in ther way; but sumtimes they mout seem tuh git in ther road, an' guv warnin' tuh theh party yuh was awantin' tuh s'prise. Hain't thet so, suh?"

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"Reckon ye knows best, Tom; an' let me say that I sees what yer drivin' at," the officer told him. "Ye believes as ye knows whar this Jasper'd most likely be aholdin' out, an' ye kin take us thar without the use of the hounds? Is that it, Tom?"

"Close tuh what I war meanin' tuh say, Sheriff,"

the alligator hunter went on to remark; "an' if so be now yuh kept the dawgs back heah a bit till we seed if we cud round-up our man, it'd be better. Then, if he wa'n't whar I laid out tuh find him, yuh cud call up the critters agin, an' start in fresh."

"That's settled, then," asserted the other; and turning to one of the posse who seemed to be in charge of the brace of hounds he continued: "Townley, ye heard as what was said, didn't ye? Well, pick out another to help, and stay heah till ye gets the signal to come on; or we-all joins ye later."

He spoke with such authority in his voice that the man dared not evince any disposition to disobey, though doubtless he secretly groaned in spirit at being left out of the deal at such an important juncture.

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"And now, Tom Smith, lead us on; everybody keep quiet, and let's play this game fo' all she's worth. If so be we brings the critter to bay, they'll be fightin' in plenty, I reckons, if what the kunnel says about this man is only half true. And in case we have to take to the boats, p'raps now some o' us'll be let crowd in with these plucky scouts. Fo' the last word, then, here's hopin' we'll have the best o' success."

The alligator-hide hunter again took the lead; but now he had a following that must have given him a strange thrill every time he turned his head to glance backward, for quite a flotilla of boats came in his wake; while on the nearby land a swarm of figures flitted, reminding one somewhat of a pack of silent wolves chasing relentlessly after a wounded stag.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SCOUTS SHOW THE WAY.

"Thad!"

Step Hen leaned back in the boat he occupied in company with Bumpus, Davy Jones and the scout-master, as he softly uttered the name of the last mentioned.

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"Yes, what is it, Step Hen?" remarked Thad.

"Would you mind if I asked a single question?" pursued the other, speaking as near a whisper as he could, and still make his voice carry.

"Go ahead, then," the other went on to say, knowing full well that when once Step Hen's curiosity became fully aroused there was nothing to do but gratify it; besides, had he not often told the scouts that a certain amount of "wanting to know" was commendable?

"Why, I saw you talking with the sheriff just before we started out again, and while you were ashore; would it be a fair question to ask what you fixed up with him?" Step Hen inquired, boldly.

"Oh! nothing that would make any change in our plans," said Thad. "The fact is, I was a little

nervous about what might happen in all the excitement of a fight; and it was only my plan to get the sheriff to promise that he would warn every man in the whole posse to be very careful not to injure a hair of the girl's head, even by accident; that's all, Step Hen."

"Thank you, Thad, and I hope you don't think I was putting in my oar where I had no business to?"

"Sure I don't," replied the scout-master; "we're all chums, and I'm certain that every one of you feels almost as much interest as I do about meeting up with this girl Jasper has with him, and learning whether she can be our little Polly. But please don't talk any more just now, Step Hen; because it isn't best; and besides, I want to do some tall thinking."

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Neither Bumpus nor Davy had taken any part in this little whispered conversation but they had listened eagerly, and doubtless caught every word that was spoken; if one could judge from their manner, and the great sigh that the fat scout managed to heave when Thad brought the talk to an abrupt close.

Yes, it was true that every member of the Silver Fox Patrol did feel that he had a deep personal interest in the outcome of this journey and search. Thad was very dear to them all, and many times they had pitied the boy because, outside of old "Daddy" Brewster, his uncle and guardian, he seemed to have no close relatives, while they all had parents, and in most cases either brothers or sisters, perhaps both.

Now, Thad was a sunny-natured lad, and not given to complaining; yet these warm chums of the Boy Scout Troop could remember instances where tears had come into his fine eyes when visiting at the home of some comrade around Christmas time, and he seemed to realize what it was to be without even one brother or sister, and lacking the love and affection of father and mother.

And now that there really seemed a chance of Thad's discovering a sweet little sister to love and care for, every scout was praying pretty much continually in his mind, that the expedition might not turn out a failure, but that when they once more turned their faces northward there would be an addition to their number, and that Thad would be smiling all the while with supreme happiness.

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Meanwhile Tom Smith was leading them carefully on.

It was entirely different now from what the advance of the sheriff's posse had been before the scouts met the crowd. Up to that time noise had predominated, with the hounds baying wildly, and men shouting back and forth, as though by this means they expected to frighten the swamp fugitives into surrendering.

Scout tactics now prevailed. When real woodsmen start out to track an enemy, or even a wild animal, they adopt the ways of the wolf or the stealthy Indian, and keep utterly silent. Why, even the paddles seemed to rise and fall with nothing to mark their laboring save possibly the trickling drip of drops of water falling from the

elevated blades; so careful were those who handled the same how they used them.

Had they been trying to approach a feeding deer on the edge of the water among lily pads the scouts could not have exercised greater caution; and those in the other boats, noticing how gently the boys drove their canoes along, made haste to pattern after them, not wishing to be outdone.

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All the while the swamp was getting more and more lonely looking, and the vegetation becoming even thicker, showing that Alligator Smith must be taking them to a part of the great morass where few people ever came.

Undoubtedly he had his reasons for this, and more than one of the scouts found himself nearly bursting with eagerness to know what these could be; but so long as the guide remained in the lead there was no opportunity to put questions, even could they muster up courage enough to attempt it.

Of course they were constantly on the alert, not knowing at what moment there might come a change in the conditions, and something not down on the bills occur to break the monotony of the advance.

Some of them remembered what the sheriff had said about this Jasper, and how, if all accounts were true, there would be a wild time when they finally rounded him up, as he would not succumb without a desperate fight.

Bumpus watched the bushes and trees ahead of the guide's boat. He was a great fellow to imagine things, and doubtless had many a sudden start when some bird stirred, or a small swamp animal scudded away, each time causing poor nervous Bumpus to imagine that it must be the terrible Jasper who was hidden there, drawing a bead on the most prominent object in the leading canoe behind that of the guide, and which of course meant himself.

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But then, try as he would he could not reduce his bulk any more than had already been done; and so he must continue to play the part of "martyr," serving as a shield to his three more fortunate chums back in the boat.

The guide moderated his pace from time to time. Bumpus wondered at first whether this came from a fear lest he might be running into an ambush cleverly set by the man in hiding; but after watching more carefully he finally realized that he was far from striking the truth when he thought this way.

In fact, these periods of seeming hesitancy were only indulged in when the men on the shore had fallen somewhat behind; and undoubtedly it must be Tom Smith's plan to allow them an opportunity to come up again, so that the entire company might be close together.

Finally Bumpus noticed that the guide was now heading straight in toward the land, as though he meant to give over the water part of the trip; whereat the fat scout had a thrill of expectancy and joy sweep over him; for once they left the boats it would no longer be necessary for him to stick there in the van, such a conspicuous object, when by rights he felt much more at home in the

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rear, letting such fire-eaters as Giraffe and Bob White take the lead if they felt so inclined. "Every one to his taste," was the motto of Bumpus; and as for him he always loudly declared that Nature had not intended him to be a fighter, or else would he have been fashioned on a different model from that of a dumpling.

Yes, now Tom Smith had driven the prow of his clumsy canoe right into the bank, and he was clambering out of the same, showing that there was about to be a positive change in the character of the hunt.

A minute later and Bumpus was able to clamber over the bow of his own boat, and actually reach solid ground. How he drew in a great breath of relief when this became an accomplished fact. After all, give him the touch of good old *terra firma*—how well he remembered going to the dictionary to find out what those italicized words meant when he first came across them in a story of young plant hunters written by one who used to be a great favorite among the boys several generations past—Captain Mayne Reid, but who is seldom known to the lads of to-day; and ever since that time Bumpus had been prone to spring his knowledge upon his unsuspecting fellow scouts, until they threatened all sorts of dire things unless he changed his tune.

Still the very thought of "solid ground" must always please a fellow built on the order of an elephant, Bumpus told them time and again, as an excuse for his satisfaction. However, he did not dare open his mouth now to say a single word, and had to take it out in sighing, and mentally shaking hands with himself.

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Presently they were all gathered there. The boats were drawn up on the bank to be left in charge of a guard, for it would not be very pleasant if they returned later on, to find that some enemy had been there, and either carried their canoes off, or else in some way smashed holes in the bottoms, so that they would be useless for the return trip.

The sheriff, Thad and Tom Smith came together and talked for several minutes in low tones, the rest gathering around, and trying to get in touch with what was being said.

Had any one been noticing Davy very closely, however, they might have seen him moving uneasily, then withdrawing his eyes from the central figures to look hurriedly around him; and after that deliberately walking away so that he could place himself on the *windward* side of the large group.

"Huh!" grunted Bumpus, frowning when he saw this, for he had by accident been pushing up against Davy at the time, in his eagerness to hear what the leaders were deciding on; "think you're smart, don't you? But I kinder reckon you're overdoing the thing, and you'll get called down good and hard by Thad, if you don't let me alone. Huh! who cares, anyway?"

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Bumpus became aware about this time of the fact that Tom Smith was no longer standing still, but had begun to move off, as though meaning to lead them on land the balance of the way.

He also seemed to keep close to the border of

the water, for some reason or other, as though either the trail led there, or else he had some object in not immediately plunging into the thick of the scrub.

Before they had gone fifty yards this object was made manifest. The guide carefully parted the tall reeds that grew in the shallow water, and then beckoned to the others to come forward and look for themselves.

Of course the scouts were in the van, and they quickly discovered what it was the swamp guide wished them to see.

"Why, it's only an old boat, after all!" grumbled Bumpus, who had possibly anticipated discovering a monstrous alligator, or else the terrible Jasper himself.

"Yes, only a boat," added Allan, who was at his elbow; "but it belongs to the man we're looking for, and tells us that we'll find him home, when we get to where he hangs out; for that's the means he has of coming and going. Things look good to me."

CHAPTER XXI. ON THE TRAIL.

Tom Smith looked as though he were himself rather pleased over his find. Thad had an idea that the swamp guide had been basing a part of his plans on some theory he had formed; and was tickled to discover how well it had turned out.

Under his directions a guard was also set over the boat, with orders to remain in hiding, but constantly ready to spring upon the hunted party, in case he should manage to elude the main body, and make his way to the secret hiding-place of his boat, with the intention of fleeing from the swamp.

And when all these little arrangements had been completed, Tom Smith passed to the other side of the sedge grass, and showed them what seemed to be a sure-enough trail, leading directly into the scrub, and undoubtedly only recently made.

"Wait up for just a minute or so, will you, Tom?" said Thad; and while the boy did not go further in order to explain what he wished to do, when the other scouts saw him move hastily along, and drop down on his hands and knees beside the trail, somehow they just seemed to instinctively guess what was in his mind and heart.

Thad was looking for the track of *little feet* there; such as would betray the fact that a child had accompanied the man when he passed to and fro from the boat to the secret hiding-place!

All of them fairly held their breath while waiting to hear the result of the scout-master's investigation. They knew what his ability was in the line of reading "signs," and felt no hesitation about believing that if any one present could

discover the impression of the girl's shoes in the soil, Thad would.

He got up presently, and those who had seen him almost tenderly touch the ground in certain places with his hand, knew before he said a word that his search had certainly met with abundant success.

"Yes, he has the girl along with him," Thad went on to say, softly, noticing the anxious faces of his chums; "and so far as that goes, the story that was sent up North was true. But then, we will have to wait a little before we know whether she is really his daughter or—little Polly!" and his voice was very tender as he just softly breathed that name which had been almost constantly in his mind of late.

The sheriff had drawn near the guide, and seemed desirous of learning something more about the expected hiding-place of the fugitive from justice; and thus having his hands doubly strengthened for the anticipated fray.

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"Tell us a leetle more about it, Tom," he urged; "how did ye ever come to think Jasper he'd be a keepin' undeh cover heah; and what does it look like? We-all ain't agoin' to get a chanct to talk agin, I reckons, an' let it all be said an' done now."

The guide did not seem to be unwilling to rest a bit before starting out on the last leg of the "closing-in" process. And no doubt he quite agreed with the sheriff in what the other said about the man who was forewarned being doubly armed.

"Why, yuh see, Shurff," he began, softly, "I done took consid'able int'rest in everything 'bout this heah ole swamp; an' when I fust cotch theh story 'bout theh Jasper fambly, I investigates, an' larns how a cupple o' theh boys used tuh hide out in the swamp days at a time, when theh ole man he was riled at 'em, an' nobody ever cud find out whar they stayed."

"I see that same just got your spunk up," remarked the officer with a grin, "and ye was detarmined ye'd find it out fo' y'self, eh, Tom?"

"W'ich I did afore I was satisfied," continued the other, "an' we'en I larned as how a Jasper hed kim back, tuh disappear like to Alligator Swamp, w'y, don't yuh see, I jest nat'rally concludes as how he must be one o' them as used to play hide an' seek thar. So I reckons I'd know whar tuh find theh same; an' arter runnin' acrost that ole boat whar we did, I hain't any doubts 'bout hit. He's thar, as sure's my name's Thomas Beauregarde Smith."

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"But tell us somethin' about the nest, now," urged the sheriff.

"This heah trail'll lead us plumb thar, see if she don't," remarked the guide, wagging his head with conviction. "Yuh see, tuh git tuh the place it's fust necessary tuh cross a big bed o' muck whar a sunken ridge lies. I had tuh *feel* my way acrost mighty keerful; 'cause if yuh takes a wrong step chances are yuh'll be up tuh yuh waist in mud; an' if so be thar hain't nobody 'round thet section tuh lend yuh a helpin' hand yuh kin make up yuh mind it's the end. I seen

quicksand sum in my time, but they ain't a sarkimstance alongside that muck fo' suckin' yuh in."

Bumpus tightened his fists as he heard this stated. He seemed to have a sudden inspiration, or fear, and it was to the effect that if any single person in all that host were unlucky enough to slip from that concealed ledge, and test the depth of that muck bed, he would be the wretched victim—was it not always the case that he had to play the part of the "goat" in any performance?

"But once over thet bad part an' the rest is easy sailin', Shurff," the guide went on to say, confidently, "fo' yuh see, they's a sorter wooded island thar; an' outside o' them Jasper boys an' me, I done reckon as how nobody ever did find theh way tuh git oveh thar. All I asks yuh is tuh keep right still till we kin kinder s'round theh shack an' s'prise him!"

"Then there is some sort of house, is there?" asked Thad, thinking again of the little girl, and what a cover over her head might mean in wet weather.

"I allow as thar be, suh; leastwise 'twar thar w'en I larst been oveh. You see, it happens as how the 'gators they don't use thet island, frum sum cause er other, an' so I neveh keered tuh stay thar any time; so it's ben sum yeahs sense larst I crossed. But I hain't forgot theh way, I reckons, an' I'll guide yuh thar, safe an' sound."

"Glad to heah ye say that, Tom," remarked the sheriff: "and fo' the sake of this heah fine boy I sure hopes that we'll find his sister, too."

"Well," remarked Thad, turning his eyes toward the officer, with a feeling of gratitude in that Fortune had raised up such a sympathetic friend just when they were in need of help; "you can be certain that I'm hoping all the while the same way. When we get back to town I'll find letters there from my uncle, and begging me to wire him how it has come out; and I trust that the news I send will be just the one word: 'Found!'"

"And as for me," Bumpus was heard to say, softly, "I'm also hoping to get a letter in answer to the one I wrote my ma on the way down, asking her if I'd delivered that medicine she sent me for. Hope to goodness the answer is 'yes,' because it'll be a turrible load off my mind."

"Five cents' worth of worry, and you'd think it spelt ten thousand dollars!" jeered Giraffe; but he was careful to say this in the ear of the stout scout, for he did not want Thad to know he was still keeping up this badgering process.

"I don't care for the amount, and you know that," said Bumpus, in an irritable fashion that was strange for him, but might be laid to the cold in the head from which he had now been suffering for several days; "it's just the *principle* of the thing that hurts me. My honor as a scout is in question. I hate to think of having failed the only mother I've got, when she trusted and depended on me. Get that, do you, Giraffe?"

"Oh! sure, only how many mothers would you expect to have?" the other went on; but Bumpus, having had his say, relapsed into a dignified

silence.

Thad had taken his position alongside the guide when they started out again. As they now had a trail to follow there was no longer any necessity for depending on the knowledge of Tom Smith, and his broad acquaintance with the intricacies of the swamp. Left to themselves the scouts could have easily carried the expedition safely along from this point; for they were well versed in the secrets of woodcraft.

And as he walked along by the side of Alligator Smith the scout-master kept his fond gaze fastened, a part of the time, upon every fresh indentation of those heels belonging to the shoes of the girl who was in the company of the fugitive, Jasper.

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What hopes and fears must be passing constantly through the mind of Thad as he contemplated those dainty footprints. Many and many a time had he yearned to be as well off as some of his chums, in the way of having some one near and dear to him, whom he could love and protect; and now that there seemed a possible chance of a little sister being miraculously given to him through the working of Fate, the boy could hardly believe that he was not dreaming.

At the same time he did not forget his scout schooling, and that he must always be on the alert. So from time to time he would take his eyes away from the faint trail ahead, to scan the bushes, and seek for any sign that might spell danger.

When a lesson has been well learned it soon becomes what might be called "second nature;" and so Thad, even in the present excited condition of his mind, could not help acting as he believed a sagacious scout should when on duty, and following in the wake of a dangerous man.

Perhaps it was a good thing he kept himself on the alert, for while Tom Smith was a woodsman, and might have seen what attracted the attention of the scout-master, there could be no telling. And had it not been discovered, they might have found what Giraffe would call "rougher sledding" later on.

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They happened to be in a particularly thick patch of scrub and woodland where Thad felt more than half convinced that if the fugitive had thought to lay any sort of trap the springing of which would give him warning of the coming of enemies he must have chosen this place; when he made a little discovery that caused him to instantly clutch the arm of Tom Smith, and say softly:

"Hold on!"

Others of the party gripped their guns, and looked eagerly around, under the impression that Thad must have sighted a hovering figure back of some tree; and no doubt half expecting to hear the crash of a gun break the silence that hung over the spot. But nothing of the kind came to pass. Instead, Thad drew the guide several steps along, and then pointed to the brush close at their feet.

"Well, what d'ye think of that?" Bumpus remarked, as he pushed forward the better to see; "if he hasn't put an old rope across the path just to trip us up, and make all the trouble he can."

Giraffe looked scornfully at the fat scout.

"Think so, do you, Bumpus?" he remarked, with a lofty sense of his own sagacity. "Well, if you happened to trip over that same rope, chances are now you'd hear a gun go off. P'raps the load *might* miss you, though I don't see how anything could do that; but all the same, the bang of the gun'd tell Mr. Jasper it was time he took to the woods, and ran like a scared rabbit. So you see what Thad's shut off by his find."

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CHAPTER XXII. THE MAN-TRAP.

"Seems like it took a scout to do the job, and make such an important discovery!" Step Hen hastened to remark, apparently proud of the fact that he too wore that magical khaki uniform.

"But where's the gun, I don't see?" demanded Bumpus, who seldom allowed himself to wholly believe things, until he understood all the details, for he could be very practical when he wanted.

"Watch Thad, and you'll know," Giraffe told him.

Thad was bending down, and to all appearances examining the stout cord that had been drawn directly across the trail, mostly hidden by the low scrub. It had been arranged by a master-hand at cunning, and was just high enough to make certain that a careless foot would strike against it, bringing about the immediate result that the one who had placed it there contemplated.

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Without even touching the cord the young scoutmaster commenced to follow it along, foot by foot. The sheriff's posse, including Alligator Smith, the swamp guide, stood there and just watched to see what he would do. Somehow all of them seemed to have taken a strange liking for the patrol leader. Perhaps it was his manly bearing that made Thad friends so quickly; while the errand that had brought him down to Dixieland may have had more or less to do with it; for the hearts of these Southern boys and men are always tender toward one who has suffered; and chivalry toward women and girls still abounds in the South as it can be found nowhere else in this broad land of ours.

But then that was an old story with Giraffe and the rest of the fellows; ever since Thad Brewster had come to Cranford and entered into their sports they had been accustomed to seeing him make new and warm friends as though he might be a wizard.

Meanwhile the scout was apparently nearing the spot upon which his attention had been centered. It was only a dozen or so feet away

from the trail and seemed to be where three trees grew up in a queer clump, being shoots of a former swamp king among the oaks.

Here Thad paused and bent still lower.

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"He's struck ile!" one of the posse was heard to say to a companion.

"Reckon as haow he hes, Jed," another went on to remark.

Bumpus stared as best he could, and waited impatiently to see what would be the result of Thad's search. He held his breath so long, through eagerness, that his face grew furiously red; and one of the posse even moved a little further away from the fat boy, possibly under the vague suspicion that he was about to have a fit; or from some other reason.

"Bully for Thad!" Giraffe was heard to say, a little louder than discretion might have dictated; at least Allan gave him a nudge in the back, which the tall scout understood to mean "less noise, there!" for he cut his exultant ejaculations short, and wilted.

"It's a sure-enough gun!" admitted Bumpus, giving a sort of whistle as he allowed his breath to flow evenly again; just as you may have heard the hydrant do when there is air in the pipe, and the water has been turned on or off suddenly.

But then all of them had already made sure of that same fact, even if they did not think it necessary to announce it in the same way the fat scout did.

Thad came back to where they were grouped, awaiting him, and holding in his hand the gun he had unfastened from amidst the three saplings, where some one had secured it, with the muzzle pointing straight toward the spot at which the trail was crossed by that concealed cord.

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"It was a sure enough man-trap!" Davy remarked, in considerable awe, as he noted that the hammer of the old gun was still drawn back, as though ready to be discharged with the slightest pull.

Bumpus noticed that there still hung from the trigger a foot or so of that cord and from this he judged Thad must have just drawn the blade of his knife gently across the taut line; as the scout-master was very particular to always keep his hunting knife in perfect condition, the edge of the blade was as keen as a razor, and would sever that cord without the slightest influence upon the gun.

"Well, that was a smart dodge, all right!" the Dixie sheriff remarked, admiringly, as Thad handed him the gun, which seemed to be an old musket, such as several of the posse were even then carrying, and which had perhaps played its part during those troublous times many years back, when the yankee horde invaded Southern pastures, and gradually, through force of numbers, drove the gallant Confederates to the wall.

"Of course it was aiming right this way, Thad?" remarked Step Hen.

"Yes, if any one of us had been silly enough to

drag that cord with our feet, the gun would have been fired, and whatever it contains must have come this way, with more or less painful results," the other informed him.

"Huh! looks to me like it'd hold just about a pint of bullets, old nails or anything else that's calculated to give trouble," said Davy, as he respectfully touched the rusty old weapon that Jasper must have fetched along especially for the purpose to which it had been put.

"And," Thad continued, "you can see how he expected it to serve two purposes; for besides standing a chance of wounding some one when it went off, the gun would give him warning, and he could have time to escape. It was a clever trick, and shows us what sort of smart rascal we're looking up."

"An I wanter say right heah," remarked Alligator Smith, frankly; "thet it's all owin' tuh them sharp eyes o' yourn we ain't riddled afore now by the shot er bullets as mout be in this yer gun; 'case I admits as how I never sot out tuh look to' any sech contraption in ther grass er brush; an' chances air I'd gone stumblin' right acrost, so as tuh draw thet trigger, an' upset theh fat in theh fire, even if I war lucky enuff tuh 'scape gettin' plugged myself. Arter this I'm agwine tuh larn more 'bout scouts an' sech. Seems like they knows ther bizness; an' even a ole swamp hunter like me kin larn somethin' frum theh same."

"Hurrah!" said Giraffe; but he knew Allan was standing close beside him, and not feeling like drawing another stiff dig in the ribs as a reproof, he just whispered the one word, while pretending to clap his hands; for these boys were justly proud of their calling, and could never hear words of praise uttered for scout-craft without a personal sense of satisfaction.

"Well, that's one game failed, anyway!" Bumpus was heard to say, half to himself, as though in imagination he was thus decreasing the perils that he expected were lying in wait along their course.

"They'll all fall before us, see if they don't," Davy Jones went on to say, as though his confidence had grown by leaps and bounds, and had reached a final stage when he saw Thad nip the plot of the enemy so neatly.

"Sometime I'd just like to take the trouble to draw the load he put in that old musket," Step Hen told Smithy, who was close to his elbow.

"Whatever good would that do you?" asked the other, who could not understand why any one could allow his curiosity to make him so much unnecessary work; for while Smithy had reformed in many ways, he still "shirked" a little, Thad had often noticed, for he had never been shown the delight of *doing things*.

"Well, don't you understand that it might give a fellow a certain amount of satisfaction to know what a narrow escape he had?" asked the other. "Suppose now, I was to extract seven bullets, sixteen rusty nails, a couple of marbles, four screws and a few other things I just can't think of, from that old cannon, wouldn't the sight of the lot make me gladder than ever that Thad found it out in time; and that we didn't get that

wagon-load of stuff turned in on us, backed by six drams of black powder? Smithy, you ain't got any idea of being thankful over things. Just however would you be able to keep on talking in that stilted lawyer-like way you've got, if a nail had knocked a bunch of teeth out—tell me that, will you?"

"Aw! keep still, there, Step Hen, this ain't the place for arguments like that. Just wait till we've got to the end of the trail, and then some!"

Strange to say it was neither Thad nor Allan who took the trouble to admonish the talkative scout in this fashion, but Giraffe himself. Since he was debarred from giving *his* opinion by the proximity of Allan and his ready hand, the tall member of the patrol evidently thought that he could at least find some satisfaction by passing the reproof along; since misery likes company.

But all the same, while Step Hen did relapse into silence after being told so plainly that he had no business to air his views, he took especial pains to notice where Thad laid the old rusty musket down in a clump of brush.

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"Huh! reckon I could find that place again, easy," the boy was telling himself in confidence; "and I will, too, if everything passes off comfy, and we get our man. Guess there ain't much danger of our missing connections there, with such a bully mob to surround the place, and fellows like our Thad to think up things. I want to just show Smithy what there is in that gun, and s'prise him, that's all."

Now that the trail could be followed once more without much danger of another man-trap, Thad and the swamp-guide were again starting out; though the latter before taking a step had made sure to add further warning to what he had already said about every one keeping as still as possible.

Really there was little need of saying that, for it was easy to see from the set looks on all those faces how the men and boys were alive to the occasion, and not likely to risk spoiling the surround by any incautious move, or loud unnecessary talk.

One thing at least favored them a little. This was the breeze, which seemed to be blowing directly in their faces. Thus any sounds they might happen to make would not be carried ahead, as would have been the case should they have been traveling *down* the wind.

This probably came about by sheer accident; but all the same it was noticed by those of the scouts who were woodsmen enough to pay attention to small things; and of course Thad and the swamp-hunter had known of it all along.

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The boys presently realized that they must be close upon the broad slough spoken of by Tom Smith, when he declared that the sunken ridge which must be followed was the only way he knew about whereby passage might be effected, so as to reach the higher island wooded beyond; though he had at the same time admitted that Jasper might have some other means for escaping if hard pressed, discovered when, as a boy, he frequently visited this section of the swamp.

"There she is!" muttered Giraffe, and Bumpus, hearing the low words, raised his eyes from the ground, to stare ahead at the prospect facing them.

It did not require any particular knowledge of woodcraft to proclaim that what the elongated scout had remarked was quite true, for the dreadful bog might have no substantial bottom short of a hundred feet, was before them.

It looked bad to Bumpus, stretching away for several hundred yards to where the trees again grew heavily on solid ground. The ooze was deceptive. It had a green scum on the surface in places, as though some verdure had taken root, but in all probability had any one ventured to trust his weight upon such deceptive spots he must have speedily found himself immersed in muck up to his knees, or worse, and unable alone and unaided to ever keep himself from sinking gradually deeper and deeper, until it was over his head.

Bumpus shivered as he looked. It was as though he felt in his very bones that an unkind fate destined him to make the test as to whether the bad name given to this bog were well deserved, or not.

As they stood there on the edge looking out, while the alligator hunter was making sure that he knew exactly where to enter the muck bed, so as to feel out the sunken roadway that wound in zig-zag fashion over to the island, good-natured Bob White felt some one poke him in the side.

Looking down he saw the solemn face of Bumpus there; and there was an expression of almost pitiful appeal in the eyes of the fat scout, such as the Southern boy remembered once noticing in the brown orbs of a deer he had wounded, and which had to be put out of its misery.

But then of course he did not anticipate that Bumpus was going to ask him to do the merciful thing by him, and end his sufferings; though he understood plainly enough that the stout scout was enduring some sort of agony of mind.

"Will you do me a favor, a great favor, Bob, *please?*" Bumpus whispered, looking quickly around at the same time, as though wishing to make sure that neither Davy nor Giraffe were close enough to overhear what he said.

"To be sure I will, Bumpus," quickly replied the other; "anything within reason you can count on me doing, suh. I believe in scouts standing by each other."

"Oh! thank you, Bob; it's kind of you to say that," Bumpus went on, as he tried to thrust something into the hand of the other. "Please take this, and if it does happen, pull like everything; because I'm heavy, you know, and chances are I'd sink quicker'n any of the rest of you."

"But—this is a piece of heavy cord, Bumpus, perhaps the same that was stretched across the trail a little while ago?" exclaimed the astonished Bob.

"That's right, I was quick to see how I might use it, for scouts are expected to keep their brains

moving all the time. You see," continued Bumpus, confidently. "I just feel it in my bones that I'll be the one to miss connections with that crazy old hidden path, and fall slap into the mud, and I've got the other end tied under my arms; so in case you hear a splash, be ready to hold tight, Bob. That's a good fellow!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ANCHOR TO WINDWARD.

When Bob White heard Bumpus talk in this way he took notice of the fact that the stout scout was in deadly earnest in what he said. It was no laughing matter, apparently, because Bumpus had evidently made all sorts of preparations for the expected disaster, besides fastening one end of that cord around his body, and asking his fellow scout to hold the other.

His precious silver-plated bugle which, as the accredited musician of the troop, he always carried along with him, unless otherwise forbidden by Thad, he had now made more secure against possible damage by fastening the same about his neck, so that it dangled between his shoulders. And he was gripping his rifle as though bent on keeping that also out of the awful muck, should the accident he anticipated come to pass; for once let any of that ooze find a way into the barrel, and it would be a most difficult task to get the interior "spic-and-span," and shiny again, as Bumpus always wished to keep his firearm.

But Bob White did not smile.

He liked the fat boy too well to give him unnecessary pain, though the fact of Bumpus preparing that heavy cord so that he might be saved in time, should he slip from the narrow causeway and sink into the slime, was really comical; and later on would doubtless elicit roars of laughter from unfeeling Giraffe and Davy, when they came to talk matters over, and were free to make as much noise as they felt like.

"That's all right, Bumpus," Bob said, reassuringly, as he accepted the cord, and proceeded to wind it several times around his left hand, for he was carrying his gun in his right.

"You'll do me the favor, then, will you?" questioned the other, with eagerness.

"To be sure I will, suh, and only too gladly," replied Bob; "but, if so be you happen to know when you're going, it might be a good thing, I take it, to give me due warning of the same, because a sudden jerk would perhaps pull me over with you; and then, suh, it'd be a case of the blind leading the blind."

"I will, Bob, depend on it, I'll try to," Bumpus assured him. "Course I don't want to souse in that awful mud, and I'm agoing to try my level best to keep on the straight and narrow road all I can; but if it does happen, it's always some

comfort to know you've got an anchor out to windward."

"Yes, suh, it's sometimes a good thing to have a string tied to things, so they can be jerked back if the conditions don't seem favorable. I've known fellows who never made a bargain but they had an 'if' or a 'perhaps' fixed to the same. But nobody could say that of you, Bumpus. Don't worry about me; I'll attend to business at the old stand, suh, all right. You won't go down so quick but that I'll manage to draw the line taut; and if she holds you're just bound to come out, either whole or in sections, suh. That's all."

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Which intelligence could hardly have been very comforting to poor Bumpus; whose face took on a thoughtful look, as though he had begun already to wonder whether the remedy might not be more dreadful than the disease.

But there was no time for more conversation in these whispered tones between the two scouts; because Alligator Smith had apparently found the place for which he was looking, and boldly stepped out from the firm ground.

While his feet went under the surface an inch or so, he seemed to have struck a solid foundation; for he immediately turned, and waved his hand to the posse; and then held up his finger suggestively, as though warning them under no circumstances should they make unnecessary noise.

Perhaps the fox they hoped to find in his hole might be sleeping, and not apt to take the alarm easily; but it was not wise to depend too much upon that chance. The really keen woodsman never underrates the party or animal he may be hunting, but always acts as though he must expect the worst. It is better to be too cautious than to lack in this regard, and ruin well-laid plans.

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Pretty soon there was a long line of men and boys making their way along that submerged ledge of solid ground. That came immediately after the guide, walking in the footprints of the swamp hunter, if such a thing could be said where the soft ooze instantly settled back as soon as one withdrew his foot. Then others of the scouts, led by the sheriff, trailed along, Bumpus being just behind his good friend Bob White, so no one really noticed that there was a connecting link between the two.

By the time the last member of the big posse had entered the bog, Alligator Smith was almost halfway over; and thus far all had gone smoothly, so that save for a certain amount of soft splashing there had nothing happened to create a disturbance. Bumpus was going strong. He must feel more or less encouraged by the success with which he was following in the wake of Smithy, who evidently felt this thing of soiling his brand new leggings with that black ooze more than any other scout; because Smithy never could get over being particular in his appearance, though he had been cured of being a dude, brushing his hair when in camp, and other silly ways of trying to imagine that certain duties must be performed when roughing it, just the same as when he was at home.

Bumpus kept his eyes glued upon the feet of

Smithy, knowing that eternal vigilance was always the price of safety and liberty. If the other manifested signs of wobbling Bumpus was apt to shudder, and stand stock-still until he saw Smithy go on again without taking the anticipated tumble into that quaking muck bed that seemed to just yawn expectantly on either side of the moving line of men and boys.

Some persons declare that when one is anticipating a thing it generally comes about. Others say a "watched kettle never boils;" so you can take your choice. But as events proved, Bumpus' fears were not without a foundation; for when he was all of two-thirds of the way over the bog he suddenly slipped, and losing his footing, just settled into the ooze like a big balloon might drop down.

Bumpus gave no yelp of alarm, for he had kept schooling himself on this score all along, and made up his mind that if the sacrifice must be carried out he would at least prove himself a credit to the training of Thad, and go down in silence.

Bob White came very near being pulled in after him; but Giraffe who came just behind the Southern boy, succeeded in clutching him in time.

There was poor Bumpus over his knees in the slime, and sinking steadily all the while on account of his great weight. He knew the futility of trying to get out by himself, and that the more he moved about the worse his plight was bound to be; and so he just squatted there like a huge frog, holding his gun up above his head, and looking appealingly toward the chum from whom he felt that he had a right to expect help.

Nor was Bob White slow to get busy on that line. Fortunately it was a new and strong cord that Jasper had used in his man-trap which failed to work because of the vigilance of the scout-master; and when several others had laid hold of the same no doubt they could assist Bumpus to clamber out again.

It was rather difficult to accomplish anything while on such a narrow footing, because in the first place they could not bunch together; and then again there was always a chance that one of the other scouts might also lose his footing, and slide into that soft bed; for the muck was no respecter of persons, neither did Bumpus have a monopoly of the same, because there was plenty of room for others.

But by dint of judicious handling, and a sort of swinging pull they managed to start the heavy scout coming.

"Get a move on, and help yourself, can't you?" fretted Giraffe, upon seeing how Bumpus was just content to let himself be hauled out by main strength.

"Shall I, Bob?" asked the object of all this solicitude, as though recognizing the Southern boy as the one in command, because it had been in his charge he had submitted his case when the prospects looked dubious.

"Yes, it would help some, I take it, suh, if you did make motions like you-all might be a frog

swimming in there," the one appealed to made answer.

And so Bumpus, who had doubtless often watched a frog swimming so gracefully in the water, started to give them his conception of what it was like. Giraffe nearly doubled up with silent laughter, and only for the proximity of Allan might have made more or less of a noise; but he succeeded in restraining his exuberant spirits, and even did some hauling on the faithful cord that did not fail Bumpus in this great emergency.

They got him out presently, and while Bumpus was a sight, with all that black mud clinging to his legs, so that the rest had to keep away from him, Davy had the temerity, instead of giving thanks over the successful rescue of his chum, to go and mutter something that sounded like:

"Anyway, now, he'll just *have* to throw away that old suit, and the rest of us'll be able to breathe easy again. Blessings lots of times come along in disguise, my ma says, and this must be one of 'em. And so I'm real glad we had to creep along this slippery ridge after all, because it's going to make a change in things when we get back to our duffel."

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"Keep quiet, can't you, Davy!" warned Giraffe, who all the time was chuckling to himself as though he really enjoyed every word he heard the other scout say, because Davy was voicing his own sentiments exactly.

When that suspicious "plunk" had warned them all that some one was in the mire, Thad and the guide had come to a full stop, to wait until the rescue had been effected. While they were strung out in that wavering line, what was the interest of one concerned them all; and there would be little use in a few of them getting safely over the bog if the main body were held up out there; because none of those in the rear could pass by until Bumpus had been saved.

The fat scout gave Bob White many thankful looks, and insisted upon the other retaining hold of that friendly piece of thin rope, because, as often happens, history might choose to repeat, as one good turn deserves another, and he did not like that oozy bed any better after testing its capacity, than he had before his slip-up.

As for that line, Bumpus would treasure it most religiously, as one of his most valued possessions; for had it not saved his life?

The forward march was resumed, with everybody hoping that clumsy Bumpus would be much more careful of his footing now, so that the solid ground might be reached without more trouble.

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Nobody was more anxious than the stout boy that such a thing might carry; and quite naturally he exercised all the caution he could muster up in order to keep from doing that sliding trick again.

When finally he reached solid ground, and actually felt something firm under his feet, Bumpus gave a great sigh of thanksgiving and relief. Others did the same, it may as well be confessed.

First of all, Bumpus restored his bugle to its customary place at his side. Then, having deposited his gun on the ground, leaning up against a tree, he next proceeded to coil up that valuable cord, and stow the same away inside his khaki jacket.

“Why don’t you get busy, and scrape some of that mud off?” asked Step Hen, in the ear of the one who had so recently been saved; whereupon Bumpus sat him down deliberately, picked up a stick, and began to reduce the amount of bog which he was carrying on his person; which operation some of the others watched in more or less amusement, particularly Davy, who shook his head, and grinned as he caught the eye of Giraffe, as much as to say:

“Here’s where luck came our way in great big chunks, Giraffe, because, don’t you see, he’s just bound to throw that suit away after getting it in such a horrible mess, for Thad won’t allow him to tote it along, nohow. Our time is near at hand, thank goodness; and I say again we’re lucky; because it’d almost take an earthquake to make such a stubborn mule as Bumpus to change his mind, he’s so sot in his ways.”

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The others had better luck than the fat scout; several may have slipped a little on the way over, but no one actually fell in far enough to make a rescue necessary.

By degrees they came ashore, until presently it was seen that every one in the expedition had landed.

The sheriff deemed it a wise piece of precaution to leave a couple of his men at this point to act as a guard. If, as Alligator Smith believed, this was the only means of crossing the fearful muck bed, then, should they have the misfortune to do anything that would start the fugitive to action, he might still be nabbed in the act of trying to get over to the mainland at this point.

And this having been duly attended to, the rest of the posse, together with Alligator Smith and the Boy Scouts, prepared to leave the vicinity of the quaking bog, and start in among the trees with which this queer island, looking like an oasis in the midst of a desert, was pretty well covered.

Every fellow just knew that they must be very close to the place where the man they were hunting had his “hang-out;” and the knowledge caused them to experience a succession of odd little thrills that seemed to chase all over their bodies, as though some one might be pouring ice water down their backs. But at the same time there was a delightful sense of expectancy in the air that caused most of the scouts to feel that the climax to their long journey must now be at hand.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OASIS IN THE QUAKING BOG.

Before they made any sort of a start upon what

would probably be the last leg of their hunt, Thad believed it would be only a wise move if he and the sheriff had a little consultation with the man who was guiding them to where he believed the lair of the fugitive thief lay.

Thad had always found that a good understanding in the start was more than half the battle. It often prevented serious complications from arising, and mistakes being committed that were apt to prove fatal to success.

Accordingly he spoke to Alligator Smith along that line.

"A little hold-up right here and now won't interfere with our hopes of success, will it, Tom Smith?" was the way he put it.

"Reckon as how it ain't calkerlated tuh do theh same, suh," came the reply; for the alligator-skin collector had learned to have considerable respect for this thoughtful and resourceful lad who was serving as scout-master in the absence of Doctor Philander Hobbs, the real head of the troop.

"Wait a little bit then, till I get the sheriff alongside," added Thad. "I think we ought to have an understanding, so there'll be no need of much whispering later on, when it might upset our calculations to indulge that way."

"Seems like yuh mout be k'rect thar, son," admitted the other, readily, and possibly wondering how it was that this boy seemed to think of everything.

The sheriff quickly joined them when he saw that something was in the wind. He too had been more or less impressed by the quiet sense of ability shown by this Northern lad, who while serving as a leader among his fellows did not attempt any of the swagger that many lads could not help displaying.

"Before we start off again, Mr. Sheriff, we ought to find out a little more of this business, it seems to me," Thad began; "and especially about the lay of the land; what sort of a shack this is; and how we'd better creep up on the same so as to take the man by surprise, and at the same time not give him any chance to endanger the life of the little girl; because if he's the sort of rascal they say, he might be small enough to hold her up as a sort of shield from our guns, and threaten all sorts of terrible things unless we went away and left him alone."

"I've known that same to be done, suh," agreed the official, nodding his head as though he agreed with what Thad said. "And let me say that I understand jest how ye must feel 'bout it. We've butted in to this game, an' it's on'y right an' proper as how we ought to try an' suit our purposes to yourn. So, whatever ye reckon on as agreeable, suh, ye'll find us atryin' to meet up with ye."

Thad gave him a grateful look; for, truth to tell it was the fear lest some unexpected and unprepared-for peril threaten the girl before they could capture the desperate man, that had been worrying him.

He knew that doubtless among the members of this hastily summoned sheriff's posse there must be a number of hotheads, men or boys who were so bent on accomplishing something that would serve the ends of justice that, given half a chance and they would spring forward, risking their lives recklessly in the hope of being selected by fate as the one to pull the rascal down.

Many a brilliant plan, Thad knew, had been spoiled by just such well meaning but thoughtless individuals. And he was trying to figure it out how the chances for having such a blunder occur might be greatly reduced, if not cut out altogether.

In fact, he had it in his mind that since the posse now virtually controlled the avenue of escape from the island, it might be well for the guide and himself, say, to leave the others near by, and creeping along, try to find out what Jasper might be doing.

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And deep down in his heart Thad possibly was hoping that if this were undertaken a glorious chance might arise whereby he could manage to get in communication with the girl, and even stand by to protect her while Tom Smith went for the rest; or else even coax her to flee with him.

The very thought gave Thad a thrill of strange delight; now that the crisis was so very near, and he must soon learn the truth, he had great difficulty in repressing his eagerness, and displaying his customary caution, when his heart was urging him to more hasty action.

"Why," said the swamp hunter, as he screwed up his forehead in a way he had of doing when trying to "cudgel his brains," as the saying is, "bout all I remembers o' thet shack she war on'y made up ouden slabs an' ther like; an' seems tuh me like theh w'ar an tear o' years'd like as not make it look sick. But then, mebbe as how this heah Jasper he done tote some more stuff acrost, an' patched theh cabin up so hit'd shed water like."

"Does it lie among the trees?" asked Thad

"It sure does, suh," replied the other.

"How long would it take us to get there from here?" the boy went on to inquire.

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"If so be we started tuh walk reg'lar-like, we'd be thar in three minutes I done reckon," answered Tom Smith.

"So close as that," muttered the sheriff; "I hope then, none of my posse happens to let out a bark or a sneeze; seems like that'd be heard if a feller happened to be awake an' listenin' like."

On his part Thad was more concerned about Bumpus than any of the others; because in the past on more occasions than one the fat scout had, as Giraffe expressed it, "knocked the fat into the fire," by some unexpected act. Which explained in part why the scout-master was wild to accomplish something looking to the rescue of the little girl before any such accident could occur.

Why, it had come to such a pass among the scouts that if a fellow wanted to be very particular about some group picture he hoped to snap off, he kept his eye severely on Bumpus all the while; for if he could make sure that the clumsy member of the patrol were all right, he had little fear about the rest. Bumpus had ruined many a picture by some stumble, or upheaval that was not gratifying to the artist.

"I'm going to ask a favor of you, Mr. Sheriff," said Thad, suddenly, as he leaned forward, the better to speak in the other's ear.

"Then spit her out, son," replied the officer, though he looked rather surprised, and somewhat disappointed, just as if he suspected along what lines this request on the part of the scout might lie; "as I said before, this heah is more your game than it is ourn, an' I'm willin' to let ye have the right o' way."

"Would you care very much if Tom Smith and myself crept on ahead, to see how the ground lay?" asked Thad, determined to take advantage of the sheriff's kindness while the other was in a mood to accommodate him.

The officer glanced toward the guide.

"Would you think that to be a good play, Tom?" he asked; "'case if ye do, I ain't got a wo'd to say agin the same. This youngster beats my time, an' I'm right glad I run up ag'inst him. Neveh did have much use fo' Yankees sense they run off my ole man's slaves yeahs an' yeahs ago, leavin' the fambly po' as church mice; but if they raise his breed up thar, I've got to change my ideas, that's all. How about that move, Tom Smith: be ye of theh same mind as him."

Now, possibly the guide had not up to then even considered such a move; but he was quick to see the wisdom of it, since Thad had brought the matter up. He was also too shrewd an old chap to disclose his ignorance; and accordingly he made out that he had himself been considering such benefits as might come to them from a spying expedition, but through a sense of modesty had refrained from mentioning it thus far.

"Wanted tuh say sumpin like thet myself, Shurff, but didn't know jest how yuh mout take hit," he observed, complacently; "but sense Thad, he opens the ijee, sot me down as favorin' theh same."

"Oh! all right then, just as you figger, son," the sheriff went on to say, turning once more to the young scout-master; "but take us along as fur as ye dar, Smith; and fix it with me so as how if ye need help suddent-like we'll know it's time to git busy."

Thad felt almost like shaking the hand of the sheriff again and again, he was so delighted with the readiness with which the other had fallen in with his scheme.

Under similar conditions there were many pigheaded officials, so inflated with a sense of their own importance, that nothing could have induced them to yield one atom of their authority in a case like this. They would have insisted on taking the lead, and running things

as they pleased, no matter if failure resulted through their recklessness.

"We'll give a loud whistle if we get in any trouble, and want you to rush up with the whole posse," he said, quickly, fearing that unless he clinched the bargain immediately the sheriff might repent himself of having made it.

"No need of tellin' ye to be keerful, son," continued the other, as Thad and the old swamp guide prepared to leave the party; "because I reckons as how ye jest couldn't be anything else if ye tried. Yes, this heah scout business hes cotchcd my fancy right smart, an' I 'spect to look into the same later on. Good luck, Thad, and heah's wishin' she may turn out to be all ye hopes fo'!"

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That told the boy the sheriff had a good heart, even if his business was that of hunting desperate men, and his face had what would appear to be a hard look.

None of the other scouts took occasion to say a single word, because they had not been asked to share in the consultation. But when they saw Thad and Alligator Smith preparing to move on ahead, a short time later, leaving the rest of the posse in hiding, they could easily guess—all but Bumpus perhaps, and he afterwards got his information from Bob White in the lowest of whispers—what lured the pair forward.

So they simply took it out in waving their hands to Thad when he turned his head to look back; as though in this mute fashion they might waft after him their very best wishes for success.

After which the boys settled down to count the minutes, which would of course drag as though each one were weighted with lead; hoping that at any time they might hear the welcome "cooee," or whistle that had come to be known among them as a signal that their presence was needed in hot haste.

And it need hardly be stated that every fellow belonging to the Silver Fox Patrol held himself in readiness to make the utmost speed in case such a call came from their leader.

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So the utmost silence reigned over that island oasis amidst the great quaking bog; now and then some bird would give utterance to a caw or a croak; but beyond this not a sound could be heard, as they crouched there, wishing it would come to an end, and something in the way of excitement follow.

CHAPTER XXV.

PLAYING "SECOND FIDDLE" TO A BOY.

Action must now take the place of words, with Thad.

From the moment that he separated from his chums, and started off on this scout in company with the swamp guide, he would have little or no

opportunity to exchange confidences with any one.

It suited his mood exactly, because he was wishing to do, rather than plan; and gladly welcomed the opportunity to accomplish something.

He quickly discovered that Alligator Smith had changed his course considerably, and could guess the reason for this. The other judged it best that they try and come up on the concealed shack where the fugitive was in all likelihood hidden, from the other side. And as Tom Smith had been here before, he undoubtedly must know what he was about.

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Being quite content to take things as he found them, Thad did not even try to ask a single question, which he might have done by placing his lips close to the other's ear.

When the hunter got down, and wriggled along past some spot that was more open than usual, Thad followed suit; and it was fortunate that he knew as much concerning the ways of the tracker as he did, and could imitate him to the life.

After a little while he saw Smith making motions as though to call his attention to something ahead. This caused Thad to find an opening in the brush that shielded them; and the first thing he saw was what appeared to be a primitive shelter made of slabs and branches, though capable of shedding rain, no doubt.

In front of this a small fire was burning, though throwing up very little smoke, as the man had been careful to select such wood as would not give off the black oozy results that come from Southern pine.

This in itself was enough to tell Thad they were in luck. A fire could not be started without some human agency. Undoubtedly Alligator Smith must have figured correctly when he "allowed" that this same Jasper, wishing to remain hidden from everybody for a time, would come to this former retreat where, as a boy he had been wont to retire from the parental wrath.

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And if Jasper were here, of course the girl must be also.

Thad was straining his eyes to the utmost now, in the wild hope that he might discover her somewhere by.

He had often thought deeply over this part of the matter, and wondered whether it would be possible for him to recognize this girl. Should he meet her on the street would there be *something* about her that must tell him he was looking on a Brewster?

When he failed to see anything of her, he confessed to a sense of disappointment; but even as he looked there was a movement at the door of the shack, and a man came slowly out.

He was fixing a pipe for a smoke, and seemed to be entirely at his ease, so Thad made up his mind that at any rate no suspicion of the danger that hovered over his head had come to Felix Jasper.

Lying there perfectly motionless the boy tried to study the man whom he had come so many hundreds of miles to find. So this was the unfaithful steward whom his mother had been compelled to discharge; and who, it was believed, had revenged himself in the most cowardly way possible by stealing the Brewster baby, and so cleverly that all the detectives who had been hired at great expense to search for the same, had been unable to accomplish anything.

No wonder Thad shivered and then grew fiery hot as he fixed his eyes on the figure of the man who had once been in the employ of his parents, and proved treacherous to his trust.

He had always hated the name because he believed that if Jasper were really to blame for the disappearance of his baby sister his act had certainly shortened the life of his dear mother, for whom Thad had grieved many a year.

Jasper was a slender sort of a man; but then, knowing this fact already, Thad was more concerned about his features. He saw that when the other glanced up and looked around there was a hunted expression on his face; just as though he must have known that this last desperate act of his would make him a much sought prize with all the sheriffs and marshals of the country.

He must have figured on remaining in hiding for a certain length of time, after which in some sort of disguise, and carrying his stolen loot as well as the girl along, he could make his way to New Orleans, and take passage on some steamer bound for a Mexican port, or else one in Central America, where he could buy a plantation, and live at his ease.

Neither of the concealed scouts dared move hand or foot so long as the man was in plain sight; for the least action might have caught his attention, with the result that the plans of the sheriff would be overturned. A dead man was not worth more than half as much as a live prisoner, to the law.

After puffing away at his pipe for a few minutes the man knocked it on his heel, as though after all the flavor did not appeal to him. He looked around once more, shrugged his shoulders, yawned once or twice; and then taking out a revolver from a hip pocket he seemed to be idly turning the cylinder, as though to make sure the chambers were all loaded.

When Thad saw him yawn again he concluded that Jasper must be doing more or less sleeping day and night, to make up for lost time; or else hardly knew what to do with himself while in hiding.

He did not like the man's face. To his mind it expressed cunning, and he wondered how any one could trust him; but then Jasper may not have always looked this way in those days far back, when he had charge of the Brewster estate.

Now he was gone again, having passed back into the shack. Thad could catch what seemed to be the sound of voices within, and again he felt a thrill, because this went to prove that the man

was not alone.

If only the girl would show herself, Thad thought, he would be satisfied. Besides, it might give him a chance to get in communication with her, and if such came about there could be no telling what the happy result might be.

And while he was wishing this it came to pass; for suddenly the boy realized that she stood there in front of the lowly shack. Imagine the feelings that swept over him as he lay there, his eager eyes fairly glued upon her face.

Yes, she was pretty, but that alone did not occur to Thad. He believed that he could surely see a Brewster strain there—something hard to describe, but which reminded him of the picture he had of his father in his own room at home.

So this was the girl Jasper was now calling his daughter. Why, she no more resembled the man than she did Bumpus Hawtree; and that was saying it as strong as any one possibly could, for the fat scout had a red and freckled face, marked more by good nature than rare intelligence.

Thad was seized with an almost irresistible impulse to rush forward and carry her off; but he held himself in with an iron hand. That would be a silly thing to attempt, because she would be apt to look on him with distrust, perhaps call out in wild alarm, and bring Jasper hurrying to the spot, angry, and ready to do all sorts of terrible deeds in order to defend himself against arrest.

As Thad lay there, and watched her every move he saw the girl stoop down and take hold of a galvanized bucket which, with other things, Jasper must have purchased at the time he laid in his supplies looking to an indefinite stay in the swamp.

She was undoubtedly going to some spring for water.

Thad never gave the fact of fresh water bubbling up on that elevated ground in the heart of Alligator Swamp the slightest thought; though later on he might consider it a singular thing. What flashed into his head was the sudden wild hope that in some way he might cut off her return to the shack; and thus manage to separate her from her guardian.

As soon as she started away, swinging the bucket in her hand, and humming some little air that she had possibly learned in the convent school in New Orleans, where it was afterwards discovered Jasper had kept her all these years, Thad gave evidence of meaning to follow after her.

The old swamp man had kept just as still as the boy all this time; but somehow he must have divined what influenced Thad now, for he made no sign to show that he considered it an unwise thing to do, but followed along at the heels of the patrol leader. And perhaps that was the very first time in all his life that Alligator Smith ever played "second fiddle" to a boy.

They backed away, first of all, so that another growth of bushes would come between their moving bodies and the shack; in case the man

chanced to issue forth again he would not be quite so likely to discover them as though they kept to the open.

Thad could still catch glimpses of the girl; for her pail flashed in the sun's rays as she swung it idly to and fro. Then again her dress happened to be something along the red order, and in contrast to the browns and greens of the "island" in the quaking bog it stood out vividly.

One thing that pleased Thad was the fact that the spring would seem to be some little distance away from the cabin. He felt that every yard counted in a case of this kind. And too, she was going in a direction at right angles to the course that must lead to the place where the sheriff and his posse lay concealed, waiting to be "called to the feast."

He meant that when he disclosed his presence to the girl he and the swamp guide would be standing between, so that should she be alarmed, and try to return, they could prevent such a thing from coming to pass.

But Thad was fervently hoping that he would be able to convince her how much it would be to her interest to at least stop and listen to what he had to say before either trying to flee, or even raising a cry to warn Jasper.

Much depended on how she felt toward the man. If he was a tyrant it would all be easy enough; but on the other hand, should he have been good to her, and did she believe him to be really her father, Thad feared he might have a hard task cut out for him.

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He had made up his mind though, that since the girl was separated from Jasper she must not be allowed to rejoin him, even though force had to be temporarily used in order to effect this result. It was a glorious chance that had been raised up, and he would be a queer sort of a scout if he hesitated to take advantage of the golden opportunity.

And presently he saw that she had reached the spring, for she was bending down as though to fill her bucket.

CHAPTER XXVI.

POLLY.

It certainly did seem as though everything might be trying to assist Thad. Why, even the elements lent a helping hand; for the wind had only recently risen to such a busy degree that it was now sighing among the upper branches of all the trees, and rustling the leaves of oaks and pines and cypresses until there was raised such a commingling of various sounds that possibly one might speak in an ordinary tone without its being carried from the spring to where the concealed shack lay.

This was what Thad thought, for with a scout's education he noticed everything that promised to have any connection with his affairs.

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Providing, then, that the girl would not be so startled at his sudden and unannounced appearance that she would cry out, there was a chance of them carrying on a little heart-to-heart talk, by means of which he could impart certain facts which must be of considerable interest to her.

“Watch out for the coming of the man, while I try to speak with her,” he whispered in the ear of Alligator Smith; who immediately stopped short, as though he thought it would be as well to lie in ambush right there, as go on any further.

Thad forgot all about his companion after that.

The girl was still by the spring. She had set her pail down, and was on her knees. Thad could not see exactly what she was doing, but imagined that it might either be getting a drink, or else in girlish fashion utilizing the clear water of the spring as a mirror, to look at her reflection.

A dozen quick, noiseless paces served to bring him close up to where she knelt. He managed to get control of himself, and give a little cough, as though in this fashion he hoped to alarm her less than by suddenly speaking.

The girl instantly turned her head. He saw that she was astonished, and immediately Thad pressed his finger on his lips to beg of her not to call out. At the same time he tried to have a reassuring smile on his face, though in his excitement he hardly knew what he must look like.

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“Please don’t call out to betray me to that man!” he said, softly, “I don’t mean you the least harm. In fact, I have come all the way down from the North just to speak with you. Will you believe me enough to listen, while I tell you something?”

She was on her feet now, and at first Thad feared he had so alarmed her that her whole desire would be to run as fast as she could to the shack, perhaps screaming out loud, in her desire to have Jasper hasten to her assistance. In that event he had made up his mind to seize her, and then depend on the guide to hold the angry man at bay when he came rushing up.

But if this was indeed her first intention she must have soon changed her mind. Possibly the friendly reassuring smile on his eager face influenced her; then again she may have been braver than he had ever imagined could be the case; and last of all perhaps she knew more about her past than it had entered his mind to imagine.

“Yes, boy, if you promise not to come any nearer to me than you are now, I will hear what you want to say,” she replied, in a voice that quivered with nervousness, fear, and perhaps anxiety. “But how could you ever find your way over here, when he told me no living person knew of that trail under the mud.”

“There was one man who knew about it,” Thad went on to say, softly, thinking it wise to approach the wonderful subject that he wanted to speak about by degrees, and first of all satisfy her girlish curiosity. “But first of all, tell me if you believe the man you are with is your own

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father?"

"He says he is, but somehow I do not believe him," she replied, drawing a long breath, while her eyes opened wider than before, as though hopes that had lain half dormant in her heart for some time, once more flashed into life. "At the convent school the sisters often talked about him, and they could not believe he was my father. He gave his name as Allan; but once when he came to see me an empty envelope fell from his coat pocket, and I saw that it was addressed to Felix Jasper; so ever since I've believed that must mean him."

"And you guessed what was true," said Thad, quickly, pleased beyond measure at what success had already come to him in his suddenly arranged plans; "his right name is Felix Jasper. Years ago he used to be in charge of my mother's property, just after my father died; but he took advantage of her inexperience to defraud her and was discharged, but not prosecuted. Instead of being grateful he seemed to lie awake nights trying to think up something dreadful, through which he might have revenge for what he considered his wrongs. It is an old story, but happens now and then, just as it used to do centuries ago. My little baby sister disappeared most mysteriously, and was never found, though they hunted everywhere. Jasper was careful not to give the least clue; but my mother believed until she died that he was to blame. And now, many years afterwards, word reached my uncle and guardian that this same Felix Jasper was seen coming into this swamp, having a girl in his company who seemed to be just about as old as my little sister Pauline must have been if she were alive. And I have come down here to find out if it might be true. Now you know why I asked you not to call out! You do not love that man, I hope?"

"I have hardly seen him more than four or five times in as many years, until he came two weeks ago, and told me I would have to leave the convent school, and go with him, because he had to live abroad. And then we came here to this queer spot, and he has acted so strangely all the while, as though he feared some one might be meaning to do him an injury. Ever so many times a day I have seen him examining a terrible pistol he carries in his pocket. Is it you he is afraid of, boy?"

"No, I don't think it is," replied Thad; "you see he is a thief, and has robbed a wealthy planter who employed him; so that he is afraid the sheriff and his posse will find him. And they are here close by, meaning to arrest him; so that you must not go back there to that shack, for it would be too dangerous. But if you believe that he could not be your real father, have you not sometimes tried to picture who was, and what your right name might be?"

"Yes, oh! yes, I have, many, many times," she went on to say, breathlessly, so that Thad was emboldened to take a step toward her, and follow it up with another. "And then there was that day when the sisters showed me the clothes that were on me when he brought me there as a baby, saying that my mother had died, and he had to go abroad on a very important mission. I shall never forget that there were three letters

embroidered on one of the garments; and oh! how often I used to dream that the day *might* come when I could know whether my name were really Mary Allen, or something else that those initials stood for."

"Listen," said Thad, his very heart seeming to stop beating, because everything might depend on what answer she would make to the question he meant to ask her now; "tell me, were those three letters P. C. B?"

"Oh! you have said them just as I saw them!" she exclaimed, in sudden awe, not unmixed with ecstasy; and Thad breathed freely again, while his face lighted up with a joy that could no longer be denied.

"They stand for Pauline Chester Brewster!" he said, "and I do not for a minute doubt but that you are my own dear little sister; but all that can be settled when we see those sisters you speak of, in New Orleans, and the garments they have kept all these years are shown. You will not be afraid of me any longer, will you?"

He was drawing very close to her when he said this. The little girl's bright eyes were fastened upon his face. What she saw there must have given her complete confidence in the boy, for she suddenly extended both hands toward him.

"No, I am not afraid of you. Why should I be when you have brought me such splendid news? And you look just like what I have always thought a brother must be. Oh! I do hope I won't wake up and find that it's all only a dream; because that has happened so many times. It always made me cry, because I was so very much disappointed. But then this time it seems different, because I've heard you speak, and you have told me the things I've always wanted to know. And so my name is Pauline?"

"Yes, or Polly for short," the delighted boy went on, as he took both her extended hands in his; "do you think you will like it better than Mary? It was my mother's name too, and she was a Chester before she married my father. I am Thad Brewster, your own brother Thad."

"How queer it seems to me—to have a real brother," she went on to say; "but oh! we forget about *him*. He will be very, very angry if he finds me talking to you in this way; because he has always told me I must never say a single word to a stranger."

"Well, it's different when you're talking with your brother, you see," Thad replied; but her words had awakened him to the fact that it was most unwise to continue to linger so close to the shack where Jasper was staying; and that the safest policy would be for them to reach the spot where Sheriff Badgely and his posse lay concealed, and leave the rest to that astute peace official.

He wondered at such a young girl talking so well, but then she had been all of her life in the charge of the sisters at the convent school, and consequently was somewhat old-fashioned in her ways.

"But what will you do about it?" she asked him; "because I am sure he will never let me go away

with you, even if you are my brother."

"I don't mean to ask him," Thad told her. "All you have to do is to walk off now with me, and we can laugh at him."

"Oh! but you don't know what a terrible man he can be!" she said, laying a little hand earnestly on his sleeve; "once I saw him furiously angry, and he frightened me very much, even if he did tell me I mustn't think he was meaning me when he said such awful things. He will follow after us, and do something wicked, I know he will."

"I hope he will follow us," said Thad, with perfect confidence; "because then he may step into a trap, and have his teeth drawn without being able to do anybody harm. But come, let us hurry off."

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She seemed to have the utmost faith in this boy who had so suddenly dawned upon her horizon with the astonishing claim that he was her own real brother; for without hesitation she was about to take his hand, when suddenly she gave utterance to a piteous little cry:

"Oh! dear, I just knew it would turn out like it always does!" she exclaimed; and Thad, seeing that she was looking past him in a sort of daze, instantly turned his own head to ascertain what had caused this new alarm.

What he saw was not reassuring. There not twenty feet away stood the man of the shack, Felix Jasper. He was holding something that glistened in his right hand; and seemed both angry and astounded to see a stranger here on his private island that was guarded by that supposed to be impassable bog.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. JASPER SURPRISED.

"Don't move, you!" the man called out, threateningly; "I've got you covered; and I'm desperate enough to shoot, if you rile me just so far. Get that?"

Thad managed to preserve his level head in spite of the seriousness of the conditions. It had always been one of his strongest points that when an emergency arose he could calmly meet it. In times past this sterling trait had placed him head and shoulders above the other scouts, and had considerable to do with making him the assistant scoutmaster of Cranford Troop.

He knew that this man was in a frame of mind to do almost anything wicked. He had always been a bad man, and now that his whole future depended on his getting safely out of the country with the plunder he had lately stolen, it was not likely he would let anything stand in his way.

Thad began to use some of the shrewdness that a scout should always aim to have at his command when placed in a position of this sort.

He saw something moving just a little way behind Jasper, and quickly realized that this

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must be the swamp guide. Alligator Smith had allowed the man to pass him by, but he was now creeping up like a panther back of him, advancing inches at a time, but with the utmost care, and meaning when the proper second came to spring upon Jasper's shoulders.

So Thad knew that it was his duty to hold the attention of the man in some way or other, until his confederate could cover the little space that still separated him from his intended victim.

Once let Tom Smith make that plunge, and the chances were he would fix matters, so that Jasper would not be left in any condition to do further damage.

Above all else Thad knew that under no consideration must he allow the man to suspect that he was only trying to hold his attention for a deep purpose. And in order to make the matter stronger Thad determined to stagger Jasper by revealing his identity. Anything at all so that he could cause him to remain just where he was, and allow the other to reach him.

"Oh! I surrender, all right, so please don't think of using your gun. It isn't at all necessary, you see!" and as he said this the boy held up his hands, both of which were free; for he had allowed his rifle to fall to the ground at the time he seized upon the extended hands of the girl, outstretched to him.

"However did you get over here: and what's that uniform mean?" demanded Jasper, who was apparently almost stunned with surprise.

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"Why, you see, I belong to the Boy Scouts," remarked Thad, off-hand; "and you must know they're always interested in boats, motorcycles, aeroplanes and all such things. And it looks like a fellow would need a flying machine to cross that sink of mud around this place."

"An aeroplane! You an air pilot?" exclaimed the man, hardly knowing whether it could be true, or that this boy might be deceiving him for a purpose. "I'd never believe it unless you showed me your machine. What were you doing holding the hands of my daughter? There's something more about this thing than you've admitted! I'm beginning to suspect that you came here with some purpose!"

Only another minute, Thad expected, would be necessary; Alligator Smith was making good progress, and must soon be in position to hurl himself upon the unsuspecting Jasper, wrestling with these staggering facts.

"Well, that's right, Mr. Jasper, I did come here for a good reason!" Thad went on to say composedly, hoping that he could manage to hold the attention of the other just a brief space of time longer.

"You know me!" gasped the man, still further amazed; "who are you, boy? I demand that you tell me, and in a hurry too, if you understand what's good for you." and he made a significant movement with the hand that gripped the pistol.

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"My name is one you've heard before, Mr. Jasper. I'm Thad Brewster!"

That was almost like a thunderclap to the rascal. It must have brought up before his mind's eye many things connected with his wretched past. When he had succeeded in digesting it better no doubt he would show signs of anger; he might even think of raising his hand to do the lad injury; because when one has bitterly wronged another he is apt to hate him in the bargain. But just then Jasper was too utterly astonished to even show rage.

"You Thad Brewster?" he cried out, his hand falling to his side from weakness, as he stared into the face of the boy who stood there, and calmly confronted him.

"Yes, and I have come to find my little sister, Pauline, the girl you stole away from my mother many years ago. There's no use in saying that you didn't, because I have plenty of proof. Why, anybody could tell from her looks alone that she was a Brewster. And of course you'll let her go back with me, Mr. Jasper. You must have long ago repented having been so cruel to my poor mother, who died, mostly from grieving after her lost baby. You can go your way, and let Pauline be with me. You will, won't you?"

Of course Thad was talking in this way for the simple reason that he must say something to hold the attention of the man, because the critical moment was close at hand. And he had really taken the strongest measures possible for riveting the mind of Jasper upon what he was saying. A dozen seconds more, and it would all be over; so the scoutmaster was determined that he would continue to grip Jasper's mind for that length of time.

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The man laughed, now, a little hoarsely.

"Of all the nerve I ever met up with, you take the premium!" he remarked, with a vein of sarcasm in his voice. "I guess you are a Brewster, all right, and a chip of the old block in the bargain. But you're off your reckoning if you think I'm going to let that little girl get away from me. Why, I'm just beginning to care for her; and in some distant country she'll make me a fine, dutiful daughter for my old age. And it'll be a sweet morsel for me to roll under my tongue, having a child of Henry Brewster to wait on me!"

"Then she is my sister; you don't try to deny that, do you?" demanded the boy, like a flash.

"Why should I, when it adds to my pleasure to see you hate to lose her?" answered the other; and then beginning to scowl savagely he went on to say while he waved his deadly weapon to and fro: "however you came over here, you're not going back again in a hurry, to betray me to my enemies. I'll just tie you up, neck and crop, and perhaps leave you here, monarch of all you survey, when Polly and myself make up our minds to skip out. Don't move a finger now, boy, or it will be the worse for you!"

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"Oh! I've got both hands held up, as you see; and as there's all of twenty feet between us, why I couldn't do anything even if I wanted to. But would money induce you to let me take my sister away with me? You always liked money, Mr. Jasper; and if you saw a chance to make twenty thousand dollars perhaps you'd change your mind, and go off without Polly. Huh! I guess you

will, anyway. Whoop! hold him tight, Tom Smith; and here's helping you if you need it!"

The swamp hunter had finally made his leap, and with such success that he landed on the back of Jasper, bearing the rascal heavily to the ground. Of course the man struggled furiously; but he was as a pigmy in the grip of the stalwart alligator-skin hunter, who not only prevented him from using the weapon he held, but forced him to drop the same, by bending back his arm until he almost broke it.

Thad jumped forward, and secured the dangerous weapon; after which felt that the case was so nearly settled that it would be safe to call the rest of the sheriff's posse up. Accordingly he let out a loud "cooee" that would mean a whole lot to the balance of the scouts; and almost immediately he heard them tearing along, fairly wild to reach the spot, and see what was happening.

And when they did come hurrying up, imagine the delight of Bumpus, Giraffe and the rest at discovering Thad standing there, holding the hand of the girl, and looking happier than they could ever remember seeing him before; while Alligator Smith was covering the prostrate form of Jasper with his angular body.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED— CONCLUSION.

The sheriff was satisfied to find that he had the much sought thief in his hands, and that the stolen property of the rich planter turned up after a search of the interior of the shack; though some of the younger elements in his posse felt a bit disappointed because they had had such a small part to play in the affair, the honors of which seemed to go to Thad and the swamp ranger.

As for the scouts, they were fairly wild with delight over the successful outcome of their trip into Dixie. Thad declared that they would make for New Orleans as soon as possible, where he expected to interview the sisters at the convent school at which Pauline had been kept for years.

Jasper, after he had recovered in a measure from his bitter disappointment, began to show a yellow streak. Perhaps he cherished a faint hope that if he tried to make amends Thad might interest himself in seeking to have his punishment lightened; as though anything the boy could do would make a difference with the stern justice of the law he had defied so long.

He admitted before them all that the girl was the Brewster baby, and that he had been guilty of stealing her, just to get even with those whom he hated because he had wronged them, and had been found out. Thad was wise enough to get him to write out a confession, and have the sheriff and several others witness the same. He believed that this would be enough to prove that Pauline was his long lost sister. But all the same

Thad did go to New Orleans with his chums later on, and made sure to get the little garments which the sisters had kept all these years, and which they affirmed had been upon the child when she was first brought to them by the man who called himself her father, and who paid well to have her taken care of.

They left the strange island in the heart of the quaking bog in the same way they had reached it. And Jasper thus learned that after all he had not been the only one who knew about that hidden ridge, by following which the treacherous bed of slime could be safely crossed.

When the scouts once more arrived at the spot where their boats had been left they concluded to spend the night in camp. Alligator Smith would not leave them; but the sheriff was eager to get back with his prisoner and the loot, so that he might claim the rich reward that had been offered for the capture of the man, and the safe return of the stolen property.

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“Our last night in old Alligator Swamp, boys,” said Allan, as the afternoon began to wear along, and found them very comfortable, with the tents erected, and a cheery fire blazing near by, “and let’s make it a memorable one by every means in our power.”

“If we’re meaning to have a real pleasant evening,” spoke up Davy Jones, with a determined look upon his face; “then I move that the first thing we do is to make Bumpus here sink his old suit in the swamp, and put on his nice clean one.”

“Second the motion; and all in favor say aye!” shouted Giraffe, excitedly.

A loud shout attested that the desire was unanimous. Even Thad nodded his head.

“We’ve sure been a patient crowd, Bumpus, as you’ll admit,” he said; “and now that you’ve gone and got that nasty mud plastered all over you, we’ve reached the end of the rope. Here, take that jacket off, and hand it to me. I’ve got an idea the truth is about to come out. Oh! no wonder some of the boys have been complaining about this. See here, Bumpus, your cold is better, isn’t it? You can begin to sniff around some again, can’t you? Well, just take a whiff of this coat, and tell me what you think!”

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Bumpus proceeded to do so, while the rest of the boys awaited the result. Sure enough, the round, jolly face of the fat scout immediately screwed itself up as if he were not favorably impressed.

“Put your hand in the inside pocket, Bumpus,” continued Thad, severely, “because I think you’ll find a little package done up in paper there, and which you’ve been wondering about this long while.”

A shout went up from the other boys when Bumpus did fetch out a small but very *powerful* packet, tied with the red cord used by druggists in their business.

“Why!” ejaculated the astounded Bumpus, staring hard at the contents of his hand; “would you believe it, that’s the very package I’ve been worrying my head off about, and never able to

say whether I gave it to my ma, or left it at the house of some fellow I visited on the way home!"

"Yes," Thad went on to say, "you put it in the pocket of your old jacket; and when you got home just rolled that up, and stowed it in your knapsack, because we were off the very next day. And when you put that suit on down here, you had such a bad cold in the head you never guessed a thing about it. Bumpus, do you know what that awful stuff is? Why, it's just asafetida, one of the rankest drugs going. Most people have to keep it out in the barn, because it's pretty nearly as bad as a skunk to have around. Perhaps your mother wanted to use it for a cold. I think that's what they buy it for; and according to my mind it would scare any respectable cold off in one inning. Now, you just take this coat, and sink it as deep as you can in the swamp; yes, get in your tent and change to your new suit. We've stood about all we can of this thing."

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Bumpus looked around at his seven chums, and grinned.

"Well, to think that I'd find that lost package after all; and had it along with me all the time, but didn't know it," he went on to say, as though this struck him as the most remarkable part of the whole affair.

"But we knew it, all the same," avowed Davy; "and after you've loaded that suit with a stone, and sunk five feet deep, perhaps we'll accept you again as a member in good standing. But you sure are the most stubborn fellow that ever lived."

"Anyway, my mind's relieved of a load," affirmed Bumpus, composedly; "because I know now what I did with that lost package."

He soon made the change, and then some of the boys went with him to see that he buried the strong smelling garments where they would never come back again; which ceremony was conducted with all manner of laughter and boyish jokes.

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True to his promise Step Hen did manage to secure that musket which the cunning Jasper had used in constructing his man-trap; and spent an hour extracting the load from the rusty barrel. He confessed himself very much disappointed, however, because, after all, it proved to contain only a single bullet instead of the handful of missiles that he had prophesied would be found packed away there. But he took the old weapon away with him, and declared he would hang it from the wall in his den at home, to remind him of other days.

In New Orleans Thad easily procured all the further evidence needed to prove that the girl whom he had found with Jasper was really his own true little sister Pauline; and when the scouts once more reached Cranford there was quite a furore in the town over the successful outcome of the boys' trip South.

Thad had even asked the sheriff about the escaped black convicts said to be hiding in Alligator Swamp, and whom he expected to round up with his posse after placing Jasper in a place of security; and when Giraffe and the rest heard that there was really a fellow who was

minus the third finger of his left hand, they gave the patrol leader great credit for reading the signs of the trail aright.

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Having accomplished the one important mission that had taken them down into Dixie, and successfully navigated the numerous perilous channels upon which their boats had embarked, it should not be necessary for us to accompany the Silver Fox Patrol any further in these pages; but we shall surely hope and expect to meet with Thad Brewster and his chums again at some time in the near future; for such wide-awake and enterprising scouts must of necessity constantly encounter new and interesting adventures which would be worth while telling. Until that time arrives, then, we will ring down the curtain, and say good-bye.

THE END.

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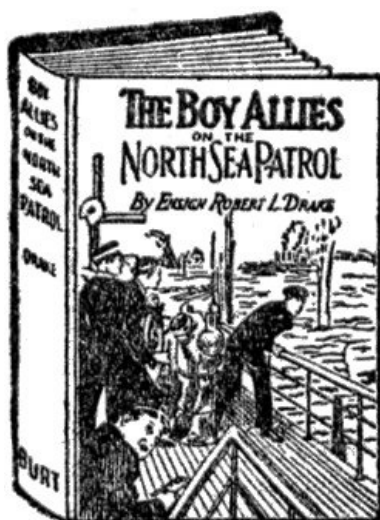
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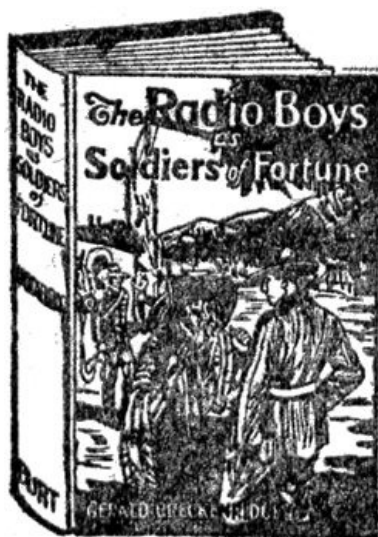
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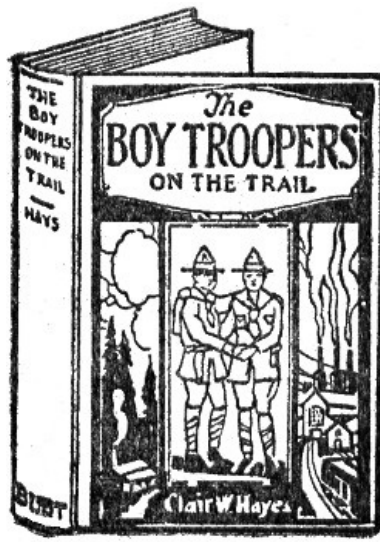
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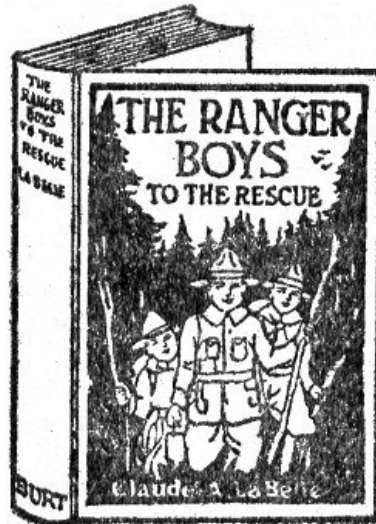
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- Added a Table of Contents.
- Fixed the caption of the frontispiece illustration:

When this book and “The Boy Scouts on Sturgeon Island” were printed, the captions of their frontispiece illustrations were swapped. This eText restores the correct caption from that other book. The illustrations themselves (and the book name portion of the caption) were printed correctly. For reference, the other book’s caption is:

“There’s the Island!” yelled Giraffe, pointing to the right. “But we’re going past it!” shrieked Bumpus. Page 136.

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