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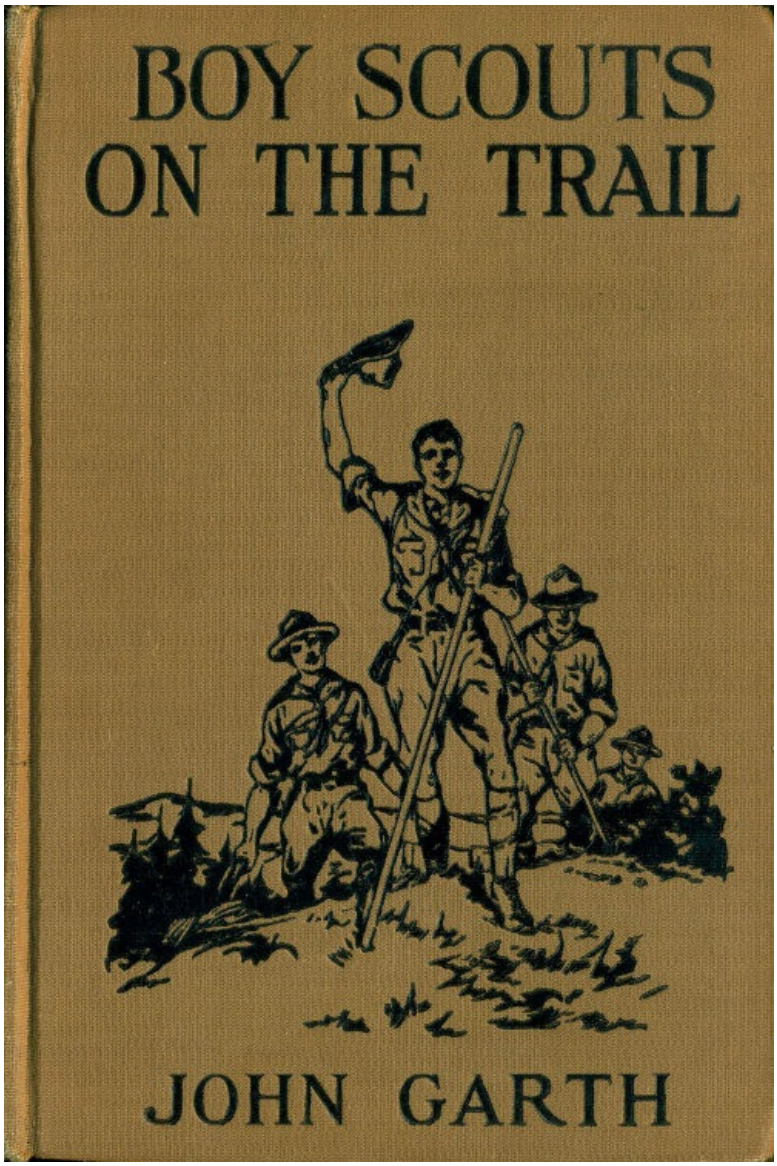

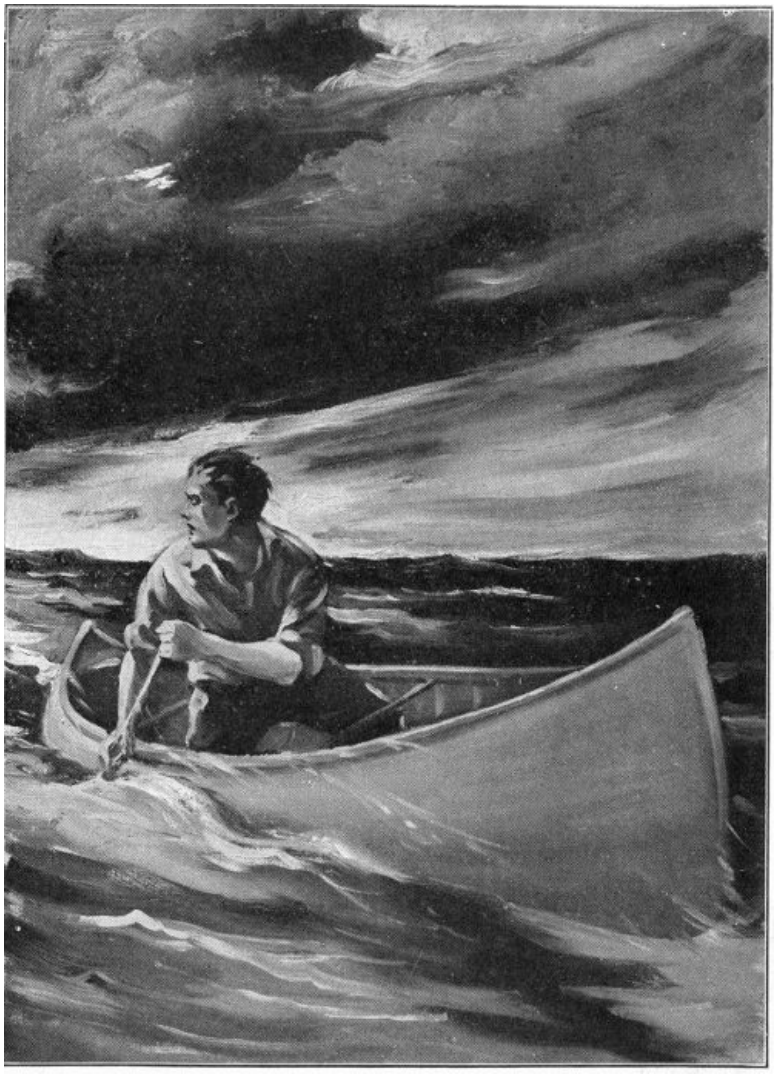

A hundred yards from shore he hazarded a backward glance, and saw the wind sweeping across the bay, a line of turbulent tossing spray.
(Page 60) Frontispiece.

BOY SCOUTS ON THE TRAIL

BY
JOHN GARTH

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BOY SCOUTS ON THE TRAIL

CHAPTER I
THE CAMP ON LONG POINT

Stout Harry Ritter gave a sudden chortle of glee and looked up from the copy of the "Long Point Snort" he was languidly perusing in the shade of some cedars behind Tent Four.

"Say, fellows, have you seen this stuff about Bull Taggart?" he demanded joyously.

"How could we when you hog the paper the minute it comes out?" inquired Ted Hinckley sarcastically. He had sent in a poem the day before and for ten minutes or so had been waiting with ill-concealed impatience to see whether it had found favor with the editors. "Well, what is it?" he went on impatiently. "Why don't you get it off your chest? What kind of bull has he been throwing now?"

"He's been chased by a shark," chuckled Ritter fatly. "Monster fifteen feet long pursued his boat for over a mile out in the Sound. Tried to upset him by bumping its nose against the keel. This is rich! Four rows of teeth sharp as razors.... Gleaming white belly—stomach would have been more refined, seems to me. Remember Dolly Wade, who called 'em blue-*stomach* crabs.

Where was I? Um-um. Oh, yes. Monstrous dorsal fin cutting the water like a knife. Gee-whiz! Bull will kill me dead one of these days. I s'pose he's training to be an author when he grows up. You can have it, Ted; I'm through."

He tossed the sheet lazily to Hinckley and lounged indolently against the trunk of the cedar.

"Does he pretend he really saw it?" asked Steve Haddon, linking brown, muscular fingers about an equally brown knee; "or is it meant to be just —er—fiction?"

"Oh, he saw it, of course," said Ritter with a giggle. "No fiction about that. Recognized it as a regular man-eater, too, by something or other about its expression, didn't he, Ted?"

"Eh?" Hinckley started guiltily and hurriedly shifted his gloating eyes from the five-line verse which, even in crude mimeograph, thrilled him with the pride of authorship. "What's that? Oh! Why, sure! It—its teeth, it was."

"Showed 'em in a glistening smile, I s'pose," chuckled Ritter. "I shouldn't think any self-respecting shark would lick his chops over Bull Taggart. Even served up on toast, he wouldn't make a good, respectable bite." 11

There was a responsive chuckle from the half-dozen fellows lounging in the shade; then Haddon glanced questioningly at the tall, striking-looking chap whose handsome head lay pillowed on Billy McBride's knee, while his well-knit body stretched out comfortably on the sand.

"There aren't any—man-eating sharks as far north as this, are there, Cavvy?" he asked.

"Of course not. I should think you'd know better than that." Jim Cavanaugh's tone was positive and a little impatient. "They're only found in the south. The sharks around here are nothing but big dogfish; I don't believe Bull even saw one of those. He's the most unmitigated— Well, Midget, what's your trouble? Don't you know any better than to come in without knocking?"

An exceedingly small boy with snapping blue eyes, a shock of sunburned hair and an amazing self-possession of manner, darted around the tent and paused in their midst, somewhat heated with his haste.

"Trouble?" he repeated, scowling. "There's plenty of trouble, let me tell you. What do you know about their cutting us out of the Sound and making us swim in the *kid's place*?"

"Wa—hat!" came in an incredulous chorus; and then: "Cut out the fancy touches, Midge. You'll be as bad as Bull Taggart if you're not careful." 12

"Fancy touches!" snorted the infant with cold scorn. "That's what you think, is it? Huh! Well, it's up on the bulletin board in black and white. 'Until further notice all swimming will be restricted to the north side of the point,' and signed J. P. Wendell as big as life. That's the kid's place, ain't it? And because why? It's that nut Taggart shooting off a lot of bull about seeing a shark in the sound. He—makes—me—sick!"

If it was his purpose to stir up the group so comfortably taking their ease in the heat of early afternoon, Midge Willett was entirely successful. With one accord six boys sat up abruptly, their faces expressing varying degrees of surprise, incredulity and indignation. And for a space the air resounded with shrill question, heated comment and fragments of argument which satisfied even the small Willett's inordinate fondness for attention.

"It's true, all right," he declared, spreading his feet apart and rocking back and forth on his heels. "The stuff's all in the *Snort*; you must have seen it."

"So we have, Shrimp," admitted Cavanaugh. "We've also seen yarns of his before. You don't mean to tell us that Mr. Wendell takes any stock in it?" 13

"That's what Marshall says. He heard 'em talking in Headquarters tent. Bull sticks to it that it's true. He says he really saw a shark and that it bumped into his boat."

"What if it did?" demanded Cavanaugh, irritably; "though I don't believe it for a minute. Why, the sharks up north here are as harmless as kittens. They'd no more tackle a man than—than one of those stupid blow-fish."

"Well, the chief don't seem to think so. Bob says he didn't know whether to believe Bull or not, but he and Mr. Cartwright talked it over and decided to cut out swimming in the Sound till they find out something for sure. And then they stuck up that notice, and now we've got to go into that rotten hole where you can't dive and it takes half an hour to wade out to any decent depth. I—I'd rather stay ashore."

A concerted groan went up in which stout Harry Ritter joined heartily. Exertion of any sort was distasteful to him, and it made little difference whether he undertook his languid splashings in the shallows, or in the wider, more varied waters of the Sound. But he liked to criticize and seldom lost an opportunity.

As for the others there was some excuse for their annoyance. The scout camp was located at the base of Long Point, which thrust its sandy nose diagonally out into the Sound. Off the southern side lay the open water, wide, deep, and full of interest and variety. Here the older fellows and proficient swimmers had always gone, while the novices were limited to the wide, shallow cove on the other side into which the tide had swept such quantities of sand that for over a hundred feet from shore it was not more than waist deep. 14

"Midge is about right," sniffed Hinckley, as the diminutive Willett departed to spread his news. "A lot of fun there'll be wallowing around over there. Bull ought to have his head punched."

"The big chump!" exclaimed Cavanaugh bitterly. "He'll get his if I have anything to say about it."

He stood up abruptly and shook off the sand. The khaki shorts and sleeveless gym shirt he wore showed off his fine figure and well-developed muscles to uncommon advantage. Even the scowl failed to detract noticeably from

his good looks, which were remarkable—the good looks of clean-cut features, clear skin, glowing red under the tan, blue eyes set wide apart, and wavy blond hair.

Haddon watched him for a moment or two in silence, his rough-hewn face oddly wistful.

“I suppose he—he might have thought it was true,” he said hesitatingly. “Whatever he saw he might have thought—” 15

“Oh, gee whiz, Steve!” interrupted Cavanaugh impatiently. “Don’t try to make excuses for the nut. He just naturally can’t tell the truth. Who’s coming for a walk? I’m tired of sitting here.”

They all arose briskly, even Ritter bestirring himself. Walking was no particular pleasure to him, but he rarely declined an invitation from Jim Cavanaugh.

“We may as well stroll around by the bulletin board and see if Midge got things straight,” remarked Hinckley as they moved away.

“Nothing to it!” declared Cavanaugh decidedly. “I haven’t seen the beastly thing, and I’m not going to know anything about it till I have to. At least we can get one more decent swim before the lid’s clamped on.”

“You mean you’d go in anyhow?” asked McBride interestedly.

“Why not? There hasn’t been any official announcement. Willett’s no town crier that we should take everything he says as gospel. If we should happen to go over on the sound side at three-thirty and went in there as usual, they couldn’t very well call us down.”

“We’re supposed to undress in the tents and wait for the whistle,” remarked Champ Ferris doubtfully. “They’ll think it’s sort of funny if—” 16

“Oh, well, if you’re looking for trouble you’ll find it,” cut in Cavvy shortly. “You don’t have to come, you know. But if we hang around here much longer some other busybody is sure to come along and tell us about the notice. I’m going to start.”

17

CHAPTER II
FORBIDDEN FRUIT

He led the way around the back of the tent, which was the last one in the row, and struck into a clump of cedars bordering the clearing. The others followed closely; Cavvy was somehow the sort others generally did follow. Steve Haddon, bringing up the rear, found himself thinking about this, and for the first time in their brief acquaintance he was a little troubled.

“I suppose he just doesn’t look at it in that way,” the big chap said to himself as they came out into the open and turned along the shore. “Maybe I’m too fussy. He’s really a corking fellow—corking!”

In this fashion he tried to excuse the other and dismiss the subject from his mind, but during the stroll which followed he was conscious of a vague discomfort that made him even more silent and repressed than usual.

From the first day at camp, little more than a week ago, he had been attracted by the handsome, accomplished fellow and in his shy, awkward manner had even “made up” to him a little. To his surprise Cavanaugh responded to a certain extent, and the two became friends as well as tent-mates. Steve could not understand what there was about himself to interest a chap so brilliant and so generally a favorite. It never occurred to him that his own sturdy, steadfast strength might have been the magnet which, consciously or unconsciously, attracted Cavvy’s more mercurial personality. He would have laughed incredulously had anyone suggested such a thing. As it was he speedily gave up trying to make head or tail of it and accepted gratefully the thing which at first had seemed incredible. There was always, to be sure, just the faintest touch of tolerance in Cavanaugh’s manner toward the big, black-browed, quiet fellow whose admiration he could not help but notice. It was the sort of attitude which said, almost as plainly as words, “Of course, I know he’s dull and heavy and not thrillingly interesting, but he’s a good hearted chap, and I like him.” 18

If Steve noticed this he gave no sign. To him Cavvy was a hero who could do no wrong. His allegiance had never wavered until this moment; and even now, troubled as he was and seeking excuses and explanations for Cavanaugh’s behavior, he could not find that his liking had in any way lessened.

Following the shore line, with the wide, glinting stretch of water spread out before them, the talk of the boys almost inevitably turned on sharks, and presently waxed so argumentative that none of them seemed to notice Haddon’s silence. Nobody knew very much about the subject, but that did not prevent them from taking side and debating hotly. Hinckley and Champ Ferris supported Cavanaugh’s argument that the species found in Northern waters was entirely harmless, and probably there were none in the neighborhood of the camp anyway. Taggart had seen something else, or made up the whole story, they declared. Ritter and McBride opposed them as a matter of principle, and upheld their side with such hair-raising anecdotes of things they had heard and read that they actually succeeded in scaring themselves, besides arousing a certain amount of nervous apprehension in the minds of the other two. Cavanaugh alone laughed them to scorn. When they returned to the forbidden bathing beach, which was hidden from the camp by a thick screen of evergreens, it was plain that he meant to carry out his purpose. 19

“Guess we won’t have time to go back to camp,” he remarked seriously, but with a twinkle in his eyes, “so we might as well peel right here. Funny there’s nobody else around.”

Hinckley chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. Haddon felt a little sting go through him. Was this the sort of thing Cavvy meant to get off 20

when they were discovered, as they surely must be? He would rather have had his friend openly break the camp rules.

“Well, I hope you’ve thought of the risk you’re taking,” said Ritter, settling himself comfortably on the sand. In spite of his airy tone there was a touch of seriousness in his voice.

“Not going to join us?” queried Cavanaugh, kicking off one sneaker. “You would make an awful tasty morsel for a shark, that’s a fact. If you’d only go in the rest of us would be quite safe. What’s the matter, Steve? You haven’t got cold feet, too, have you?”

“N—o; I just don’t feel like it, that’s all.”

Cavvy paused, one stocking half off, and stared intently at the boy’s serious face. Suddenly his color deepened and his lips curled a little at the corners.

“Oh!” he murmured. “I see.” And then he laughed unpleasantly. “I forgot we had with us the only really perfect Scout in captivity. I’m surprised you could bring yourself to associate with such a bunch of hardened sinners—or did you hope by your virtuous example to win us back to the straight and narrow path?”

Steve shrank back as if he had been struck. His face turned white and then a dull crimson. 21

“I don’t—” he stammered. “I didn’t say—”

“Of course not,” sneered Cavanaugh. “You didn’t have to say anything. You’re so goody-goody it sticks out all over you.” He yanked off his stockings petulantly and dropped the rest of his clothes in a heap on the sand. “Better stick around awhile till you’ve made sure we’ve broken the rules and then you can hustle back to camp and report us.”

“Cavvy!” cried Haddon sharply. “You’ve no right — You know I wouldn’t—”

He broke off suddenly, biting his lip. Without replying, Cavanaugh had turned his back and was trotting out on the narrow spring board. For a moment the shapely white body stood poised against the deep blue sky. Then it flashed out and downward, cleaving the water in a perfect dive.

Steve watched him with blurred eyes and a dull hurt in his heart. The onslaught had been so brutal and so unexpected that it dazed him. He did not realize that Cavanaugh’s own mental discomfort might have had much to do with the flare-up. Conscious that he wasn’t doing the right thing, but too stubborn to draw back, it was not unnatural to vent his irritation on the fellow who seemed to be showing more strength of character than himself.

Haddon did not think of this. In that moment it seemed to him as if the friendship which had meant so much to him had toppled into ruins like a fallen house of cards. Rather, it had never existed save in his own mind. If Cavvy really cared for him, even in his careless, tolerant fashion, he could never have deliberately hurt him so without a shadow of reason or excuse. Surely Steve had not shown himself the prig 22

Cavanaugh made out. He had not said a word against the others going in. He had even been conscious of an awkward sense of embarrassment at not joining them himself.

Suddenly, out of the turmoil of hurt and longing and regret, came the desire to win back at any cost what he had lost. If he went in with the rest wouldn't Cavvy realize that he had been too hasty, and perhaps make amends? It wasn't too late. McBride and Hinckley, who had stripped more leisurely, were even now moving slowly toward the spring-board. If he hurried—

Instinctively the boy bent down and untied his shoe laces with a jerk. Then he straightened slowly, face flushed and jaw squaring. He couldn't do it. Something within him made the thing impossible—the action of a coward and a weakling. What sort of a Scout would he be to deliberately fling overboard his principles and do a thing he felt to be wrong for the sake of winning another's approval? And what was that approval worth which could be won in such a fashion?

Downcast, motionless, the boy stood fighting out his brief mental battle. He was unaware of the curious glances and low-voiced comment of Ferris and Ritter, sitting together a little to one side. For a space he did not even notice the three fellows in the water save to be conscious of their splashings and sputterings and occasional peals of laughter—laughter which grated somehow, and made him feel like one apart. Then Cavanaugh's voice, still sharp and a little pettish, brought his head up and his troubled gaze sought out the fellow who had been his friend. 23

"I'm sick of this fooling," he heard Cavvy say. "I'm going for one last decent swim."

"Better not go out too far," advised Hinckley joshingly. "Remember the shark."

Cavanaugh disdained reply. Already he was heading out from the shore, cleaving the water with a swift, overhand stroke. Steve watched him wistfully, and presently a faint touch of uneasiness began to grip him. Spectacular as he was at diving and other water "stunts," Cavvy had never showed up very well when it came to long distances. He explained this once to Haddon by saying that several times he had been attacked by cramps and had learned to be careful. Suppose a cramp should seize him now with scarcely anyone around to help, thought Steve, and instantly his uneasiness changed to acute worry. In troubled silence he watched the fellow draw further away from shore until at length he could not restrain himself. 24

"Why doesn't he turn back?" he exclaimed aloud. "He's crazy to go out so far."

"He's got more nerve than I'd have," commented Ritter. "Suppose that shark should show up now? Where would he be then, I'd like to know."

"I wasn't thinking of that," returned Haddon, who had been inclined to agree with Cavvy's side of the shark argument. "But he's liable to cramp, and if he should be—"

He broke off with a sharp intake of his breath. 25

Out in the Sound Cavanaugh had turned suddenly about and was making for shore with a wild splashing haste which told instantly of something wrong. For a second Steve stood rooted to the spot. Then he ran toward the spring-board, pulling off his shirt and jerking at the buckle of his belt. As he paused a moment to kick off his shoes and slide out of the scanty shorts, a shrill, inarticulate cry of horror from Ritter urged him on. It was the cramp, then, just as he had feared. But Cavvy was still keeping up. He was even making progress shoreward in spite of that frantic splashing which wasted so much strength. If he only kept his head—

"*The shark!*" screamed Ferris suddenly behind him. "*The shark!*"

CHAPTER III
THE SHARK

Steve's feet were on the plank before the meaning of the words stung into his consciousness. As he ran, his startled gaze swept over the glinting water and for an instant his blood froze. Beyond the struggling Cavanaugh, but much nearer to him than the latter was to shore, something thrust up above the water—something thin, triangular, erect, dull gray in color, that cut through the little waves with swift, smooth, gliding ease.

To Haddon it seemed as if the plank slid backward under his feet. His dive was purely instinctive but it was a fine one, wide and shallow, that carried him well out. As he shot to the surface he almost collided with Ted Hinckley, but he was quite unconscious of the other's nearness. Out of that numbed daze of horror and dismay but one thought, one motive, rose to dominate him. He must reach Cavanaugh before the shark.

What he could do then he did not know. But as he tore through the water with that powerful overhand stroke which had won him many a race, his sturdy self-control began slowly to return. Little by little scraps of things came back to him, things he had read and heard, some of them part of that very discussion on the beach so short a time ago. Noise! That was the thing. Sharks were afraid of noises. If he could only reach Cavvy in time there might be a chance—

His hands struck the water with an even, rythmical slap-slap. Though he had not slackened his stroke, it seemed as if he were merely crawling. The temptation to increase his speed was almost irresistible, but he conquered it by deliberate effort. Already he was breathing hard, and he knew that unless he kept back some of his strength he would be helpless at the crucial moment.

At almost every third stroke his dripping face flashed up out of the water and his desperate gaze searched the wide expanse for a sight of that ominous fin. Twice he found it; once circling off to the left of where Cavanaugh was swimming, whereat he was thrilled with hope

that the creature had abandoned the pursuit. But the next time it was cutting through the ripples straight toward Cavvy, and the sight made Haddon throw caution to the winds.

With every remaining ounce of strength he lunged forward. His muscles ached, his lungs were bursting. But still he managed to send his weary body sizzling through the water at a racing speed. Then Cavanaugh's face flashed up before him, strained, white, panic-stricken, and he slowed down. 28

"Keep on, old man," he gasped. "Go straight ahead. I'll stay—"

He did not finish. Already Cavvy had passed him and was laboring shoreward. Steve gulped in the precious air, took a few long strokes forward and stopped with a sudden gasp. The fin had disappeared!

The moments that followed were like nothing that he had ever known. Cold horror gripped him by the throat and choked him—that horror of the unknown which is so potent and so paralyzing. The shark had dived and was swimming under water. At any moment he might feel—

For an instant he came close to screaming wildly, to beating the water with that mad frenzy which comes to drowning men. But just in time his teeth dug cruelly into his under lip and he jerked himself back into a semblance of sanity. And then he began to shout and beat the water, but with a set purpose. Noise was what the creature dreaded. He could not hope to outswim the monster, but in this fashion he might hold it off till Cavanaugh was safe, and perhaps himself.

Ceasing his clamor he swam shoreward a dozen strokes and then paused again to splash and shout. Again and again he did this, and each time it was harder to make that deliberate pause. He was possessed by a panicky desire to speed ahead, trusting to his swiftness. Once he did let himself go and swam perhaps a score of strokes without stopping. When he finally forced himself to halt and glanced back over one shoulder, he seemed to glimpse under the water not a dozen yards away, a great gray-blue shape that struck terror to his soul. He splashed frantically and shouted hoarsely, and the thing slid away from his vision. But he knew it was there, lurking, waiting for a chance, and the remnants of his courage began to drain. Six strokes was all he dared to take now, and even those were halting and full of dread. 29

He had lost all track by this time of Cavvy; he did not even know how near or far he was himself from shore. Presently he saw the creature again, nearer this time. As he strove to shout his voice seemed a mere croak; there was scarcely strength in his numbed arms to lash the water.... A sudden splash near him brought a strangled sob to his lips; the touch of something against his body made him cringe.

"All right, Steve," said a voice in his ear. "Just let yourself go."

With a long-drawn, sobbing sigh, the boy's weary muscles relaxed and his eyes closed. He was vaguely conscious of being propelled swiftly 30

through the water, of the clamor of shrill voices, of a constant, irregular splashing all around him. Presently his dragging feet touched bottom and he made an instinctive effort to stand erect. But now there was a muscular arm about him which not only held him up but urged him forward. Finally he felt himself lowered gently to the sand and a moment later he opened his eyes.

Stripped to the waist and dripping wet, Mr. Wendell was bending over him. As he met Steve's glance, his lips curved in a curious smile that somehow thrilled the boy. There was pride in it, tribute, appreciation, but when the man spoke his voice was low and matter-of-fact.

"Better lie still for a minute or so," he said quietly. "You're about all in."

Steve nodded and his glance wandered over the beach. It was thronged with boys, all talking excitedly and many of them still hurling missiles at the water. A sudden thought struck him.

"Did Cavvy—" he began, raising his eyes. And then he stopped.

The scoutmaster had moved aside; it was Cavanaugh who stood beside him holding some garments in his hands. His face was drawn and haggard, and in his eyes was a look which neither Haddon nor anyone else had ever seen there.

"Steve!" he said at length, in a low, uneven voice. "I—I—" He paused, his lips trembling. Then his jaw squared. "I'm a beast, Steve, a perfect beast!" he went on rapidly. "I've been a beast from—from the very first. You're— When I think of what a chum you might have been, and I was fool enough— You'll never want to—to have anything to do with me again, but I had to tell you—" 31

"Don't!" Haddon sat up abruptly. His physical weariness had suddenly left him. All the regret and longing and mental soreness of the afternoon had vanished. "Why can't we—we just forget all that and—"

He paused. A sudden flash like sunlight swept into Cavvy's face, wiping away the haggard lines. His eyes met Haddon's longingly, incredulously.

"You don't mean you'd ever—"

Steve laughed happily.

"Why not?" he asked.

Cavanaugh made no answer in words, but impulsively his hand went out and caught Steve's. To the onlooker it seemed as if he were merely helping the other fellow to his feet, but Haddon knew there was a good deal more than that in the action. Cavvy's grip, and the look in his eyes were both more eloquent than speech. Then Mr. Wendell appeared beside them, his face puzzled and a little stern.

"Feeling all right again?" he asked Haddon. "That's fine. Well, I guess we'd better get back to camp; there seems to be nothing more doing here." He turned abruptly to Cavanaugh. "Perhaps you can explain this business," he said rather curtly. "I can't seem to make head or tail 32

out of what Hinckley and McBride have to say. How did you come to go in over here when there's a notice up forbidding it for the present?"

33

CHAPTER IV
THE MAN IN THE DORY

Cavvy hesitated for an instant, a slow flush creeping up into his face. Then his eyes met Haddon's and his lips tightened.

"It was my fault, sir," he said quickly. "The other fellows aren't to blame; they'd never have gone in but for me. You see, I didn't believe Bu—er—Taggart really saw a shark at all, and I wanted to get one more decent swim before I saw the notice."

The scoutmaster's face cleared. "Oh, then you didn't see the notice," he said, turning toward the camp. "That makes a difference, though I still don't understand—"

"I didn't *see* it," interrupted Cavvy, "but one of the fellows told us about it. I hadn't any excuse at all. I was just sore and—"

The words died away as the two moved off together, leaving Steve to hurry through his dressing alone. He got into his clothes swiftly, a little anxious to know what penalty was being meted out to Cavvy, but in his heart there was nothing but gladness at the realization that he hadn't been mistaken in his friend after all.

He was given little time to think of this or to speculate on the possibilities that Cavvy's changed attitude opened up before him. He had not even got his shoes on before he was surrounded by a throng of boys, all jabbering excitedly and full of eager inquiries as to how near the shark had come, what it looked like, how he felt, and a thousand other questions.

34

Haddon answered them all good naturedly, turning aside with a shrug and a laugh the words of praise and admiration which followed. As soon as he was dressed he headed for the camp, to find Cavanaugh standing in front of their tent.

"Well?" he questioned eagerly as he came up. "How about it? What did he give you?"

Cavvy grinned.

"Not as much as I expected," he said. "He was pretty decent, considering. I've got to stick around the camp limits for a week, that's all. He didn't even cut out my swimming. Guess he thought going into the cove wouldn't be any too much of a treat."

He laughed; then his face grew suddenly serious. "I never even thanked you, old man," he said in a low tone, "or said a word about the corking way you—you went in after me, and—"

"Don't do it," interrupted Haddon, smiling a little. "You'd have done the same for me, and

35

more. Let's cross it off the books and not think about it again. There's one thing I'd like awfully to know," he want on quickly. "Was it really a man-eater, or just a big dog fish? How close did he get to you, anyhow? How much of him did you see?"

"How close?" repeated Cavvy slowly. "I don't know exactly. It must have come within twenty-five feet, though. It was a sort of blue-gray—different from a dog fish. And big! Man!" His eyes widened and he shuddered a little. "Of course I was scared," he confessed, "and maybe the reflection on the water sort of magnified it, but—"

"I don't know about that," put in Haddon as he paused. "It looked like a whale of a thing to me. Say, Harry," he called, to Ritter who was loitering nearby, "how much did you and Champ see of the brute?"

But it appeared that they had only seen the fin, and no one else had glimpsed of the creature. Next morning, however, the matter was settled beyond a doubt, and very satisfactorily. About an hour after breakfast Shrimp Willett came tearing into camp with the news that some fishermen whose nets were out about a mile from shore were having trouble.

"They're having the dickens of a scrap with something in the nets, fellows," he panted. "They've got three boats out there and the men are stabbing and hitting with boat hooks and things, and the water's shooting up all around in regular geysers. I'll bet it's the shark."

He turned and rushed away again, and with a chorus of excited yells every boy within earshot streamed after him up the beach. The scoutmaster was away in the motor boat for supplies, but Bruce Cartwright, hearing the commotion, snatched up a pair of field glasses and followed the crowd.

The nets were set off shore about half a mile above the scout camp, and it was plain that something unusual was happening there. By the time the boys had reached the rough little dock opposite there were no "geysers" spouting, or other signs of strenuous activity. But the three fishing boats were clustered in a bunch, their occupants bending over the sides busy attaching tackle to something in the water which was invisible even through the glass. Presently the engines started, the boats separated, and headed for the dock.

The foremost chugged slowly and behind it streaked the distinct wake of a heavy tow. On tiptoe with excitement the boys watched eagerly as it drew nearer and nearer. When at length a great blue-gray shape could be made out, they set up a shout and poured a volley of shrill questions at the man in the stern.

"It's a shark, all right," answered that individual shortly. "I ain't seen one of 'em around these parts for years. He got caught in the net and pretty near tore it to bits, drat him!"

He spoke with considerable heat and the other two men were scowling. But to the scouts mere damage to nets was as nothing compared with the thrill of seeing the great creature close at

hand. They hovered around as close as Mr. Cartwright would let them, and when the shark was finally hoisted to the dock they were allowed to examine it to their hearts' content, take measurements, make photographs or do anything else they chose.

The length of the creature from snout to tip of tail was a little over fifteen feet, and the mouth, though small and undershot, was powerful with its double row of razor-like teeth. Even lying there still and motionless, the body covered with a score of wounds from boat hooks and an old sword fish spear one of the men had fortunately had aboard, it was an evil looking specimen. As Steve Haddon thought of their experience of the day before he could hardly suppress a shudder.

"No, they ain't native to these parts, praise be!" said the fisherman to whom Cartwright was talking. "If they was we'd about have to go out of business. They breed in the south, but once in a while one strays up this way. I dunno why. Hungry, mebbe; or it might be jest accident. Well, fellers, what say we get them nets in an' start repairin' damages? We got a good two days' work ahead of us, hang the brute!" 38

Naturally the capture of the shark affected the swimming situation at camp. Mr. Wendell did not at once remove his restrictions, but when a day or so passed with no signs of any more about, he relaxed the new rules a little. The scouts were allowed to go in at the old place provided they did not venture out too far. Two guards were also appointed who rowed back and forth about a hundred yards from shore, keeping a constant lookout for danger.

Cavanaugh enjoyed these swimming periods extremely, for though he made no complaint, he found restriction to the camp limits very dull. He had quite recovered his spirits and also a good deal of that old good natured, easy air of leadership. With Haddon, however, there was a marked difference. He still joked and chaffed the big, slow-speaking chap, but the chaff was all good-natured now, with a subtle touch of affection in it. Instead of Steve's making advances, it was Cavvy who sought the other out, who moved his seat at table, who found a place beside his friend in the wide circle around the evening camp-fire.

There was nothing forced or obtrusive in his actions. He simply sought Haddon's companionship in the direct, matter-of-fact manner he went after anything he wanted, and yet he was not selfish in his seeking. That, perhaps, was the most marked feature of the moral change which was taking place within him. In the old days if he liked a fellow he was apt to monopolize him regardless of the other's feelings in the matter. Now, though Steve would have been perfectly content to spend all his time within the camp limits with Cavvy, the latter refused to allow it. 39

"No reason why you should stay cooped up here just because I have to," he said one afternoon in his quick, decisive manner. "You've spent three days hanging around doing nothing; it's time you had a change. If you hustle you can get off with that bunch fishing."

"But I don't give a hang about fishing,"

protested Haddon.

Cavvy grinned. “Well, get a canoe, then, and find someone to take a little exploring expedition with you,” he suggested. “I’m going to write letters and don’t want to be bothered.”

Steve laughed, shrugged his shoulders and walked away. He saw through his friend perfectly, for Cavanaugh never wrote letters if he could help it. But after all perhaps it would be better for them to separate for the afternoon. One can have too much of almost everything, and Haddon had no wish to endanger the association which meant so much to him. 40

He secured his canoe—it was the last one to be had; but when it came to finding a companion, all the fellows he particularly liked had departed on other expeditions, so he decided to go alone. He was an expert paddler and enjoyed it thoroughly. He also liked poking about in new places, and when he rounded the point and pushed out into the Sound, he turned unhesitatingly westward.

Long Point thrust out its blunt nose from a stretch of rather wild, deserted beach on the south shore of the Cape. Amongst the sand dunes to the eastward were a few fishermen’s huts. Several miles in the other direction lay the village of Shelbourne, and beyond it, along both sides of a wide estuary, sprawled the raw, staring buildings, the many dry docks and numberless other appurtenances of the big, new Government ship building plant. But between the village and the camp the shoreline cut abruptly inland for upwards of a mile, forming a wide, deep harbor which did much toward isolating the camp site from the rest of the world.

Across the mouth of this harbor and reaching well out into the Sound itself, there lay a multitude of small islands, some mere jutting rocks to which a few scraggly pines clung tenaciously, others larger and thickly wooded. All of them were steep and rocky, and between them the tide rushed ceaselessly in queer, erratic, frequently dangerous currents. It was a fine place for fish of many sorts, but little more could be said for it, though on one or two of the larger islands duck shooters had put up rough huts which they used in the late fall and early spring when the season was on. 41

Steve had never happened to visit these islands. He had, in fact, seen no more of them than was visible from Shelbourne the day they made an inspection of the shipyard over a week ago. And as he headed the canoe toward the nearest one, he looked forward with increasing eagerness to an afternoon of exploration. They looked interesting, and as he drew nearer he got attractive glimpses of little coves and miniature harbors, of wooded points, rocky slopes masked with green, of turbulent, rushing channels, and a dozen other features which thrilled him, and made him regret his wasted opportunities.

The reality quite equalled his expectations. He went from islet to islet, clambering about the rocks, pushing through trees and undergrowth, poking into everything to his heart’s content. There was a touch of the wilderness in it which appealed to his imagination. It seemed, indeed, a 42

perfect paradise to the furred and feathered wild things many of whom were heedless or oblivious to his presence, and their presence added greatly to his enjoyment.

It was already fairly late when he first saw the great blue heron. It was later still when, having followed the bird across the small island to the edge of another—one of the largest of the group he crouched amongst some bushes amusedly watching the solemn, awkward, long-legged creature stalking sedately away from him along a narrow strip of beach.

Suddenly with a great whir and flapping of wings, the heron arose and sailed out of sight. At the same instant Steve was conscious of the popping of a motor's exhaust coming rapidly nearer, and turned curiously to see what it might be.

Swiftly the boat came into sight, a dingy, unpainted dory propelled by an auxiliary of unusual power. In the stern sat a single figure, bare headed and clad in rough fishing clothes. Almost unconsciously, Steve had not emerged from the bushes, and as the dory passed his hiding place scarcely a dozen feet from him, he had for an instant a clear, unrestricted view of the man's face.

He gave a start and frowned; raised himself partway and then dropped back on his haunches. The boat swept on and disappeared around a jutting point, the sound of the motor grew rapidly fainter—ceased. Still the boy crouched amongst the bushes, staring blankly at the spot where the craft had left his vision.

When he stood up a little later and moved slowly toward his canoe, there was a puzzled, troubled expression in his face. And in his narrowed eyes was the look of one groping blindly through his memory for something which he cannot find.

CHAPTER V
PERPLEXED

A shout of laughter went up from the group of fellows gathered in the cook shack. There was a regular cook attached to the camp, but every other evening supper was prepared by the boys themselves as a means of perfecting themselves in the culinary art. Usually these occasions were marked by an earnest seriousness, for there was great rivalry between the various tents; but to-night a spirit of levity undoubtedly prevailed.

"But why shouldn't he have been in the dory, you old lobster?" asked Billy McBride, from where he bent over the frying pan.

Steve Haddon shrugged his bulky shoulders and ran his fingers through an already much towsled mop of brown hair. "Well," he said hesitatingly, "because he wasn't—he wasn't—"

"Wasn't what?" demanded three or four voices, as the big fellow paused.

"Well, he wasn't the sort of person who'd be in—

in that sort of a boat."

Another shout of laughter rang out. Jim Cavanaugh, still chuckling, thumped Haddon on the back. 45

"You're certainly lucid, Steve," he exclaimed. "Just what do you mean by that? What sort of a person was he, anyhow? One of those swell city guys who came down to fish, all dolled up in dinky knickerbockers and that sort of thing?"

Steve was grinning good naturedly, but the color had deepened faintly under his tan; he shook his head slowly. "He wasn't dolled up at all," he told them. "He had on—well, just ordinary old things; I didn't notice his clothes much. He might have had a rod, though he wasn't fishing when I saw him."

"What was he doing, then?" asked Ted Hinckley rather sharply. "He must have been doing something out of the way to set you against him like this."

Again Haddon shook his head. The smile had faded and his lips straightened into a firm line. "He wasn't doing anything except just running the dory past that big island—Loon Island, I think they call it," he returned. "You wouldn't understand, Ted. It—it was his face—"

Hinckley laughed again, but not so uproariously this time. During their ten days at camp together, he as well as most of the others, had discovered that while they could usually josh "good old Steve" to the limit, a curious, stubborn tightening of jaw and chin was a sign that this limit had been reached. And because, for all their banter, they liked him so well, they were generally quick to notice and respect that sign as Hinckley did now. His laughter trailed off into a comfortable chuckle and he turned to assist the cook. Cavanaugh flung one arm across Haddon's shoulder. 46

"So you didn't like his face, eh?" he smiled. "It must have been *some* face to work you up like this, old man. What the dickens takes you so long with those eggs, Micky? I'm starved."

"They were mislaid, that's the trouble," returned McBride without batting an eyelash.

A groan went up and one or two made as if to lay violent hands upon the cook. But the responsibility of his position saved him, and ten minutes later the meal had been served up and was being consumed with an appetite and dispatch characteristic in a crowd of healthy, active boys whose afternoon has been spent more or less strenuously in the open. And as they ate they kept up a running fire of josh and fun and banter which flowed from most of them with the ease and fluency of second nature.

One of the exceptions was Steve Haddon. He did not often joke, and when he assayed a pun it had much the effect of an elephant trying to dance. It wasn't that he lacked a sense of humor. He thoroughly enjoyed the badinage which went on about him, even when he himself, as was often the case, became the butt for another's humor. But he had never acquired the trick of answering back in kind, and appeared always more or less deliberate in thought and speech. 47

To-night, both at supper and later when they had gathered around the camp fire, he was even quieter than usual, for he was thinking about the man he had seen that afternoon in the dory. He realized that, with characteristic clumsiness of expression, he had given the fellows an idea that something about the man's face had prejudiced him. As a matter of fact it wasn't so at all, though he made no effort to correct himself. He had had but a single good look at the stranger, but that look was enough to rouse in the boy a strong conviction that he had seen the man before—seen him, too, under conditions and surroundings so totally different that the stranger's mere presence on this out of the way stretch of New England coast seemed at once incongruous and puzzling.

What those conditions had been he could not, unfortunately, remember. Though he had tried his best all the way back to camp to drag out of his brain some further details of that former meeting, Steve had failed utterly. That there had been one he was quite certain. But how or where or when it had taken place remained a mystery. He felt, however, that it must have been of the most casual sort, and also that it could scarcely have taken place very recently, else surely he would have remembered. 48

"Very likely it was at home in Washington some time," he thought, after they had settled down lazily around the fire. "Though it might have been when I visited Uncle Joe in New York last fall. Oh, hang it all. I'm not going to bother my head about it any more."

But this was a resolution more easily made than kept. For a short space Steve did succeed in detaching his thoughts from the annoying puzzle. Lying there on the sand with Cavvy's head pillowed on his stomach, he grinned in silent appreciation of Micky's airy monologue, and presently began to hum under his breath the air Champ Ferris was laboriously coaxing from a much harassed guitar. Then, unconsciously, his glance swept past the lounging figures of his friends and out across the wide stretches of shadowy water vaguely luminous under the stars. Back of those shadows Loon Island lay, with all the other rocky little islets that crowded the entrance to Shelbourne harbor. And, perhaps, on Loon Island—

Suddenly Steve awoke to a realization of where his thoughts had carried him, and moved abruptly with an impatient squirm.

"Easy, boy, easy," murmured Cavvy drowsily. 49

Grinning shame-facedly, Steve reached down and ruffled the other's hair. A perfunctory scrimmage followed. But Cavanaugh was too drowsy to carry this far. And very shortly Mr. Wendell's orders sent the crowd staggering sleepily tentwards.

A little later, crawling into his blankets, Steve reached a sudden, abrupt decision. Since he could not seem to rid his mind of the problem which had been raised there, why not make an effort to solve it? Very likely the answer would be a simple one not worth his trouble, but at least it would be an answer. Suppose he got another look at the perplexing stranger? If he saw him again that stubborn memory might

awake.

“I’ll take a trip to Loon Island to-morrow,” he said to himself. Then he turned over and went to sleep.

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CHAPTER VI
LOON ISLAND

Steve said nothing to anyone next day of his determination. He knew he would be laughed at, for he felt himself that it was a rather foolish proceeding, and it would be difficult or impossible for him to explain in words the curious intensity of his interest in the matter. So he did not even take Cavanaugh into his confidence, merely explaining that he was going for another little trip in the canoe. Cavvy’s approval was prompt, but there was just a touch of disappointment in his manner which made Steve a little troubled.

Was he making a fool of himself or not, he wondered, as he slid out into the Sound from behind the point. A portion of Loon Island was visible now and he glanced speculatively in that direction. For all he knew the stranger whose face had so puzzled him might not be in the neighborhood again for days or weeks. His presence yesterday could easily have been the result of a chance excursion never to be repeated. Nevertheless, once started, he had no thought of giving up the trip, for he was not the sort to turn aside readily from something he had once set his mind upon. So he dismissed his doubts and sent the canoe forward resolutely.

51

The surface of the Sound was smooth—almost too smooth, in fact. There was an oily look to the long, easy swells which rolled the canoe ever so slightly as it cut across them. Once or twice Steve glanced back and frowned a little at the smoky, golden haze hugging the eastern horizon. But he paddled steadily, keeping fairly close to shore; and when he came opposite the group of islands and headed his craft across the half-mile stretch which separated the nearest one from the mainland, the storm signals had not increased.

“I guess it’s going to hold off for a while,” he decided. “Anyhow, at the worst I’d be stuck on the island over night—which wouldn’t kill me.”

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Presently he came abreast of the first little islet and passed it, passed the next one, and then turned into a narrow, rock-bordered channel along the north side of Loon Island. The tide ran swiftly here, but it carried him with it and without much effort he managed to circle the lower end of the island and reach the point where he had landed the day before. Here he stepped ashore, and pulling up the canoe, hid it in a thicket of juniper. It was still fairly early—an hour and a half earlier, in fact, than when Steve had glimpsed the man in the dory yesterday afternoon. But he had planned for this deliberately. He wanted to take a look over the island before returning to the point to watch for the stranger.

Back of the point the rocks rose steeply, with stunted pines, scrub oak and a tangle of scraggly bushes growing from every conceivable crevice and earth-pocket. It was far from easy going, but Steve pushed his way through the undergrowth with only an occasional pause, keeping as close to the shore as possible.

Presently he came upon a gully, slid into it, climbed the other side and finally, pushing through a grove of wind-tossed trees, stepped out into a narrow, open space. Then he paused abruptly.

On either hand steep, smooth masses of rock jutted up, shutting in the place completely. Less than a score of yards apart, they shelved down into the water, forming a tiny, sheltered cove toward which the ground sloped gently. It was a snug spot, shielded from storms, and also from observation, and a rough shack of weathered boards seemed a natural part of the gray, rock-strewn landscape. But Steve had not been expecting to find a hut here, and his first thought as he stared at it, motionless and a little tense, was to connect it, somehow with the man he was seeking.

For several minutes he stood there alert, his glance fixed curiously and intently on the cabin. It was one of the duck shooters' huts, no doubt, of which the boys had told him. It must have stood there for some time, too, judging from the dingy, weathered look of the planking. But it seemed odd, with the duck season so far away, that the shutter of the single small window at the rear should be swinging open. Surely any one leaving it for a year or more would have made things more secure against intrusion. 53

Steve waited a little longer, turning over various possibilities in his mind, and then moved slowly forward. The stillness of the place, coupled with a certain instinct hard to define, made him feel that the shack was at the moment unoccupied. When he reached the window and looked in, he found that instinct had served him well. The place was empty, and after a brief survey, he moved around to the front and opened the door, which was merely on the latch. Instantly his eyes fell upon a raw, splintered spot where a lock had been and he bent to examine it closely.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I thought so. Somebody's broken in."

Thoughtfully he straightened up and looked around. There was little doubt in his mind as to who had made the forcible entry, but the object of it was as great a puzzle as the identity of the mysterious stranger. And presently he discovered that there was more than one in the marauding party. 54

In each of the four rough bunks at one end of the cabin were blankets. Also, scattered over the rude plank table in the middle of the room, were four tin plates and as many cups, all of which had been lately used.

"This is no place for me," decided Steve as he took in these details. "If they should come back and find me here, I—"

The words clipped off and he whirled about with widening eyes as the muffled beat of an engine's

exhaust smote suddenly on his ears.

“Jimminy!” he gasped, and leaped for the door.

He was half way through it when he saw the bow of a dory sliding into view past the rocks at the end of the cove. Jumping back like a flash, he jerked the door shut and latched it noiselessly. For an instant he hesitated, heart pounding in his throat. Then he moved swiftly to the window, pulled himself up, squeezed through and plunged into the fringe of undergrowth about a dozen feet away.

But as he gained the shelter he realized that the popping of the engine had ceased and he heard the sound of voices. He dared not pause here, but sped on over the rough ground. It was not the same way he had come, but he cared nothing for that. The closeness of his escape had shaken him considerably, and he was trembling. It was not until he had pushed through the woods for a hundred feet or more that he began to slow down and recover himself.

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“What a nut I am!” he muttered, wiping his forehead with the back of one hand. “They’ll never come here.”

And then, being what he was, he grew angry at himself for that panicky flight. If he had stayed at the edge of the woods he might have had a good look at the stranger without any special risk. He might even have gained some hint as to what the party was doing here. He had just about decided to turn and retrace his steps, when he stumbled and almost fell, saving himself only by a quick snatch at an overhanging branch. Then, looking down to discover what had tripped him, he saw the tins!

At first glance, indeed, they did not look like tins, but more like square, rectangular boxes covered with canvas. It was only by pressing one with his fingers that he felt the distinctive give of thin metal. There were a dozen or more in all, piled neatly in a cavity among the rocks and covered over with leaves and dead branches.

Filled with curiosity, Steve punched and prodded the top one inquiringly and ran his fingers exploringly over its surface. He was on the point of lifting it to test the weight, when the sound of voices behind him brought him upright with a gasp.

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CHAPTER VII
THE LIGHTNING FLASH

For the barest second Haddon stood listening. Then he bent down again and made a frantic, scrambling effort to cover the tins. But as the voices came steadily nearer and the scuffling of feet began to sound in the dead leaves, he abandoned the attempt and darting a few steps to one side flung himself down behind a thick, low-growing mass of laurel. In a space so brief that he felt they must have heard him, the bushes were thrust aside and the footsteps ceased.

"—a rabbit, I guess, or maybe a bird," said a voice. "It don't matter, anyway. Here's the stuff, half uncovered, too. Hang that Peters! I told him to— Here, catch hold, will you? We haven't much time."

"Want it in the boat?"

"Sure! The chief is going to leave in about an hour. We'll land at Cobb's Point and wait there till dark. Here's a couple for you, Jansen. We'll take the rest in another trip."

Flat on the ground behind the laurel clump, Steve listened intently to their departing footsteps. Not daring to stir, he had failed to get even a glimpse of the three men, but he missed no word of their brief conversation which left him in a state of bewildered doubt and speculation. He could make nothing out of it at all. What was in those tins? and why were they being taken secretly to Cobb's Point, that lonely strip of sand dunes the other side of Shelbourne? 58

As he lay there waiting, a good many possibilities flashed through the boy's mind. He could not rid himself of the feeling that the men were up to nothing good. Yet on the other hand he realized that even the broken door and the hidden tins might have some harmless explanation. There was a fish hatchery, for instance, at Shelbourne, and it came upon him with a sudden sense of chagrin, that he had seen the young fish shipped from there in just such tins as these.

Nevertheless, the feeling of suspicion remained uppermost, even though the men, on their second trip, let fall no enlightening words. When they finally departed, he emerged from hiding, a look of determination on his square jawed face, and headed for the spot where he had left the canoe.

At least it was in his power to follow up the matter if he chose; and he did choose. He knew where they were going, and he knew Cobb's Point. He could reach it before they did, and by concealing himself among the dunes, he might get a chance not only to glimpse again the face of the man he so wished to see, but also to learn something further of the party's purpose. 59

As he hurried along, Steve realized that through the woods shadows were deepening on every hand, while in the glades and open spots the light had a curious greenish-saffron tint that urged him to his utmost speed. Emerging finally on the shore he saw that there was no time to lose. The sun had disappeared. Above him the sky glowed with an unnatural light, while piled up in the east were great banks of black, ragged looking clouds.

For a moment Steve hesitated, measuring with his eye the distance of those clouds. Then he dragged out the canoe, dropped it hastily into the water, climbed in and thrust away from shore. Among the islands the current was swift, but even there he did not spare his paddle. And every little while he glanced backwards apprehensively.

As he left the shelter of the islands and faced a mile-wide stretch of open water, the cloud-bank 60

was half way up from the horizon with long, ragged streamers stretching out before it. He thrust his paddle deep and sent the canoe leaping across the oily swells; but like the tentacles of an octopus, those cloud streamers seemed to reach after him, dragging the black, ominous bulk behind. Half a mile he made, the sweat standing out on his face, his breath coming in gasps. Another quarter mile. He was paddling with every scrap of strength and skill he had, yet the clouds were overhead now, reaching out and onward inexorably.

A hundred yards from shore he hazarded a backward glance and saw the wind sweeping across the bay, a line of turbulent, tossing spray. It caught him with incredible swiftness, hurled the canoe forward, whirled it about, and before Steve could realize what was happening, he found himself struggling in the water.

He lost his paddle, but managed to retain a grip on the canoe, and swimming in a sort of daze, he finally dragged himself and it ashore. There, utterly done up, he flung himself face downward on the sand and lay for he knew not how long, drawing in the air in long, gasping gulps.

At length, still panting, he raised his head and slowly gained his feet. The surface of the bay was torn into a sea of angry, tossing whitecaps. The wind shrieked past him, driving gusts of fine spray into his face. Darkness was falling fast, relieved now and again by a vivid flash of lightning.

Uncertain whether the men would venture across in the teeth of the storm, Steve felt that if they did make the attempt they might appear at any moment. So he made haste to drag the canoe back of a mass of beach grass. 61

It was as well he did. Scarcely had he flung himself down beside the upturned keel and hunched his shoulders against the driving rain which had begun to pelt him, when out of the curtain of mist and shadow the dory flashed suddenly into his startled consciousness. He heard nothing of the engine; the shrieking of the wind and the first rattle of thunder drowned every sound. He simply saw, by the aid of the lightning and his straining vision, the bow of the dory, billows of foam spreading out on either side, cleaving the waves not fifty feet from shore. In another moment he heard the crunch and grating of the boat beaching, followed by a confused mingling of voices.

It was not yet absolutely dark and by this time his eyes were accustomed to the scene. Presently he could make out a number of shadowy figures bunched together and bending over. They were dragging the dory up the beach; he could tell that by their strained attitudes and their slow approach. Nearer they came to the screen of grass and nearer still, for not so much by chance as from the extreme narrowness of the point, they had landed at almost the same spot as Steve. Now he could make out the party quite clearly, black silhouettes against the grayish black of the sea behind them.

They had halted now, not half a dozen feet from his hiding place, and were bending over the dory taking out the tins. Their backs were toward him, but as Steve lay there blinded by the 62

flashes of lightning and deafened by the rolls of thunder, he felt, somehow, that on the contents of those tins hung the solution of his mystery. If he could only find out that, and the identity of the man who had drawn him hither, he would know something of where he stood.

Though he could distinguish nothing save their outlines, his eyes had not left the four men for an instant. He even raised himself a little and parted the screen of beach grass in an effort to keep track of their movements. Presently he saw that they had straightened up. Apparently they had removed all the tins, and he wondered eagerly what would be the next step. Then, of a sudden, as they stood there, another jagged fork of light flashed through the dark storm clouds, and Steve caught his breath and narrowly escaped crying out in sheer amazement.

The blinding glare showed him two of the men erect and partly facing him; but it did more than that. It awakened memory at last. And as the blackness settled down again, thick and stifling, the rain, the wind, the whole wild, storm-swept strip of coast vanished. The darkness remained, but it was the tempered darkness of a street in Washington the night of that thrilling day over a year ago—the day after the declaration of war. Back of some iron palings loomed the outlines of the German embassy. Beside the curb stood a limousine from which two men had just alighted. As Steve, hurrying home from a belated engagement, came opposite them, their faces were illumined brilliantly for a moment by the glare of a passing headlight. One of those men was the German Ambassador himself. The other —

No wonder Steve Haddon had almost betrayed himself at what that lightning flash revealed. No wonder he asked himself breathlessly, excitedly, what sinister business could have brought that other—here.

CHAPTER VIII
THE PLOT

Mechanically Steve put up one hand and brushed away the water that trickled down from his soaked hair. He was wet to the skin, but he fairly tingled all over with the thrill of his discovery. He was not mistaken; he could not be. That mental picture was much too clear to admit any doubt.

He was still ignorant of the man’s actual identity. But his presence with the ambassador that night, the friendly touch of the latter’s hand upon his shoulder, the earnest undertone of their conversation carried on in German, all pointed to an unusual degree of intimacy. And many months ago the ambassador, his staff and all his other associates, official and otherwise, were supposed to have left the country or to be safely interned.

This one had evidently escaped the net. Steve wasted no time speculating how he had done it, or where he had spent the intervening time. He

was a spy, doing a spy's work; everything pointed to that. His objective must be the shipyard, too, for there was nothing else worth destroying within a score of miles. Inwardly Haddon bitterly blamed his own stupidity in not having thoughts of that before. The tins contained powerful explosive, no doubt; enough, perhaps, to blow up both buildings and dry docks. They had planned the thing with their usual infernal care, waiting, perhaps for this very night of storm and blackness to make the attempt doubly sure. And they would succeed, the boy told himself with a dry sob of mingled rage and nervousness, unless he could outwit them.

He ground his teeth in helpless fury. He ought to be up and away immediately to carry the warning. But the plotters were so close that he could scarcely stir without detection. There was a chance that by edging back cautiously he might safely reach a point where he could take to his heels, but so much depended on him that he dared not risk it. He must wait until they moved away a little and then, by speeding down the opposite side of the point, he might gain the mainland and the shipyard ahead of them and give the alarm.

Presently another lightning flash showed up the group again, and Steve's eyes widened in astonishment. Instead of four men there were six. Where the other two had come from he did not know, but it seemed as if they must have made their way out along the beach. So he was faced by a new difficulty. There might be others still, stationed along the way, and if he tried to reach the shipyard ahead of the gang, he was as likely as not to run straight into hostile arms. 66

Nevertheless, he meant to try it, for by this time he was desperate with anxiety and impatience. He was about to creep back without further waiting, when suddenly there came one of those curious lulls which occur sometimes at the very height of a storm. Abruptly the shriek of the wind died down and he could hear the voices clearly.

"—all in the guard house. As long as the storm holds there won't be a soul around."

"But the rain!" put in another voice with a harsh, guttural accent. "Will not that eggtinguish the fire?"

"Not this fire," returned another confidently, and Steve recognized one of the voices he had overheard that afternoon. "There ain't enough water up above to drown this stuff once she gets started. Besides, it's letting up. By the time we get things going it won't be more than a drizzle; and if the wind holds the whole shebang will go up in smoke. What we want is to get busy right —"

The rest was inaudible, scattered by the storm, which broke out again with a fresh strength. But Steve had heard enough. Fire, then, was to be their weapon, and not explosives. The tins must contain gasoline, or some even more powerful inflammable. But it made little difference in the result, for the destruction would be as great or greater. With sudden decision the boy made up his mind to delay no longer. 67

His every muscle tense, he waited impatiently for the next flash. The instant it had come and gone, he began to edge backward, slowly, silently, with infinite care, over the wet, yielding sand. It took a long time to worm past the length of the canoe, but after that he made better progress. At length, a hundred feet or more from the end of the point and on the opposite side, he rose to his feet and hurried along the beach toward the mainland.

Anyone who has tried walking in the dark will realize something of his difficulties. Actually Steve could not see his hand before his face, and he had not gone twenty feet before he found himself splashing in the water. He edged away from that and presently tripped and almost fell over a hummock of beach grass. Then, very swiftly, all sense of direction left him. His only guidance was the splash of waves about his ankles and the tingle of salt spray against his face.

It was a nightmare, that blind struggle through the storm; a nightmare of pelting, lashing rain, of stumbling, falling, wading through surf, of pounding over hard sand. And like a nightmare little things grew big and big things little; time seemed to stand still or stretch out into infinity. Worst of all was the blackness, thick and suffocating, that pressed upon his eyeballs and tangled about his feet. And behind that blackness there was fear. Not fear for self so much; he was past that now. The thing that dominated and urged him on, that kept him going in spite of weariness and doubt and panting breath, was fear lest he should be too late to reach his goal before the others. And in the end he was too late!

His first inkling of it was the sight of those three spots of light twinkling low over to the left. At first they meant nothing to his weary brain. Then, watching them dazedly, he realized all at once that they were electric flashlights, and with a sudden, bitter pang he understood.

The men were almost opposite him, moving rapidly along the other side of Cobb’s Point, which here was some two hundred yards across. Unhampered by the darkness, they had caught up to him, were really ahead of him, in fact, for Steve had to cross the base of the point to reach the shipyard a mile or more to the westward.

With a discouraged droop to his shoulders, the boy plodded on mechanically for a little way and then halted. The spots of light had suddenly shifted. He could still make out a faint, luminous glow, but it was obscured by moving shadows. And then it came to him that for some minutes past he had felt no water sloshing around his feet.

“It’s the mainland,” he muttered. “They’ve left the point and turned up the other shore.”

It was no time for caution and delay, and Steve went after them at once. Though his attempt to reach the shipyard first had failed, there was still a chance, though not nearly so sure, of gaining his end by following close behind the plotters and giving the alarm before they had time to carry out the details of their plan.

In the brief interval of waiting a number of other

possibilities had flashed through his mind, only to be discarded. He might make his way back to Shelbourne and get help. There was a good road leading through the woods from the village which was used by workmen going to and from their quarters; a motor car could make the distance in five minutes. But Shelbourne was quite as far from Cobb's Point as the shipyard, and there were sure to be delays in rousing people and getting out a car. He thought, too, of pushing straight through the woods from where he was and trying to hit that road, but the chances of getting lost in even that short stretch of scrub and tangled undergrowth were too great to be risked. The open beach was really the only sure way, and Steve took it without hesitation.

With stumbling, uncertain steps he felt his way across the point and gained the other shore. Far, far ahead of him, it seemed, wavered the faint glow of the flashlights, and their apparent distance startled him. He had planned to follow as close behind the plotters as he dared; it had not occurred to him that they might outdistance him altogether. With a sharp catching of his breath, he plunged forward and began to run. A moment later the lights blinked out abruptly.

CHAPTER IX
THROUGH STORM AND DARKNESS

Steve fell twice and a thorny branch lashed him across the face with painful force before he got the better of that panicky dash. One of two things must have happened. Either the flashlights had been extinguished, or else the men had passed around a bend which hid the sight of them from view. The latter was perhaps the more likely; but it was the possibility that they had heard him and were lurking ahead in the darkness, awaiting his approach, that turned him cold.

It was the first time his nerve had been really shaken, but it was shaken now. The darkness or the plotters, taken separately, he could face without tremors. It was the combination of the two, the combination of the unknown, the unseen, the suspense of uncertainty, which made him shiver and brought out a clammy perspiration on his forehead.

It set him to thinking, also, of the camp and wishing with a desperate sort of longing for the presence of some of the fellows to back him up. If only Cavvy were here, with his cool head and ready wit; his sturdy fearlessness would be a tower of strength. Why, even little Shrimp Willett would be a comfort.

But they were all back there in camp with lights and warmth and cheerfulness about them, while he was here—alone. And he must go forward alone, too, no matter what that beastly blackness held in store for him. He dug his teeth into his under lip. Then his chin went up abruptly.

What had got into him? What was he thinking

of? Why, at this very instant men were facing with a smile things a thousand times worse than this. Black wastes of shell-torn barrenness, tangled with barbed wire, littered with unknown pitfalls, loomed into his imagination. There were shadows brightened ominously by the flare of signal rockets or the flash of hand grenades; silences shattered by the thunder of big guns or the whining ping of sharpshooters' bullets. And in imagination that worst horror of all—the deadly poison gas—caught him for an instant by the throat and choked him. Yet over there men looked hourly into the face of such a death and laughed, while he was afraid to take a little risk —for them!

A burning flush flamed into the boy's face and he clenched his hands spasmodically. From his lips came a sound of mingled shame and fury and determination.

"What a cur I am!" he grated scornfully. "What a beastly coward to be downed by a little dark and wet! And I won't be!" 73

Doubt and hesitation thrown aside, he sped on along the beach. Once or twice the thought of what might be waiting for him slipped past that mental barrier of resolution, but he flung it fiercely back. And when he had gone two hundred yards or so he began to breathe more easily. They could scarcely have been much further off than this when the lights vanished. Another hundred yards and he was quite certain. It was impossible in the darkness to tell where the shoreline curved, but he had a feeling that it must be about this point. A few minutes later the faint, distant gleam of light ahead confirmed his guess.

"All that stupid fuss about nothing," he growled. "Now it's up to me to catch up with them."

But though he did his best, he was still a hundred yards behind when, as nearly as he could guess, they reached the wide estuary of the shipyard. There was a dock here where supplies and materials were landed, and from it a well-used road led through the regular lines of store houses, machine shops and countless other buildings.

Almost at the edge of this road the lights winked out again, but this time Haddon felt no uneasiness. Though it was still blowing hard, the rain had lessened noticeably. Some of the guards, more zealous than the rest, might venture forth, and the twinkle of strange lights would inevitably raise an alarm. 74

Steve paused for an instant and stared ahead, trying to penetrate the darkness. To his right, among the buildings, a few scattered electric lights shone obscurely, but they did little toward relieving the general gloom. Slipping along from shadow to shadow, the plotters would have no difficulty in gaining any part of the yard they chose for their incendiary purpose. But this same condition was a corresponding aid to him.

Having visited the yard, he knew the general direction of the guard house. Now, when the men ahead vanished into the gloom, Steve turned abruptly to his right across an open space of recently cleared land. He found it far from easy going. There were stumps and roots to

trip him up; hollows and other pitfalls to avoid. With the spies so near, a fall or even a noisy stumble might ruin everything. But the boy crept on, feeling his way forward, chafing at the sense of precious minutes flying, until the dark bulk of the first building loomed before him.

Speeding a little, he passed along the rear of it, crossed a slightly brighter space, and gained the shadow of the next one. But as he reached the further corner a sound, slight yet unmistakeable, brought him to a sudden halt, breathless and tingling. The sound was the faint splintering of wood, and close upon its heels came the noise of a window being slowly lifted. With nerves like taut-strung wires, Steve crept forward and peered around the corner. 75

In front of the third building in the row hung one of the temporary electric globes that were dotted sparsely over the shipyard. At this distance it served merely to lighten the gloom a trifle. But Haddon, staring intently into the shadows, presently made out one which seemed darker than the rest—a shadow that moved slightly, to merge a moment later into the blacker darkness of an open window.

Just a second the boy stood petrified. From the first it had been his plan not alone to prevent the catastrophe, but to try and bring about a capture of the plotters. But the sight of one of them actually entering the building shocked him to a realizing sense of how much more vital it was to prevent the fire from getting headway. In a flash he had left his hiding and headed for the guard house on the run.

Racing across the open space between the two buildings he sped through the shadows back of the third one, circled it, and gained the open road. Instinctively he kept to the darker side of this. The padding of his sodden shoes made scarcely any sound on the hard dirt, and there was a chance that he might escape detection.

Presently the lighted windows of the guards' bunk house loomed ahead like a beacon. There was a swift, final spurt along the silent, deserted road, a nervous, backward glance which revealed only the placid darkness unlighted by the sinister glare he feared. Then he gained the steps, stumbled up them, and flung open the door which yielded to his touch. 76

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CHAPTER X
HIS BIT

For a moment Steve leaned panting against the door, blinking in the glare of the long, brightly lighted room. He was conscious of dozen faces turning toward him, and of a man in khaki rising swiftly from a table close at hand. In that first instant he could not seem to find his voice, but his sodden, dripping, mud-caked figure, his white face, streaked across one cheek with red, his wide, dilated eyes, evidently were eloquent, almost, as speech.

"What is it?" snapped the man, moving quickly

toward him. “What’s the matter?”

“Fire!” gulped Haddon thickly. “Six men—out there—” he waved one arm. “They’ve got cans of gasoline—or something. I followed them—from Loon Island. They’re spies. I—heard them plotting to—burn the yard.—”

A babel of exclamations drowned his voice. There was a noisy scrape of many chair-legs. As the men leaped up, cards dropped from laxed fingers and fluttered to the floor. A chair fell backwards with a crash.

“A plot to burn the yard!” gasped the man before him. His face paled beneath the tan; then flushed. Across one temple a tiny vein began to throb. “That can’t be so! Why—” 78

“It’s true, I tell you!” cried the boy desperately. “I heard them planning it. The leader’s a German spy. I saw him with von Bernstorff in Washington a year ago. One of them’s already broken into a building down the road. Unless you hurry it will be too late. You *must* believe me!”

The man stared silently at him for an instant, one hand mechanically gripping the butt of a Colt that swung at his hip. Then he whirled around.

“Get busy, fellows,” he ordered with crisp decisiveness. “It may be a false alarm, but the kid seems pretty sure of his facts.” He turned to Steve again. “Which building is it? Third from the dock on the left? Good. The rest of ’em may be anywhere. Charley, take eight men and slip along by the dry docks. Look into every shop, but don’t waste time. The rest of you come with me. Switch on the search lights, Dick. Hold up, though. Wait about three minutes and then throw the switch. That’ll give us time to spread around. Hustle, boys!”

The admonition seemed scarcely necessary. Before he had ceased speaking each man had seized a rifle, buckled on a revolver and stood ready. Except for that first moment of startled surprise, there had been no stir or tumult. They were well disciplined and apparently realized the need for speed and caution, for when the leader issued forth, they followed him silently and swiftly. 79

Like twin lines of phantoms, the two squads glided into the open and sped away to their positions. It was as if they meant to make up now for the relaxed vigilance which had made this danger possible. Without a word the smaller body disappeared into the darkness toward the water front, and at a whispered command two men hurried off to take their stand at the limits of the yard nearest the village. The remainder, under the leader whose name was Kelly, scattered among the buildings to the left of the road.

Steve went with this party and presently found himself with Kelly and another man speeding toward the building near the end of the row which he had seen the spy enter. From a broken sentence or two he learned that the system of search lights had just been installed, but not formally received from the contractor, and hence had not been turned on. That explained

the first darkness of the yard. But there was little time for conversation and there was to be even less. For as they dashed up to the front of the building, the windows which before had been mere patches of blackness were sharply outlined now with the lurid, flickering glow of fire.

A savage snarl came from Kelly's throat and he leaped for the door, master key in hand. The other man ran past him, pulled up at the corner, and yanked out his gun. Twice it spat fire, the echoes of the shots crashing through the silent yard with sharp distinctness. 80

"Get him?" snapped Kelly, flinging open the door.

"I did," was the grim reply.

But it passed unheeded. Steve himself only recalled it afterward; for as the door swung open a cloud of smoke belched forth and behind it they could see a leaping, quivering wall of flame. At almost the same instant there came a blinding flash and the whole yard was bathed suddenly in a flood of clear, white light.

"The extinguisher, Joe—quick!" grated Kelly. "We've got to stop it before this wind takes hold." He whirled on Steve. "Chase back to the bunkhouse, kid, and tell Dick to start the pumps and sound the alarm. Run!"

Steve ran, and long afterwards he had only to close his eyes to bring back every detail of that strange scene—for it was strange beyond description. The search lights had come on, and the wide road flanked with buildings was as brilliant as the busy street of any city, but as silent as the grave and as empty of any signs of life. And yet, to the boy, that surface emptiness and silence fairly pulsed with life—vivid, vital, elemental life, which might flame up, white hot, at any instant like the fire of a volcano bursting its thin crust of ashes. And as he ran Steve waited tingling, almost breathless, for that outbreak. 81

It came just as he reached the bunkhouse steps —a pistol shot, sharp and snapping. There was another and another still, and out of the tail of his eye he glimpsed indistinctly the swift dash of some figures past the rear of a building across the road. Racing up the steps, Steve panted out his message. In a moment more the piercing wail of a siren screamed shrilly through the night, followed quickly by the dull throbbing of machinery.

Back in the road again, the boy paused for an instant, his heart beating fast with excitement. The sense of empty quiet had vanished utterly. Above him, from the engine-house stack, the high, piercing note of the siren rose and fell shrieking a clamorous warning. From somewhere in the yard a rifle shot came sharply to his ears. Ahead of him several guards were thudding down the road towards the clouds of red-tinged smoke which poured from the burning building with increasing volume.

He ran a few steps in that direction, slowed down for a lagging second or two, spurted again, and ducked around the corner of a big machine shop on the left of the road a little below the 82

guard house. Back of this ran the completed portion of a high board fence topped with barbed wire which would ultimately encircle the entire yard. A moment before he had glimpsed, slipping along that fence, the figure of a man whose furtive movements roused instant suspicion. He might just possibly be one of the guards, but to Steve, remembering the three he had seen running that same way a little while before, it seemed much more likely that he was one of the spies heading for the end of the fence and freedom.

There was little time to think or plan or be afraid. It was pure instinct which sent him flying to cut the creature off—instinct, and a consuming fury against the treachery of these villains. He reached the rear of the building at almost the same instant of his quarry. There was no pause, no word; only a sob of exulting recognition jolted from Steve's lips as the whole weight of his solid bone and muscle struck the fellow and they went down together.

In falling, he gripped the man about the body. Almost instantly he realized that his hands were more than full. The play of steel muscles beneath his fingers told him that much, even before those furious writhings began, or the fierce blows which fell upon his head and shoulders. Twice his hoarse cry for help rang out before he ducked his head defensively under the other's arm, and tightened the clutch of interlacing fingers against the hollow of the fellow's back. 83

Blows began to fall upon his neck and shoulders, fierce, heavy blows that shook his whole body and jolted the wind in gasps through his clenched teeth. The man heaved up almost to his full height, dragging the boy by sheer strength over yards of roughstones and stubble, but still he failed to loose that grip. Something sharp like the upturned spike in a forgotten piece of planking tore through Steve's clothes and bit deeply into his thigh; his face, scraped by the rough pressure against the man's coat, burned like fire. But he hung on doggedly in spite of pain and weariness and failing breath.

Then came a blow upon his neck, a cruel, dazing blow which made his senses reel and brought tears of pain into his eyes. Would they never come? he wondered dully. He could not strike back without loosening his hold. He tried to move his head a little to protect his neck, but again that iron fist beat down on his quivering flesh and wrenched from him a moan of agony.

His senses swam; he felt his muscles laxing. Now searching fingers slid across his shrinking neck and clutched his throat. Before the choking grip had tightened a muffled cry of pain and dull fury burst from him—a cry which, even to his dazed brain, seemed strangely echoed and prolonged. Then came an instant winking out of everything. When consciousness returned he could breathe again, but persistent hands were busy prying loose the grip of his cramped fingers. 84

"You can't do it!" he panted stubbornly. "I won't —"

"Easy, boy, easy!" said a roughly soothing voice. "Let go, son; it's all right now. We've got him."

Steve's muscles relaxed instinctively, and as the spy's body was drawn from his grasp, his bruised shoulders dropped back wearily against a supporting knee. Blinking, he stared upward at a vaguely familiar face bending over him. It was a moment or two before he recognized it as the face of the guard called Dick. Two others stood nearby and between them sagged the body of the prisoner, whose limpness proclaimed no gentle handling.

"Don't let him—get away," murmured Steve. "He's—he's the leader of the bunch."

"No fear, son," Dick assured him grimly. Then his face changed. "Are you hurt bad?" he asked anxiously.

A crooked smile twisted the boy's lips, and he shook his head. "Not—much," he said slowly. "I—I'll get up—in a second. Did—did the fire get away from them?" 85

"Not yet," answered the big guard. "They're fighting it hard. At the worst it'll take only the two buildings to windward."

He slid an arm around Haddon and lifted him to his feet, supporting him carefully as they moved slowly back to the road. "Pure grit," he remarked over one shoulder. "The beast had him near murdered."

A faint flush crept up into Steve's face, but he was not thinking of the praise, though this meant much to him. His mind had leaped a gap of many thousand miles; and in imagination he saw a battered band of men in khaki returning from a foray. Again that twisted smile curved his dry lips. He was not one of them—might never be. But he had done his best for them, and in his heart there glowed a sudden sense of humble comradeship which was its own reward.

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CHAPTER XI
THE LAST NIGHT

Back on the main thoroughfare of the shipyard, Steve stared about him with widening eyes. How could he ever have thought the place quiet or empty he wondered? The siren still wailed shrilly from the engine stack. But added to it now was the dull, hoarse clamor of many voices rising and falling, the roar and clatter of arriving motor cars, the thud of hurrying feet.

Along the road as far as he could see ranged a long line of empty automobiles, and fresh ones were constantly arriving. Workmen and mechanics belonging to the yard, fishermen from Shelbourne, farmers from the surrounding country who had heard and answered the alarm, poured from the cars and were marshalled into line and sent to the danger points by a file of soldiers.

"Where on earth did they come from?" the boy asked, staring at the latter.

"It's Major Whitcomb's bunch," explained Dick. "He got here about five minutes ago and took 87

charge. Come ahead in; he'll want to see you."

Steve was about to protest, but remembering that he would probably have to tell his story sometime, he gave way with a shrug. Dick pushed through the throng, followed by the two guards with their prisoner. A moment later the group halted before a big table in the bunk house behind which sat the officer who had charge of constructing the shipyard. He answered Dick's salute smartly; then Steve caught the gimlet stare from a pair of cool gray eyes.

"Two more?" the officer questioned curtly.

"No, sir; only one," returned Dick. "This is the lad who brought us warning of the plot He's just caught the fellow, here, who he says is leader of the whole gang."

Major Whitcomb's face changed abruptly. The gray eyes softened a bit, and under the crisp mustache his lips laxed something of their sternness.

"You're just the one I want to see, then," he said in a friendly voice. "You look done up, too. Bring a chair and sit down here. Sergeant, take this man in charge and don't let him out of your sight. Now," he added when Steve had brought over a chair, and dropped down in it, "tell me all about it. Who are you? and how did you get mixed up in this business?"

Steve obeyed, telling his story as briefly and as clearly as he could. The officer listened intently, making an occasional note and asking many questions. When Haddon had finished, the man bent forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

"That was splendidly done, and I congratulate you," he said warmly. "You've rendered a great service to the country. I needn't tell you what an enormous amount of damage and delay would have resulted if the fire had gotten a start; you seem to have realized that perfectly. You're quite certain of your identification of the man you saw in Washington?"

"Quite, sir. I'd be willing to swear to it."

"You may have to later when the secret service men take hold," said Major Whitcomb. "It's a fine bag," he added grimly, his glance sweeping the further end of the room where several sullen-faced men stood guarded by half a dozen soldiers and two lay helpless on mattresses with doctors bending over them. "We've got all six, thanks to you. Well, you'll be wanting to get back to your friends; they'll be anxious about you. I'll send you over in my car at once."

He called the sergeant and gave a crisp order. Then, with a cordial word or two of farewell, he dismissed the boy and Steve left the building. Five minutes later he was leaning back in the officer's car speeding toward Shelbourne.

Now that there was nothing more for him to do, the inevitable reaction had come, and he could scarcely hold his head up. Every muscle ached; the cut in his thigh and that other lesser one across his face, burned and stung. With head back and eyes half closed, he listened vaguely to the remarks of the soldier at the wheel, but the

mere answering of the man's occasional question seemed like the most tremendous effort.

They had reached the outskirts of the village, and the car was just turning into the lighted main street, when a sudden shout halted the chauffeur, who slowed down and stopped. A moment later the car was surrounded by a mob of excited boys and before Steve realized what was happening, he was dragged from his seat by a dozen hands, while a score of voices poured question after question into his dazed ears.

It was Mr. Wendell who came to his rescue and to whom he conveyed the information that the fire was under control and everything practically all right. Seeing the boy's state of exhaustion, the scoutmaster did not press him further, and the whole crowd turned back to the docks, with Haddon in the center. It was not human nature to refrain from asking questions, and little by little during their trip back to camp the essential incidents of Steve's adventures were extracted in scraps and disjointed sentences.

The details followed next morning. A night's rest put new life into the boy and though he hated talking about himself, he very soon found that he would have no peace until he had answered every question. It was Cavanaugh, in fact, who suggested to Mr. Wendell soon after breakfast that Haddon might as well tell his story to the assembled crowd and get it over with. 90

"I guess you're right, Jim," agreed the scoutmaster. "We really ought to save the yarn for the council fire to-night, but I don't suppose the fellows can wait that long. As a matter of fact I feel a sort of hankering myself to know just how it all came about."

And so, in the shade of the mess tent, with the scouts gathered about him in a close circle, Steve told his tale. He was stammering and embarrassed at first, but gradually he warmed to the narration, losing his self consciousness in the interest of recalling the strenuous hours on Loon Island and in the pursuit along the beach through the storm. To be sure, he quite failed to do himself justice and only persistent questioning brought out the details he slurred over. But Cavvy, who sat beside him, saw to it that those questions were asked and answered, and when it was over the two strolled off together.

"And to think that we laughed that night you told us about the man in the dory," remarked the blond fellow whimsically after a brief silence. 91

"I suppose it sounded awfully silly the way I put it," said Steve quickly.

"*We* were the silly ones—regular nuts, in fact." Cavvy sighed. "I wish to thunder I'd been with you, old kid."

Steve laughed a little. "I wish you had. I never wanted anything more in my life when I was stumbling along that beach through the dark. I was scared then, all right. Now, if you'd only been along—"

"We'd have been scared together, I guess," chuckled Cavvy. "Well, I wasn't, and that's an

end to it. How does it feel to be a celebrity? You'll have your name in the paper, and be thanked by the Government, and—"

"Slush!" Steve pounded his friend on the back and when the brief tussle subsided, he hastened to change the subject.

This was not difficult, for there were plenty of other topics to occupy them. With two weeks of camp gone, the third and last one seemed crowded with various contests and scout activities for which there had not been time before. That very afternoon an aquatic meet was scheduled, and to-morrow would be taken up by the track events which would go far toward deciding who was going to win the coveted camp emblem for the year. An all day picnic to Loon Island was also being considered, and after that the day of departure loomed disagreeably near.

It came all too soon for everyone—the end of those three golden weeks which, at the beginning, had seemed almost as if they were going to last all summer. Scarcely a boy in the crowd but longed to stretch them into six, and it was no small tribute to their new-found sense of responsibility and willingness to serve, that not one of them even made the suggestion. 92

They had their work to do at home—on farms, in gardens, in the woods and along the country roads searching out black walnut trees for the Government. There were War Saving stamps to sell, and all those other duties which the war had brought home to them. It had been understood in the beginning that three weeks was the utmost which could be taken from those tasks, and even around the council fire on that last evening there were no complaints.

"But just think of the years when we had a whole three months' vacation," sighed Cavvy whimsically, after the last song had been sung and they were moving slowly tentwards. "Those were the good old days, all right. You never appreciate what you've got—till you haven't got it." He sighed. "I s'pose you couldn't change your mind, old man, and stay a couple of weeks with me before you go home?" he added, to Steve Haddon.

"I'm afraid not," the big chap said regretfully. "Dad hasn't been away from Washington even over a Sunday. He says he's nearly driven to death and is counting on me to help him out with clerical work. I wish I could, though." 93

"You don't wish it any more than I do. But if you can't, you can't. Lord knows we're doing little enough to help. Gee! but I wish I was old enough to enlist."

"I'm going into the Navy if this war lasts two years more," volunteered Haddon.

"You are? Same here. That's funny, isn't it? I hope— Well, no I don't, either. Nobody wants it to last any longer than it has to, but I would like to get into it some way besides grubbing with a hoe and selling Liberty Bonds. See here; if you can't come now, will you promise to visit me during Christmas vacation?"

"Sure—if you'll spend part of it with me."

"That's a bargain." In front of the tent their hands met in a firm clasp. Then Cavvy groaned. "Reveille at four—and two hours' hard work striking tents!" he murmured. "Guess we'd better hit the hay."

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CHAPTER XII

"WHAT IS SCOUTING FOR?"

A week later the camp on Long Point was only a memory—something to discuss pleasantly, perhaps, at odd moments, but of little real importance compared with the ordinary work and play of the crowd who had been there.

Work decidedly predominated with most of them. Back at Wharton, where the majority lived, they took up their self imposed duties with conscientious vigor, if not with complete enthusiasm. For it must be confessed that the average youngster hates work. There are those who believe, or imagine they do, that there is nothing a boy loves more than to be out in the dewy freshness of a summer morning, turning the "fragrant earth," or leading an enthusiastic attack on the enemy weed.

Let such persons inform themselves from life. Early rising is only popular amongst the young when an adventure is on foot. Nine-tenths of our youthful population detest weeding, and to them the hoe is an implement of torture strangely and inexplicably neglected by the Inquisition.

95

It was to their credit, therefore, that the scouts of Wharton devoted themselves so conscientiously to the tasks at hand, which happened to be mainly rural. The town itself lived principally by, and for, the great mines. But in the surrounding country were many and excellent farms, and the fact that the great bulk of unenlisted men were working in shaft and smelter made the services of boys on the land more than usually welcome. Even Harry Ritter did his part, though with a good deal of surface grumbling and complaint. And Cavvy, out on his grandfather's farm, resolutely took his share of work as it came, finding some additional comfort in the realization that the hardening muscles and increasing girth of chest would be of no small benefit to him on the football field that fall.

Of course it wasn't all unadulterated slavery. On the contrary there were a good many relaxations. They had the weekly scout meetings to look forward to, and Mr. Wendell worked hard to make these especially attractive. Now and again they took a day off to hike through the woods in search of walnut trees. And through it all there was undoubtedly a strong feeling of satisfaction that, with the whole world working earnestly toward a single great end, they were doing something concrete to help in its attainment.

96

In this wise came September and the opening of school. Most of the troop attended the Wharton High School, or were in the eighth grade, and saw each other every day. Cavanaugh greatly missed Steve Haddon, who had long ago

returned to his home in Washington, but he found compensation in the companionship of Bill McBride, who was a near neighbor, and had many similar tastes. Besides, between lessons, football and duties connected with the troop, he had little time to waste in lamenting the absence of even so good a friend as Haddon had come to be.

Cavvy, as senior patrol leader, was very keenly interested in the welfare and development of the troop. His ambition was to make it the best and biggest in the county, and to this end he worked hard and constantly, and was of no little aid to Mr. Wendell. There were times, however, when their ideas were very much at variance.

Had anyone asked Cavvy what he considered the qualifications of a good scout, he would probably have enumerated “pep,” keenness to get on, interest in the troop and the work generally, and the like. But back in his mind, unvoiced perhaps even to himself, he held something of the standard by which men are picked for college fraternities. He preferred the members of the troop to be more or less of good family, to be prominent in school or athletics, to be good fellows, quick, amusing, capable, and of his own class. Perhaps the scoutmaster sensed something of this. He had a quiet way of sizing up one’s mental processes which was sometimes rather disconcerting. At all events at a meeting of the troop leaders, he brought the discussion around to that very point and ended with a little lecture on the subject. 97

The meeting was held as usual in the scout master’s study, a room of comfortable chairs, book-lined walls, and interesting souvenirs and relics of many sorts. There were swords and daggers from the East, old flint-locks, Indian pottery, old bronzes and a multitude of other curious things which the boys were never tired of looking over. In cold weather a fire always glimmered on the broad hearth, and to-day, though this was empty, they had from force of habit gathered around it.

“One of the things I’ve noticed about a good many troops,” said Mr. Wendell, leaning back in his chair, “is a tendency to be just a little clannish. It’s perfectly natural, of course. A fellow wants his own particular friends in the troop and in proposing a member he naturally picks a boy he knows, who’s in his class, or on his team or lives next door. That’s human nature, but the result is narrowing and to my mind it defeats one of the great fundamental objects of Scouting—democracy. Take our own troop, for instance. We’ve got a corking bunch of fellows who work well and play well together. But there’s a whole great class in Wharton that we haven’t even touched.”

He paused and the boys glanced doubtfully at one another. Cavanaugh’s forehead was crinkled with a little frown. 98

“You mean— You think we ought to take in fellows from the—mine families?” he asked.

Mr. Wendell smiled.

“Why not?”

“But they’re mostly Da—er—Italians and Poles

and all that," protested Cavvy.

The scoutmaster's smile deepened.

"Well, what of it?"

Cavanaugh flushed faintly.

"But they're mostly an awful lot of roughnecks. Besides, they don't know anything about scouting, and I don't believe they'd want to belong if they were asked."

Mr. Wendell crossed his legs and linked his strong, brown fingers around one knee.

"I think you're mistaken—just a little," he said quietly. "And even if you're right—even if they don't know or care anything about it, I think we ought to make an effort to take scouting to them. The majority are boys from poor families. Some of them work in the mines all day. They haven't many pleasures or relaxations except what they find on the street corners at night. The scouting program would be a revelation, and I feel sure would save many of them from getting into idle, useless, even vicious ways."

His eyes twinkled and a smile curved the corners of his mouth.

"I don't want you to think I'm preaching. I know perfectly well that none of you look on the troop as a missionary work, or a means of reformation—and it isn't. The normal fellow joins because he thinks he's going to have a good time, or because he's interested in some particular feature of the program. That's as it should be; I've no kick coming there. As you get into it, you grow more and more interested, and end by doing willingly what before you'd probably have thought a beastly bore. We've got through a lot of hard work together this summer, and yet I think we've had some pretty good times.

"Don't misunderstand, either, what I've just said. The troop is yours, and you have the right of taking in or turning down any one you choose. I'd just like to have the doors a little wider open. Personally I don't believe you'd find a single drawback in taking in some of these fellows. Human nature is the same everywhere, and a boy from the shaft or the smelter has in him the makings of just as good a scout as one from—High School."

He glanced at the clock and then stood up. "I guess there's nothing else to-day. Just think over what I've said and discuss it amongst yourselves. Next meeting you'll have a chance of voting on that young Tallerico chap who applied two weeks ago. I suppose it was he who put this into my head. But remember this: whatever you do, do it because you feel you want to and it's right, and not because you think I'd like you to."

CHAPTER XIII

THE TALLERICO KID

The little group of scouts filed out of the room and left the house quietly enough, but once in

the street their tongues were loosened.

“I think he’s wrong,” declared Cavvy, in his impulsive, rather positive manner. “You know what kind of a bunch that mine gang is. I’ll bet a soda you couldn’t haul one into the troop with a rope.”

“Still, it’s just as Mr. Wendell says,” remarked Clay Marshall. He was tall and rather quiet, and took his new position as leader of the Owl Patrol very seriously. “They’ve never had a chance.”

“They’ve never asked for one,” returned Cavanaugh. “This—er—Tallerico is the first one I ever heard of who showed the slightest desire to belong.”

Bill McBride laughed.

“Well, I don’t know as you can blame them for that. You know how much the fellows run in sets in this town. I don’t suppose even those chaps would try and push themselves in where they think they’re not wanted.”

Cavvy frowned impatiently.

“That’s not the point,” he retorted. “They haven’t tried; anyway they’re not the sort we want. Can you imagine Red Garrity a scout?” he added triumphantly.

There was a momentary silence and into the minds of those present there flashed a picture of the ragged, red-haired, pugnacious young tough in question. A leader of his kind, he smoked and swore and lost no chance to jeer openly at the scouts whenever they crossed his path.

“Humph!” grunted Ted Hinckley. “At present he don’t seem very promising. But I’ll tell you this, old man; if he ever got the scout bug, he’d make a crackerjack.”

“You make me sick,” sniffed Cavvy. “He’d never get the scout bug, as you call it—never in a thousand years.”

By this time they had reached the center of the town and paused in front of the Post Office.

“Well, that don’t apply to Tallerico,” remarked Harry Ritter. “He has applied and he wants to get in.”

“I can’t say I want him either,” declared Cavanaugh stubbornly. “What does a wop like that care about scouting, I’d like to know.”

Ritter pursed up his lips. He rarely lost a chance of arguing.

“None of us knew much about it when we first joined,” he returned. “We picked it up afterwards. He doesn’t seem half bad to me, even if he is a foreigner.”

“That’s just it!” Cavvy caught him up hotly. “He *is* a foreigner. What do you s’pose he knows or cares about the flag, or patriotism or anything like that? Those fellows don’t give a hang about this country. Dad says they all come over here just because they can make more money than at home. As soon as they’ve saved up enough they hustle back to spend it over there. They’re not Americans and never will be, even if a few of

them do get naturalized. We don't want that kind in the troop."

A brief silence fell upon the boys, some of whom looked convinced, others doubtful. Jim Cavanaugh's statements, even when slightly illogical as at present, frequently carried the crowd, for he was the type which dominates by sheer force of temperament. Besides, his father was superintendent of the iron mines, and one whose opinion carried weight. Nevertheless, Ritter refused to relinquish his stand so readily.

"Maybe that's true of some of them, but why shouldn't this fellow be an exception," he persisted. "I was talking to him last night and he doesn't seem like a foreigner. He speaks English all right, and he's got some good ideas about scouting. Besides, you know what Mr. Wendell said."

Cavvy frowned impatiently. He had an uncomfortable feeling of being somehow in the wrong, but opposition always roused all that was stubborn and contentious in his disposition. 104

"Of course I do," he snapped. "I was there, wasn't I? You'll remember, perhaps, that he also said the troop was our own and that we have the right to take in or keep out whoever we choose. Of course you fellows can do as you please, but I know what I'm talking about and how I'm going to vote. Come ahead, Micky; the whistle blew five minutes ago."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned away and with Bill McBride, walked briskly down the street. His temper was distinctly ruffled, the more so, perhaps, from the realization that his arguments had been far from strong. He was also annoyed and disgruntled at Mr. Wendell for having brought up the subject at all, and particularly for the attitude he had taken. For a time he walked on silently. Then he glanced at his companion.

"Fat's such an ass," he remarked.

McBride smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"He does love to hear himself talk," he chuckled. "He likes it almost as well as eating. Still, of course there is a little something in what he said. I suppose we might broaden out some without hurting ourselves. A roughneck like Garrity would be the limit, but this—"

He broke off with an exclamation of interest. "There he is now!" 105

"Huh? What—who?"

"That Tallerico kid over there in front of the old Jessup house."

Cavvy frowned and glanced quickly across the street. Their short cut home took them through the older portion of town—a region of ancient, tumble-down houses, once the abode of wealth and fashion, but long since given over to laborers and workmen in the mines.

Amongst these dingy, decrepit tenements the Jessup house stood forth with a faded, forlorn distinction. In its simple, dignified proportions, in the graceful fanlight above the door, and in certain delicate bits of molding and carving,

there remained traces of the colonial mansion where General Washington had slept more than once in the early winters of the Revolution.

On the threshold, one hand resting on the latch, stood a boy of fourteen or so, short, square-built, with dark, wavy hair and olive skin warmly tinged with red. His lips were half parted and his dark eyes rested eagerly on the faces of the two across the street, whom he had apparently just noticed. But as their glances quickly shifted, a shadow swept across his face and jerking open the door, he disappeared within.

Cavanaugh felt a sudden twinge of conscience, and to elude it he burst into abrupt denunciation. 106

“It’s a darn shame about that house!” he exclaimed hotly. “Think of a place where Washington slept let go to rack and ruin that way and turned into a tenement for dagos! Any other town would buy it and keep it up decently. They’d be proud of it. Look at those windows—every blooming one broken and patched up with paper and stuff. It’s disgusting!”

“There’s two whole ones,” remarked McBride —“up-stairs to the left.”

“What do they amount to?” sniffed Cavvy. “It’s an accident they’re not busted like the rest, that’s all. I’ve half a mind to get after dad and see if he can’t wake up the mayor or somebody to do something about it. Why, when I was down at Mount Vernon last year—”

But Micky wasn’t particularly interested in Mount Vernon. He had heard all about that trip once and was more intent now on getting home to lunch than working up indignation on any subject. He listened carelessly, occasionally punctuating Cavvy’s tirade with a joke, but when they paused at his gate his mind had veered to another subject altogether.

“Come on down after lunch and bring your football,” he called, from half-way up the walk. “We’ll round up the bunch and have a little practice.” 107

“All right,” returned Cavanaugh absently.

Intent upon his new-born project, he presently burst into the Cavanaugh dining room, smoothing his rebellious crop with one hand and wiping the back of the other—which had escaped the towel—against his coat.

“Where’s dad?” he exclaimed, stopping short. “He hasn’t gone yet, has he?”

“He couldn’t get home to lunch to-day,” explained his mother quietly. “He telephoned that he’d have to stay at the mine.”

“That’s funny.” The boy dropped into his chair and unfolded his napkin. Almost never, except at the time of the big cave-in three years before, had his father failed to run home in the car for their mid-day meal. “There hasn’t been an accident, has there?”

“No; it’s something about the men. There’s been some trouble amongst them for several days, and—”

“Ginger!” Cavvy straightened up. “Maybe it’s those anarchists. Why don’t they run them out of town? All they do is to try and upset everything and make trouble for the Government. I bet they’re paid by the Germans!”

Mrs. Cavanaugh smiled. She was used to her son’s outbursts. 108

“Running them out of town isn’t as easy as it sounds,” she said. “Unfortunately, some of them belong here and have their rights like any other citizens.”

“Well, the mayor might do something,” contended Cavvy, applying himself to his lunch. “Does dad think there’s going to be trouble?”

“He didn’t say, but I’m afraid he’s a little worried. They’re to have some kind of a mass meeting this afternoon, and you know how easily those foreigners are sometimes swayed. We’ll hope for the best, though. They’ve always been well treated and seemed contented, and with all this extra work ahead I don’t see how they can possibly complain.”

Her anxiety, and the desire to keep it suppressed, caused her to forget for the moment her intention of forbidding Jim to go near the mine that afternoon. When the omission occurred to her, ten minutes after lunch was over, the boy was nowhere to be found. He had been expecting something of the sort, and had lost no time in departing quietly by the side door. A convenient lane brought him quickly to the rear of the McBride house, where a yodel summoned Micky.

“Hustle,” said Cavvy briefly. “There’s something doing down at the mine and we want to be in on it.” 109

McBride nodded.

“I heard ’em talking it at lunch. Do you s’pose they’re going to have a strike, or something?”

“Don’t know; they’ll be fools if they do. Anyhow, there’s going to be a mass meeting this afternoon, and maybe they’ll decide then.”

110

CHAPTER XIV
QUICK WIT AND COURAGE

Departing in haste, with ears purposely dulled against possible parental voices, the boys headed for the mine by the shortest possible route. The streets were singularly bare for a Saturday afternoon. Here and there a woman talked anxiously to another over a fence-rail, or there was a glimpse of children playing in a back yard. But there were scarcely any men to be seen.

“Gee! I hope we’re not too late,” commented Cavanaugh, as they turned the last corner and started up a steep, narrow street leading to the open space in front of the mine property. Suddenly he stopped. “Listen!” he said abruptly.

For a long moment they stood motionless. Down the narrow thoroughfare swept the dull, low, pulsating murmur of many voices rising and falling. The windows of the houses at the end of the street were filled with people all staring in the same direction.

They were vaguely stirred and a trifle uneasy. 111
What little they had heard of the disturbances of the past week had passed mostly over their heads. Cavvy merely knew that certain outside agitators had been haranguing the men for the last few days. As they panted up the slope and reached the level they paused, startled at what lay before them.

The wide, open space was packed with men. Hundreds and hundreds in their greasy, ore-grimed working clothes, a week's stubble, darkening their already swarthy faces, stood shoulder to shoulder in close-packed masses. That ominous rumble of voices had ceased. Only here and there sounded sibilant whispers or hoarse, low-voiced comment. For the most part they were listening intently to a speaker who stood on a box over by the big flag pole in the center of the space.

Cavvy could not see the man clearly, nor could he get the thread of what the fellow was saying. But there was a quality of harsh, sneering dominance in the stranger's voice to which he took an instant dislike. He glanced at Micky, who had drawn closer to him.

"Come on over to those steps where we can see something," he whispered, and, turning quickly, he began to skirt the crowd.

McBride nodded silently. The steps in question were already pretty well filled with late comers, but by dint of a little squeezing the two boys managed to gain a foothold where they could overlook the crowd.

The square was a familiar spot transformed. 112
Every window was filled with heads. Every foot of standing room was occupied by that close-packed mass of men, oddly silent in contrast to the shouting, gesticulating orator. And suddenly, to Cavvy's wrought up imagination, instead of an ordinal crowd of workmen, many of whom he knew by sight if not by name, the throng became a mob of strangers waiting now only the word to launch into ravening destruction.

For a moment it all seemed incongruous, impossible. Mechanically his eyes travelled up the tall, white pole and rested dazedly on the Stars and Stripes rippling in the hot September sun just as it had gleamed there yesterday and the day before. Only that seemed real. His heart swelled unaccountably, then leaped driving the blood into his face as a phrase from the man on the box below stung into his consciousness.

"That flag up there—what does it mean to you?" the fellow shouted, with an upward fling of one long arm. "Does it stand for *your* country, or for a government *you* have any share in? No! A thousand times no! It's like the Union Jack, or the French Tricolor—a symbol of tyrants who take the bread out of your mouths and fatten like leeches on your toil."

He paused to sweep a long lock of dark hair out 113

of his eyes. Then he reached out and dexterously loosened the rope halliards. Cavvy caught his breath.

“You’re dirt to them, that’s all,” continued the speaker loudly. “They work you for their own selfish ends and when you cry out, what do they tell you? It’s for the flag! Bah!” He was manipulating the ropes skillfully. Aghast, incredulous, Cavvy saw the flag quiver, dip and droop into a crumpled mass as it was dragged swiftly downward.

“The flag—look at it!” screamed the agitator, deftly loosening the bunting from the halliards and crushing it in both hands.

A startled murmur rose from the crowd, but Cavvy did not hear it. He bent forward, face white and strained, eyes glittering. Unconsciously the fingers of one hand dug into McBride’s shoulder until the boy winced.

“Look at it!” repeated the hateful voice triumphantly. “The symbol of tyrants! There’s no real flag but the emblem of universal brotherhood. This thing—this rag, is fit for nothing but the dirt, to be ground under foot.”

“No!” cried Cavvy hoarsely. “Stop!”

The words which had so infuriated him were scarcely spoken when out of the crowd packed around the flag-pole there leaped a boy—short, square-built, olive skinned. Like a flash he reached up and snatched the crumpled bunting from the hands of the startled orator, ducked under the arm of a burly miner who was too surprised to stop him, and disappeared into the throng. 114

Cavvy caught his breath and straightened. From his point of vantage he could follow the progress through the crowd of this new actor in the drama. Ducking, squirming, wriggling, the boy eluded a dozen hands stretched out to stop him. Away from those immediately surrounding the agitator, his progress was easier. So swift had been his action that many of those on the outskirts of the crowd had not even seen it. They did not know what it was all about. Suddenly Cavanaugh clutched McBride and dragged him down the steps.

“He’s getting away with it. It’s that Tallerico kid. Come ahead, quick. Maybe he’ll need some help.”

Their progress toward the point where Cavvy thought the Italian boy would merge was more or less hindered. The crowd was suddenly in motion, roughly pushing in to gain a nearer view of what was going on about the flag-pole. A bedlam of voices chattering half a dozen tongues took the place of that former tense silence.

At last, bursting from the crowd, Cavanaugh caught a glimpse of Tallerico darting down an alley, and impulsively he followed. Several half-grown mine boys were headed in the same direction, and he determined grimly that if they meant to stop the Italian they would not do it unhindered. 115

Down the alley he ran with Micky at his elbow. They passed the mine boys and presently

emerged unopposed into the street beyond in time to see Tallerico disappearing through the doorway of the Jessup house.

“He’s got away,” said Cavvy with a sigh of relief.

He slowed down, and McBride paused with him.

“Some kid!” exclaimed the latter. “Took nerve to put across a stunt like that.”

Cavanaugh did not answer. He moved slowly on, and at the door of the old house he paused, a curious expression on his face.

“I’m going in,” he stated abruptly, a touch of defiance in his glance.

The hall was dark and rather smelly. In the days of Washington it had been spacious and beautiful, but it could scarcely be called so now. Dirt streaked the walls; odds and ends of broken furniture cluttered the door. Four doors opened out of the hall, all of which were closed, and Cavvy hesitated doubtfully at the foot of the graceful, curving, battered staircase.

Then from above, punctuating the stillness, came faintly the sound of suppressed panting. Cavvy took the stairs at a run, McBride following at his heels. An instant later he paused on the threshold of a room so different from anything he had expected that he was fairly speechless with surprise. 116

It was long and low, with three windows, two looking out on the street. The glass in them was clear and unbroken; instinctively he realized that these must be Micky’s “two whole windows” of that morning. The woodwork shone immaculate in its creamy whiteness; the floor was clean. A table and a few chairs were ranged against the wall. There were other things, but just now Cavvy had no eye for detail.

From the wall above the white mantel—aloof, majestic, a touch of kindliness about the eyes, a hint of world-weariness in the tight-lipped mouth—looked down the face of Stuart’s Washington. Below the picture, startled, defiant, a little afraid, stood the Tallerico kid, the rescued flag still clutched tightly in his arm.

As recognition dawned, his tense expression faded. His eyes softened, and with a long, relieved sigh his lips parted in a flashing smile.

“Oh!” he said. “It’s—it’s *you*!”

Cavvy gulped.

“Yes, it’s us,” he answered, oblivious of grammar. “We thought you might need some help, but—” He broke off and moved swiftly toward the boy. “It was great—simply great!” he exclaimed a little incoherently. “We got there late and were away on the outside. When that—that *beast* grabbed the flag, I—I—” 117

“I heard you,” said Tallerico simply. “It—it helped.”

Cavvy stared. “Helped?”

“Yes,” nodded the other, smiling. “It came sudden, you know. I had not thought the—the *faccino* would do the thing he did. When you cry

out it—it wake me up. I know you were too far away to help; and so I did quickly what you would do if you were near."

A slow flush crept up into Cavvy's face. He bit his lip, and then one hand reached out and caught the smaller boy by the shoulder. For an instant he stood there silent. Then:

"Let's fold up the flag," he said rather gruffly. "And while we're doing it you can tell me about this room. It's got me guessing."

"It is the room of the great Washington," explained Tallerico promptly—"his special room. He was here in the Revolution. You see, my father says General Washington is the greatest man in the world, and when he find out about this room he fix it up and keep it nice. Sometimes—" He hesitated and then went on rather shyly. "Sometimes, when I come here by myself and read the history and look at his picture, it makes it all so real as if, almost, I could turn around and—and see him standing by the window, or—" He broke off with an embarrassed laugh. "Maybe that sounds foolish to you."

Cavanaugh shook his head; there was a very curious expression on his face. 118

"No," he said slowly at length, "it doesn't. I'll tell you what I do think, though," he went on briskly. "You're one good scout, Tallerico. There isn't a fellow in the troop who'll beat you."

The dark eyes glowed. "You mean—"

"Sure thing!" Cavvy's lips parted in a friendly grin. "There's a troop meeting next Friday, and — Well, I guess he'll see, won't he, Micky?"

119

CHAPTER XV
THE SCOUT RALLY

Mr. Wendell clamped some papers carefully together and laid them within the covers of his troop record book.

"Now that we've gone over the matter of the Liberty Loan," he said, leaning back in his chair, "there's one more piece of business before we take up our final practice for the rally to-morrow. I mean the application of young Frank Tallerico for membership in the troop. I don't think I need say much about him. He's been present for several meetings and you've had time to size him up and talk over the matter amongst yourselves. There is just one thing, though. You know I don't wish to influence you in any way, but for some time it has seemed to me we might very well broaden out and take in more fellows like Tallerico—boys who work or who come from laboring families. I've already talked about this with the troop leaders, so I won't say any more now. The meeting is open for nominations."

As he ceased speaking there was a little stir amongst the scouts seated on a long row against the opposite wall. The scoutmaster, apt at 120

reading expressions, sensed a slight feeling of tension and was prepared, as he had expected to be, for a marked difference of opinion. Clay Marshall, serious and full of responsibility, seemed on the point of getting on his feet. But before he or any one else had time to make a move, Jim Cavanaugh sprang up.

“I nominate Frank Tallerico for membership,” he said abruptly.

“Second the motion,” echoed McBride, from his place at the head of the Eagle Patrol.

There was a murmur of surprise from several quarters. Stout Harry Ritter’s jaw gaped.

“Well, of all the fakes,” he muttered to Ted Hinckley beside him. “Why, not more than a week ago he wouldn’t listen to such a thing.”

John Wendell’s face expressed neither his surprise nor his gratification.

“You’ve all heard the nomination,” he said. “Will you have a standing vote, or ballot?”

“Standing vote,” suggested several voices at once.

“Very well. Those in favor of the nomination please stand. Those opposed remain seated.”

With a stir, a rustle and much scraping of feet, the entire troop arose. The scoutmaster smiled.

“Fine,” he said. “I think you’ve done the right thing, fellows. I’ve an idea you’ll find Tallerico has the makings of a good scout.”

“He has,” said Cavanaugh emphatically. “May I say a word, sir? It’s just this,” he added with some embarrassment, his glance traveling swiftly over the line of scouts. “As Fa—er—Ritter says, not very long ago I didn’t want him in the troop at all. He’s a foreigner, and I didn’t think he knew or cared anything about scouting for the flag or—or anything. I was dead wrong. You all know about what happened in front of the Smelter buildings last Saturday. A beastly anarchist was gassing the crowd and he pulled down the flag and was going to tramp on it. Very likely you’ve heard that a boy jumped out of the bunch and grabbed the flag and got away with it. It broke up the meeting and afterward the men ran the fellow and his gang out of town. Well, that boy was Tallerico, and if he don’t make as fine a scout as anybody here, I’ll—I’ll—” 121

Just what Cavvy would have done in that event remained unknown. A roar of applause, punctuated by stamping feet and whistling, broke from the troop and drowned his voice. Long before order was restored, Cavanaugh had resumed his seat and recovered his usual composure.

“I suppose you’re going to train him yourself for the Tenderfoot exams,” commented Ted Hinckley slyly.

“He don’t need it,” returned Cavvy coolly. “He’s pretty near ready for the second class, which is more than *some* people can say.” 122

There was another laugh and then Mr. Wendell intervened. In a few words he expressed his

pleasure and appreciation of Tallerico's act, which, he said, any of those present would have been proud to have performed, and then took up the practice for the rally.

This was to be a small affair confined to members of the troop. With so much war work, and the Liberty Loan so near, there was no time for anything elaborate. The several patrols were simply to compete together in various scout stunts on the village Green, and there would also be two or three combined maneuvers with staves and first aid materials for the entertainment of any onlookers who might be present.

Naturally there was a lot of good natured rivalry amongst the patrols. Each leader was determined that his particular group should come off with the most honors, and there had been considerable secret practicing at odd moments for two weeks past. The meet was scheduled for three o'clock, and there were no late comers.

The events were started with a dressing race in which there were six entrants, two from each patrol. A distance was marked off and divided into six narrow imaginary lanes, along which at regular distances the contestants laid their shoes, leggins, coat, belt and hat. At a given signal each scout started down the course, putting on his things in the order named. The one to reach the tape first, provided he was properly dressed and his equipment in perfect order, was the winner. 123

Naturally a good many ludicrous happenings occurred and evoked much laughter both from the scouts and the people lining the course. Bill McBride came in third, and Shrimp Willett, also a member of the Eagle Patrol, took first honors. He was small, wiry and quick as chain lightning, and the way he seemed to slide into his garments as if they had been oiled, provided much entertainment to the bystanders.

"That kid don't need much time in the morning," commented one of the latter. "Believe me, he could get dressed on the way down stairs."

McBride, who was standing near the line, smiled unconsciously at the man's amusement. A moment later he heard a voice behind him sneer:

"Baby's tricks! Gee-whiz! Ain't they got nothing better to do with their time?"

Turning abruptly, he met the contemptuous stare of a slouching, shabbily dressed fellow a year or two older than himself, who lounged indolently against a tree. A faded cap perched rakishly on a mop of brilliant red hair; his eyes were blue and hard and wide open. From one corner of his mouth there dangled the butt of a cigarette. 124

Micky flushed, and his lips parted for a swift retort. But at that moment the signal sounded for the next event and he had to hurry off.

When he passed near that portion of the Green again the obnoxious "Red" Garrity was gone. Another boy stood there, however, whom McBride had sometimes noticed in his company.

He frowned, and then he caught an odd, almost wistful questioning in the other's eyes which puzzled him. None of that crowd of roughnecks had ever shown the slightest interest in scout doings except to hoot and jeer at the troop when they met in the street. There had been more than one case of solitary scouts or small boys in pairs who had been roughly treated by the hoodlums under the leadership of the red haired chap. With this in mind, Micky was just turning away when the other boy took a quick step forward.

"You—you didn't win that last race, did you?" he said hesitatingly.

The remark was obviously made for the sake of creating talk. But McBride was naturally a friendly chap, and just now he was a little curious to know what was in the other's mind. So he answered pleasantly, and quite a little conversation ensued.

"Hanged if he don't seem really interested," 125
thought the patrol leader, as he went off presently to oversee his candidate for the firelighting contest. "He certainly talks that way. I don't know why he shouldn't be, either. Those fellows don't seem to have much to do except bum around street corners, and I can't see any fun in that."

Twice afterwards he paused to chat with the boy, whose name was Conners. Then came the final exhibitions, and when it was all over Micky had to hurry home to look after some chores which must be done before supper.

His patrol had won out by a narrow margin, and he was in high spirits as he took a short cut through a rather slummy part of town. Swinging briskly along the narrow street, he entertained himself by recalling some of the amusing happenings of the afternoon. Fat Ritter had been particularly funny in the one-legged race, and Micky was thinking how he would josh the fellow next time they met, when he suddenly realized that a few hundred yards ahead three figures were lined up against a factory wall, watching him intently.

One of them was Conners; another he did not 126
know by name. The third was swaggering Red Garrity. There was something unmistakably ominous in their attitude of quiet waiting. Things he had heard of as happening to scouts at the hands of this red haired hooligan and his followers flashed into Micky's brain, and for a second his pace faltered and he almost stopped.

Then abruptly his head went up and his jaw squared. Swiftly he resumed his stride and came on steadily. His lips were firm, his eyes set straight ahead; and though it must be confessed that his heart was beating rather rapidly, he did not show it.

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CHAPTER XVI

ROUGHNECK GARRITY

When Red Garrity left the Green, he sauntered down a side street to a small tobacco store where he bought a package of cheap cigarettes. Outside the door he met Shrimp McGowan and the two lounged on a corner for half an hour or so before deciding to indulge in a soda. This also took some time and when it was finally over they strolled toward the section of town that was filled with factories and cheap dwellings in a languid search for Chick Conners.

In the end it was Conners himself who did the finding. Speeding homeward from the Green, he overtook the two cronies dawdling along in front of a factory. His appearance met with slightly aggrieved inquiries.

“Where you been all afternoon?” demanded Garrity.

“Yes,” chimed in McGowan, “we’ve been looking all over town for you.”

Conners sniffed. “You couldn’t have looked very hard,” he commented. “I just come from seeing the boy scouts on the Green.”

Garrity hitched up a frayed suspender and sneered. 128

“Boy scouts!” he repeated in a scornful tone. “You must be terrible hard up, Chick, to go hanging around that bunch of dubs.”

Conners flushed a little.

“Aw, I wasn’t hanging around ’em,” he protested. “I was just watching ’em do them stunts.”

“Stunts! Do you call them loony kid games stunts? Taking off their clothes and then seeing which can put ’em on quickest! I ain’t very shy of time, but would you catch me wasting it on that rot? Nix!”

Conners’ thin lips expanded in a grin.

“If you wasn’t watching ’em yourself how’d you get wise to what they was doing?” he countered.

Garrity took a long pull at the butt of a cigarette and flicked it into the street. Then he turned on Conners, chin thrust out aggressively.

“I don’t need no lifetime, like some guys, to catch on to what’s doing,” he remarked. “A glance while I was passing along the Green was plenty. Besides, I seen enough of ’em long before I come to this slow burg—parading around in their cute little uniforms an’ peddling stamps an’ the like. New York’s full of ’em.”

He pronounced it New Yoick. And as he swaggered there with legs wide apart, hands thrust deep into trousers’ pockets, shabby cap cocked on one side of an untidy mass of carroty hair, it was not hard to guess where he hailed from. Chick Conners eyed him with the admiring gaze of a satellite, beneath which was a touch of doubt and a little hint of protest. 129

“Maybe that’s right when they’re all dolled up with their coats on an’ everything,” he said. “But they ain’t always like that. A guy was telling me they had darn good fun at their meetings, and in summer they go off to camp, and—”

“Listen at him, Shrimp!” cut in Garrity with a loud laugh. “Don’t he talk up nice. You might think he was hankering to be a boy scout himself.”

Conners flushed scarlet, hesitated, and then his shoulders squared.

“Well, s’posing I was,” he retorted with a sort of uneasy defiance. “I don’t see what difference it makes to you.”

Garrity bent suddenly toward him, chin thrust out, eyes angry and threatening.

“You don’t, eh?” he snorted. “Well, let me tell you something, Conners. You go fooling around them boy scouts, and you’re all off with me. I don’t pal around with that kind of a softy. You’d look good in one of them play soldier suits, you would. Here comes one of ’em now. Ain’t he cute? Don’t forget to s’lute your brother scout, Chick.”

With mouth still sneering, he stepped back beside McGowan who lounged against the wall. After a moment’s hesitation Conners ranged himself with the others, and with varying degrees of expression they watched the approach of the boy in khaki who had just swung the corner half a block away. 130

He was about fifteen, younger and slighter than Red Garrity, but with a trim, erect carriage which was in marked contrast with the other’s slouch. On his left sleeve was a first class patrol leader’s badge. His clothes were neat and well brushed and his whole equipment immaculate.

He walked briskly with an easy, springy stride, the corners of his lips curving in a reminiscent smile. Suddenly he saw them. The smile vanished; a look of surprise and uncertainty came into his face; he almost stopped. Then he came on again, but with lips pressed tightly together and much of the spring gone from his movements.

Garrity watched his approach, a certain pleased expectancy in his hard blue eyes. Deliberately he kept silent until the scout was opposite him and beginning to think, perhaps, that he might pass without interruption. Then one hand shot out and gripped McBride’s arm.

“What your hurry, Cutey?” drawled Garrity. “Afraid Poppa Scoutmaster will mark you late?” 131

Micky tried to jerk away, but the muscular fingers dug into his arm with painful force. A deep flush flamed into his face and his eyes narrowed.

“Let go,” he demanded curtly.

Garrity grinned irritatingly.

“Ain’t he got pretty pink cheeks?” he drawled insultingly. “They’re smooth an’ soft just like a girl’s.”

With a sudden motion he brought up his free hand, callous and none too clean, with blackened, broken nails, and rubbed it roughly over one side of McBride’s face.

Shrimp McGowan tittered. Conners’ eyes

widened with a look of silent protest. A second later there was a loud smack as Micky's open palm struck Garrity's cheek with a force that left a momentary imprint of his fingers on the tanned and freckled skin. The next instant the scout was sprawling in the gutter.

"You fresh Ike!" snarled Garrity furiously. "I'll tan the hide off you for that. Get up!"

Dizzily McBride tried to scramble to his feet. He had struck the curb with considerable force and his head whirled. But he had not the least intention of giving in to the bully without a fight.

He had scarcely risen to his knees when Garrity knocked him down again. Micky rolled over a couple of times and managed to gain his feet without interference. He was conscious that Conners had caught the red-haired fellow by an elbow and was protesting in a shrill, uneven voice, while McGowan stared uneasily up and down the street. But all he actually saw was the sneering face of his opponent as he staggered forward, clenched fists raised in a position he thought was scientific. 132

Suddenly there came a whirlwind forward rush which easily broke through the boy's unsteady guard. Garrity had no science. His was merely the superiority of bull strength and a total disregard for the principles of fair fighting. McBride, still shaky from that knock against the curb, managed to partly parry a blow at his chest. Then came a smothering clinch and a blow on the face which turned the boy limp and sent him to the ground again.

Garrity stepped back, his breath coming a little unevenly. For a moment he stood motionless, eyes fixed on the limp figure at his feet. McBride's hat was gone, his coat was torn and muddied. There was a smear of grime across one cheek and a cut from which the blood oozed slowly. As Red stared at the white face and the sprawling body, so much slimmer and smaller than his own, a curious, unwonted sense of shame swept over him. An instant later the scout's eyes opened and he looked dazedly at the fellow standing over him.

"You—you coward!" he muttered. "You beastly coward!" 133

Garrity gave a loud, raucous laugh which somehow held no note of mirth in it.

"Talk's cheap," he sneered, hitching up his suspender. "I guess you won't get fresh again with *me*." He turned and swaggered off. "Come ahead, fellows," he said over one shoulder. "This poor prune's finished. Let's be getting down town."

McGowan slouched along beside him. Chick Conners took a step or two after them and then stopped short.

"I ain't coming," he stated briefly.

Garrity turned his head and for a moment stared steadily into the other fellow's face. What he saw there brought a faint flush into his freckled cheeks and set his forehead in a scowl.

"You ain't?" he repeated harshly. "All right. Only

don't you come belly-aching around me to-morrow or any other time. I'm through with you."

Without waiting for a reply, he went on his way with Shrimp, his lips pursed in a strident whistle. At the corner, however, he glanced back for an instant. McBride was on his feet and Conners stood beside him. Indeed, one ragged sleeve encircled the khaki shoulders supportingly and their heads were close together.

Garrity's lips curled in a sneer, but the flush in his face deepened, and in his heart there was a queer, dull, comprehensive pang such as he had never known before.

CHAPTER XVII
LEARNING TO BOX

About a week later Bill McBride appeared at Mr. Wendell's study with two pair of nearly new boxing gloves dangling from his hands.

"I want to learn how to box," he said directly to the scoutmaster. "I'm tired of trying to dope it out of a book."

There was a rather bad bruise on one side of his face which Mr. Wendell observed without appearing to notice it.

"I'll teach you all I know with pleasure, Bill," he answered, smiling. "But I'm afraid that won't be much more than the elements of the science. I haven't had the gloves on for years."

McBride's eyes narrowed and his lips straightened in a firm line.

"I want to know more than elements, sir," he stated. "I want to really know how to box."

For a moment or two the scoutmaster stood thoughtfully silent. Then his eyes brightened.

"Of course!" he murmured. "I don't know why I didn't think of it at once. I've a friend who's a crackerjack with the gloves," he went on to McBride. "It's Chambers down at the bank; you probably know him. I'll see if he won't give you some lessons. I've an idea there are several other fellows who'd like to take it up."

There were. As a matter of fact more than half the troop were eager to take up the new sport and for a time things were rather congested. Frank Chambers willingly lent his aid, agreeing to give at least one night a week to the instruction.

There was a large barn back of Mr. Wendell's house and here the two men met their pupils every Tuesday night. The scoutmaster undertook to coach the smaller boys and those who failed to show especial proficiency or interest in the art. As soon as they developed any noticeable degree of skill, they were passed on to the more advanced teacher.

Bill McBride remained only a short time in the former class. There was no question of his keen interest and willingness to work. He never missed a chance to profit by instruction or to get practice. He even bought a punching bag which he put up at home and used whenever he had a few spare minutes.

He came in for considerable mild joshing from the others. They took to calling him Slugger McBride, and wanted to know how soon he was going to challenge the champion tissue-paper weight of Wharton. Micky took it all serenely, or made some apt retort, and before long his critics were silenced by his rapidly growing expertness at the art. Naturally quick and clever, and a good athlete, he soon developed a skill which surprised even his teachers. Almost from the first he could outbox every fellow in the class save Jim Cavanaugh, and even he was sometimes hard put to hold his own. 137

Cavvy, by the way, was the only person who had his confidence and knew what he was working for. He had been furious when Micky told about that encounter with Red Garrity, and at first was all for getting after the fellow and giving him a lesson. But in the end he had to abandon the idea.

“Nothing to it, old man,” declared McBride firmly. “It’s my scrap, you know, and I don’t want anyone else butting in. I’m going to wait till I can handle myself half way decently and then I’ll show that big piece of cheese where he gets off. It’ll be done fair and square, too.”

So Cavvy had to give up his plan of interfering, but his dislike for Garrity and his crowd was by no means lessened. In fact when Chick Conners appeared shyly at the troop meeting one night and it was rumored that he wanted to join the troop, the two friends came close to a violent disagreement. 138

“What kind of an institution will this troop be anyhow, if we take in that sort of riffraff?” the older chap demanded hotly on their way home. “I was wrong about Tallerico, I admit. He’s a good kid. But Conners and Garrity and that slimy McGowan and a lot more of ’em are all rotten. They’re not worth powder to blow ’em to —”

“Listen, Jim,” cut in Micky hastily. “You’re dead wrong. Conners isn’t that sort, anyhow. I told you how decent he was that—that day. He’s cut away from Garrity and the rest and he wants to be a scout. And when a fellow feels like that I believe in giving him a chance. At the worst we can always drop him from the troop—though I’m perfectly sure we won’t want to.”

Cavvy grumbled and protested, but in the end he gave in. The result was that at the next meeting Chick Conners was elected, and passed his Tenderfoot test, on which McBride had been coaching him, the same night. He passed it well, too, and even Cavanaugh, who still viewed him with suspicion, could find no fault with his demeanor, or the promptness and thoroughness of his answers.

The following Tuesday evening the attendance at the boxing class was small. Like a good many other experiments the general interest had 139

lessened considerably as the novelty began to wear off. Some of the scouts found they did not care as much for it as they supposed they would. Others were not able to take the time from lessons, especially as preparatory details for the Liberty Loan Campaign was giving them a lot of extra work. But there were still six or eight eager enthusiasts who kept at it, chief amongst them Cavanaugh and McBride, who had come to be extraordinarily well matched. Cavvy had the longer reach and slightly stronger punch. But Micky could hit hard, too, was amazingly quick on his feet, and his brain seemed to work like greased lightning. That evening for the first time he held Cavvy in a bout of over fifteen minutes, which in the end was called a draw.

More than once Mr. Wendell found himself watching the boy with curious, speculative interest. It was McBride's way to take up things he liked with enthusiasm and persistence. But in this matter the scoutmaster seemed to see a degree more of dogged purpose than usual. He felt, somehow, that the boy was working for some definite end, but he asked no questions. Just as the boys were leaving, however, he spoke to Micky at the barn door.

"You certainly gave Jim a run for his money to-night," he remarked smiling. "You ought to be able to take care of yourself mighty soon with almost anybody at all near your weight."

Still faintly flushed with exercise the boy glanced up from the gloves he was tying together. The lantern light shone on a face glowing with justifiable pleasure at his success. Then suddenly the eyes narrowed slightly and his lips straightened in an odd, determined line.

"That's what I've been working for, sir," he answered.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BOY WHO COULDN'T SWIM

Red Garrity slouched through the wide gates of the Wharton Smelter Company and glanced indolently up and down the street. His application for a job had just been turned down by the superintendent, but that did not trouble him over much. He was used to it. In fact anything else would have surprised him after the caustic comment which had followed his last self determined vacation. He was a good worker—when he worked. But his habit of taking days off whenever he felt in the mood did not commend him to many employers of labor.

"Bum outfit to work for, anyhow," he yawned, feeling in his pocket for a cigarette.

He neither found one nor the means of purchasing a fresh supply, and for the first time he looked annoyed. He would certainly have to land a job to-morrow and get some kale, he thought, as he strolled up the street toward Shrimp McGowan's abode. He decided to try a certain wood working concern where he was little known, and dismissed the subject from his

mind.

Shrimp was at home and responded to his yodel. As he slouched down the steps, yawning and blinking in the bright sunlight, a look of contempt came into Garrity's eyes. 142

"Watcher been doing?" he demanded. "Sleeping?"

McGowan gaped again and nodded. "Nothing else to do," he drawled.

Garrity sniffed scornfully and stifled a longing for Chick Conners, to whom he had not spoken for weeks. Whatever failings the latter youth might have, at least he had always been up and doing and ready for excursions of any sort Red might suggest.

"Well, there's something doing now," the latter remarked briefly. "We're going out on the river road."

Shrimp showed no signs of delight at the prospect, but after a weak protest he yielded—as he always did. He could not understand Red's partiality for these country walks. It never occurred to him that the woods and fields and river could hold a subtle charm for this domineering boy who constantly belittled them in words and talked boastingly and regretfully of the lights and bustle and crowded excitements of the city. Indeed, Garrity had never really admitted as much even to himself, and in the old days he and Chick had always been at odds regarding the relative merits of town and country.

The road they took followed the windings of the Monhegan River. Overhead the sky was cloudless. The air was warm and mellow, yet with a tonic freshness in it which stirred the blood. The trees were beginning to turn, and their reds and yellows contrasted strongly with the dark bulk of pine and hemlock. Across the distant hills lay a faint, mellow Autumn haze. 143

It was a day to thrill any boy, and Garrity was perfectly conscious of its charm. As usual, however, he growled and grumbled at the dullness of the country, and talked longingly of his beloved Bowery, but somehow Shrimp's slavish agreement failed to give him pleasure.

They threw stones at birds and squirrels, tossed rocks into the river and slashed at trees and bushes with destructive knives. They strolled erratically, visiting several orchards on the way, and finally reached the point where the stream, narrowing between rocky banks, flowed deep and swift toward a picturesque waterfall which made a favorite spot for picnicers and campers. Here they sat down in the shade of the hemlocks to eat their spoils.

"Funny you never came out with the bunch to swim," remarked McGowan after an interval of silent munching. "I s'pose you're a wonder at it," he added with a touch of spiteful sarcasm that was characteristic. 144

For a second the ever-ready Garrity hesitated, his eyes fixed on the rushing water six feet below the steep bank.

“I ain’t any wonder, but I’m good enough,” he boasted. “After swimming in the East River there ain’t any particular fun splashing around in this dump. Where do you go in? Right here?”

“Gee, no! It’s too darn swift and rocky. There’s a nice pool below the falls, about a mile down. Anybody’d be a nut to try to here.”

“Huh!” grunted Garrity. “I guess I could take care of myself all right. Say! Looka that squirrel over there. Want to see me bean him?”

He sprang up and reached hastily for a loose stone lying on the very edge of the steep bank. For most of the way this was solid rock, but just here there happened to be a treacherous patch of moss-grown earth. Red’s eyes were fixed on the inquisitive little animal perched on the opposite bank, and he stepped rather closer to the edge than he intended. The next instant he felt a sickening give beneath his feet and made a wild, panicky effort to regain his balance. It failed. Clawing desperately at the smooth surface of the bank, he felt himself plunging down the deep incline, heard a smothered cry from Shrimp, and struck the water with a tremendous splash.

It seemed icy cold, and Red was smitten instantly by a keen despairing horror. In spite of his recent boasting, he had never ventured into the East River, or any other. All he knew of swimming was a few primitive strokes learned in one visit to a Y. M. C. A. pool which had never been repeated. Even those were forgotten during that smothering, choking immersion. When he finally came to the surface he struck out wildly, beating the water blindly and ineffectually with his hands. Already he had swept far past the spot where he had fallen in. Shrimp was nowhere to be seen. There was no one in sight—nothing save the cruel rocky banks and the blurred shadows of the hemlocks past which he was tossed helplessly.

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In those awful moments which seemed like hours, a swift procession of vivid, fantastic pictures whirled through Red’s despairing brain. Then his head went under again and a moment later, dazed and half senseless, he felt himself driven against something hard and solid at which he clutched with all the strength and energy of desperation.

It was a boulder jutting up in midstream. For a moment Red’s progress was stayed, but he knew that it was only the briefest respite. The swirling current tugged at his legs and body; his numbed fingers slipped and slid across the smooth, waterworn surface. He thought of the fall below with its torrent of water thundering down to that bed of sharp pointed, fantastic rocks, and a gurgling, choking cry of horror and despair burst from his blue lips.

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CHAPTER XIX
A SCORE IS PAID

Garrity’s cry for help was purely instinctive. He

had no hope at all that it would be answered, and his surprise was very great when the bushes on the bank above him were thrust aside and a slim figure appeared, to stare down in astonishment.

“Help!” he cried again. “I’m drowning! Help!”

There was a swift scurry on the bank—the opposite bank from the one from whence Red had come. A coat flew off; shoes were tossed aside. Garrity’s heart sank as he realized that it was only a boy smaller than himself, but in spite of everything he could not help admiring the clean, graceful, unhesitating dive with which the fellow took the water. Then suddenly he lost his hold on the rock and the current caught him again.

A moment later a dripping head rose beside him. Red caught at it wildly, but a foot struck him in the stomach and drove him sickeningly back.

“Stop that!” the voice beat on his dazed brain. “Don’t touch me and I’ll get you out.”

The head vanished, but something slid across his neck and he felt a tug at his straggling hair. The impulse was irresistible to try and grab the arm which held him up, and he started to squirm around. 148

“Cut that out!” ordered the voice sharply. “If you don’t, I’ll let go.”

There was grit in Garrity’s make-up, and fortunately he was not quite too far gone to reason. He had little faith in the boy’s ability to save him, but at least his face was partly out of the water and he could breathe. His teeth dug into his under lip until it bled. Cold fear was tugging at his heart, but he made the effort, and let his muscles lax.

For a space nothing happened save that he did not sink under the water again. Then all at once he saw the bank closer than it had been before. It was lower, too, and shelving. A wild hope sprang up, followed swiftly by wilder panic. For though they still moved, it was more slowly, and gasping sounds of distress came from his rescuer.

Strainingly Red’s eyes watched the bank. Would they ever gain it? It was scarcely two feet above his head and little more than that away. Suddenly he felt a little push. An instant later his clawing fingers caught at a thrusting root, his feet struck bottom, and with a strangled sob he half pulled himself, half crawled onto a slippery shelf of rock.

For a moment or two he lay motionless, drawing in the air in great gulps. He felt chilled to the bone and every muscle ached, but nothing really mattered now. Finally he struggled up and turned his head. A white-faced, panting boy in dripping khaki lay beside him, a strange expression in his great gray eyes. Garrity’s own grew wider, his jaw dropped. Somehow he felt choked and speechless. 149

“You!” he gasped at length in a strangled voice. “*You!*”

Bill McBride merely nodded. He was too busy

getting his breath to speak. At length he sat up and presently got on his feet.

“Come on,” he said curtly.

Garrity followed him without question. His mind was a turmoil of dazed thoughts. In silence they climbed the bank and pushed through the undergrowth. Presently they reached a little clearing amongst the pines. A scout axe, a hat and an open haversack lay there, and close to them a neat pile of twigs and small sticks.

McBride knelt down and with fingers that shook a little drew a box of matches from the haversack. With one of these he lit the pile of sticks and when the fire was well going, he stood up.

“Take off your clothes and dry ’em out,” he told Garrity briefly. 150

As one in a dream, Red obeyed. When he had wrung out his soaking garments, he followed the scout’s example and made a little frame of sticks to hang them on before the fire. And all the time he was doing this he watched his companion with furtive, curious glances. He did not seem at all like the boy he had knocked about on the street that day. There was an air of quiet competence about his every movement which roused in Red’s heart an odd, unexpected admiration. Though he would never have admitted it, he knew he couldn’t have made that fire so quickly and so skillfully. Even his frame of sticks was crude and wobbly compared with McBride’s. And as for the horrible experience in the water—

“Well?” said Micky suddenly, straightening his slim, white body. “Are you through?”

Garrity nodded and thrust one upright stick more firmly into the pine needles. It was cool here in the shade and he shivered slightly.

“All right,” said McBride. “Come out here in the open, then. I’m going to give you a lesson.”

Garrity’s jaw gaped. “A—what?” he repeated. “Whatcher mean?”

“We’re going to fight. Is that plain?”

Red’s wide eyes mirrored his amazement.

“Aw, say!” he mumbled. “I ain’t going to fight —*you*!” 151

“Aren’t you, though?” McBride’s lips tightened. “You weren’t so particular a few weeks ago. You didn’t mind hitting me foul and then knocking me around before I could get up. You big stiff!” His tone brought the blood tingling into Garrity’s freckled face. “I don’t believe you ever fought fair in all your life. Do you want me to slap your face again?”

He took a quick step forward, his eyes blazing. Garrity, dazed, yet furiously angry, flung up one hand—and the fight was on.

As usual, Red lunged forward to get into a clinch. To his amazement he got an upper cut which drove him backward half a dozen feet where he scraped painfully against a pine trunk. Wild with pain and rage, he plunged at his

opponent again, to find that this was an altogether different McBride from the one he thought he knew.

Quick on his feet, cool, competent, the scout seemed to slide out of the bear-like embrace with ease, landing a smart blow on Red's chest as he did so. With a savage growl Garrity pulled up and whirled around. This time he would surely get him. He came forward more cautiously, muscular arms outspread. The next thing he knew he struck the ground with a jarring force which was only partly tempered by the thick bed of pine needles. Dazed a little, but undeterred, he scrambled up and leaped forward again.

But somehow Red's moment never came. 152
Ducking, dodging, feinting, countering, the smaller fellow simply played with his clumsy opponent. Not for a moment did he let him rest. Now and then he got in a smashing blow with all the force of his weight and muscle behind it, which brought a gasp from Garrity's wide lips. Constantly he lured the other on to frantic rushes which took the fellow's strength and got his wind, while McBride, with the skill he had gained in these past weeks of work, expended not even an unnecessary ounce of effort.

At last there came the moment Micky had hoped for. Sweat streaming down his face and chest, breath coming in loud gasps, Garrity staggered back from where he had been flung amongst some bushes. As he came slowly, he swayed a little, and McBride, watching his face narrowly, stiffened. A little feinting, and then a blow on the jaw with all his strength back of it, would settle things—would pay for that humiliating experience the thought of which had rankled in his memory all these weeks.

He took a quick step forward and then he 153
paused. Something in that strained, white, dogged face before him brought to the scout a sudden strange sense of repugnance in his task. The fellow was game, all right. He would not turn tail as long as he could keep his feet and senses. But that dazed look of bewildered pain in his eyes told its own story of a suffering which was more than physical. Micky was conscious of a sudden sense of shame at the purpose in his mind; his arms fell abruptly to his sides.

"Had enough?" he asked gruffly.

There was a pause. Garrity's head drooped wearily. "Y—yes," he mumbled.

In silence they went back to the fire and began to put on their dried clothing. Not a word was spoken until they were nearly dressed. Then it was Garrity who broke the silence.

"I—I didn't say nothing—about your—pulling me out," he muttered, eyes fixed on a refractory shoelace.

"You needn't," returned McBride briefly, reaching for the haversack which held the grub he had brought on this solitary hike. "Any scout would have done the same."

Red's glance shifted from the fire to the empty rack of sticks and then back to McBride's mussed and wrinkled shirt and breeches. A

poignant memory of those horrible moments in the river made him shiver. He picked up a narrow strip of bark and began to twist it about his fingers.

"I—I want to tell you—I'm sorry for—for what I've said about the—scouts," he said presently in a low, embarrassed voice. His head was lowered and his face flushed. "I—I didn't understand, I guess. They're not—like what I thought they was —"

"I don't suppose you did," cut in Micky suddenly. "Why should you?" He had accomplished what he had set out to do, and with the responsibility of it gone, he was more like his old easy going, friendly self than he had been for weeks. And as he looked at Garrity's downcast, embarrassed face he realized all at once that the fellow wasn't wholly bad. In fact at the moment he found something almost appealing about him. "Nobody ever does really understand scouts unless they travel around with them or see a troop working," he went on impulsively. "You'd better come down some Friday night and look us over."

Garrity's head went up and he stared.

"You—you don't mean that?"

McBride smiled.

"Why not? Your old friend Conners is in the troop now. He's going to join the boxing class next week. Why don't you come down and see how he makes out?"

Red's eyes drooped again. He felt a curious warmth stealing over him.

"Mebbe—I might," he mumbled.

CHAPTER XX
THE HAUNTED CABIN

It was the end of a glorious fall day early in November. Autumn had held back this year and the hills around Wharton were flaming with masses of red and yellow, which stood out against the darker pine and hemlock in raw splashes of gorgeous color. The air was balmy, yet with a touch of crispness which made tramping exhilarating, and also roused pleasant thoughts of cracking fires and the snug warmth of indoor cheer which make the most delightful possible endings for such a tramp.

Eight scouts from the Wharton troop were off for an overnight hike. There had been few enough of these this Fall, owing to the work on the Liberty Loan, campaigns for War Saving Stamps and the like. But now there was a momentary breathing spell and Cavanaugh, McBride and six others from the troop had been prompt to take advantage of it. Amongst the others were Chick Conners and—Red Garrity! The latter had been a member of the troop for just one week but already he was clothed in a complete scout uniform which made a different fellow of him. It was plain that he tried to appear unconscious of his attire, but at times he seemed unable to

resist a swift downward glance of admiring approval at the smooth folds of spotless khaki.

Full of high spirits, they tramped along the steep, crooked wood road, laughing, joking, playing tricks on each other, and apparently quite oblivious of the weight of haversack and blanket roll with which each one was burdened. But as they drew near their journey's end, they sobered down a trifle and began to discuss the cabin with interest and curiosity. 156

"Of course it isn't haunted—really," said Fernald Barber at length, in a pause which followed some especially lurid story.

He had meant the remark to be a positive statement, but somehow a touch of questioning crept into his voice. He was an imaginative boy, and the story had impressed him strongly. Moreover, dusk was approaching, and the trees cast long shadows across the trail.

"Of course not, you nut," laughed Cavanaugh, glancing back. "There's no such things as haunts, is there, Micky?"

McBride shrugged his shoulders. "I guess not, Cavvy," he grinned. "I never saw one, anyway."

"Nor anybody else," affirmed the patrol leader positively. "Just because old Morford lived alone in the cabin for so long, and was found dead back in the woods, a lot of loafers down town have made up a lovely yarn about his ghost coming back and hanging around the place. It's all the worst kind of rot." 157

"I wonder why it ain't ever been lived in since?" remarked Chick Conners curiously. "It's been empty a couple of years, you said."

"Sure, but who'd want it? It's miles away from everything, and unless you found another old hermit like Morford, who spent most of his time rambling around the hills, I don't know who'd have any use for it. Dad stopped there a couple of times while he was out hunting, and I was there once myself last fall."

"Did you stay over night?" asked Barber.

"No, but I'd just as soon have. There's not a thing the matter of it except a little damp. The roof's tight and there's some wooden bunks, and a dandy stone fireplace. I don't know what happened to the furniture. I guess it was the homemade kind and was broken up for firewood. With some tables and chairs and cooking utensils and things, it would make a dandy place for the troop to come on overnight hikes. I only wish I'd thought of it before."

"Well, we'll have to make the most of it now," said McBride. "Let's speed up, Cavvy. It'll be dark pretty quick, and we've got to rustle around for wood." 158

"Plenty of time," returned Cavanaugh. "We'll be there in five minutes."

Nevertheless he quickened his pace and for a while conversation ceased as the others followed him closely up the narrow, winding trail. One or two, like Barber, may have been slightly affected by the weird tales they had heard of the shack and its former eccentric owner, but the majority

were simply curious for a glimpse of the place and eager to reach their destination and settle down restfully after their long tramp.

The trail, which was scarcely more than a track, followed the rocky edge of a deep ravine. There was a glint of water down below, but in those depths already shadows were creeping up, filling the hollows, smoothing over the rough slopes, obliterating one by one each separate detail of tree and rock and brawling stream. On the other side the slope swept steeply upward, covered with close-set ranks of pines, whose long branches spread out over the trail itself.

Presently the road curved sharply to the right around a mass of fern-covered rock, twisted erratically for a space amongst the trunks of tall, straight pines, turned again, and ended abruptly on an open shoulder of the mountain.

“There she is,” announced Cavvy.

Before them, at the top of a gentle slope a long, low, structure of logs nestled against a background of trees. Close to one side towered a giant pine, its feathery branches overhanging the sloping roof of slabs. The closed door was almost hidden in the shadow of a wide, projecting roof, and to Furn Barber the whole place fairly breathed desertion and loneliness. But he would have perished rather than reveal that feeling to the others, and he was one of the first to dash up the slope and cluster around the door. 159

This was merely on the latch, and in a moment they had swarmed inside and were staring about in eager curiosity. Opposite them yawned a great stone fireplace, cavernous and empty. On the left was a shuttered window and on the other side stood a double tier of wooden bunks. There were some rough shelves at one side of the chimney, and a couple of empty boxes on the floor, but that was all.

For a moment no one spoke. The silence, the bare emptiness, the shadows in the corners, undoubtedly gave the place a gloomy look, and there was a damp chill over it all which was not exactly pleasant. McBride was the first to speak.

“Why, it’s a dandy place, Cavvy,” he said cheerily. Micky was one who always made the best of everything, and there were moreover, possibilities about the cabin which he sensed before the others. “All we need is a fire and some lights to make it as homelike as can be.” 160

His words broke the spell. Candles were quickly produced and lighted, and then the whole crowd hustled out for wood. There was plenty about in the shape of dead limbs and fallen trees, and each scout worked with a will cutting it up and dragging it in. In an hour a roaring fire blazed on the hearth and there was a pile outside the cabin door which would easily carry them through the night.

The transformation was surprising. The firelight flickered cheerily on the log walls, driving out the shadows and brightening every corner. Blankets spread out in the bunks, and a litter of cooking utensils around the hearth, took off much of the bare appearance. And when cooking operations began the place resounded with the

clatter of dishes, with jokes, laughter and noisy but good natured disputes, until it would have taken a powerful imagination indeed to detect anything “spooky” about it.

Nevertheless, Furn Barber’s mind was not entirely at ease. To be sure, he thoroughly enjoyed cooking and eating supper, and the fun which went on then and afterwards. But when bedtime came and the bustle of turning in was over, his thoughts returned to the weird tales he had heard of old Morford’s “ghost” and lingered there with growing apprehension.

He occupied one of the bunks with McBride, and long after everyone else had gone to sleep, he lay watching the flames leaping in the fireplace, and their reflection glowing and dancing on the walls and roof. Every now and again, as the fire died a little, his glance swept shadowy corners nervously and he shivered at some particularly creepy detail of the stories he had been told about the place. 161

But even his wrought up imagination could find nothing very fearful in this peaceful picture, and at length he dozed off.

He woke with a start to find the room in darkness. The fire had died down to a dull red glow which illuminated only a foot or two of the stone hearth. Everything else was swathed in shadows—everything, that is, save—

Barber gasped suddenly and sat up tingling, his gaze fixed fearfully on the farther wall of the cabin. For a long moment he stared, wide-eyed, horrified, at the motionless, shapeless figure which stood out, vaguely white against the glass of the window. Then suddenly it moved with a slow, creepy motion along the wall, and with a gurgle of fright, Furn clutched his bedfellow.

“Micky!” he gasped thickly. “Micky—wake up!”

McBride rolled over. “Huh?” he grunted sleepily. “W’as matter?” 162

“The ghost!” shrilled Barber. “Morford’s ghost!”

The words penetrated to more ears than one. Startled into complete wakefulness, McBride bounced over and leaned out of the bunk. At the same instant Red Garrity sat up abruptly from a heap of blankets on the floor, and Cavanaugh poked his head over the edge of the upper bunk.

“What’s the matter?” they both cried at once.

“The ghost!” wailed Barber. “There beside the window. I can see it—”

He broke off with a shrill squeal of fright as Cavvy’s flashlight, sweeping suddenly across the room, brought into clear relief an unmistakably human form, lank and white-clad, looming up beside the rough shelves that hung between the fireplace and the window.

Furn’s cry choked, died away, changing to a surprised gasp which, in its turn was drowned in the shout of laughter that came from the others. For what the clear white light revealed was nothing more spectral than the lank figure of Ted Hinckley clad in voluminous white pajamas —he had been the only one to so thoroughly prepare for bed—and placidly munching the

remains of a cold baked potato.

For a long moment he stood motionless, paying not the slightest attention to the noise, and continuing to eat the cold potato as if it had been the most delicate of viands. Then, as the remaining scouts woke and added their clamorous questioning to the din, an odd change came over him. He started slightly and the potato slipped unheeded from his fingers. His eyes, already open, widened, and into them came a dazed, bewildered stare which merged presently into a broad, sheepish grin. 163

"Sleep-walking again, Ted?" inquired Cavvy, when he could get his breath.

"Doggone it!" mumbled Hinckley. "What the deuce was I doing, anyhow?"

"Eating a cold potato," chuckled Cavanaugh, "and scaring Furn most to death. He took you for Morford's ghost. Some ghost, eh, fellows?"

"Oh, you Furny!" laughed McBride.

He clutched the blushing Barber in the ribs and created a diversion for which Furn was only too thankful. Hinckley, chilled in his scant attire, piled wood on the fire and hastily sought his blankets, but it was a good while before the chuckles died away and silence fell upon the cabin, this time to last until morning.

There was more joking then, and a good deal of fun was poked at both Barber and Hinckley. But the necessity of making an early start for town cut this rather short, much to the former's relief. 164

"I reckon no respectable ghost would stand half a chance with this bunch," laughed McBride as they started off. He glanced back at the cabin which looked cheery enough now in the full glare of the morning sun. "It's a swell place, fellows, and I don't see why we shouldn't make it a regular troop headquarters. If we could scrape up enough money to buy some furniture and fix it up a bit, there wouldn't be a scout cabin anywhere that could beat it."

"Not a half bad idea," agreed Cavanaugh. "I don't see why we shouldn't do it, either. We'll have to take it up with the chief on Friday and see what he says."

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CHAPTER XXI
THE LOG CABIN FUND

It was not difficult to arouse Mr. Wendell's interest in the project. Always a firm believer in over night hikes and camping trips as the best possible means of carrying out the scouting program, he realized at once the value of such a place as this which could be made use of at all seasons of the year.

With some of the discoverers and a number of other scouts whose interest had been stirred up by the tales of that first party, he made a trip up the mountain. The cabin was viewed from every standpoint and it was unanimously decided that

there were far too many attractive possibilities in the building to allow it to stand there deserted and unused. Not long afterward Mr. Wendell and two of the troop committee visited the owner of the land—old Morford, the builder, had been merely a squatter—and by dint of persuasive argument obtained permission to use the cabin as a scout headquarters.

It was too far from town to be turned into a regular meeting place, but the troop decided to furnish it and use it as an objective for hikes and brief winter camping trips. It was Cavanaugh who conceived the brilliant idea of using it also as a place of entertainment for some of the many soldiers from the big new Government training camp located in the neighborhood, who constantly thronged the town.

The presence of that camp and the frequent sight of the soldiers thrilled the scouts as nothing else could have done. It did not take them long to know many men by sight and a few of them intimately. The crowd first in training happened to include a number of Western boys who had no friends in this part of the country and were too far from home to go back on furlough. The scouts got into the habit, therefore, of bringing some of these home with them for stays of varying length, and several of the young men who had been scouts themselves not so very long ago, revived their interest in the movement, frequently attending the troop meetings and even helping the busy scoutmaster in looking after the boys.

From these the scouts kept secret the existence of the cabin. They wanted to furnish and equip it thoroughly, and then have a grand surprise party and house warming for the soldiers. But unfortunately all this took a good deal of time. They might easily have filled it with odds and ends of discarded furniture from their own homes, but the majority voted against this. The cabin had become the pride of their hearts, and they wanted, as they expressed it, to do the thing right. And so, for many weeks they worked like beavers at every possible chore and occupation which would bring in money for the fund, until at length the latter reached a very decent total.

Bill McBride was treasurer and there were few waking hours that he did not think with pride and pleasure of the growing size of that canvas bag which held their hard earned dimes and nickels. It was in his mind one morning late in November as he caught up sweater and books and dashed out of the front door.

The air was chill, and overhead the clouds were dark and lowering with a hint of snow in them. But Micky was not considering the weather as he sped along, nor was he even thinking of the Thanksgiving holiday which loomed so pleasantly near.

“We’ve got over sixty dollars,” he said to himself as he hastened up the street, “and I don’t see why we shouldn’t begin pretty soon. If we don’t, Jack Farren and Harley and all the rest of that corking bunch will be ordered across and never see the cabin at all. You can get a lot of stuff for sixty dollars.”

“Aye—Micky!” shrilled a voice from up a side

street. “Wait up.”

McBride glanced that way impatiently. Harry Ritter, stout, round-faced and indolent, was approaching at his usual lazy stroll. 168

“Can’t, Rit, I’m late,” he called without pausing.

Whereupon, with a grunt, Ritter speeded up and caught McBride about the middle of the next block. “I don’t see what’s your rush,” he complained, puffing a little. “It isn’t half-past eight yet.”

“I know it, but I’ve got to fix Mrs. Wright’s furnace and carry out some ashes before school.”

Ritter sniffed. “You still doing that?” he inquired disparagingly. “You *are* an easy mark. I’ll bet you don’t get a cent for it.”

“Of course I don’t, you mercenary young pup,” retorted Micky. “I’m not doing it for money. When Jim was drafted, I said I’d look after her chores ’till he came back. You’re a hot scout, you are!”

“Shucks! When *I* work, I want something out of it, especially with the troop needing money like we do.”

Micky chuckled. “*When* you work!” he repeated with emphasis. “That’s a good one. Just let me know when you’re going to start, and I’ll come around and look on. It would be a real treat to see you exerting yourself for once.”

“You go to grass! I’ll bet I’ve turned in as much money to the fund as anybody.” 169

“Maybe so, but you didn’t earn it. You just grafted it off papa.”

Ritter flushed floridly. “Huh!” he grunted. “You think so, do you? That runt, Midge Willett’s been stuffing you full of lies. Just wait till I give him a piece of my mind—”

“Don’t do it,” laughed Micky. “You haven’t any to spare.”

He skipped up a side street, leaving the stout youth snorting incoherently on the corner. A few houses beyond he turned in at the gate of a small, white-painted cottage, hastened along a gravelled path at the side, and dived into the open cellar door.

When he had shaken down the small furnace, swept up the floor and carted the ashes around to the rear he knocked at the back door and stepped in, closing it behind him.

It was an immaculate kitchen, fairly shining in its scrubbed, polished state of cleanliness. Everything was so spotless, in fact, that the vigorous movements of the broom, wielded by the small, spare woman in a limp calico dress seemed rather unnecessary.

“Good morning, Mrs. Wright,” said Micky, pulling off his cap. “I’ve fixed the furnace and carried out the ashes. I’ll split your kindling this afternoon after school. Is there anything I can do for you downtown?” 170

She glanced momentarily at him over one shoulder. The vigorous movement of the broom never ceased. “No, thank you, William,” she said briefly.

Still Micky hesitated. He had noticed her reddened eyelids and a curious, unwonted droop to the usually erect shoulders. “I—I thought perhaps you might want something special from the store,” he persisted awkwardly. “To-morrow’s Thanksgiving, and—”

She faced him suddenly, her thin, rheumatic fingers clenched about the broom handle. “Thanksgiving!” she repeated harshly. “What’s that to me? What have I got to be thankful for?” Her lips quivered for an instant and then straightened. “Jim’s going over—going to France. And—and they won’t let him come home to say good-by!”

Micky drew a quick breath; for a moment the tragedy in her eyes turned him speechless. It hurt him, too, that look, and brought into his mind for a vivid second the eyes of a mother fox he had once seen, backed into a rocky corner, her frightened, shivering cubs behind her.

“Oh!” he exclaimed sympathetically, an instant later. “They won’t give him leave? But—but couldn’t, you—go to see him?” 171

“I could, but I’ve got no money,” flamed the woman—“and he leaves on Saturday.”

Abruptly she turned her back and resumed that fierce, monotonous sweeping of the spotless floor. Micky stared for a moment at the narrow, drooping shoulders, the plain white collar, the soft, pretty, grayish hair, and of a sudden something rose in his throat and choked him. With eyelids stinging, he reached blindly for the knob, opened the door and stepped outside. Drawing it softly shut, he blinked rapidly several times before he stepped off the stone and moved slowly down the gravelled path.

“It’s tough!” he muttered gruffly—“beastly tough!”

A picture of Jim Wright flashed into his mind—laughing, fearless, blue-eyed Jim, whose devotion to his mother had been the only thing that made him await the machinery of the draft. He might have pleaded dependency, but he did not—could not, he told Micky, who was an ardent admirer of the older fellow.

“She’ll have every cent of my pay, Micky, old scout,” he explained just before leaving. “And with you to help her over the hard spots, I guess she’ll make out all right. I just can’t stick around home when men are needed over there.”

So he had gone into training—ordered, perversely, to a distant camp instead of one so near at hand. And Micky had kept his promise to help in the spirit as well as letter. Jim had been back just once in all those months; a soldier’s pay doesn’t stretch for frequent railroad journeys. And now he is going over. It might be years before his mother saw him again; it might be—never. 172

“If only he was at Camp Wheeling,” growled the boy, speeding mechanically toward school. “It

seems too stupid to send him all that ways. Why, the round trip costs nearly fifty dollars." A remembrance of that look in the woman's eyes came back to him and he ground his teeth. "Gee!" he burst out. "If I only had the money—if I could only get some!"

But in a smallish town like Wharton, with everyone feeling the effect of the war in increased prices and voluntary self denial, fifty dollars seemed a really enormous sum to raise at short notice. It was not until Micky was running up the school steps that there came to him in a sudden, blinding flash the realization that this amount and more already reposed in the scout treasury.

CHAPTER XXII
THE APPEAL

He stopped abruptly in the hall. But that was their fund! That was what they lay up, and to the spending of which they had looked forward with such enthusiasm. For a moment the thought of its being suddenly swept away, of having to start all over again in that slow, painful piling up of dimes and nickels, seemed an intolerable, an impossible thing. But it was only for a moment. After all, what were chairs and tables, dishes, pots and pans, against the hunger of a mother's love or the bitterness of parting?

The boy's face cleared and his lips straightened. It was the only way. And as he dashed through the coatroom, deftly flinging cap and sweater on a hook as he passed, and slid into his seat just in time for roll-call, his mind was busy working out details. The thing must be put through swiftly or it would be too late. Mrs. Wright really ought to leave on the four o'clock train that afternoon to reach Jim in time for dinner the following day. In the meantime the whole troop had to be won over to the scheme, and as Micky considered the situation it seemed to him as if Fate had conspired to make it especially difficult.

Mr. Wendell was out of town for a few days. Cartwright, the assistant scoutmaster, worked in a neighboring city and would not be home until after six. And finally Cavanaugh, whom he felt sure would have backed him to the limit, had gone off that very morning to spend Thanksgiving with a relative in the country.

"It's up to me," thought the boy dubiously. "I've got to handle the whole thing. I wonder if I can put it over."

He glanced speculatively around the school room. Champ Ferris would be easy. He was assistant patrol leader of the Eagles and usually followed in Micky's lead. Tallerico could also probably be won over; so could Furn Barber. But there was Clay Marshall and one or two others who had made the fund almost their religion. There was also Harry Ritter! And finally one never knew how the smaller kids would take a thing like this.

But McBride had a stubborn streak in him which

made difficulties things to be surmounted instead of stumbling blocks. It is to be feared that lessons were much neglected that morning, but before the noon recess he had passed around word to everyone that there would be a special meeting of the troop in one of the empty class rooms at twelve sharp. In the absence of the other officials, McBride would have to conduct the meeting besides acting as principal speaker.

“What the deuce is up, Micky?” Two or three spoke at once, as they crowded around the teacher’s low platform. “Has Mr. Wendell got back already?”

“Not that I know of. This has nothing to do with him. It’s about something I found out this morning.” McBride hesitated an instant, his back against the desk, his eyes shifting swiftly from one face to another. “Jim Wright’s sailing for France on Saturday,” he explained briefly, “and they won’t give him home leave before he goes.”

There was a momentary pause. “They don’t, generally,” commented Ted Hinckley. “It’s hard luck though. Still, he’s mighty keen to go.”

One or two murmured perfunctory agreement, but most of the boys were silent, looking with puzzled expectancy at McBride. Champ Ferris’ question seemed to voice the feeling of the majority.

“But what can we do, Micky?” he asked at length, in his slow, drawling manner. “What’s up to us—to give him a farewell present, or something?” 176

Micky stared; then laughed oddly.

“Yes, you might call it that,” he agreed. “You’d call it a farewell present, I suppose, though it isn’t the sort any of you have in mind. Listen!” He bent forward abruptly, his face suddenly serious. “Jim can’t come home, but his mother could go to him. She wants to; she’s dying to. But she hasn’t any money. You know how poor they are. Jim’s pay is about all she has to get along on. And so it seemed to me—Jim’s an old scout and used to be in the troop—it’s up to us to send her there.”

He stopped and there came another pause. Several of the boys looked blank.

“But it costs an awful lot to go to Camp Merrill,” said Clay Marshall doubtfully.

“It does; the fare there and back is nearly fifty dollars. And we’ve no time to pass the hat even if there was a chance of getting that amount. She’s got to leave at four this afternoon to reach Jim on Thanksgiving. But if you fellows are willing, we won’t have to do that. We’ve got more than enough—in the treasury.”

It took a moment for the idea to seep in. Then a sudden murmur of protest came from the group.

“Oh, I say, Micky!” objected Marshall. “Why, that’s our *fund*!” 177

“I know it is.” The boy leaned back against the worn edge of the desk, eyes sparkling, bright color heightened. “But what was the fund for? Chairs, tables—*junk*! What do such things

matter when maybe it's the last time she'll ever see Jim again? Fellows, if you'd seen her face when she told me this morning, I wouldn't have to say a single word." He blinked an instant and then glared at them defiantly. "You'd be falling over yourselves to do what's really the only decent thing—what any scout would know was just—his duty."

His eager, compelling gaze flashed from one doubtful, dubious face to another. Suddenly Ted Hinckley stepped over and thumped him on the back.

"I'm with you, old scout," he said briefly. "Let's send her to Jim and make a good job of it."

"Same here," echoed Furn Barber.

"I guess we can live a little longer without the stuff we wanted," drawled Champ Ferris.

"A while!" protested Harry Ritter, frowning. "But look at the time it's taken us to earn that money. Why, it's months, almost. And it'll go in a minute and we'll have to start all over from the beginning. Suppose she didn't see him again. Lots of other—"

"Suppose it was *your* mother, and *you* were going to France and couldn't come home, like Jim!" flamed Micky, his hands clenching. "Would *you* get any comfort knowing there were other men in the same fix?" He paused. His face relaxed in a whimsical, appealing smile. "I can't say any more, fellows," he went on quietly. "I'm no talker anyway. It's up to you. If you'd rather keep the money to furnish the cabin, all right. But if you'd rather—" 178

"Sure we would, Micky!" interrupted Midge Willett shrilly. Midge had the reputation of being rather tough, but he was undeniably a leader with the younger crowd. "We ain't made out of no stone. Jim's one dandy fellow, and I move we let the old furniture go and send his mother to him for a Thanksgiving present. How about it?"

The shrill chorus of approval which burst forth left no doubt as to the feelings of the majority. Even Clay Marshall joined in, and though Ritter said nothing, he made no protest.

"That's great!" exclaimed McBride delightedly. "I knew you fellows would do it. Now it's up to us to get a hustle on. Chase home for the money and buy the ticket and berth and take 'em up to Mrs. Wright. If we turned over the coin she might balk. I'll be late, I s'pose, this afternoon, but I should worry!" He pushed briskly through the group, but at the door, moved by a sudden impulse, he turned. "Come ahead, Rit," he urged abruptly. "I'll want somebody to hold the change." 179

Ritter flushed, hesitated, and then, almost reluctantly, came forward. Together they left the school and sped toward the McBride house. There the canvas bag containing their hard earned "fund," mainly in dimes, nickels and quarters, was secured and they headed for the station.

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CHAPTER XXIII
GOOD TURNS LIKE CHICKENS

The ticket agent was some time counting up the coins and making jocular comments on their probable use of the strip of paper he handed them in exchange. It must be confessed that even Micky felt a momentary qualm at the limpness of the bag that was returned to them, but he suppressed it swiftly. Ritter gave an involuntary sigh, but made no remark until they had turned into the Wright yard.

"I'll just wait here till you're through," he said briefly.

"You will not!" rejoined McBride, catching him firmly by an arm. "What do you think I brought you for? You come along with me."

Mrs. Wright sat in a rocker staring listlessly out of the window. Her hands lay limply in her lap, and something in the hopeless resignation of her pose was even more eloquent than her feverish activity of the morning. She glanced up as the two boys entered, and Micky was smitten with sudden embarrassment.

"We—we—that is, the troop wanted to give Jim a —a little send-off, Mrs. Wright," he stammered. "We didn't know what he wanted, so we thought — Here!" He thrust the bits of cardboard into her hands hastily. "We thought his mother would be the best present we could send. You'll have to take the four o'clock train this afternoon," he added more briskly.

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For a moment the woman sat motionless, staring at the printed strip in her limp fingers. Then a word leaped into her consciousness out of the blur of printing—a word which, since early morning, had burned in her brain a symbol of hopeless despair. It was merely the name of a distant railroad station, but as she realized its meaning the frozen look melted from her lined face.

"William!" she gasped. "You don't mean—" She stumbled to her feet and one thin arm reached out and caught his shoulder with surprising force. "I—I'll see Jim after all?"

"Of course," said Micky gruffly. "That's what the fellows want. You get ready and we'll come up after school to carry your bag. Remember, it's the four o'clock train."

Hastily backing toward the door, the boy caught one glimpse of a look on her face which he never forgot. It seemed almost as if a ray of pure sunshine shot suddenly out of the gray clouds to stream athwart her countenance. In that instant the haggard lines vanished, the mouth softened, the eyes glowed with a wonderful light. Then the door closed behind the two and they were out in the dull November grayness again.

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In silence they reached the street and headed mechanically toward home. Micky's eyes were fixed straight ahead with a faraway look in them and an unconscious smile on his lips. He was picturing to himself Jim's surprise and delight when he received the "present" they were

sending him. Ritter's face was downcast. He walked rather slouchingly, both hands in his trousers pockets. Now and then he kicked at a stray pebble. At the corner where their ways parted, he stopped abruptly and raised his head, an embarrassed flush on his round face.

"I—I'm glad she's going," he said awkwardly. "I—guess it won't take us so long after all to—to raise that fund over again."

"Of course it won't." Micky grinned and slapped him on the back. "We'll have it in a jiffy, what with snow coming and sidewalks to clean and all that. Well, see you later, old kid. We've only got ten minutes left before school, but I'm going home to snatch some grub. I'm starved."

Nearly the whole troop assembled to see Mrs. Wright off that afternoon, and the sight of the quaint little old lady in the old fashioned bonnet surrounded by such a throng of boys raised a good deal of comment and speculation amongst the people around the station. Of course she was flustered and bewildered and almost speechless. When she shook hands with each one of the scouts her small, gloved hand trembled and her murmured words of gratitude were scarcely audible. But the look of sublime happiness in her face was more eloquent than any words could be. It brought a curious, tingling thrill to more than one young heart and stirred up a sense of pride and satisfaction at having had a share in something more truly tangible and lasting than the most solid furniture ever made. 183

That feeling of content lingered even after the train had gone and only the memory remained of a thin, lined face with tremulous lips and shining eyes peering through a dingy window, and a neat, gloved hand waving a scrap of handkerchief with a vehemence they felt instinctively would continue long after the station and the town had disappeared from view.

The eyes of the majority were still fixed upon the train, growing smaller in the distance, when a jovial, booming voice suddenly broke the spell and brought them back to earth.

"Well, boys, seeing somebody off?"

McBride glanced quickly around to meet the smiling gaze of Mr. Baker, one of their troop committee. 184

"Yes, sir," he answered. "It's Mrs. Wright. Jim's regiment's ordered to France and he couldn't get leave. She's going to—spend Thanksgiving with him."

"Jim going to France! Well! well! That's pretty sudden, isn't it? Still, they're sending 'em over all the time. I'm glad his mother could make the trip. She'll feel a lot more comfortable after he's gone. By the way, how's the cabin coming on? Got it furnished yet?"

Micky flushed faintly and more than one boy exchanged glances with a neighbor.

"Not yet, sir," returned McBride. "We—we had to use some of our furnishing fund for—something else."

"Well, I'll tell you what," pursued Mr. Baker with

bluff heartiness. “I don’t see why you boys shouldn’t have the stuff we used in the Business Men’s Club. Ever since we gave up the room a couple of months ago, it’s all been stored in my barn doing no good to anybody. There’s some big leather chairs and a long table, and a couple of fur rugs, and— Oh, yes, that big moosehead, you know, and some other horns. Those ought to fit your place first rate.”

A ripple of excitement ran through the group. Micky’s eyes shone.

“Gee-whiz!” he gasped. “Why, they’d be—they’d be— We never dreamed of anything so corking!”

“Fine!” boomed Mr. Baker, buttoning his overcoat around his portly form. “We’ll call it settled, then. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. The things are just gathering dust and moths where they are. You boys come over any time and pick out what you want and I’ll have it carted up to the cabin.” With a wave of his hand he started briskly down the station platform. Then he looked back. “Come over this afternoon, if you want to,” he called. “I’ll be home after five.”

Thrilled, dazed, with eyes shining, they stared after his retreating figure in silence. If at that moment their English teacher, Miss Brown, had requested the definition of an angel, there would undoubtedly have flashed into the brains of nine-tenths of the group the picture of a stout, broad individual snugly buttoned into a brown overcoat and wearing a black derby hat. Then he turned the corner of the building and the tension laxed.

“Well,” drawled Champ Ferris smilingly, “they say that good deeds like chickens come home to roost. Looks as if good turns did, too.”

CHAPTER XXIV
THE FACE IN THE WINDOW

“Oh, let’s go back,” grumbled Harry Ritter, petulantly swishing at the brittle stalk of a leafless brier. “There’s no black walnut trees around here, and it’ll be dark in half an hour. We have supper early to-night, too.”

“Thinking of his bread-basket as usual,” grinned McBride. “It would do you good, Rit, to go without supper for once. You need thinning down.”

“I’m thin enough to suit me,” sniffed the fat chap. He cocked a troubled eye at the cold, gray clouds which hung low above the narrow country road. “Besides, it’s going to rain or snow before long,” he added with a shiver.

McBride laughed carelessly. “We should worry and get a wrinkle! A little wet won’t hurt any of us. I move we keep going for a while longer, anyhow. We’ve had rotten luck this afternoon. If we don’t look out Marshall’s bunch will get ahead.”

In this final clean-up for locating trees not previously reported for the census of black

walnuts requested by the Government, Mr. Wendell had hit upon the expedient of dividing the troop into miscellaneous groups of four and offering a prize to the group reporting the greatest number. The emulation and friendly rivalry aroused had produced fine results. So far Jim Cavanaugh's group was ahead, but the scouts under Clay Marshall's leadership had lately been creeping up. At McBride's remark, Ritter sniffed scornfully.

"What can you expect?" he complained in an aggrieved tone. "Walnuts don't grow in a wild country like this. They're always around farms or on main roads. It was a dirty trick of Mr. Wendell to make us come way over here. Where'd Marshall's bunch go?"

"Over around Benson's Hill," answered Cavanaugh, his gaze wandering keenly over the gaunt, bare tree tops of the surrounding woods.

"Right near the cabin!" exclaimed Ritter enviously. "I'll bet they've gone in there and built a fire and are having a dandy time."

"Well, then they can't be finding walnuts and beating our record," retorted Micky. "There's one thing anyhow, fellows. When this last clean-up is over, I'll bet nobody'll be able to find a black walnut tree with a fine tooth comb around this country. We've located a raft of 'em since we started last summer." He sighed, and his mind reverted to another subject. "Gee! The cabin certainly looks swell with all that new stuff in it. When are we going to have that house-warming Cavvy?"

Cavanaugh turned abruptly and stared blankly at his friend. "Say! I clean forgot to tell you something. Did you hear about Jack Farren?"

"No! What?"

"He's down in the camp hospital with scarlet fever. I met Dick Harley in town this morning and he told me."

"Gee! That's tough luck, isn't it?"

"And it's not the worst," continued Cavvy. "Dick says they're likely to get marching orders any day, and of course if they sail for France before Jack gets well, he'll be left behind."

McBride gave a long, expressive whistle. "That would be the extreme limit, wouldn't it? It's a shame. Jack's one of the dandiest chaps I ever met. He'd be all broken up to have them go and —What's the matter? See one?"

Cavanaugh shrugged. "I'm not sure," he returned, his eyes fixed on the naked branches of some tall trees towering up above the smaller growth quite a distance from the road. "They look pretty good to me, though."

"They don't look bad," agreed Micky, swinging the stout hickory stick he had cut and trimmed earlier in the afternoon. "Of course you can't tell for sure at this distance, but they're worth looking up. Wonder how you get in there?"

Cavanaugh was already pushing into the undergrowth that edged the road. "This is the only way, I guess," he answered. "They can't be so very far back."

“I’ll bet they’re hickory or butternut,” grumbled Ritter pessimistically.

Nevertheless, he followed the others into the tangled wilderness of briers, bushes and young trees which seemed to extend indefinitely over this remote and unfamiliar section of Fairview County.

As he plodded along over marshy ground to which belated winter had brought only a thin crusting of frost, the stout chap wished fervently that he had found some excuse for evading the excursion this afternoon. It wouldn’t have been easy, for Cavvy had a way of keeping the fellows up to the mark, but he might have managed if he had only had the sense, and then all this unpleasantness would have been avoided.

At length his growing petulance and inward stewing broke forth into audible grumbling. Nothing pleased him, even the discovery of a narrow path winding through the overgrown swamp, which, since it led in the general direction they were going, Cavvy promptly followed.

“An old cow path, I’ll bet,” growled Ritter, tenderly caressing a long scratch across one check. “It won’t take us anywhere. Whoever heard of walnut trees growing in this kind of a beastly hole. We’re just wasting—” 190

He broke off, jaw sagging, and stared over the shoulder of Champ Ferris, who walked ahead of him. The woods had ended abruptly in a cluttered, overgrown clearing. Across this the path wavered diagonally through dead, rustling grass and weeds nearly waist high to a house surrounded by eight or ten magnificent black walnut trees.

At the sight of them Cavvy’s eyes gleamed triumphantly. “By jingo!” he exclaimed. “What *beauties*!”

McBride and Ferris echoed his enthusiasm, and there was a hurried forward movement. Then, inexplicably, they paused. In that first moment there had been eyes for nothing save the objects of their search. But now, as their glances wandered from the great trees and took in the other details of the clearing, there came suddenly over each one of them an impression of loneliness and desolation and decay which was almost chilling.

The house was large and rambling, but bore a hundred signs of neglect and disuse. The paint had scaled from its surface leaving it a dark, streaked gray. In the moss-covered, sagging roof were rotting holes. Shutters covered the windows or hung crazily by a single rusted hinge. A pillar of the porch in front had fallen and lay buried in the tall grass. 191

At one side of the house lay a stagnant pool covered with a thin film of ice, and a quantity of green slime. Beyond it loomed the gaunt outlines of a great barn. The roof had been almost stripped of shingles, and the beams and rafters stood out against the cold gray sky like the bleached ribs of some long-wrecked ship. Farther still they could glimpse stretches of what had once been pasture land, but which now was smothered in a thick tangle of brier and bay

and juniper. The view was limited on every side by thick, encompassing woods.

“Whew!” breathed Champ Ferris. “What a hole! It gives you a regular chill.”

“We’re going to have a job finding the owner,” said McBride disconsolately. “Don’t look as if anybody’d lived here in a thousand years.”

Cavvy’s face was puzzled. “But the path,” he reminded them. “Why hasn’t that grown up like the rest if it isn’t used?”

“That is queer,” agreed McBride. “Of course it might be some short cut, but— What the deuce is the matter with you, Rit?”

A sharp, half smothered exclamation from the stout chap made them all turn quickly, but for a moment Ritter did not answer. With jaw sagging and eyes wide and startled, he was staring at one of the grimy windows on the upper floor of the gray house from which, a second before, he had glimpsed a face peering down at them. 192

A heavy, pendulous face it was, of a curious and pronounced pallor. It hovered there for an instant and disappeared so swiftly that Cavanaugh, following the direction of Ritter’s frightened gaze, was in time to catch only the white flash of its vanishing.

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CHAPTER XXV
THE MAN WITH NO HAIR

“There is someone there, after all, then!” exclaimed Cavvy quickly. “What did he look like, Rit?”

Ritter’s gaze, still wide and nervous, swept along the row of broken or shuttered windows, returning quickly to the one near the corner. “I—I don’t know, exactly,” he answered. “White and fat and—and sort of queer looking. Let’s get out of here, fellows. This beastly place gives me the creeps.”

“But we can’t go without finding out about the trees,” protested McBride. “It would be a shame to let them go.”

“Of course it would,” agreed Cavvy impatiently. “We’ve got to— Well, now what’s the matter?”

Ritter started slightly and withdrew his wandering gaze from the gaunt outlines of the great barn. “N—nothing,” he stammered. “I thought I—saw something—moving down there, but I guess I didn’t. What are you going to do now?”

“Knock at the door and ask him if he’s willing to sell his trees for Government use,” returned Cavanaugh tersely. “Nobody can eat us for doing that.” 194

The stout chap sighed deeply, but made no actual reply. It was with very evident distaste, however, that he followed the others past the pool and on through the tall grass to the front

porch.

The wooden steps were rotted into fragments, and as the boys scrambled up without their aid, they felt the old flooring give dangerously under their feet. The door itself seemed strong enough, however. Though streaked and weathered and bare of paint, it sounded hard and firm under the vigorous rapping of Cavanaugh's knuckles.

The knock echoed curiously, with hollow, prolonged reverberations.

"Sounds empty," remarked Cavvy, intently listening.

"Like Rit's stomach," grinned Micky, giving Ritter a sudden poke in that region which made him jump nervously.

"Haven't you any sense?" he snapped irritably.

"It *is* empty," spoke up Champ Ferris suddenly. He had been peering curiously through a broken pane in the narrow window beside the door. "There's not a darn thing in the hall that I can see but a couple of boxes and a mess of dirt and rubbish."

Cavanaugh waited a few moments and then knocked again. By this time the silence and desolation of the place was beginning to wear upon the spirits of others than Ritter. A frankly deserted house often has interesting possibilities. But this gloomy ruin, so far from the unfrequented road, that appeared to be the hiding place of a mysterious unknown, was something quite different. 195

"Funny," commented Cavvy presently, in an unconsciously lowered tone. "He must have heard that. I wonder why he doesn't answer.... Well, suppose we try the back door."

They left the sagging porch and circled the house in silence. The path ran along this side and was the only thing which showed the slightest trace of use. Everything else was overgrown with grass and weeds.

The path ended at the rear door, and here, too were more black walnuts. There was also a great pine, one of the largest they had ever seen, which towered up not a dozen feet from the house. Its huge trunk actually touched the wall of a decrepit woodshed, while the lower branches swept across the roof of the main building.

"That's a corking tree," said Cavvy admiringly. "But what a crazy place to plant it. It's a wonder to me there's any roof left at all, with the needles and all to rot it. The fellow who did it must have been some nut."

"Regular wal-nut," murmured Micky from force of habit. 196

"Help!" groaned Cavanaugh. "Can't you pull off anything better than that? Besides, it's the pine I'm talking about. Here; give us that club of yours," he went on, taking Micky's hickory staff. "Maybe I can raise him with that."

The clatter he made would certainly have roused anyone but a deaf person, but apparently it had no effect whatever on the eccentric occupant of

the old house. When the hollow echoes died away, all four boys stood motionless, fairly holding their breath as they listened for the sound of footsteps inside. But none came, and presently Cavvy, backing away a little, stared curiously up at the dingy, slatternly windows.

"It's got me," he said with a touch of petulance. "I don't see why the dickens a man wouldn't answer a knock at his own door, unless— Jingo! I wonder if he would be hiding from something?"

"That's just it!" put in Ritter in a shrill, nervous whisper. "How do we know he isn't a criminal, or—or an escaped lunatic, who's broken in here perhaps? Maybe he's not the owner of the house at all. Let's beat it, Cavvy. We're just wasting time, and it'll be pouring in a little while. I felt a drop on my face just now." Cavanaugh did not answer. His own face, still upturned, had taken on an oddly intent, curiously puzzled stare. His gaze, no longer focussed on the windows, had shifted to a point just under the sagging eaves where a long branch of the pine tree stretched across the roof, seeming almost to touch the rotting shingles.

Suddenly his face flushed, his lips half parted, a look at once eager and incredulous flashed into his widening eyes. Swiftly those eager eyes followed the limb to where it joined the massive trunk, then darted upward to the point at which that trunk disappeared in a baffling mask of dark green foliage. Then, of a sudden, there came the grating of a key and the door beside them was flung abruptly open.

"Well?" snarled a voice. "What's the matter with you? What do you mean trying to pound a man's door down like this?"

Ritter gasped and stepped swiftly backward, treading on Ferris's toes. Cavanaugh whirled about, unconsciously tightening his grip on the stick he held. Even Micky felt an unpleasant tingling on his spine as he met the shifting glance of the individual in the doorway.

There was something oddly repellant about the man—something to be felt, in that first moment, rather than defined. He was big beyond the ordinary, but with a flabby, unwholesome bulk that reminded one of a jellyfish. His hands were soft and pudgy; his clothes hung about him like shapeless bags.

All this and more they swiftly noted without hitting on the feature which roused that curious repulsion. Then suddenly they saw. The creature had no hair! His shiny scalp was bare of any vestige; he had no eyebrows or eyelashes. The flesh which hung about his pendulous jowls in pasty, yellow rolls was as innocent of a beard as any baby's. Moreover, his eyes—gray they were and very small and pale—stared unwinking, the hairless lids so narrowed that an alien roll of flesh showed there, making those lids look double.

"What's the matter," repeated the fat man, as the four stared at him without speaking. "Ain't you got voices?"

"There's nothing the matter," returned Stafford, recovering his self-possession. "We came to find out if you'd be willing to sell your trees."

The fishy eyes widened abruptly. “Trees?” shrilled the man. “Trees?” For an instant his gaze flashed upward. “What do you mean? Who are you?”

“We’re boy scouts from Wharton,” Stafford explained quietly, keeping his eyes fixed intently on the pasty, pudgy face. “We’ve been ordered by the Government to make a census of all the black walnut trees whose owners are willing to sell. The wood is needed for gun stocks and airplane propellers. You’ll get a good price, and be doing a service to your country at the same time.” 199

“Oh, walnut trees! That’s all you want? Gunstocks? You’re sure? Well, I won’t sell. The—nuts are too valuable.”

“But—”

“Never mind any buts,” cut in the fat man harshly. “I’ve told you, and that’s enough. I’ll remind you, also, that this is private property and you’re trespassing. The sooner you get off it the better I’ll be pleased.”

Without further comment he closed the door with a slam, leaving the boys to stare at one another with wry faces.

“Sweet temper,” commented McBride. “Regular merry little sunshine, isn’t he?”

“He ought to be *made* to turn over those trees for Government use,” exclaimed Champ Ferris hotly. “I’ll bet he’s a regular pro—”

“Come ahead and let’s get out of here,” interrupted Cavanaugh hastily. “He won’t sell, and that’s the end of it. No use wasting any more time.”

He turned quickly from the door and led the way toward the path. At the corner of the house he paused for a second to send back a sharp, searching glance at the great pine tree beside the woodshed. Then he passed on, striding briskly along the path without so much as a backward look at the dreary gray house standing out against a background of equally dreary sky. 200

He entered the fringe of undergrowth that edged the clearing, passed thence into the stretch of woods and kept steadily on for several hundred yards. Then he stopped suddenly and faced the others, his expression alert and eager.

“Listen, fellows,” he said abruptly, in low swift tones. “There’s something wrong back there. Did you notice that pine tree by the shed?”

“Sure. It’s the biggest one I ever saw,” answered Micky.

“I wasn’t thinking about its size,” went on Cavanaugh hastily. “You remember the long limb that runs over the roof? Close by the house there’s a branch that’s lately been broken off and hangs down—probably in the storm yesterday. Well, just under the eaves at a point where that branch must have covered them—two wires come out and run over to the big limb!”

CHAPTER XXVI
THE HIDDEN WIRELESS

"Wires!" exclaimed McBride and Ferris together.

"Yes, wires. They come out of a little hole that's been bored through the clapboards. Unless I miss my guess they run along that big limb and on up the tree trunk. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Great guns!" exclaimed Micky excitedly. "You don't think it's a—wireless!"

"That's exactly what I do mean. You know as well as I do that ever since the U-boats showed up along the coast last summer, they've suspected that a hidden wireless was giving them information about ships and things. Don't you remember the talk Mr. Wendell gave at the meeting a few weeks ago when he said that secret service men were busy hunting for it, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack? He told us we must report the least thing that seemed suspicious. Jove! If this should be it, and we should the ones to find it!"

"I hated that fat man from the first," said Ritter viciously. "I was sure there was something queer about him." 202

"There is, all right," agreed Cavvy with conviction. "If he isn't running a secret wireless, he's doing something else underhand. Otherwise why is he living in this tumbledown ruin away from everything? Why didn't he answer our knocking until we pretty near broke the door down? There's something crooked about him, you can bank on that."

"Gee-whiz! I'll bet you're right, Cavvy!" exclaimed McBride. "What are you going to do? Tell Mr. Wendell, or the police?"

Cavanaugh's face took on a faintly troubled expression. "I don't see how we can do either just yet," he answered. "You see, we really don't *know* anything. There's nothing but those wires to go on. If I could only get up that tree I'd be sure one way or another."

"But you can't do that," said Ferris quickly. "He'd be sure to see you."

"Not after dark," returned Cavvy pointedly.

"What!" protested Ritter, his face falling. "Wait all that time! Why, it'd be ages. And we'd probably get wet to the skin. The rain can't hold off much longer."

"You give me a pain, Rit," said Micky scathingly. "What the dickens does a little rain matter when we've got a chance like this? You oughtn't to howl. You're so well padded you wouldn't feel it. Besides, it won't be long at all. It'll be good and dark by half past five on a night like this. I'm game to stay, Cavvy. So's Champ, aren't you, old kid?" 203

Ferris acquiesced, though not quite with McBride's eager impulsiveness. The woods were cold and dreary and the possibilities ahead of

them did not fill him with delight. But he was too keen an admirer of Jimmy Cavanaugh to risk losing the other's good opinion. Finally, with the other three against him, Ritter gave in, though with much grumbling and complaint, and a good deal more secret apprehension, and leaving the path they found a more secluded spot back in the undergrowth in which to pass their vigil.

This did not prove so long or so tedious as some of them expected. They were wrought-up and excited, and there were plans to make and possibilities to discuss. Moreover, the early twilight, hastened by the lowering clouds, fell swiftly. Long before six it was quite dark. Twenty minutes later Cavvy decided that it was time to move.

Cautiously they crept out of the bushes and felt their way along the path. It was spooky business, this stealing through the darkness, and more than one heart beat faster at the thought of what might lie before them. At the edge of the clearing they paused, trying to make out the lines of the old house through the gloom. A cold sleety drizzle had begun to fall, and with a shiver Ritter turned up his mackinaw collar.

Cavanaugh, in advance, took a few more steps forward and then stopped again. Of a sudden, out of the blackness before them, came a faint, wavering glow of light. For a second or two they failed to place it. Then the vague outlines of a window sprang up in the darkness, only to fade again as the light flickered, died out, to reappear presently in another window on the upper floor.

"He's moving around up there," whispered Cavvy. "I guess it's safe enough. Champ, you and Rit stay here. Better get off the path a little; he might come out. Mind you don't run into the pond. Come ahead, Micky."

Ritter and Ferris stumbled gropingly from the path, the former giving another shudder at the thought of blundering into that slimy pool. The other two disappeared instantly into the shadows.

They moved cautiously, and as they neared the house even their occasional stealthy whispers ceased. The light remained stationary in the window near the corner where they had first glimpsed the fat man's face. This was no proof that he also was there, but some chance had to be taken, and Micky found no slight comfort in the heft of the stout stick in his hand.

At the rear of the building, under the shadow of the great pine, not a ray of light relieved the gloom. The boys felt their way past the closed door and on to the woodshed. Here McBride helped his friend to the low roof and then retired a little way to keep watch according to agreement.

Slowly and carefully Cavanaugh edged his way along the roof, thankful for the rubber soles which gave him some slight hold on the slippery surface. Without them he would certainly have slid off, for there was nothing to take hold of with his hands, and he had constantly to feel ahead for holes and weak spots in the rotten shingles.

Reaching the tree, he stood upright, steadying

himself against the trunk. He had noted that afternoon the projecting stub of a broken limb which gave him his first foothold. Thence, with the aid of a similar butt and a curious, unexpected projection which felt like a wooden cleat nailed to the trunk, he gained the lowest crotch.

It was ticklish business, climbing through the dark with only his sense of feeling to guide him, and Cavvy breathed a sigh of relief as he threw one leg across the solid branch. A moment later his fingers touched the wires and his heart leaped exultingly. There they were exactly as he had imagined them—two heavy insulated wires snugly fastened to the limb with staples, and in such a position as to be quite invisible from the ground. His eager fingers traced them to the trunk where they turned upward just as he thought they might.

"It *is* a wireless!" he muttered excitedly. "It can't be anything else."

CHAPTER XXVII
MICKY DISAPPEARS

Without delay he resumed climbing. There were other big limbs at frequent intervals which made this easier. Presently a heavy mass of fragrant pine brushed his face. A moment later his groping hand touched another wooden cleat nailed to the trunk, and a little exploration convinced him that this was the bottom rung of a rough ladder which led directly into the treetop.

And there, at last, he found what he was looking for. Far above the level of the house roof, and completely hidden by the thick foliage, was a small, wooden platform. That it was near the top of the tree Cavvy knew from the swaying of the limbs about him and the chill beat of sleet against his face. There were ropes here and a sort of rigging, the purpose of which puzzled him until his searching fingers encountered the shaft of a slim, tough pole which seemed to be held in place by a series of u-shaped iron bands driven into the trunk. At a point about on a level with his head as he stood on the platform, the wires left the trunk and continued upward along the pole with a good deal of looseness and play; and of a sudden an explanation of the whole ingenious apparatus came to him.

The pole must hold the wireless aerials. It could not be placed permanently in the treetop for the simple reason that it would project above the branches and in the daytime be visible for a long distance. Hence this device for lowering it except at night, the pole simply slipped down through the irons and held by them close to the trunk of the tree on the opposite side from the ladder. When darkness fell it could be hoisted without danger. And it was at night, of course, that those treacherous messages of information or warning were sent to the enemy U-boats, for Wharton was within easy reach of the coast, and it would be a poor wireless indeed which could not transmit many times that distance.

In spite of the cold sleet and drenching rain that beat upon him, Cavanaugh felt a glow of mingled triumph and anger at his discovery. It seemed as if he could not reach the ground swiftly enough so eager was he to start rolling the ball which would end in the capture of this traitor and perhaps his confederates. In vastly less time than it had taken him to make the slow ascent, he reached the bottom crotch and scrambled to the shed roof. Without waiting for McBride's help, he hung by his hands and dropped. Then he tip-toed over to the house.

"Micky!" he whispered, a thrill of excitement quivering even in his carefully lowered voice. "Micky! I've found it." 209

There was no answer. Surprised and puzzled, Cavvy took a step or two forward through the darkness and his outstretched hand suddenly touched the casing of the door.

"Micky!" he repeated, this time a little louder. "Where the dickens are you?"

Still no answer came, and the boy turned away with a muttered exclamation of irritation. "He must have gone back to the others," he thought. "Funny thing for him to do, but of course that's it."

Hastily circling the house, he groped his way to the point as nearly as he could find it where Ritter and Ferris had left the path. A backward glance showed him the dim light still burning in the corner room, and he called the boys' names in a guarded but penetrating whisper. The response was instant, and in a moment they stood beside him.

"Is Micky here?" asked Cavanaugh quickly. "Why, no," returned Ferris. "Isn't he with you? I thought—"

"You haven't seen him, then?"

"Not since you two went off together."

Cavvy stood silent for a moment, fighting back the vague, yet persistent feeling of alarm which was stealing over him. There must be some simple explanation for McBride's disappearance, but what was it? At any rate this new development upset all his calculations. He had planned to hasten back at once to Wharton and report his discovery so that authorities might lose no time in coming out to capture the wireless spy. But that was impossible now. No matter what lay in the balance, he could not bring himself to leave this desolate place without finding out what had happened to his friend. He tried to think, but all the time that nagging sense of anxiety and misgiving grew stronger. Suddenly his jaw squared and his chin went up. 210

"Listen, fellows," he said abruptly. "You two will have to go back to town and bring help. I don't know what the dickens has happened to Micky. He just seems to have disappeared. I left him by the back door while I climbed the tree, and when I came down he was gone. He may have slipped off to take a snoop around the house, but we can't all go and leave him, especially since there is a wireless up that tree, and you know what kind of men would be running a thing like that

these days. So I'll stay here and look around, and you hustle back as quick as you can and get hold of somebody to come out here. You needn't go all the way to town if you can dig up two or three men at any of the farms along the road. But they've got to be men you can depend on. Get me?"

"Y-y-yes," stammered Ritter, his teeth chattering audible. "B-b-but what about you?" 211

"Don't worry about me; I'll be all right. Now hustle; and for Pete's sake don't lose any time!"

Obediently they started off; then Ferris ran back. "I forgot," he said hastily. "A little while ago we heard a car out on the road. It slowed down, but we couldn't tell whether it stopped, or whether the trees muffled the sound."

"A car?" repeated Cavvy thoughtfully. "Humph! Of course it might be just a farmer's jitney passing; it's not really very late. Better be careful when you get out on the road, though. This guy must have someone or other to bring him news."

Ferris nodded, and without further comment turned and vanished into the shadows. Listening intently, Cavanaugh heard the faint rustle of their hurried passage through the bushes. Then silence fell—a silence utter and complete and different, somehow, in its quality from the silence of even a few moments before. He was alone now—yet not alone. Somewhere in that spooky ruin of a house mystery and danger lurked. He felt it in every breath he drew, and it needed a distinct effort of will to force himself into action.

But there was nothing else to do. He could not stop here; he must begin at once to search for his missing friend. Slowly he approached the house and circled it. At the back door he paused and whispered Micky's name. There was no answer, nor did he, curiously, seem to expect one. He took a step or two forward, his eyes, by this time accustomed to the darkness, sweeping the shadowy outlines of the house and shed. Then his foot struck something on the ground and bending down he picked up a stout stick which lay there in the tall grass. 212

Micky's stick! He knew the heft and feel of it, and a fresh wave of apprehension swept over him. Why should Micky have dropped it here after carrying it with him all afternoon?

And then, as he stood there motionless, his heart began to throb suffocatingly. A faint scraping sound had come to him, and in another moment he realized that the door beside him was slowly, silently opening.

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CHAPTER XXVIII
TO THE RESCUE

Slowly, silently, inch by inch the portal widened. Beyond that first faint scraping sound, not the slightest creak accompanied the stealthy

movement. Cavanaugh, flattened against the house wall, simply saw the black shadow of the door as it swung outward, growing imperceptibly wider against the almost equally dark background behind it. It was almost as if the thing were happening without human agency; and to the boy, already keyed up by the strange doings of the night, the suspense became well nigh intolerable.

He longed to shout, to dash forward, to run away —to do anything which would end that desperate tension. The thudding of his heart suffocated him; he felt sure the sound was audible for yards. It was only by digging teeth painfully into under lip that he was able to keep a precarious hold on himself.

Then all at once he saw a blurred white patch against the shadow of the door—a hand resting on the latch. His own fingers gripped the hickory staff with unconscious force; his muscles stiffened. A faint rustling beat on his taut nerves with a sense of actual physical shock. What was coming? Who was coming? Could it possibly be McBride? Or was it that beastly fat man with the pasty, yellow, hairless face? 214

The question pounded through his brain, and then suddenly was answered. Another blurred white patch showed in the darkness, larger than the other and higher up—much higher than Micky's face would have appeared. And Cavvy staring with wide, straining eyes, seemed to glimpse the vague, shadowy outlines of a broad, bulky figure standing almost at his elbow. The head was thrust slightly forward, the face moved in a slow circle as if the man were making a stealthy survey of the yard.

It was too much for Cavanaugh. In that instant his self-control snapped like a taut rope when the strain becomes too great. The stick flashed up and fell, with every ounce of his young strength behind the blow. There was a grunt, a groan. He struck again, frenziedly, but already the tall figure was reeling. In another instant it thudded to the ground and, with a gasp of horror, Cavvy came to himself.

For a second he stood there shaking, the stick dangling from his laxed fingers. Then he drew a long, shuddering breath and one hand lifted mechanically to wipe the moisture, which was more than rain, from his face. 215

"I can't have killed him," he muttered in a frightened whisper. "It isn't possible!" And then: "But suppose I have?"

Dropping swiftly on his knees beside the motionless body, he had another shock. He found one of the limp hands and was fumbling desperately for the pulse, when all at once he realized that the wrist he held wasn't in the least fleshy. On the contrary it was lean and hard, and terminated in a big, muscular hand. The person he had struck down was not the fat man at all!

Cavvy gasped and dropped the hand. Then he reached for it again and deliberately forced himself to find the pulse. When he felt it fluttering beneath his fingers, he gave a sigh of relief and slowly his composure began to return.

At least the worst hadn't happened. He was in a

tight place, to be sure; the stranger might regain consciousness at any moment, and it behooved him to act quickly. But he could think and act now without the handicap of that numbing horror which had come so near to undoing him.

Crouching in the wet grass, he glanced swiftly over one shoulder through the open door. It was dark inside, though not so dark as out of doors. He made out dimly the shadowy proportions of a wide, empty hall which seemed to run straight through the house from front to rear. Part way down its length stairs ascended. He could just distinguish the upper portion of the banisters, as if a light from one of the rooms above was shining through an open door. And listening intently, he could hear the sound of someone stirring there, accompanied by a curious scraping clink of metal striking against metal.

Evidently the person above had failed to hear the fall, and, reassured, Cavanaugh felt in his pocket and drew forth a match box. There came with it some lengths of stout cord he always kept in his scout suit, but these fell to the ground unheeded. Cautiously striking a match, he cupped his hands around it until the wood was well alight. Then he bent forward, holding the flame close to the face of the man lying before him.

It was a square, powerful face with a heavy jaw and chin, and a hard curve to the wide, close-lipped mouth. Even with the eyes closed, there was a certain harsh ruthlessness about it which made Cavvy shiver apprehensively. What would happen when he came to his senses, as he was likely to do at any moment?

The match went out, but not before Cavvy had noticed the lengths of cord and realized their possibilities. Hastily picking them up, he turned the man over with some difficulty so that he lay upon his face. Five minutes later he had tied the fellow’s wrists firmly behind his back and made his ankles fast. Then he straightened up and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

His mind was in turmoil of doubt and fear and uncertainty. Up to this moment he had acted almost entirely on impulse—an impulse born of nervous fright and the sense of self preservation. He felt certain that in another moment the man would have discovered him and so he had struck instinctively. But now that the tension had relaxed for a moment he did not know what to do.

More than anything else he wanted desperately to get away as quickly as he could and follow Ferris and Ritter back to town where the whole business could be turned over to the proper authorities. He had had more than enough of meddling with anything so fraught with risk and danger as this proved to be, and he blamed himself bitterly for not realizing at first how things were likely to turn out.

But there was Micky. His strange disappearance and the discovery of his stick beside the door made Cavanaugh feel almost certain that his friend was in the house. Remembering what Ferris had said about the motor car that slowed down, he wondered whether the occupant, who might easily have been one of the gang of spies, might not have come suddenly upon McBride

and made him a prisoner. The wind and rain up there in the tree top would easily have drowned any sounds of a slight scuffle.

At all events Cavvy couldn't make up his mind to run away and leave his friend. He didn't want to venture into that spooky house at all, but he felt that he must at least make a reconnoiter and find out whether what he suspected was true or not. 218

He glanced again at the man on the grass. The fellow was breathing heavily, but showed no other signs of returning consciousness. With a long breath, Cavvy gripped the stick tightly in one hand and stepping over the sprawling body he cautiously crossed the threshold. Noiselessly, in those rubber-soles which had already served him well that night, he tip-toed down the hall to the foot of the stairs, where he paused to glance around. Even in the semi-darkness, the ruinous, uninhabited look of the place was unmistakable. There was not a stick of furniture to be seen—nothing but odds and ends of rubbish, a few empty packing cases and layers upon layers of dust and cobwebs. Blotches of mold and mildew streaked the walls; a damp chill penetrated to his very marrow. On either side of the hall, doors opened into various rooms, but these rooms were dark, and it was evidently not on this floor that the activities of the wireless gang were centered.

Cavanaugh lost little time in the survey. His teeth were chattering with nervousness and cold and he wanted to be moving. From above still came an intermittent sound of movement and that same clink of metallic objects which he had been unable before to place. Whoever was up there had evidently not yet taken alarm, and Cavvy quickly decided that it would be safe to venture further. 219

He took the stairs slowly, keeping close to the wall to avoid awkward creakings. Presently his eyes reached the level of the floor above and he saw that the light came through an open door not far from the head of the stairs. Dropping on hands and knees, he crept up the few remaining steps, gained the door and peered eagerly through the crack.

From this point of vantage his glance swept curiously around the room. It was a large one, the walls streaked and spotted, with rotting remnants of paper hanging down in strips. The meager attempts at furnishing dotted the floor sparsely, like an oases in a desert. A bed, a table holding a small oil lamp, a couple of old chairs and a small, round stove thrust into the wide, old fashioned fireplace, practically comprised these furnishings.

But against the outer wall was the most interesting feature of them all and one which instantly riveted the boy's attention. A wide, rough bench stood there holding a complete wireless apparatus. That is, it had been complete at no very distant time. Just now it was being dismantled as rapidly as the nimble fingers of the fat man could accomplish the task. His back was toward the door, but wires, screws, switches, and various other wireless parts lay about in confusion, while the twitching elbows projecting from the rear of that grotesque, massive figure told something of the feverish 220

haste with which the demolition was being carried on.

The sight thrilled Cavvy and absorbed him for a moment. It looked decidedly as if the plotters had taken alarm and were making ready for a hurried flight. And the cause of that alarm was not difficult to locate. As Cavanaugh's glance shifted again about the room, he started and narrowly escaped betraying himself by a surprised gasp.

Close to the open door and partly hidden by it, stood a straight backed wooden chair. Someone was sitting in it and for an instant Cavvy wondered if this was still another member of the gang. Then in a flash he realized that the person's hands were tied together around the back of the chair, and recognized the crisp black hair and familiar profile of—Bill McBride!

CHAPTER XXIX
ESCAPE

Cavvy caught his breath and instinctively drew back. His heart was thumping violently and the hand which held the stick shook a little. Presently he managed to control himself and took another peep through the crack of the door. The fat man was still absorbed in dismantling the wireless, but it seemed certain that his companion's absence must soon arouse his suspicions. Besides, though the man below was helpless, there was nothing to prevent his using his lungs as soon as he recovered consciousness.

"I've got to hustle," thought the boy desperately. "I've got to cut that rope before something happens."

Swiftly he laid the stick down on the hall floor and taking out his scout knife, opened the largest blade. Then he got down on hands and knees and crept to the doorway and across the threshold. The chair to which McBride was tied hid him from the fat man and another discovery heartened him not a little and brought a momentary sparkle to his eyes. The key was in the lock on the outside of the door. No doubt when the room was not in use it was kept carefully secured, and Cavvy realized comforting possibilities in the fact.

His chief worry at the moment was that Micky might give a start or an exclamation which would betray him. But fortunately the boy's self control stood the test. As Cavvy, crouching behind the chair, pressed his knife blade across the knotted rope, there was a slight quiver of the bound hands, a swift drawn breath that was barely audible, but that was all. A moment later the severed rope slipped down and Cavanaugh gripped the other's arm and drew him gently toward the door.

All would have gone well but for an abominably squeaky board. At the sound the fat man straightened with a jerk and whirled around.

"Quick!" cried Cavvy, jerking McBride across

the threshold.

There was a bellow of rage from the fat man and a swift forward rush. The door crashed shut and the key clicked in a well oiled lock. Close together the two boys whirled around the newel post and tore downstairs, urged on by the muffled, angry cries and poundings on the door. At the foot of the stairs Micky stumbled and fell headlong, but Cavvy dragged him up and they gained the outer door.

The sprawling body of the man still lay across the threshold. But as they leaped over it and reached the open, a snarling curse burst from him followed by a volley of threats and execrations. 223

To these the boys paid no heed. Dashing around the corner of the house they made for the road as fast as the inky darkness and the unfamiliar ground permitted. Once they stumbled into the oozy margin of the stagnant pond. Again Cavanaugh ran against a rusty reaper abandoned in the grass and barked his shin painfully. They were constantly tripping and falling over unseen obstacles, but they never paused and at length they gained the belt of trees and undergrowth which surrounded the clearing.

Here they slowed down to get their breath and listen for sounds of possible pursuit.

“They’d—hardly come—this far,” panted Cavanaugh. “Do you—hear anything?”

“No,” gasped Micky. “Nothing but—the rain and —wind. Whew! I’m winded.”

For a space the silence was unbroken save by the sound of their suppressed panting. Then Cavvy turned and began to push through the undergrowth.

“Let’s be going,” he whispered. “It’ll take a while to find the road, I’m thinking.”

McBride followed. “You’re a pippin, old man, to get me out of that mess,” he said presently. 224

“That’s all right,” shrugged Cavvy. “How did you ever come to get into it?”

“Because I was a nut, I guess,” answered McBride in an apologetic tone. “All the same, he showed up so suddenly and jumped on me so quick, I honestly didn’t have a chance to do a thing—not even to let out a yell.”

“You mean the tall chap with the black beard?”

“Sure. I was standing there beside the door trying to follow you by the rustling you made,” McBride explained. “All at once there was the dickens of a flash in my eyes and the next second somebody grabbed me by the throat and half choked me. I squirmed around and kicked him on the shins a couple of times; then he must have choked me tighter, for I sort of went woozy and the next thing I knew I was inside the house and the door shut.”

“What happened then?” asked Cavvy interestedly.

“He dragged me upstairs and held me down in a 225

chair, while the fat fellow tied my hands. They wanted to find out what I was doing there, of course. The tall guy didn't talk much; just stood alongside and glowered. It was Fatty who asked the questions—about a thousand of 'em, I should say. He wanted to know who I was, and where I came from, and what I was doing there and a lot more. He was especially keen to know where the other fellows were, and I told him—" Micky gave a chuckle of satisfaction—"I told him we'd seen the wires and suspected a wireless, and the others had gone back to town to get the police.

"Say! It was worth a whole lot to see the way they took it. They were scared green—at least Fatty was. The other guy was madder than a hornet and worried some, too. I stuck to the yarn —of course it wasn't true, Cavvy, but you've got to stretch things sometimes with skunks like that, haven't you? And after all it was only what we would have done in a little while. Well, the two went off in a corner and gassed a lot. Finally Fatty began taking down the wireless and the big guy pussy-footed out of the room and down stairs."

"Did you hear anything a little while after he'd gone?" asked Cavanaugh interestedly.

"I thought I did, but I wasn't sure. I was worried stiff, because it seemed as if he might sneak out and nab you when you came down from the tree. So I listened as well as I could and after a while I heard what sounded like a thump. But I couldn't be sure, for just then Fatty dropped a coil on the floor and it made the dickens of a racket. Was there a thump?"

"There was," returned Cavvy grimly. "I was standing just outside the door when your friend opened it, and I beaned him with your stick."

Briefly, and with many interruptions caused by their progress through the thickets toward the road, he went on to relate what followed and then returned to a consideration of the second man.

"How did he come at you, Bill?" he asked. "Was it from the house?"

"No, he couldn't have. I was standing right beside the door and it never opened, I'm sure. He must have come around the corner of the building and snapped a flashlight on me."

"The motor car," murmured Cavvy to himself. "It was just as I thought."

Instead of passing, the car must have stopped and the man made his way to the house unperceived by the waiting Ferris and Ritter. For a moment Cavvy considered the possibility of hunting up that car and driving back in it to town. Then he realized that still another member of the gang might have been left in it, and abandoned the idea. While he was still lamenting the necessity of this, they pushed through a final fringe of bushes and stepped out on the road.

"There's nothing else but to hoof it back to town," he said in a low tone. "We ought— Listen!"

They both held their breath and in the ensuing silence they heard the throbbing of a motor,

growing rapidly louder and more distinct.

“It’s a car coming!” exclaimed McBride excitedly. “Do you suppose Rit and Champ could have—”

He broke off abruptly as a flash of light suddenly illumined the mist. Brighter it grew and brighter still. Then all at once two brilliant headlights popped into view and behind them another pair.

“Guess we’ll take a chance,” muttered Cavanaugh.

He stepped out in the middle of the road and held up both hands. His figure stood out clearly in the glare of the approaching lamps and presently, with a jarring grind of brakes, the foremost car slowed down and came to a standstill a few feet away.

“We’ve got ’em, Cavvy,” shrilled Ritter’s voice from the depths of the tonneau. “A farmer down the road drove us to town and we found—”

Cavanaugh did not hear the rest. His eyes were fixed on the welcome and familiar face of the County Sheriff, who had stepped out into the road followed by several deputies. There were others in the second car, and a few moments later the boy was hastily explaining the situation to a group of keen-eyed, competent looking men gathered about him.

“The car’s the first thing,” stated Sheriff Mardon crisply. “They’ll try to get away in that. Scatter along the road, fellows. It’s likely run into the bushes a ways. Hustle, now!” 228

There were plenty of lanterns and flashlights, and by their aid the search began. It was quickly over. Cavvy had lingered behind to have a word with the other two scouts when, from a point a hundred yards or so ahead there came a sudden bedlam of voices and the sounds of a scuffle. The scouts dashed forward at a run, but when they reached the spot the brief excitement was over.

Along one side of the road, its hood just protruding from the bushes, stood a small car with all lights out. In front of it were two hatless figures with hands upraised, who glared malevolently at the circle of officers surrounding them.

“These your men?” asked the sheriff curtly as Cavvy came up.

The latter nodded and the sheriff turned to a deputy beside him.

“Take ’em in charge, George,” he said. “Three or four of you men had better stay with him. Don’t take any chances of their slipping off. Now, son, suppose you show us where this plant is.”

Five minutes later they were standing in the upper room of the deserted house, which showed every sign of a hurried flight. The sheriff viewed what remained of the wireless outfit with a grim smile. 229

“Caught with the goods,” he said in a tone of satisfaction. “It’s a case for the Department of Justice, all right. I’ll leave a couple of deputies ’till their man can take charge.” He turned to Cavanaugh. “You kids have done a mighty good

day's work, son," he stated. "I want to hear all about how you came to think it out. Suppose you drop in at my office to-morrow and—" He broke off, his eyes widening. "Why, you're the boy scout who sold me Liberty Bonds, ain't you?"

Cavvy nodded, his eyes twinkling.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the man. "Got me to take twice as much as I was going to, at that. Well, it was a good job even if I did get stung, and now you've done a better one. Let's get a going. Don't forget to come and tell me all about this in the morning."

On the stairs Cavvy heard the big, burly fellow chuckle again.

"I'll be hanged," he muttered. "Boy Scouts!"

CHAPTER XXX
THE LONELY SOLDIER

Private John Farren of Seattle, glanced listlessly out of the barracks' window and sighed. It was not a very cheerful view. The snow drove past his vision in fine, slanting lines that veiled and softened the raw outlines of the building across the cantonment street. It had been falling steadily all night, and Farren was tired of the soft, monotonous brush of icy particles against the glass. It took very little today to tire him. A month in the contagious ward of a camp hospital is apt to weaken nerves as well as body, and Farren had come out only the afternoon before.

A laugh from the other end of the room, loud, hearty, a little strident, brought a frown to his face and made him lift languidly on one elbow to glance across the rows of neat cots to where a group of men in khaki was gathered intimately in the further corner. There were six or eight of them, bright-eyed, alert, pleasant looking chaps. Their uniforms were still a trifle new, perhaps, but already there was a touch of the soldierly in carriage and bearing in spite of the brief tenure of their training.

Yet Farren, after a single glance, dropped back on his cot, a pang of bitterness in his heart. That was the very corner where he had been wont to gather with his chum, Dick Harley, with chuckling, smiling Bruce Ballard, with lank, taciturn MacComber, and a dozen other of those men whom six months of close association had transformed from strangers into the most intimate of friends.

Where were they now, these men who had come to mean so much to him? In France, no doubt. He could not tell. He only knew that while he lay helpless in the hospital his regiment had gone, bag and baggage, leaving him behind. The nature of his illness made it impossible for them to even come and say good-by. He had returned yesterday to the barracks which had been his home for months to find it full of strangers—strangers who had already acquired an air of permanent possession, which made him feel, curiously, as if he were the rookie and they the

old established veterans.

The newcomers had not been deliberately indifferent. It was simply that they had already formed their little cliques and friendships. And with Christmas day at hand, there was the exciting lottery of leave to occupy them, the interest of Christmas letters and Christmas parcels to fill their minds. An added obstacle, too, was Farren's lassitude and weakness, which made the mere act of friendly overture an effort he could not bring himself to tackle. So he simply slipped back into his place, silent, reserved, desperately lonely. He did not even try for leave. Of what use would that be to him when he knew no one in the East and had no place to go? Once, to be sure, he thought of the Boy Scouts he had come to know so pleasantly. They were mighty nice chaps, and he felt they liked him. But at this season they were probably too full of Christmas fun and excitement to give him even a thought.

A lump rose in Farren's throat, his lids drooped defendingly. And out of the sheltering darkness, the soft swish of snow sounding in his ears, there rose a picture of—Home! There were dear, familiar faces in that picture, shadowy familiar objects in its background. And because Farren was young and rather weak and very lonely, he clung desperately to the illusion, quite failing to hear the click of a door opening or the rapid thud of feet across the bare boards. The footsteps ceased abruptly and there came a momentary pause. Then a low, eager voice broke through his reverie.

"Jack! Are you asleep?"

Farren's lids flashed up and he blinked dazedly. Beside the cot a boy of fifteen looked down on him—a red-cheeked, dark-eyed boy with snow powdering his mackinaw and clinging to hair and lashes. Farren's eyes widened, his lips parted in a smile.

"Why, Micky!" he cried, struggling to a sitting posture. "When did you blow in?"

"This minute. I've just come from the hospital." He caught the man's thin, white fingers and squeezed them tightly. "Gee! but I'm glad to see you out, Jack!" he exclaimed. "It's been perfect ages."

Farren smiled wrily. "It has that," he agreed. "I began to think they were going to keep me there forever."

"How are you feeling?" asked McBride, sitting down on the side of the cot. "A little rocky yet?"

"Sort of," nodded Farren. "I'll pick up, though, in a day or so. It—it just seems a little queer getting back and finding—"

A roar of laughter came from the far corner of the room and he broke off, wincing unconsciously. The boy, following the direction of his glance, nodded comprehendingly.

"I know," he said in a low tone. "It's beastly! But maybe they'll send you after them. We—we saw them off at the station. It was great, but it made me feel—sort of queer. They gave us all sorts of messages for you—Dick and Mac and Bruce, and

all the others. They said—”

He paused. Farren had turned abruptly and was staring out at the driving snow. For a moment the boy hesitated. Then one hand reached out and gently touched the other’s sleeve. A moment later, his voice, elaborately casual, broke the silence.

“Can you get leave this afternoon, Jack?”

“Leave? What for? What would I do with it?”

Farren’s tone was dull and listless, but his face softened a little as he looked into Micky’s eager, smiling eyes.

“Don’t you worry about that,” the boy answered. “We’ll see you have enough to do. I’ll bet the old man would let you off now if you asked him. You’ve been sick and all that, and I don’t believe you’re fit to do any work yet. Come ahead and try. We want you for all day. Cavvy’s waiting outside with a sleigh. I don’t believe you ever had a sleigh ride before. They don’t have any snow in Seattle, do they?”

“Not often,” admitted Farren. He hesitated a moment longer and then stood up slowly. His curiosity was roused, and unconsciously his load of depression was lightening. “What the deuce have you boys got up your sleeves?” he asked doubtfully. 235

Micky’s eyes danced. “That’s a secret,” he grinned. “You just go and get off for all day and leave the rest to us.”

Farren smiled back at the boy, a pleasant glow stealing over him. After all there were some who seemed to care whether or not he spent Christmas day lying around the barracks. His glance strayed to McBride’s legs, neatly encased in khaki.

“You’re all dolled up in your scout clothes,” he remarked, reaching for his overcoat.

“Sure! This is a scout stunt—sort of. Here let’s hold that for you. Where’s your hat? Oh, I see. There! Now, let’s get going. We’ve got a lot of things to do yet, and it’s getting later every minute.”

He slipped an arm through Farren’s, and together they walked the length of the barracks and out into the storm. As the door closed behind them the man was conscious of a sense of relief, as if in that act he had shut behind him, also, a host of memories and regrets and unattainable longings. For a time, at least, he was free from the bitterness of the past and the uncertainty of the future. His eyes brightened and a faint color came into his face. Life wasn’t such an entirely hopeless business, after all, he thought as he tilted his hat against the driving snow.

There proved to be no difficulty in getting leave for the day, and almost before he realized it they had reached the cantonment entrance and found Jim Cavanaugh driving a sleigh slowly up and down the road. His greeting was quite as eager and enthusiastic as McBride’s had been; and presently, tucked between the two, thick furs drawn up to his chin, Farren relaxed with a 236

contented sigh. The snow drove against his face, bringing the blood tingling responsive to his cheeks. The merry jingle of the bells sounded in his ears. On either hand the white countryside swept by, veiled, mysterious, pleasantly unfamiliar behind that curtain of flying particles.

Pleasantly mysterious, too, was their destination. Farren tried to wheedle something out of the boys, but both refused to give him any satisfaction. They were full of news, having quantities of things to tell him of what had happened during his illness. Chief among them was the exciting incident of the hidden wireless and how the captured men had proved to be German spies of the most flagrant type.

Seeing that his curiosity must remain ungratified, Farren resigned himself to the inevitable and listened with much interest to the tale, which culminated in the arrival of Government Secret Service agents, who heartily congratulated the scouts and carried off the plotters to, as Cavvy put it—"Goodness knows where."

After all, there was a distinct pleasure in just sitting there, warm, comfortable, relaxed, taking part in the boys' gay chatter, conscious of their friendly interest with back of it all that intangible sense of a surprise party looming in the future. 237

In the town they made several stops where bulky, mysterious looking parcels were tucked into the back of the sleigh, adding to the feeling of festivity. Farren rather expected that they would then head for one of the boys' homes, where he would probably be invited to take part in the family Christmas dinner. But to his surprise Cavanaugh drove straight down the main street and on out into the country again.

"Look here, son," he said with mock severity, "you're not going to try any kidnapping stunt, I hope. Don't forget I've got to report back at camp before nine o'clock, or it'll be the guard house for mine."

Cavvy grinned. "Don't worry," he laughed. "We'll return you before that in first class shape, charges paid and all the rest of it."

"Only the parcel will be a few pounds heavier than when it was posted," chuckled McBride.

Farren smiled, but inwardly was puzzled. So it was a Christmas dinner, then—but where? He knew most of the Wharton scouts well; a few of them intimately. Not one, so far as he could recall, lived as far out as this. 238

His bewilderment increased when the cutter left the main road and turned to the right into a country road that led back into the hills. It curved along, winding through bits of woods, past level white stretches which might have been swamp or meadow land, or between bush-strewn pastures. The storm had lessened a little and presently the red front of a low farm house loomed warmly through the snow. But they passed that, too, and a little later, when Cavanaugh pulled the horse again sharply to the right into a narrow, twisting track, Farren gave up all speculation, and settled back comfortably to enjoy his outing.

The road was steep as well as narrow and the horse took it at a walk. On either side towered great pines and hemlocks, their laden branches sweeping almost to the ground. Yet here and there through little openings one could glimpse the close-set ranks of dark trunks standing out sharply against the snow, which seemed to stretch on indefinitely. Still climbing steadily, they made a turn and presently another. Then the track levelled abruptly, and in another moment they came out into an open space and stopped.

“Well, here we are,” said McBride, throwing aside the fur robes.

Farren’s eyes swept the clearing interestedly. It seemed to be a bare, rocky shoulder on one of the high hills which looked down on Wharton. From here, on fine days, one could no doubt get a widespread view of hill and dale and open country. But Farren was not thinking of the view just now. His attention was riveted on the structure of logs which stood before him, nestling against a background of pines. It was a log cabin, long, low, with an overhanging roof and a great stone chimney rising at one end. Out of the chimney smoke curled; the small-paned window glowed with the cheery gleam of fire; the tang of burning wood came pleasantly to his senses. And as he stared, heedless for the moment of Cavvy’s question of how he liked it, the door flew open and a horde of boys in scout uniform burst out pell-mell and clustered around the sleigh.

“Merry Christmas!” they shouted exuberantly. “Merry Christmas, Jack! How’s the boy? It’s great to see you again. Lay off him, you roughnecks; don’t paw him to pieces. Give him a chance to get his breath.”

Farren grinned broadly as he stepped from the sleigh into the throng of dancing, excited youngsters. “I certainly need it,” he laughed, ruffling one boy’s hair and slapping another on the back. “You fellows put one over on me this time, all right. But how did it ever come to be here? You didn’t build it yourselves, did you?”

“Alas, no!” returned Cavvy. “Not that we aren’t capable of it if it had been necessary, you understand. But we put some magnificent finishing touches to the interior and furnished it completely. We wanted it to be a surprise for you and Dick and the others. But before we got it quite ready they—they went, so you’re the only one left to take part in the house warming. Come ahead in and look the joint over. Furn, hold the horse a minute, will you?”

He took Farren’s arm, and with Micky on the other side, and the remainder of the boys trailing behind, they tramped through the snow to the open door and stepped inside.

And there they paused, the man surprised, fascinated. He had been prepared, no matter what he found, to show surprise and approval if for no other reason than to satisfy the boyish pride of his hosts. But as it happened there was no pretense necessary; his emotion was entirely genuine and very keen.

CHAPTER XXXI
THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

The interior was a single room some twenty-five feet long and over half as wide, the walls of pine logs carefully trimmed and notched, with joints made tight with cement. Opposite the door yawned a cavernous fireplace of rough stone in which a pile of four foot logs roared and crackled.

That much there had been on that October night when the scouts first occupied the cabin; otherwise one would have scarcely have recognized it as the same place. Another pair of bunks had been added to match the first. Over the fireplace hung a fine moosehead beautifully mounted, and here and there above the windows or on the walls were other horns of elk, caribou or deer. There were several bear skins on the floor, shelves containing tinware and dishes, several big, comfortable armchairs, a heavy table piled with packages and boxes. And hanging from the rafters, or festooned about the antlers or along the walls, thick ropes of hemlock mingled with glossy mountain laurel lent a festive note to the picture and filled the room with the pungent fragrance of Christmastide.

It was a picture to stir the imagination of any boy, old or young, and John Farren was stirred deeply. In that instant as he stared around, there came to him a vivid memory of the hunter's shack on the Pacific slope which he had found and renovated with such pride in those boyhood days which now seemed so remote and far away. Swift on the heels of this, there flashed over him in one queer mental medley, the thought of home, of Christmas trees, of his mother's smiling face, his little sister's shrill, sweet laugh. And mixed up with those fleeting brain pictures, were vague, blurred visions of skates and toys and candy—even of stockings hung before another fire whose ashes had been cold a thousand years.

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He blinked—and was back in the present again, the boys clustered around him, the real fire hot against his face. "It's great, fellows—simply great!" he said in a voice which was not quite steady. "I never saw anything so corking as—"

He paused, his gaze fixed incredulously on the rough oak slab which formed the mantel. A long, black stocking hung there, bulging, distended, and for a moment he thought his brain was playing tricks. Then someone behind him snickered and Cavanaugh gave him a gentle forward push.

"Santa Claus was here and left that with your name on it, Jack," he chuckled. "Better take a look at it. The kids are itching to see what's in it."

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Amidst a laughing chorus of denial from the youngsters, Farren stepped quickly forward. The stocking was very real and solid to the touch, bulging along its length with mysterious, suggestive bumps and corners. Pinned to the top was a card on which was written in painstaking script: "J. Farren; Merry Christmas." Farren

read it slowly; then he laughed—a sudden, bubbling, infectious laugh, and faced around, the stocking in his hands.

“He’s a great old scout, isn’t he?” he chuckled. “Think of his knowing I was going to be here when I didn’t even know it myself! He must have had some silent partners about. Where’s a chair? I’ve got to sit down and take this slowly. I haven’t had a Christmas stocking for goodness knows how long.”

He dragged one of the big chairs up to the table and with the boys crowding around, he began to empty the stocking. It was crammed with parcels of various sizes, some neatly tied in tissue with red ribbons, others showing the work of clumsy fingers in their rumpled, wrinkled wrappings. But each separate one, as its contents was revealed, bore evidence in some way of painstaking thought, of kindness, even of sacrifice. There was a jack-knife, new and shining in its chamois case, a money belt, a leather covered shaving glass. There were packets of writing paper, some handkerchiefs, soap, chocolate, a box of cigarettes, besides many other articles of utility or luxury. As he opened them, Farren kept up a brisk running fire of comment and approval, but when they all lay spread before him, he sat motionless for a moment, his head a little bent.

“This is corking of you, fellows—simply corking,” he said presently in a low tone. “It’s the nicest thing that ever happened to me, and I—I won’t forget it in a hurry.” He raised his head and flashed about the circle a smile of gratitude and appreciation. “I can’t say any more than—thank you; but I mean that a thousand times, and I want to shake hands with every one of you.”

He stood up abruptly, releasing the slight touch of embarrassment which, for just an instant, had held them silent. When the handshakings were over the cabin resounded again with a babel of talk and laughter, which presently merged into the bustle of preparation, for it appeared that a regular Christmas dinner was to be cooked and served.

Farren was eager to help, but his offers were firmly refused, and he was ordered to make himself comfortable by the fire while the others got busy.

“Of course, if you see anything being done wrong, you can draw our attention to it,” said Jim Cavanaugh, his eyes twinkling. “A fellow can’t remember everything all the time.”

“I guess you’ll remember more than I should,” laughed Farren. “What I don’t know about cooking would fill a large volume.”

“We’re none of us experts,” admitted Cavvy. “Still, I reckon we’ll make out somehow.”

In spite of his modesty, the work went forward in a businesslike manner which betokened either uncommon culinary skill, or a good deal of expert advice obtained beforehand. Farren drew up a chair to one side of the blaze and watched everything interestedly, keeping up a running fire of joke and comment with the cooks and their helpers. Once or twice he got up and strolled about the room, admiring the

furnishings and decorations, and each time a scout or two accompanied him to make sure he missed no special feature.

But gradually the interest centered around the fireplace. The fire had been allowed to die down and a thick bed of glowing coals raked forward to accommodate the various cooking operations which were going forward in every available corner of the wide stone hearth. Sweet potatoes boiled merrily in one receptacle; onions in another. From a heavy iron crane above them hung a large and ample kettle, a trickle of steam rising from its spout. These, however, were minor details of the banquet, interesting as accessories, but of no real importance compared with the principal dish which occupied the center of the stage and absorbed the anxious attention of the entire assemblage.

In the middle of the hearth stood a heavy iron grate supporting a large tin oven. Cavanaugh, and Steve Haddon, who was in from Washington for a week, squatted before it, each holding an iron poker with which, at frequent intervals, they raked forward fresh coals to replenish the heap beneath the grate. And at intervals almost as frequent one or the other opened the oven door to peer within. Their movements were followed anxiously by every scout not otherwise fully occupied, and there was no lack of advice from the many onlookers. This was received by the two cooks with contemptuous jeers, but there was, nevertheless, a slight touch of tension in their manner, a decided caution of movement, a keen attention to details. For in that oven, trussed, stuffed already delicately browning, reposed—*the turkey*!

“Mother wanted us to have it cooked at home and just warm it up in the cabin,” explained Cavvy to Farren with a touch of scorn. “But, gee! What’s the use of having a turkey if you can’t *smell* it cooking!”

“There’s nothing like it,” agreed the soldier, sniffing the air appreciatively. “Doesn’t it make you hungry, though?”

“You’ve said it!” came in unison from several lips.

“You’re sure it won’t get burned, Cavvy?” added McBride, who had charge of the onions.

“What do you think we’re sitting here watching it for?” retorted Cavanaugh with some heat. “You look after those onions and don’t bother about the turkey. I’ll bet you haven’t made the cream sauce yet.”

“Rit’s mixing it up now.”

“Well, he wants to get some speed on. This bird will be dished up in twenty minutes sharp, and we want all the other grub ready by that time. How are the potatoes, Red?”

Flushed but smiling, Red Garrity withdrew the fork he had just plunged into the bubbling pail. “Just about done,” he answered.

“Better set ’em off to one side, then, and about five minutes before we’re ready you can peel them and put ’em on a plate. When he gets out of there, Chick, you slick on the plum pudding to

heat.”

To most of them that twenty minutes dragged interminably, but like all other similar periods of waiting, it came to an end at last. When all the other accessories of the banquet had been placed on the carefully set table, Cavanaugh and Haddon together lifted the oven from the fire to the hearth and removed the steaming fowl to a platter placed in readiness. There was a moment of gasping suspense as Cavvy brushed one hand against the hot metal and nearly dropped his end of the load. But he hung on, and the calamity was averted at the expense of a red ridge across three fingers. A moment later the turkey was laid triumphantly on the board and the boys scrambled to their places, with sighs of mingled relief and anticipation. 248

The latter were more than justified. No turkey, it seemed to them, had ever been so plump and juicy, so tender, so crisply brown, so succulent of dressing. The creamed onions were delicious, the potatoes done to a turn, the brown gravy plentiful and thick. They ate and ate, and passed their plates for more. When the first pangs of hunger had been assuaged, jesting and banter began to run up and down the table, compliments phrased in the inverse to terms of boyhood were showered upon the cooks, who tried not to look too proud as they themselves enthusiastically consumed the products of their skill.

John Farren’s enjoyment of the meal was utter and complete. The food really was delicious, but better than any material pleasure was the mental relaxation that had come to him. His troubles had quite vanished, his laugh rang clear and unrestrained, and he joined in the joking give and take with all the mischievous abandon of a boy. 249

So the feast passed on to its predestined end. And when the turkey lay dismembered on its platter, looking like the yawning wreck of some stranded derelict, when the plum pudding had vanished save for a few crumbs and every other dish was scraped quite clean, the boys arose with sighs of repletion and gathered around the fireplace. Fresh logs were piled upon the embers, skins dragged up, and they crowded in a close semi-circle before the blaze with Farren in the center.

Outside the early dusk had fallen, the whispering touch of snow flakes brushed against window panes or across the roof. Now and again the wind howled eerily in the chimney. But inside the cabin was only warmth and cheer and comradeship. And as the dancing flames lit up that circles of boyish faces, some flushed and drowsy, others bright-eyed and alert, each one meeting his own glance now and then with a friendly smile, Farren thrilled oddly. McBride sat close on one side of him, little Furn Barber nestled against the other. And presently, when the small boy began to nod, Farren slid an arm around his shoulder and drew the tousled head down upon his knee. How could he have thought the world cold and lonely, he wondered?

They did not sit long in silence. There were jokes and laughter, a story or two, and presently someone started up a song. But all too soon came the jingle of bells and the muffled 250

stamping of the horse, brought up from the red farm house below.

“I hate to break up the party,” said Cavanaugh, scrambling to his feet; “but you know we promised to return you on time.”

“I know.” Farren stood up, smiling a little at Barber’s dazed awakening. “I’m not the least bit keen to leave, but of course I must.”

It was not easy to tell them what that day had meant to him. They could not understand it all; he hoped they never would. But when he had finished, at least they knew that he was grateful. There was a brisk bustle of handshaking, a chorus of good-bys, and he was in the sleigh, looking back at the open door filled with smiling faces and wildly waving hands. Then the faces blurred into mere outlines, black against the glow of the fire, the friendly voices grew fainter, there came a turn in the path and the cabin vanished.

It was nearly an hour before Cavvy and McBride returned, but it was an hour well spent in washing dishes and tidying up generally. It is just possible that this job *might* have been put off till morning but for the fact that the entire crowd was spending the night here and needed every inch of room. The clearing up had hardly been finished before the two boys were heard outside kicking the snow from their feet. A moment later they entered. 251

“Greatest news you ever heard,” exclaimed Cavanaugh at once, stripping off his mackinaw and hanging it on some horns to dry. “Jack’s going over!”

“What! Right away?” inquired several voices at once.

“Yep. He starts the first thing in the morning. His Colonel’s had word that the regiment will be a month longer wherever they are in France before going to the front, so he’s sending four or five men who were left behind to join it. Jack’s about crazy with joy.”

“I should think he would be,” remarked Steve Haddon slowly. “It must have been tough having all the others go without him. I’d hate it, I know.”

No one answered him directly. At the further end of the room the youngsters were raucously disputing over sleeping places, but on the four or five older scouts gathered before the fire a sudden, thoughtful silence had fallen. A year from now where would they all be! Scarcely together as they were to-night. Presently Cavvy caught Steve’s eye and his arm dropped across the other’s shoulder to rest there with a faint pressure. 252

“So should I,” he agreed. Then he smiled. “Steve, old scout,” he went on briskly, “we’ll have to enlist together when we go and maybe they’ll put us on the same ship. Meantime—Hanged if I’m not hungry again! Let’s see if we can’t dig up some cold turkey.”

THE END

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