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Shaler**

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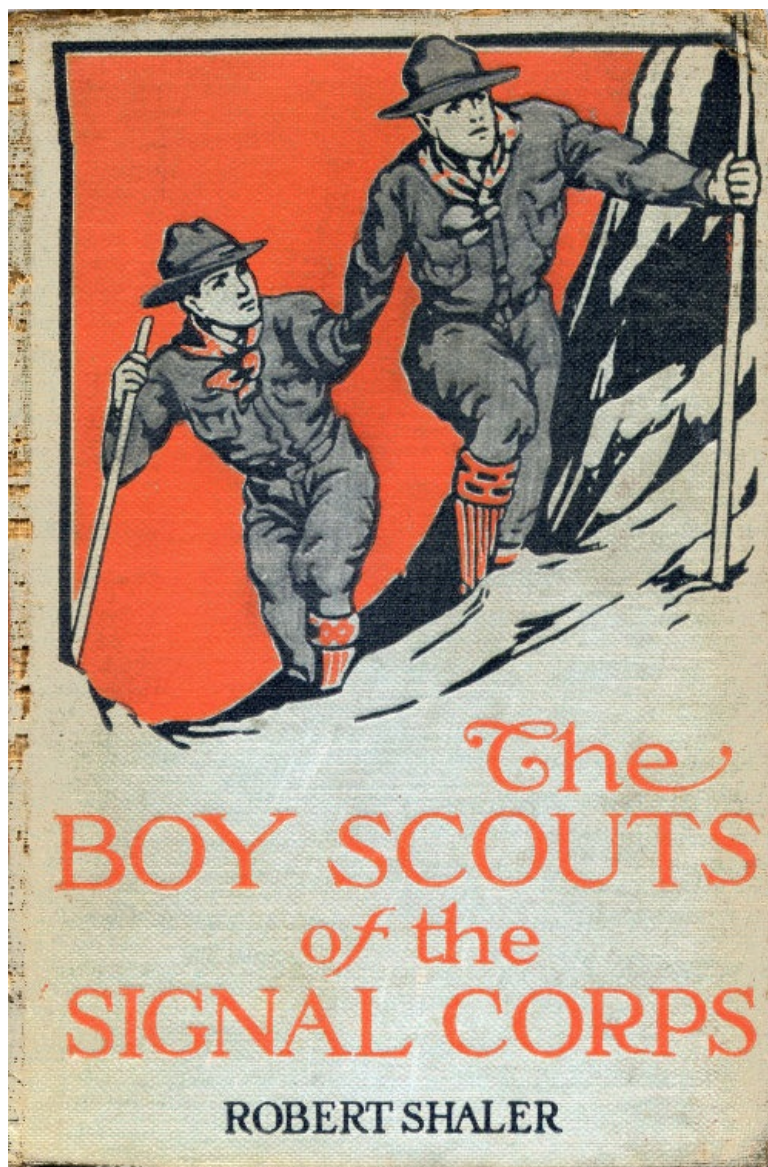
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS ***



THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS

BY
ROBERT SHALER

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Signal Corps

CHAPTER I. GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

"Hi! you, Billy Worth!" cried the leader of the Wolf patrol, a tall youth of seventeen named Hugh Hardin, addressing his assistant. "Scramble out of that bunky, my boy, in two wags of a Wolf's tail, or I'll have scout's law on you!"

"All right, chief! Coming!" was the prompt response, as Billy, thus adjured, turned over in his bunk and thrust one long leg over the edge.

His bare brown foot, dangling perilously near the head of another boy whose bunk was beneath Billy's, proved too great a temptation for the lad. Pulling a whisp of straw from his mattress, he proceeded to tickle the sole of that foot, thereby causing Billy to elevate it hastily with a loud squeal.

As he did so, Hugh made a dexterous sweep of his arms, and, grasping Billy around the knees, almost flung him over one broad shoulder and deposited him none too gently on the floor.

"Ouch!" whooped Billy.

His shout and the dull thump of his fall aroused other inmates of the cabin who had not already wakened in time to witness the onslaught.

"Help! Murder!" yelled a scout of the patrol.

"Shut up!" another boy said, laughing, as he sprang from his bunk. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"Not hurt, are you, old man?" inquired Hugh, a trifle anxiously, for he seldom cared to perpetrate practical jokes. "I didn't mean to——"

No response from Billy. He lay where he had fallen, with one arm outstretched, the other pillowing his head. His face was covered by a limp hand, but between his fingers he slyly peeped out, and his twinkling eyes sought the serious face of Hugh, who was bending over him.

"Billy's done for!" said the lad who had tickled him. "Let's put him to bed, chief, for he will be happier there."

Ignoring this facetious suggestion, Hugh bent still lower; he even dropped upon one knee, and put his hands on Billy's shoulder.

"Wake up, son!" he urged, smiling and giving his chum a gentle shake. "First round is over, and in ten seconds you will be counted out."

This was the chance for which Billy had been waiting. Now he saw that Hugh was completely off his guard. Suddenly his free hand shot out, grasped Hugh's ankle from behind, gave it a strong push—and the next instant Hugh

measured his length on the floor. Before Hugh could fully realize what had happened to upset his equilibrium, Billy gathered up his own sprawling limbs, and hurled himself upon his fallen leader.

"Down and out, am I?" he gurgled. "Who said so? Come on, we'll—"

"Sure! We'll see!" As he spoke, Hugh struggled free from the other's hold, and met the reprisal with his usual jolly laugh. "Good for you, Billy! Good one on me! O-ho!"—he dodged nimbly a "half-Nelson" which Billy had vainly attempted—"none of your famous strangle-holds, now!"

Then ensued a rough-and-tumble match, the outcome of which was awaited in joyous suspense by every scout in the cabin. They all gathered in a wide circle around the wrestlers, showering liberal encouragement. Had the match been between Hugh or Billy and a member of the other patrol, however friendly, it might not have been greeted with the same impartiality.

The circle soon narrowed, for not more than three minutes elapsed before both contestants were down on their sides, facing each other. Hugh, being quicker and less stockily built than his chum, was the first to make a final overthrow. In a trice, he pulled Billy under him; and, though Billy put up a good fight, he crumpled flat under Hugh's weight.

"You win!" he gasped. "Get off my arm,—it hurts!"

"Sorry, son," said Hugh, when murmurs of applause had died away. "Shall I put you back to bed now?"

"No, thank you; I—"

Laughter greeted Hugh's query, for Billy Worth bore an undeserved reputation of being a sluggard. On his part, he took the laugh good-humoredly.

"Is that what you call doing a daily good turn?" he inquired of Hardin, with a grin. "You've begun the day nicely, I must say!"

"*You* did the good turn, old scout!" called Walter Osborne, of the Hawk patrol, from across the room. "I never saw a neater tumble!"

"I'll take a fall out of you for that, Walt!" threatened Billy, cheerfully. "If we have archery practice to-day, you'll miss a feather from your wing!"

"Hear! Hear!" came a chorus of voices.

"Fly at him, Walt!" urged one of young Osborne's patrol.

"Go to it, beak and claws," added another.

"Billy the Wolf'll catch you if you don't watch out!" chanted a third, in a sing-song voice, thumping his pillow as if to beat time to the words.

Neither Billy nor Hugh made any response to this friendly taunt. Hugh turned aside and, going to the rear of the room where a tier of lockers

stood, numbered to correspond with the bunks, he drew out a pair of bathing trunks.

"Going for a swim before breakfast?" asked Billy, turning to a young fellow who appeared in the doorway of the cabin and paused on the threshold outside.

"Are you?" came the evasive answer.

"You bet! The Lieutenant gave us permission yesterday, and we're off to the lake, bright and early."

"I see," remarked the outsider, glancing around the cabin, which was filled with boys in various stages of undress.

Something in the tone of his voice, a note of wistful bitterness, struck the ears of Hugh Hardin, who was standing near enough to overhear this brief colloquy. He looked up from the process of tying the strings of his shorts tight, and was on the point of making some remark, when, recognizing the visitor, he kept silence.

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Billy Worth was not so tactful.

"Come along, Alec," he urged. "The water's fine!"

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm on police duty, as punishment."

"Punishment? For what?"

"Carelessness," was Alec's truthful, albeit sulky, reply. "Yesterday I dumped 'Buck' Winter out of a canoe,—though it wasn't all my fault. The kid wouldn't keep still, and he told me he could swim like a fish,—and he was nearly drowned."

"Gee! That little piker! Why, he *can* swim! Didn't he capture two points from us last week, in the hundred yards?"

"Wrong again, Billy! It was his brother, who is the star swimmer of our patrol."

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"Well, your Otters put it all over us, Alec, in those water games."

"That is why we are so glad to have morning practice," added Hugh, in a tone which he honestly intended to be kind. "We Wolves want time to find out what we can do."

"Buck must have lost his head," remarked Walter Osborne, who had drawn near.

"He did," said Alec, emphatically, "and he gave Chief Hardin a chance to qualify in first-aid—at my expense."

There was no mistaking the resentment that underlay those words. Walt and Billy glanced uneasily at Hugh.

A flush stained Hugh's bronzed cheeks and brow at the retort, and he turned away scornfully, biting his under lip. It was hard to keep his temper in control, as a scout should; but he managed to do so, and the next moment he was outside the cabin, filling his lungs with deep

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draughts of the pine-scented air and watching the mists roll up the side of the opposite mountain. With the coming of the sun, he was able to take fresh note of his surroundings, and his eager dark eyes dwelt fondly upon the familiar scene in the first light of a new day.

Indeed, it was a scene to stir any red-blooded boy. As far as Hugh could see through the lifting vapor lay the lake, a great silvery mirror reflecting the heavily wooded shores so clearly that the inverted forest appeared no less real than the original. From the shores of the lake, in every direction, hills sloped ruggedly up into mountains, for the most part clothed to their summits with the variegated green of a mighty woodland. The side of one of the nearer mountains was scarred by exposed ledges of bare rock, which, as Lieutenant Denmead, the Scout Master, had said, would make fine strategic points for the Signalers' Game.

"We'll try it some day this week," he had told Hugh on the previous evening, as he sat with his assistant scout master, Rawson, and the leaders of the four patrols around the camp-fire.

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Hugh recalled that vague promise now, as his gaze wandered from those rocky ledges to the deeper hollows not yet penetrated by the sun's rays.

How dim and mysterious they looked! How Hugh longed to explore them and to discover, by means of such woodcraft as he had already learned, the treasures hidden in those shadowy nooks and ravines!

Several boys of his patrol followed him from the cabin. They saw that something had vexed him, but they made no comments, even among themselves. Presently they dashed away, down to the shore of the lake, where most of the boys from the other cabins were gathered. These boys belonged to the Otter and the Fox patrols.

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Left alone for the moment, Hugh waited for Billy and Walter, to whom he had decided to make an explanation of Alec's thrust. As they walked down to the lake together,—Alec having departed on his rounds to the chip-basket,—he told them how he had happened to be on hand to give assistance at the canoe accident.

"I didn't help very much, really," he finished, "and I don't see why Alec should be so sore."

"Oh, never mind him, Hugh; he'll get over his grouch after a while," declared Billy. "He is jealous of you because you qualified as a first-class scout before he did, and because you are in line for a merit badge as chief scout woodsman."

"Hello, son!" exclaimed Walter, turning to greet an eager-faced boy, Number 8 of his patrol, who had trotted up behind them. "What's eating you now?"

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"Do-do you know why the Big Chief has called a m-m-meeting of the patrols this morning?" panted the boy.

"No, I don't," admitted Walter. "But we will find out after breakfast. Run along now, son, and mind: not more than ten minutes in the water!"

"All right, I'll remember," promised the younger boy, and he raced ahead several yards. Suddenly he stopped short, turned around, and waited for the trio to come up. "I-I say, Hugh, will you—will you do me a favor?" he inquired hesitatingly. "Will you coach me on the crawl?"

"Surest thing you know! That's what I'm here for," Hugh responded heartily.

A few more strides brought them to the shore of the lake, where they stood for a moment, watching a group of boys swimming out to the raft. Then, with a quick "Come on, now! Watch me!" Hugh leaped forward into the water, followed by Walter and Billy. The boy whom he was coaching stood knee-deep in the water, gazing with admiration not unmixed with envy at the powerful yet easy overhand strokes that sent the swimmer through the ripples without apparent exertion, yet at a speed that made his own best efforts seem hopeless. In another moment he, too, was breasting the lake, and soon he gained the raft and climbed upon it.

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"That's much better," was Hugh's brief comment, at which his admirer glowed with pleasure. Praise from Hugh, who was usually so reserved, was rare indeed!

Just as they were practicing swift dives, a bugle call rang clear and full across the water.

"The 'recall'," gasped Billy. "Wonder what's doing?"

"That means everybody report at once," said Don Miller, leader of the Fox patrol. "Back to shore, fellows."

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"Hit her up, son!" added Walter, and, suiting his action to his words, he slid rapidly through the clear water, leaving a wake of swirling ripples.

As soon as the swimmers reached shore, they hurried to their respective cabins, dressed, attended to their beds, and then repaired to the larger log-house, where a bountiful breakfast was served. During the meal the talk was all of the eagerly anticipated meeting of the patrols, and everyone wondered why it had been called.

Mess over, Don Miller and Walter Osborne took their stand at either side of the cabin door, and as each boy passed out he saluted the two chiefs with the scout's salute, and was saluted in return. This was a point of etiquette upon which Lieutenant Denmead, who was a retired officer of the United States Army, always insisted, believing that it did much to maintain discipline and to instill the scout virtues of courtesy and of respect for superior officers.

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CHAPTER II.

FORMING THE SIGNAL CORPS.

A cheer, heartier and more informal than military, rose from forty throats, as Lieutenant Denmead and Assistant Scout Master Rawson came forth from their quarters to break the news to the assembled boys.

"Scouts of Pioneer Camp," began the lieutenant, smiling, when silence had been restored, "I have called this meeting in order to lay before you a plan which I think will merit your approval.

"Most of you have heard that in two weeks there are to be National Guard maneuvers over in Oakvale and the adjoining meadows, not far from here?"

A murmur of assent greeted this question, and the Scout Master continued:

"Part of these maneuvers will be the work of a carefully trained and efficient signal corps, and you boys will undoubtedly be interested in seeing that, among the other events. To understand it thoroughly, you should have some practical knowledge of the system of signaling; that is, the semaphore signal code, the wig-wag or Myer code, and the sound codes. You should know how to send and receive messages by each and all of these three methods. Such knowledge may be of great use and benefit to you or to others, at any time.

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"In your woodcraft games, in trailing and stalking, in hunting, you have learned the various signals used in Indian warfare, the signs and blazes along a forest trail. Some of you are familiar with the Morse telegraph alphabet, and every tenderfoot who does not know it must learn it, in order to qualify as a second class scout.

"Now, what I propose to do is this: Let us form a signal corps made up of scouts from our four patrols, who can show by superior skill that they can qualify. Proficiency in any branch of scoutcraft, in any of our games or pursuits (but particularly in the art of signaling) counts in determining who shall join the corps.

23

"The number of points or 'honors' won by each scout makes his record. From each patrol two boys who have made the best records will be chosen, and the leader of the corps will be the scout who has scored the greatest number of points."

Lieutenant Denmead paused, and his clear gray eyes roved searchingly over the group.

"Have I made all this clear?" he added. "Any questions?"

There was a moment's silence, while the boys exchanged eager glances among themselves.

"How does the plan appeal to you?" asked Lieutenant Denmead.

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Another cheer greeted this question, showing the degree of interest felt by the majority. Many of the boys were enthusiastic; a few, whose interests lay in less serious sport, such as water games, canoeing, fishing, photography, field-day events, etc., rejoiced in it chiefly because their prowess in such activities would be counted toward election for the corps; two or three remained silent, considering it from their individual standpoints.

Among these reflective ones was Alec Sands. Sitting on the ground beside Don Miller, he had listened attentively to the Scout Master's

proposition, and he had seen in it only an opportunity for additional rivalry between the two cabins,—which meant between Hugh Hardin and himself. For, by tacit consent, Hugh and Alec were regarded as the two principal leaders among the scouts.

To Alec,—who had gained his leadership of the Otter patrol by unquestioned ability in scoutcraft rather than by virtue of the true scout spirit of kindness and equality,—rivalry meant a certain degree of hostility to “the other fellow.” Being the spoiled son and heir of a railroad magnate, Alec was inclined to consider himself a little above his companions. To compete with them was an act of condescension.

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On the other hand, Hugh Hardin, though but slightly less favored by fortune, was by no means a snob. His patrol was made up largely of boys who had not come from homes of wealth, yet among them there was not one who would ever have suspected, from Hugh’s bearing, that he had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. Reserved and self-reliant as he was, he possessed an apparently inexhaustible fund of good-humor, energy, and ready sympathy with others.

The Scout Master’s plan struck a responsive chord in Hugh, to whom Alec’s personal view of it would hardly have occurred.

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“Great idea! Don’t you think so, Billy?” he whispered.

“All to the good, chief.”

“Walt knows a lot about ordinary telegraphy, you know. That ought to come in handy and count several points for him.”

“‘Bud’ Morgan, in our patrol, worked with a surveying crew last summer. He learned most of the sig——”

“Cut it! The big chief has something more to say.”

After a brief pause, Lieutenant Denmead continued:

“Since most of you are scouts of the second class, and have some knowledge of elementary signaling, we can start our try-outs for the corps by playing the Signalers’ Game this morning. I would like to see what you can do in work with the semaphore codes. It is going to be a perfect day, clear and sunny, and we ought to take advantage of it.

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“The game is one for good signalers; nevertheless, those of you who are not so expert can take part in it and learn the first principles. How many of you know how to play it?”

About eleven hands were raised confidently, then two others went up almost timidly, as if the owners were uncertain of their knowledge. The Scout Master counted them, then turned smilingly to his assistant.

“Rawson, there will be quite enough for the first try-out,” he said. “I will take charge of the smallest division, you of the largest. In that way we shall work to the best advantage. I observe that most of those who seem confident of their

ability as signalers are Otters. I shall need a few of them, and you may distribute the others as you think best.

“Now, boys,” he added, “this is how the game is played: The troop must be split up, temporarily, into three divisions. Division A, numbering eight scouts, will go with me to some position on high-ground,—like those bare ridges on old Stormberg yonder,—where we can command a good view of the stretch of country between here and the mountain. We will take with us our semaphore flags, to-day, although any other signaling apparatus will serve equally well in the game. Division B, numbering twelve scouts, will then go out and keep under cover in this stretch of country which we, the signalers, or defenders, overlook. This division, keeping under cover, will try to dodge or trick the signalers by appearing in different places and disappearing, and will finally take up a concealed position. After Division B has been out fifteen minutes, the rest, Division C, under command of Mr. Rawson, will leave camp.

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“Then Division A will signal down to Division C, or attackers, the position of the hostile Division B, and other details that will help the attackers to advance unseen and surprise the enemy. Of course, Division B, the enemy, is watching the signals all the while. To win, the attackers must capture the scouts of Division B by surrounding their hiding-places. If Division C passes by more scouts than they capture, it counts a win for Division B.

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“We’ll put a time limit of, say, two hours upon the game.”

Following this explanation, came a series of questions about minor details of the game, which were answered by Rawson, while Lieutenant Denmead undertook the arrangement of the troop into three divisions, so that in each division there should be a certain number of scouts who were familiar with the code.

It so happened that Alec Sands, Don Miller, Walter Osborne, and a lad named Arthur Cameron, who belonged to Hugh’s patrol and was just finishing his first month’s service as a tenderfoot, together with Bud Morgan and three others, were chosen to form Division A, much to their delight. Hugh was assigned to Division B, the so-called invaders or enemies, while Billy Worth became Assistant Scout Master Rawson’s right-hand man in charge of Division C.

30

Taking their semaphore flags, the first division, led by the Scout Master, sallied forth from camp. They followed a faintly defined trail which ran close to the shore of the lake and thence up the nearer slopes of old Stormberg, climbed up and up, scrambling over rocky patches of ground, plunging through thickets of white birch, ash, and maple, until they reached an elevation whereon grew only a few somber spruces and pines, but which commanded a magnificent view of the surrounding territory.

As these eight signalers proceeded on their way, they eagerly discussed ways and means by which their other activities could be correlated with working for the signal corps.

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"Any exceptional feat of woodcraft scores twenty points in the record of the scout who performs it," announced Lieutenant Denmead. "For instance, the scout who positively identifies the largest number of birds, animals, or trees may count twenty points to his credit; he who obtains the best six photographs of living wild animals may count fifteen points each; the same for him who makes the best collection of botanical specimens, insects, or minerals. And the prime requirement for the corps will be to send or receive a message by semaphore, American Morse, or Myer alphabet, sixteen letters per minute."

Don gave a low whistle.

"You think that is pretty stiff?" inquired Denmead, turning to him with an encouraging smile. "Just you wait! I expect you fellows will be even more expert than that before these two weeks are over. Look out there, Arthur! That ledge you are standing on is rather slippery, my boy. Now then, Osborne, you and Sands go forward along that bare rib of rock, out to its edge, where you see a blasted pine-tree. Brace yourselves against the trunk and the lower branches, if they're not rotten, and keep a look-out over the backwoods trail from camp. I suspect Division B will take that trail first. Have they left camp yet?"

32

"Can't tell, sir," called back Walter, when he and Alec had crawled to the end of the ledge. "I think they must have left, though, because——"

"Yes, they have, they have!" interrupted Don, pointing down to a clump of willows that grew in marshy ground near the easternmost arm of the lake. "See those blackbirds flying out in circles down there? That shows they are scared by something passing through the willow grove."

The next moment, while they were taking their places and preparing to use the flags according to the alphabet-diagrams they had studied, there came to their ears, faint and far away, the low, weird, mournful howl of a wolf.

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"That is Hugh Hardin calling his own patrol," declared Billy. "Sounds like——"

"A trick!" muttered Alec, under his breath. "He wants to make us look for him in some place where he is least likely to appear."

As if in answer to the wolf call came the subdued yet shrill "*Kree-kree-eee*" of a bird of prey, and, by an odd coincidence, a hawk was seen soaring rapidly above the tree-tops in another direction.

"Some of your Hawks are over there, Walt," observed Alec. "The real bird is making no noise that I can hear. There he goes now! Watch him swoop down into that open glade! Wonder what he saw? A rabbit, most likely. Well, it must be nearly time for Division B to go into hiding, and I ——"

34

"Attention, boys!" Lieutenant Denmead's voice sounded close beside them, and he blew one long blast on his whistle, meaning "Silence," or "On guard! Look out for my next signal."

"Attention!" he repeated. "Get your flags ready. Watch for signs of the enemy. What is that over

in that patch of scrub-oak yonder? Hello! Three of them! And running for cover, like mad! Signal it! Signal it, Alec! There! Now Division C has started from camp. They're advancing to the attack."

CHAPTER III. A PERILOUS ENCOUNTER.

The three scouts of Division "B" who had been sighted by the Lieutenant as they made a dash for cover were Cooper Fennimore, Buck Winter, and his brother Sam, who, mistaking a sound signal of three blasts of Hugh's whistle, had been creeping forward quite openly across a clearing made by lumbermen during the previous summer, thereby coming in full view of the signalers perched on the ribs of old Stormberg.

Alec and Walter, acting under Lieutenant Denmead's rapid-fire commands, lost no time in signaling this information to the advance guard of Division "C," as soon as the latter made their sortie from camp.

Instantly Rawson led his attackers in the direction of the clearing, instead of taking the backwoods trail, as Hugh and his followers had done.

From a coign of vantage on one of the upper forks of a young oak tree, which he had climbed with the agility of a monkey, Hugh perceived the trio's mistake. He had intended to warn them by those three shrill blasts, but they had evidently counted only two, which would have meant "Safe—Go ahead." Now, to leave no room for doubt, he sounded a succession of long, slow blasts meaning "Scatter. Get further away," and accompanied them with the Wolf's peculiar, long-drawn-out, "*How-oo-ooo.*"

Whether these sounds could reach the ears of the signalers he could not tell, but he had the satisfaction of seeing Cooper and Sam dart across the clearing and plunge into the surrounding underbrush, where they could easily find some place to hide in.

Of course, any one of the attacking party could not fail to hear the whistle signals; but that did not matter, as it would be difficult, at best, to locate the scouts exactly, since all of Division "B" were doubtless in hiding by this time.

Not all, however; for there on the edge of the clearing, in full view of the sending station, stood Buck Winter gazing wildly around him, evidently trying to make up his mind where to hide. As usual, Buck had lost his head.

Craning his neck, Hugh could see in the distance two flags,—one held by Bud Morgan, and the other by Arthur Cameron,—pointing directly, it seemed, at the bewildered Buck. Another flag, on the end of the mountain ledge, was being jumped rapidly up and down, to urge speed on the part of the attackers. The air was so still and clear that morning that the defenders' flags

could be plainly seen: small, waving patches of brighter color against the blue of the sky.

Hugh read their messages rapidly.

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"Wonder if they can see me?" he asked himself. "I'd better climb down, get Buck out of danger of being captured, and sprint over to those rocks. Then I can—oh jingo!"

He uttered the exclamation aloud, for at that very moment he caught sight of Billy emerging from the timber.

"Buck! I've got you!" yelled Billy, dashing forward to seize the young Otter, who promptly turned and fled.

Hugh watched the chase with keen interest.

"Billy is no match for that kid, in speed," he commented. "He'll never capture Buck! Wish he could! If one of Division B *must* be captured so soon, I want it done by a Wolf, anyway: that would give our patrol two points."

Suddenly Billy Worth stumbled against a half-buried root, staggered, and fell headlong, rolling over and over on the dry leaves. Buck Winter raced ahead—straight into the arms of two scouts of Division "C," who had skirted the clearing and come out most unexpectedly on the further side.

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The first capture was made. The attackers had won the first victory.

In silent dejection Buck took his way back to camp, while his captors signaled the news to the eager watchers on the mountain, and then ran on to join their comrades who were hunting in the woods.

As Buck passed Hugh's tree, Hugh called down to him:

"Cheer up, Buckie! You'll do better next time! You would have got away from Billy easily."

"That's a cinch!" retorted Buck, in an effort to revive his drooping spirits.

"Wait! I'm coming down."

"Stay where you are, Hugh!" warned the lad. "There's Rawson coming this way, and he'll see you!"

40

So saying, he walked away, and soon was lost in the shadows of the trail.

Nevertheless, Hugh descended cautiously, crawled on all fours through the tangled underbrush and ferns, and then, rising, strode swiftly yet noiselessly toward a group of lichen-covered rocks, behind which he crouched and waited.

All around him he could hear the rustling of leaves, the snapping of dry sticks, the low calls of unseen comrades who were trying to discover and surround the hiding-places of his division. At intervals there would be dead silence in the forest; and once, peering over a jagged boulder, he caught sight of Billy making questioning signals to the defenders.

Two others of his division passed him, returning to camp, having been found and “touched” by the attackers. It was evident that Division “B,” the enemy, was getting the worst of the game! Perhaps they had not had time to hide. Before starting out, he had told them to select the most unlikely places for concealment. Perhaps they were hidden where they could not watch and read the signals. Not much sense in that, but—

Suddenly a low snarl, like that of an angry feline, startled Hugh. Glancing around him, he beheld a lean, gray, spotted creature crouched upon a rock not more than ten feet away from the spot where he stood. The creature’s large pointed ears were laid back, its short tail was jerking viciously from side to side, its amber-colored eyes were glowing with a greenish light.

“Bobcat!” muttered Hugh aloud; adding inwardly: “and she’s mad at me, too!” He raised his voice to a bolder pitch. “Scat! Sca-a-at, you spotted devil!” he almost yelled, advancing a pace nearer the animal.

But the bobcat did not move.

Hugh “froze” in his tracks. Indeed, a chill shiver crept along his spine; his nerves seemed to tingle as with cold. Without being actually alarmed as yet, he realized that he had nothing except his knife with which to defend himself, in case the beast should spring.

“It isn’t likely she’ll do that,” Hugh decided; “but I didn’t scare her. She won’t budge!”

Indeed, the bobcat’s only movement now was to crouch lower upon the rock, tearing its mossy covering with her claws, flexing the muscles of her sinewy flanks. Would she risk a leap at her enemy? Never had Hugh encountered a wildcat so fearless, so determined to stand her ground. Yet this one was not cornered, not at bay; she had every opportunity to bolt and vanish in the thicket. Why, why did she remain there, poised in that menacing attitude upon the rock?

Like a flash, the only probable explanation came to Hugh: “Kittens!” he reasoned swiftly. “There must be kittens hidden somewhere near. I’d better—no, if I turn she *may* spring; you never can tell!”

By mere chance his foot dislodged a small stone from the earth. Stooping quickly, still keeping his eyes on the bobcat, he picked up the stone and flung it at the snarling beast. It struck sparks from the rock, glanced off, and went bounding into the dense undergrowth, whence came a very human howl of anguish. The bobcat vanished—but only for a moment.

“Say, what are you doin’; throwin’ stones?” wailed a voice, and Sam Winter stood up above the ferns, rubbing his shoulder. “That’s not fair, Hugh!” he complained. “You are betraying me to —”

“I wasn’t throwing stones at you, you chump! I didn’t know you were there!”

“What were you trying to hit?”

“A bobcat, Sam.”

“Bobcat? Where?”

"I don't see—oh, look! There she is, just slipping around that stump! Look out, Sam! Beat it!"

With a yell, Sam turned and fled, leaving Hugh again face to face with the creature.

Reckless defiance of danger, a foolhardy lust for battle, now seized Hugh; and all else was forgotten: his comrades, the game they were playing, the record he hoped to make. Here was a far more exciting game, matching his quickness, his steadiness of nerve, with the fierce instincts of that denizen of the forest. Unarmed, he might lay her low with a stone or his hunting knife.

Grasping another stone somewhat heavier than the first, in his right hand, he took careful aim. The next moment, the stone whizzed through the air, there was a blood-curdling screech, and a furry body hurtled across the intervening space, straight toward him. In mid-air, however, it seemed to waver; then it fell headlong to the ground, with a thump, kicking up a shower of dry leaves and clods. By a miracle, Hugh's well-directed missile had struck the cat on the ribs, breaking them; and she had not had time to check her leap, which had inflicted internal injuries.

Hugh was trembling now with the reaction of excitement. He could scarcely believe that he had taken such a slim chance.

"What a fool I was, what a fool!" he gasped, looking down on the dying wildcat. "I ought to have had more sense than to take such a risk. I'm sorry I killed her! I'm sorry and ashamed. Poor thing! I must put her out of misery; it is all I can do now. Oh, I won't forget this for many a day! What a blind-lucky fool I was!"

"Yes, you were," said a deep voice beside him.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Rawson? Have you your automatic there? Please, please finish the poor brute! I-I've wounded her—after provoking an attack."

"I saw you, saw the whole episode," Rawson declared grimly.

He drew his revolver, a shot rang out through the wood, and the bobcat lay still.

Silence.

Hugh swallowed hard, choking down a lump in his throat.

"I suppose we'll have to report this—this exploit," said Rawson gravely, laying a hand on Hugh's shoulder. "Of course you'll want the skin?"

The absence of any word of praise, any congratulation on his narrow escape, made Hugh feel doubly ashamed. To be sure, he had done a very plucky thing, he had shown a certain sort of courage which, had it been exerted wholly in self-defense, would have won golden opinions from his comrades, instead of this tacit censure on the part of Rawson. But there was nothing to do except brazen it out.

"Ye-es, I want the skin," he replied slowly. "It will remind me of—of—not to do it again."

"Take it and welcome, old man. When you have skinned the critter, you will go back to camp. I've caught you, see? You're my prisoner."

The young leader of the Wolf patrol, self-accused of needless slaughter, glanced at his superior with a look of unconcern.

"Oh?" said Hugh. "I forgot! Are we still playing that game?"

CHAPTER IV. A FIRE IN CAMP.

The game was over by the time that Hugh, after a fruitless search for the bobcat's kittens, returned to camp, and Division "C," the attackers, had won the day.

Owing to the fact that each division had been made up of scouts from the four patrols, no single patrol could claim the honor of victory, although individuals in each patrol who had done good work in signaling were complimented by their fellow scouts, as they all were gathered around the camp-fire that evening.

"Alec Sands will surely make the corps," declared young Osborne. "The Chief said that he —"

"I know, I know," interrupted Billy, whose loyalty to Hugh made him loath to hear Alec's praises sung. "You have a good chance, too, Walt."

"Don't feel sure at all, myself," Walter replied, yawning. "Say, Billy, what's the matter with Hugh this evening? Look at him sitting over there, talking to the Lieutenant! He's as solemn as a great horned owl. Do you know what he did all afternoon, after we got back?"

"He went to see the Lieutenant first, and showed him the pelt of a big bobcat he'd killed. Gee! it's a stunner, Walt! Then he spent two hours out on the field, practicing wig-wags with Bud Morgan. You see, to-morrow we are going to change divisions, so everyone will get a fair trial."

"Bully! We all need a lot of practice. Even Alec is a little rusty."

"And the same way with the Myer code and the American Morse," continued Billy. "Each one, in turns."

"For the next two weeks?" queried a boy who sat beside them.

Billy nodded.

"It's not a bit too long," Walter affirmed. "We want to make a good showing as a corps."

"Hope it will be a nice day to-morrow," said the boy, looking up at the sky with its glittering host of stars. "I want to take some photos."

"Guess you'll be able to, all right," was Billy's confident rejoinder. Billy was a born optimist,

ever ready to see the doughnut before he beheld the hole; he had the happy faculty of expecting and looking for the best always, in conditions as well as in people.

"Feel the grass," he suggested a moment later, passing his hand lightly over the sward. "It's as dry as chips. You know what that means?"

"Dangerous to light fires," said the other promptly.

"Pretty good, for a tenderfoot!" quoth Billy, with a grin. "But I was thinking of a little rhyme which I'll repeat for your benefit, if sufficiently urged."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"When nights are cold and days are warm,
A circle round the moon means storm."

"Thanks for the information!" laughed the tenderfoot. "You can see the moon's rim clearly now. Plenty of sunshine to-morrow? I doubt it!"

"When the grass is dry at night,
Look for rain before the light."

"Oh, well, we can't do anything but wait and see," commented Billy.

With which sage remark he rose, stretched himself sleepily, and crossed over to where the Scout Master and Hugh were seated upon a fallen log.

As he approached Hugh, who was gazing into the fire with his hands clasped over his knees, Billy noticed a group of boys of the Otter patrol gathered around Alec Sands, and heard Alec say to them:

"We're going to have stalking games to-morrow afternoon, after signal practice in the morning. Don't let those Wolves give us all the go-by in stalking, fellows! If we do, it will give every one of them a chance to score a lot of points. I hope it will rain; then we'll have to do something else, or perhaps everyone can do just what he likes best."

There were murmurs of approval, indistinguishable to Billy, who passed on and took a place by Hugh's side. Presently the whole troop was listening attentively to Lieutenant Denmead's clear and concise explanation of wireless telegraphy. It was his custom to give informal talks on various subjects during these meetings at the evening council-fire, and to outline a program for the ensuing day.

When the council was adjourned, at a quarter of nine, the scouts retired to their cabins. Alec and two other boys, being still on police duty, extinguished the fire, scattered and trod upon the few remaining embers, and then sought their bunks. Half an hour later, the profound silence of the forest was broken only by the eerie hoot of an owl and the nocturnal chorus of frogs in a distant marsh.

Soon after midnight, Hugh, whose bunk was near the open window of the cabin, was awakened by a faint smell of smoke. A light breeze had sprung up during the night, wafting that pungent, unmistakable odor to his sensitive

nostrils. Instantly he sat up and threw aside his blankets.

"Billy," he whispered hoarsely, "wake up, son!"

54

There was no response save his assistant's deep, quiet, peaceful breathing.

Knowing that Billy had a chronic objection to being awakened suddenly, if at all, Hugh was thoughtful enough to respect his friend's amiable weakness even at this crisis. Leaning over the sleeper, he took Billy's hand, held it a moment, then pressed it firmly. The result was that Billy stirred comfortably and opened his eyes, without a start or a protest.

"What—what's the matter?" he drawled sleepily, blinking at Hugh through the darkness.

"I smell smoke," was the whispered reply. "Billy, do you think a fire has broken out in camp?"

"What! Fire?" Billy sniffed the air. "Say, Hugh, it can't—"

"S-sh! Not so loud! We don't want to wake up the whole cabin. Come outside. If anything's happened, we must act at once, or at least give warning."

55

"Wonder where it is coming from? Hope it isn't a fire in the woods! That would be more than—" Suddenly he remembered his conversation with the tenderfoot about the dryness of the grass, and coupled it with a warning which the Scout Master had given them that very day, concerning the danger of starting forest fires.

"It is criminal to leave a burning fire," Denmead had said. "Always put out a fire with water or earth. A fire is never out until the last spark is extinguished. Often a log or snag will smoulder unnoticed after the flames have apparently been trodden down, only to break out afresh with a rising wind."

Had this happened now? Billy wondered, as he followed Hugh to the door. Had the scouts on police duty been guilty of criminal carelessness?

56

Outside, the two lads instantly discovered the cause of their alarm.

Some of the sparks from the camp-fire must have lodged between the logs of the mess-cabin, and, lying undisturbed and unnoticed there, have slowly eaten their way through the resinous wood until it was ignited. Little tongues of flame were licking one wall, but as the soft breeze was blowing *away* from Cabin 2 and the Lieutenant's cabin, no one could have detected the smoke, unless by mere accident. Even Joe, the half-breed guide who, with the cook, occupied a tent not far removed from the mess-cabin, was apparently oblivious of the threatened danger.

Yet even while Hugh and Billy, each snatching a bucket of water that stood outside their cabin (left there for morning ablutions) ran over to the scene of peril, they caught sight of a shadowy form in the moonlight, rushing from Cabin 2, and heard a voice hoarse with anxiety call out:

57

"What is it? Who's there?"

Without answering, they dashed the two pailfuls of water upon the flames, and were gratified to hear an immediate sizzling that told them the fire had not bitten deep into the log walls; indeed, it had only grazed the bark and outer rings of wood.

The third fire-fighter had now come up to them, but he hung back a little, as if nervously anxious to avoid recognition.

"Run, Billy! Get another pailful!" directed Hugh, in a low voice, and his comrade sprang away to carry out instructions. "I'll club it out with this roll of old canvas. It'll be out in a—oh, is that you, Alec?"

"Yes, yes! Hugh!—Billy! Please don't make any noise!"

"Why, what are you afraid of, Alec?"

"Of—of—oh, nothing; only I think we can put this little fire out, and—and perhaps no one will be any the wiser, except ourselves. Here, let me help you!" He seized the small roll of canvas with hands that actually trembled, and began to assist Hugh in beating out the flames. "Oh, Hugh, if this is my fault, I——"

"What do you mean? You won't say anything about it?"

"No!" whispered Alec.

"But it will be seen by daylight to-morrow. The charred logs——"

"I can smooth them off with my knife. Here! Slam it against this one! That's the way. Again! Softly, no noise! Thank goodness, here comes Billy with the pails!"

Alec ran forward to meet Billy and to relieve him of his burden, leaving Hugh to wonder why he had spoken so strangely. Why this shrinking on Alec's part? Had he been in any way responsible for the mishap? In spite of his proficiency in woodcraft, Alec was sometimes thoughtless, impulsive, not thorough in his methods. Carelessness was his besetting sin. But lack of courage to own up to a mistake? Surely he was no coward! If he had done wrong, he would admit it, make a clean breast of it, and "face the music."

These thoughts passed swiftly through Hugh's mind while he stood watching Billy and Alec pour a stream of water from the pails upon the fire.

In a few moments the flames were extinguished, but Hugh's curiosity in regard to Alec's desire for secrecy was not quenched. He resolved, however, to say nothing more on the subject; it was no concern of his, anyway.

"All out!" announced Billy cheerfully.

"Do you—do you think there's been much damage?" Alec questioned, still speaking in a low and guarded tone.

"Can't say. Wait till to-morrow."

"I guess it is very slight," said Hugh.

"But it will show, I suppose?"

"Of course it will."

"I don't want it to show. I might be blamed for it."

"You!" said Billy, astonished. "Why, how could you be blamed?"

"Fellows, I'll tell you," Alec replied soberly. "It's this way: When Dick Bellamy and I put out the council-fire this evening, after the Lieutenant had left us, we were so darned tired we didn't take any extra great pains in doing it. All we did was to sprinkle a little water over the embers, throw dirt on them, and tread them down. Oh, yes, I,—I mean Dick,—did pile a few stones around them, but that was all. I heard Rawson say he thought it was going to rain to-night. Now if anyone can prove that this little blaze started from sparks from the camp-fire,—which will be pretty hard to prove, after all,—there'll be the dickens to pay, and I'll lose—" He cut his explanation short with a glance in the direction of the guide's tent.

"Didn't you hear footsteps?" he asked nervously.

61

Mechanically, the three listened. There was, indeed, a muffled tread upon rustling leaves.

"Cook's asleep, anyway," remarked Billy, as a stertorous rumbling greeted their ears. "Perhaps Joe's sneaking out on the war-path!"

His good-natured levity jarred upon Alec.

"Shut up, Billy!" he exclaimed irritably. "I'm going to get my knife and scrape away this charred wood. Will you fellows help me fix it nicely? Just for appearance's sake, you know."

"Never mind it. How fussy you are, Alec!" remarked the unsuspecting Billy. "Let it go. I'm too sleepy. Come along, Hugh. Me for my little bunk!"

When the two Wolves went back to their lair, Alec followed them, on a pretense of having abandoned his idea of subterfuge. He saw that Hugh disapproved of it, and he resented that attitude.

62

Bidding them good-night, he hurried to his locker, got out his favorite claspknife, and returned to the mess-cabin, upon which he at once began to work, whittling off the burnt and half-burnt wood.

In the midst of this occupation, he heard the same stealthy footsteps, and, looking up, saw Joe, the half breed, standing beside him.

The grin that distorted Joe's features made his splendid white teeth fairly gleam in the moonlight.

"Me know wot you do dere," he said softly. "Me hear wot you say to Hugh Hardeen. Why you say eet, boy?"

Alec gave an uncomfortable start.

"You won't tell on me, Joe?" he asked, with a laugh of pure bravado. "You're a pretty good friend of mine, aren't you?"

63

"Yes, Joe your frien'."

"I like you, Joe, and I'll tell my father to be sure and hire you for a guide up in Maine, next October. I—I'll tell him to give you more pay than the other guides get, too, if—if you'll say nothing about this accident. Someone else can take the blame, for a change."

"Yes, some boy he get bad talk. Not you."

"That's right!" Alec laughed again, a strained, hollow, mirthless laugh. "Joe, I know you admire my silver-handled knife; want it?"

"You no want it, Joe take it. Tanks."

"Joe, you—you don't like Hugh Hardin, do you?"

The halfbreed's answer was merely an ambiguous grunt.

"Neither do I, just now," said quick-tempered Alec Sands. 64

Joe said nothing. Doubtless he understood the hint. 65

CHAPTER V. REVEILLE.

When Alec stole back to his cabin, noiselessly entered it, and climbed into his bunk, half an hour later, it was not very clear in his mind how he could contrive, even with Joe's possible assistance, to bring Hugh Hardin into the shadow of blame for the fire. Of course, he could admit that he had caught Hugh and Billy in the act of putting out the flames, and the fact that they had done it secretly, as it were, without arousing the whole camp, would cast some suspicion upon them.

But their words would be worth exactly as much as his, and, moreover, Hugh would have Billy's testimony in support.

How much credence would be given to the halfbreed's vague hints? Could Joe be trusted to say anything? Or, might he not even say just the wrong thing at the critical point, the right thing at the wrong moment? 66

These questions troubled Alec as he crept shivering between his chilly sheets and drew his blanket around him closer.

"Wish I had primed Joe a little more," he said to himself miserably, "but perhaps I'll get a chance to speak with him again to-morrow."

With this comforting reflection he sank into uneasy slumber.

It was strange that a boy trained in the principles and spirit of scout-craft, particularly a boy who had reached Alec's position among his mates, could be capable of feeling such jealousy as Alec showed in his attitude toward Hugh. But young Sands was an unusual boy, and he had always been over-indulged. Only with difficulty

had he ever been able to overcome an instinctive dislike of any rival, and in the case of Hugh he had not tried to do more than comply with the rules of outward courtesy that obtained in camp.

The rules of Pioneer Camp were few and simple, and every boy in the four patrols that formed the troop was put on his honor and trusted to live up to them. Faithfulness to duty, one of the scout virtues, was required by Lieutenant Denmead, and scarcely a boy in the camp cared or dared to shirk.

67

Reveille was sounded at six o'clock every morning, except Sunday, when it was an hour later. At six-thirty on week-days and seven-thirty on Sundays mess was served to two of the patrols, and half an hour later to the other two, the patrols alternating in the order of service. Noon mess was served from twelve to one o'clock, and evening mess from six to seven-thirty. At nine o'clock came "taps" which meant "camp-fires carefully extinguished, lights out, and every boy in bed."

Every morning, also, a detail from each cabin was assigned to police the camp; that is, clear up all rubbish, chop fire-wood, draw water from the bubbling spring nearby, wash dishes, and keep the camp in order.

68

In the two log cabins, the beds were plain box bunks arranged in a double tier down the sides, each containing a tick stuffed with straw. Red blankets, sheets, and a thin pillow filled with aromatic fir balsam completed the equipment. Of course each boy was expected to look after the airing and making of his own bed.

Accordingly, when the bugle sounded before sunrise next morning, all was hustle and activity at the camp, in strange contrast with the quiet lake and the majestic calm of the mountains.

Hardly had the notes of the bugle call died away in impressive silence, when new echoes were aroused to sudden life by the lusty shouts and calls of forty boys, who, being thus musically wakened from the profound sleep of healthy and vigorous youth, sprang from their bunks and bestirred themselves about their morning duties.

69

It seemed to Alec, however, that he had slept scarcely an hour. He felt tired and out-of-sorts with himself and everybody else, quite devoid of any zest for the events which the day might bring forth. Wearily he rose, partly dressed, and went outside the cabin, where, upon a bench, stood a row of aluminum washbasins, each with a towel, soap, and brush and comb to bear it company. While he and Dick Bellamy performed their ablutions, envying those who were going down to the lake for a swim, Alec "pumped" his comrade with leading questions, in an effort to find out whether Dick knew anything about the fire. To his satisfaction, Dick appeared wholly unaware that any accident to the mess-cabin had occurred.

Dick was jubilant that morning, because it was the last morning of his week of police duty. After this day he would be free to follow his own devices and in various ways build up his record for election to the signal corps.

70

"Fine day, Alec," he remarked genially.

"Yes—for ducks!" retorted Alec, glancing up at the sun which now shone ominously red through a veil of low, swiftly-moving clouds. "Looks like rain," he added, in explanation.

"For fish, too," said Bellamy. "You know they always bite better a morning like this. I hope to get some big ones to-day."

"Speaking of fish," began Alec, "we're going to have some broiled trout for breakfast this morning, some that you and Don caught yesterday."

"Broiled—! Oh, Alec, what time is it now?"

"Quarter past six."

"Will those lucky chaps never come up from the lake? I'm almost starved! Where, oh, where has my tummie gone?" warbled Dick, as he resumed his dressing leisurely. "I'm 'most starved and I can't pull my belt in another hole. 'Cause why? There isn't any."

"Patience, Dickie, patience. Take courage, don't worry."

Dick Bellamy breathed a sigh.

"Worry!" he echoed. "It's not worry that is troubling me, it's want of food. I'm ravenous! My insides are in such a state of emptiness that they resound like a drum. I could eat every scrap of a five-pound sirloin steak this very minute."

"No, you couldn't," said Sam Winter, overhearing the remark as he passed by, dripping water from his limbs and hair. "No, you couldn't," he repeated, "not with me around! I'd defy you to get your lunch-hooks on it!"

Dick cocked an eye in Alec's direction.

"Think of it, fellows," he urged maliciously. "Think of a nice juicy steak an inch thick, cooked to a turn, and all covered with delicious crisp fried onions! Doesn't that make your mouths water?"

The swimmer moaned and clapped both hands over his stomach.

"Don't," he begged, "don't speak of it! I can't stand it! It makes me feel faint!"

So saying, he went on into the cabin, followed shortly by his brother.

After Buck came a whirlwind of glistening white forms racing up the path from the lake to the cabin door, piling through it, and scattering in all directions to dry and dress themselves.

"Wonder where Spike and Shorty are going this morning?" said a lad.

"Oh, they'll show up before lunch," replied one of the Fox patrol carelessly. "I heard them say they were going up-stream in a canoe, with Joe."

Alec pricked up his ears. So he would not have a chance to speak privately with Joe that morning! The halfbreed would be away from camp, perhaps taking Spike to some sylvan glade in the forest among the hills, where he could take photographs of living wild animals, and where

"Shorty" McNeil could collect specimens of rare plants. Why had he, Alec, not asked permission to enlist Joe's instructive services on some expedition yesterday, while waiting with the scouts on the summit of old Stormberg?

"Evidently we're not going to have signal practice to-day?" he said wonderingly.

"Oh, yes,—if it doesn't rain. If it does, I'll vote for water-polo, instead."

"I'll second that motion," returned Alec. "Hurry up, now! It's nearly mess-time."

Half an hour later, when the boys were seated at the long table in the dining cabin, they heard the sudden patter of raindrops on the roof of the building, at first soft and stealthy, then louder and faster, as the drifting clouds relinquished their burden. There would be no games that morning, it was feared; yet there was a hope that the heavy shower would be over within a couple of hours. Meanwhile, there was always plenty to do, and the small but well-selected library in Lieutenant Denmead's cabin was available at all times. Thither some went immediately after breakfast, while others, donning bathing-suits, disported themselves in the lake or on it in canoes.

74

Among the latter, those whose energies were not even dampened by the rain, were Hugh Hardin and Don Miller, and they forthwith rounded up a few followers from their respective patrols and proposed a game of canoe-tag, at which Rawson consented to be umpire.

Hearing of the plan, Walter Osborne and Alec Sands summoned their patrols, each with the appropriate patrol-call, and inquired who would take part in the game.

75

"We can make it a game between the two cabins, with any number of canoes," said Walter. "The game is for one canoe to tag another by throwing a cotton bag filled with corks *into* it. It's great sport, and it gives you a chance to show what you can do with a paddle; you've got to be so quick about dodging, turning, and chasing around! The rules are just like those of ordinary cross-tag."

"Instead of playing tag, merely, why don't you get up a tilting-match?" suggested the Scout Master, standing in the doorway of his cabin and listening with interest. "Play it with the two larger canoes each manned by four of you, four of a patrol from each cabin in one canoe tilting with four of another."

"Great!" exclaimed Alec.

"That will be even more fun," Walter agreed warmly, "I'll run ahead down to the lake, and put the plan up to Hugh and Don. Come on, fellows."

76

He sped down the path, followed by several of his Hawks who were eager to take part in the tilt.

"We'll have to draw lots to see who shall man the canoe," he said, as he ran on. "There are more of us than can play at one time, but we will all have a chance. Where's Alec? Why isn't he coming?"

"He stayed behind to collect his ablest Otters," said Arthur Cameron, in reply, "and I saw him talking with the Chief, just before we ran ahead."

"Oh, well, I guess he'll be with us in a few minutes. Hugh! Don! Come here! I've got something to say to you."

In a few words, he repeated the lieutenant's suggestion, which the others welcomed readily. Alec soon joined them, having satisfied himself that no one as yet had noticed the carefully concealed damage to the mess-cabin, and presently the four young patrol leaders were drawing lots, while their followers were dragging the two "war canoes" out of the boat house, making them ready to launch.

For each canoe four men were required: a spearman, who was also the captain, a pilot, and two oarsmen. It fell to Hugh's lot to be spearman of the first canoe, of which Bud Morgan was one oarsman, Cooper Fennimore the other, and Arthur Cameron the pilot. In the other canoe, manned by the Otters, Alec was pilot, Dick Bellamy spearman, Sam Winter and a tenderfoot being oarsmen.

Armed each with a light ash pole eight feet long with a soft pad on one end, the spearmen took their places on a little quarter-deck or raised seat in the bow of the canoe. On the other end of each spear was a hook made of a forked branch about a foot long, one limb being lashed to the pole, the other projecting out and slightly backward. Both ends of the pole were wrapped in waterproof, to keep it from getting wet and heavy. The padded end of the pole was intended for pushing the enemy from his stand upon the deck of the canoe, while the hook could be slipped behind his neck, if a quick change from pushing to pulling should be required.

"To push your opponent back into the canoe on one foot counts you five; both feet, ten," said Denmead. "If he loses his spear, except when he may be pushed overboard, you count five. If you put him down on one knee on the fighting deck, you count five; two knees, ten. If you put him overboard, it counts twenty-five. One hundred points is a round, a battle, we'll say, is two rounds."

A cheer broke out, as the two canoes dipped lightly into the water and skimmed over its placid surface.

By this time, as luck would have it, the rain had ceased, and the lake shone like polished steel under a gray sky. The figures in the canoes were silhouetted sharply against it, as the light craft darted to and fro over the waters. Sam was a better paddler than Bud, but Bud's slight clumsiness with the paddle was offset by Hugh's superior deftness as a spearman; indeed, at the first encounter of the canoes, Hugh almost succeeded in pushing Dick Bellamy down on his knees, and was prevented from doing so only by Alec's quick turns and returns.

Alec would fain have had Dick's place and felt the grim satisfaction of contending with Hugh; but that was not to be, this time. Failing that, he did his level best to "put it all over poor old Bud," as he expressed it to himself; and once he

tried the trick of pretending to run his canoe accidentally against the Wolves' when Dick had succeeded in hooking Hugh, thus making Hugh lose his balance and drop back into his canoe.

But Rawson, the keen-eyed umpire, declared this move a "foul," and so the Otters did not win those ten points.

80

The battle lasted almost half an hour, at the end of which time the Otters won, owing to Alec's skill as a steersman and Sam's strong, even stroke which he so skillfully adapted to the tenderfoot's. The next battle, between the Hawks and the Foxes, was not so long; it ended with Don's laughable plunge into the bosom of the lake, a victory for the Hawks.

Amid cheers and shouts of encouragement, the canoe warriors returned to their cabins; and that afternoon the signaling games and practice were resumed. And thus, with alternate recreation and instruction, the days passed swiftly, bringing in their round the one eventful day when the members of the signal corps were to be chosen.

81

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHOSEN FEW.

Up to that day the records were fairly equal, the honors well distributed. The Otters had scored heavily by Alec's winning the trail-finding contest and the stalking event, and Sam the long-distance swim. The relay-race had been won by two Foxes; the high and broad jumps, the pole-vault, and the fifty-yard dash by the Hawks; while Billy Worth, for the Wolves, had captured the rope-climb, and he and Hugh together had distinguished themselves in the two-mile cross-country hike without compass or trail.

Even more important than these athletic events were the various ways in which the winners as well as the losers had made good individual records. For example, one lad had completed a really remarkable set of flashlight photographs taken in the heart of the woods at night; another had "rigged up" a wireless instrument and built an aerial; a third had carried out some signal-tests with a heliograph; and Arthur Cameron had established a camp weather bureau, running up a set of flag signals each day in communication with the nearest United States Weather Bureau, which, upon request, sent daily bulletins to Pioneer Camp. Arthur, in charge of this weather bureau, found it full of personal interest as well as an opportunity to render the camp a real service. He made a weather vane of an old arrow which Joe gave him, posted a daily bulletin, kept a record of temperature, and measured the rainfall and the velocity of wind. For this achievement he received so many points that his election to the corps, like that of Walter and Hugh, was a foregone conclusion.

82

Again and again, in the various signal practice games, Walter, Alec, and Hugh had proved their ability to send and receive messages, in all

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codes, at the prescribed rate of sixteen letters per minute; so they were sure of making the corps.

At last, after much deliberation, the Scout Master and his assistant decided upon the following scouts for the corps:

From the Wolf patrol, Hugh Hardin and Arthur Cameron (no longer a tenderfoot).

From the Hawk patrol, Walter Osborne and a lad named Blake Merton, who, toward the end of the trials, showed unexpected skill as a signaler.

From the Otter patrol, Alec Sands and Sam Winter.

From the Fox patrol, Cooper Fennimore and his chum "Spike" Welling.

Strangely enough, neither Don Miller nor Billy Worth qualified for the corps; the former, because his chief energies had gradually been drawn into another channel of interest; the latter, because he was absorbed in the study of forestry. Billy hoped to obtain a merit badge for forestry, so his disappointment was but slight in comparison with his zeal.

84

On this account, however, and because he wanted to become thoroughly familiar with the surrounding country, he was given permission to accompany the members of the corps, guided by Joe, on a ten-mile cross-country hike, which was planned as a final test to see who the leader should be. Of course, the Scout Master joined the hikers. A day and a night were allowed for the expedition.

So on the same day the corps was formed it set forth from camp, bound for Oakvale, where the National Guard maneuvers were soon to take place.

"There will be two divisions of the Guard," explained Denmead, "the Red Army and the Blue Army. Within a day or two I expect a visit in camp from my old friend Major Brookfield, of the National Guard, who will give us further details."

85

"How many miles are we supposed to cover to-day?" inquired Blake Merton, as the corps were descending the further slopes of Stormberg, and threading their way through a ravine or gulch that presented only a broken path between jagged rocks and moss-grown boulders, along the dried bed of a stream.

"About three miles in one group," was the Scout Master's reply. "When we come out at the end of this ravine, we'll separate; Joe will lead some of you northward as far as Rainbow Lake, and the rest will follow me in an easterly direction until we meet at the lower end of the valley, near the town of Oakvale. That will be about the middle of to-morrow morning. Then, by pretty steady 'hiking,' we ought to be in camp again by to-morrow night, as we'll return by a shorter route."

Emerging presently from the shadows of the narrow gulch, the corps halted to rest and to draw lots for a division of their number. Half an hour later they were again on their way,

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separately; and, at twilight, Joe's party came in sight of a small lake set like an emerald in the darker green of the hills.

"Rainbow Lake, hurrah!" cried Hugh.

"Hurro!" shouted Billy, the odd number.

"Don't be too sure it is," Alec advised scornfully; then, turning to the guide: "Is that Rainbow Lake, Joe?"

"Sure, him Rainbow," grunted the halfbreed.

"I thought there could be no doubt," said Hugh, politely. "The route which brought us to this spot was clearly marked on my map, and it opened up as we proceeded. For the last hour or more, in spite of Alec's opinion, I've felt sure we were following the right course. Joe knows this country, trust him for that!"

"You bet he does!" put in Billy.

87

Hugh's compliment was not without effect on the guide, who was already growing weary of Alec's continued rudeness to the Wolf leader.

They were some three or four hundred feet above the lake, and behind them lay the notch amid the mountains through which they had come. Although the descent to the lake was steep in places, they would have very little trouble in getting down.

"It's great up here," remarked Spike Welling. "I say, Hugh, what's that little white mist blowing away from us down there above those trees? It looks like an Indian smoke signal, but if someone were lost in the woods there'd be two of them."

"Joe, what do you make of that?" asked Hugh.

88

The guide was leaning against a projecting point of rock, gazing down at the lake without the least sign of emotion. Suddenly he straightened himself and sniffed the air.

"Hunters down there, make fire, cook bacon," he announced solemnly.

"You mean to say you can smell frying bacon, at this distance?" queried Blake. "Joe, that nose of yours is sure a wonder!"

Joe grunted and grinned. "Hungry," he explained. "Nose good; better when hungry."

"Come on, let's have some grub, ourselves," suggested Billy. "Then we——"

"No. Wait till we get down little way. Then make camp for night; then eat."

As they could plainly see, the shores of the lake were deeply indented by many inlets and coves. Even from this height, it was impossible to survey the entire surface of the lake. Afar to the eastward there seemed to be a portion of it hidden amid some hills.

89

"Gee! it certainly is pretty!" said Billy, noting the great variety of trees, shrubs, and plants that clothed the hills with verdure. "Where do you intend to pitch camp, Joe?"

"Where you say, Alec?" was Joe's question.

"On that little plateau we're coming to," said Alec confidently.

"Where you say, Hugh?"

"I marked a spot on my map where I thought would be a good place for a one-night camp," said Hugh. "It's right here where we can be in signal communication with Uncle Sam's weather bureau, and thence with camp,—in case anything happens," he added, with a glance at Joe.

For a few minutes they trudged on in silence. Then:

"Good!" grunted the halfbreed, as they reached the spot Hugh had pointed out. "We camp here."

90

The greater part of the next two hours was consumed in gathering branches suitable for a lean-to shelter, building a fire-place of flat stones and cooking the evening meal. Finally, when the lean-to was constructed, and a goodly fire was blazing cheerfully in front of it, they chatted and laughed as they ate supper.

After supper, Blake Merton, who had a very agreeable voice, entertained them by singing a number of Irish melodies. The others, with the exception of Joe,—who strolled to and fro, sniffing the breeze,—joined in the choruses. But soon Hugh lapsed into silence, listening to the plaintive airs, feeling a strange, indescribable thrill.

"I wonder what's worrying Joe?" he remarked, during a pause in the singing.

Alec looked up quickly.

"He told me he didn't like the way those hunters left that fire over there," said he, then added in a louder tone: "You can't be too careful of fires, you know, Hugh!"

91

If this observation was intended to reach the ears of Blake and Spike, it failed utterly, and only Billy heard it—with a start of surprise. The next moment Blake's youthful tenor warbled out, "I've been workin' on th' railroad, all th' livelong day."

Now, lounging somewhat apart from the others, Joe betrayed amazing interest in Blake's singing. He listened with his thick lips parted and a surprising expression of animation upon his usually stolid and immobile features. Once when the others clapped their hands vigorously in applause, he actually clapped his also.

"Gee!" exclaimed Billy, nudging Hugh with his elbow. "That Injun has an ear for music. Just look at him! I never saw him perk up this way before."

"Yes," murmured Hugh, "all his people love music. They have their own wild, sad songs. Perhaps Joe might sing. I'll ask him, in a moment. Joe," he added, "won't you sing for us? We'd like to hear——"

92

"Sing? No!"

At first Joe refused, shaking his head almost sullenly, and regarding Hugh with suspicion. But when, after a little, he seemed somewhat

satisfied that he was not being made sport of and that Hugh really wished him to sing, he reluctantly consented.

That song was one which none who heard it ever forgot. It was wild and weird and full of unspeakable pathos. It was more of a chant than a song, more wailing than tuneful, and to Hugh it seemed that Joe was lamenting the lost power and greatness of his people. This, however, Hugh knew could not be possible, for he had often talked with the halfbreed and had found that Joe knew no more of Indian history than a child might learn at school.

The singing of the guide seemed to bring a spell upon them, for thereafter, that night, they talked little and laughed less. Yet this was undoubtedly because they were tired and sleepy and more than ready to seek their beds of piled leaves.

93

All were astir early the following morning. Immediately after breakfast they continued the descent to the lake, and, following the shore, encountered many obstacles, being compelled more than once to enter the water in order to avoid climbing over precipitous rocks. And as they went along, each one made careful notes of things seen and done; for it had been decided that the scout who showed the most knowledge of woodcraft and who wrote the best—that is, the clearest, fullest, yet most concise—report of the hike should be appointed leader of the signal corps.

In the course of the morning, as they were almost upon level ground again, not very far from Oakvale meadows and the town itself, Joe suddenly disappeared into the woods.

94

This was strange conduct, indeed, and they marveled at it no less than at his uncanny ability to slip from sight like an animal of the forest. They called and sought for him in vain, and Hugh and Spike were growing decidedly uneasy, when Joe was seen running toward them through the underbrush, apparently in great excitement.

"See um, see um?" he gasped, pointing through the trees and across the narrow valley, where, on the brow of a hill, Lieutenant Denmead's party could be seen, with the aid of Alec's field-glasses, making their way down.

"Yes, yes, we see. They got here before us, Joe."

"Good t'ing! Good t'ing we get out of de woods. Woods a-fire! See!" He pointed up the hill they had just descended, and they saw a column of dark smoke rising against the sky. "Wind blow fire dis way. Comin' soon, quick!"

95

"Je-ru-salem!" exclaimed "Spike" Welling.

"That's so, that's true!" Billy added excitedly. "What are we going to do now?"

"Hugh!" cried Alec, grabbing his rival's arm. "See that old farmhouse over there?"

"Yes, I see it. What of—?"

"It's right in the path of the fire that's sweeping down this hill!"

Hugh sprang forward.

"Boys, it's up to us!" he shouted. "Thank fortune, we've got our signal flags and heliograph with us! When the other half of our party starts for the town on the run, we've got to signal to them, telling them just where the fire is; then they can tell the firemen in Oakvale what to do."

"Save that farmhouse!" yelled Alec. "Come on, boys! Out here on this high rock with me! Now, get out your flags!"

96

The crack of Joe's rifle burst upon the warm morning air.

"That'll attract their attention to us!" Hugh called out. "Ready now! Come on, begin the messages. Work those flags as we've never worked them before!"

97

CHAPTER VII. THE END OF THE HIKE.

While Alec and Blake remained at their post of duty on the rock, exchanging messages with Lieutenant Denmead's half of the corps—who, as soon as they understood the need, hurried across the meadow, entered the town, and went directly to the only engine house of which Oakvale could boast,—Hugh and Spike hastened back some distance up the hill, to see whence the fire was coming and how far it had already spread. Joe, on his part, decided to set out for the farmhouse to give warning, if it should be necessary. He lingered only to make sure that Alec's and Blake's sendings were received and understood by the others in the town.

In the excitement attending the discovery of the fire, when he leaped down from the rock to follow Spike up hill, Hugh lost his little leather-covered tablet or note-book in which he had jotted down memoranda of the march. That is, it fell from his pocket and lay at the base of the rock upon which Alec and Blake stood waving and wig-wagging.

98

Alec saw it fall, and an expression of mean satisfaction stole over his face. Clambering down from the rock, for a moment, he ground the little note-book into the soft earth with his heel, then took up his position once more.

He did not see Joe watching this act, nor did he count on the halfbreed's secret preference for Hugh. He only realized that without these notes Hugh would be unable to write a good report of the hike, and would therefore fail to win the leadership of the signal corps.

To their surprise, Hugh and Spike found that the breeze, instead of blowing the fire up hill, as it ordinarily would do, was sending it down the slope from a point about half way from the summit; also, that the fire was spreading in an irregular semi-circle which would sweep over the farm as it advanced. They made strenuous efforts to stamp out the end of the blazing curve by beating it with branches torn from a young sapling, and succeeded in getting a very small part of it under control.

99

Fortunately, the ground was covered thickly with leaves and leaf-mould, damp after recent rains, and so the tongues of flame rose no higher than the lowest branches of the trees, which they licked greedily and then passed on, seeking whatever they might devour.

Finding their best efforts of little avail, Spike and Hugh hastened to rejoin their companions.

When they came to the rock, they found the others had gone on.

"Probably they've gone to the farmhouse," said Spike. "Come on, Hugh! Which way? Hurry!"

100

"Look!" Hugh responded, glancing around and pointing to a huge fir tree, upon the trunk of which an arrow was freshly blazed. "There's one of Joe's signs. They've gone in the direction this arrow points."

"I wond-wonder—what—sort o' help the lieutenant and—and his scouts found—found in the vil-village?" panted Spike, as they ran on down hill, plunging through clumps of second-growth pines, now slipping over the smooth brown "needles," now crashing through masses of trailing vines and tall ferns.

"Nothing but a one-horse engine and-and a bucket brigade, most likely!" Hugh replied, coughing in the smoke that came drifting between the trees.

Presently they emerged from the wood and came out upon the wide clearing in the center of which stood the farmhouse, the big red barn, and a group of smaller buildings. Before them lay a swampy meadow, evidently a hog-pasture, surrounded by a rail fence; on their right extended an orchard whose trees were heavy with green fruit; beyond that, a cornfield glistened in the sunlight; and, still further, acres of waving grain swayed lightly as the breeze passed over them. Strange to say, not an animal nor a human being save themselves was to be seen, and an uncanny silence reigned over the farm.

101

Hugh vaulted over the rail fence, followed by Spike, and together they began to pick their way as rapidly as possible across the pasture.

"Lucky thing this is swampy," remarked Hugh, "because the fire won't be able to crawl over this—ugh!—muck, and get near the barn."

"No; but don't forget it is creeping around from that side," Spike answered gloomily. "There's where the danger lies."

"You're right. But where on earth are the rest of the crowd? Is this place deserted?"

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"Looks so, certainly. Hello! There's someone coming from the house!"

Even as he spoke, an old woman appeared in the doorway and came forth, shading her eyes with one hand and blinking anxiously around her. Catching sight of the two youths as they ran toward her, she called out:

"Fer th' land's sake! More o' yer! Boys, is it true there's a fire broke out on ther mountain? Two boys an' a wild-lookin' man come along here,

'bout half an hour ago, yellin' like demons from ther pit, and they scart me an' my ol' man out o' our senses!"

"They told the truth, ma'am," said Spike, with breathless politeness.

"But don't be alarmed," Hugh added reassuringly. "It may not be a very dangerous fire, and we've sent for help from Oakvale. Are you alone here? I mean, is there anyone who —?"

"Nary a soul but me and Jake," returned the old woman. "Jake Walsh is my husband; he's laid up in bed with the rheumatiz," she added, by way of explanation, "an' our son Tom's gone to town with the calves."

"Are there any cattle in the barn?" inquired Hugh.

"The ol' bay-mare—but ye can't call her cattle," was the answer. "Ther cows is all in that meadow, yonder. But ther barn's full o' hay!"

In a flash, both boys thought of the destruction that wind-driven sparks might create, if they should chance to light upon that dry old barn.

"Oh, what'll I do? What'll I do?" wailed the poor woman, wringing her hands as she began to realize the seriousness of the situation. "I never dreamed as there'd be any danger o' fire in the woods this summer, though Tom has often ernough spoke o' folks' carelessness a-lightin' fires an' leavin' 'em lay. I can't leave Jake! I can't get away from here with him not able ter walk! An' Tom's took ther only wagon we have! Oh, what——?"

"We'll help you, Mrs. Walsh," declared Hugh. "Besides, the village fire-brigade will be here soon.

"Spike, you'd better climb up that windmill, and see if you can communicate with the village," he added, and Welling hastened to obey.

"I can see the engine-house," Spike called down, a few minutes later. "There's a little tower on it, and someone is up in the tower, waving a flag. It's Don Miller; I can tell by the way he jerks the flag. He's sending: 'We get your message now—fire brigade rushed to farm—close by—do your best.'"

They did their best, too. Long before the little engine-and-hose-cart had reached the outskirts of the farm, they had carried old Jake Walsh on an improvised litter out of the house and some distance away to an abandoned cellar, roofed over with boards and sods. Leaving him there in charge of his wife, they had returned to the farmyard, drawn buckets of water from the well, poured them over the roof and walls of the dwelling, and had begun "policing" the farmyard, watching for sparks, when they were surprised and relieved to hear shouts at a distance.

The shouts seemed to come from the wood. They were accompanied by the thud of many galloping hoofs and a crashing through the thick underbrush.

Presently more than a dozen horsemen dashed

into view, brandishing long poles wrapped with wet blankets. They were the advance guard of the fire-fighters, who had galloped to the scene along an old disused logging road through the woods. Without stopping to ask needless questions, these horsemen turned and made off at full speed, spiralling up the hill in single file, shouting and calling as they rode.

"Wish we could follow them!" said Hugh, gazing after the vanishing forms until they disappeared in the shadows of the forest and their shouts became mere echoes. "But I guess we'll have our work cut out for us here."

"That's just what I was thinking," answered Spike ruefully.

The two youths did not waste much time in unavailing wishes. Every now and then they ran to the outskirts of the farm and penetrated a little way into the wood, to learn, if they could, whether the fire was drawing nearer. Not being thoroughly acquainted with the topography of this particular tract of land, they did not know what obstacles the fire might meet in its path, such as green hollows, cup-like bogs in the depressions of the hills, streams, or even small ponds. All these were possible, for the country for miles and miles around Pioneer Camp was unusually varied.

As it chanced, there was a swiftly flowing brook—which in places widened to the size of a small stream—not far away, on the edge of the pasture where a few cows were stolidly grazing; and this stream was the hope of old Jake Walsh, the one bulwark against the attack of the dreadful enemy. On their tour of the farm, Hugh and Spike discovered this running stream, and they realized its value as a means of defence.

The worst danger, as they knew, was from flying sparks; so they kept a careful watch for these. Two old straw-stacks in the barnyard would go like tinder, if these were once ignited, and Mr. Walsh advised the boys to draw water from the horse-tank under the windmill, climb the stacks, and "souse 'em good an' plenty."

"I'd help ye, if I only could!" groaned Jake Walsh, after giving this urgent advice. "But, consarn these old good-fer-nothin' limbs o' mine! they ain't a bit o' use no more. I might's well have one foot in ther grave as have my whole livin' carkiss laid up like this!"

"Come, now; never you mind, Jake," soothed his wife. "Me an' ther boys is lively lads, and we'll take good care o' them stacks." This was more easily said than done; nevertheless, with Hugh perched aloft on top of the stack, and with Spike and old Mrs. Walsh forming a bucket-brigade and handing pails of water up to him, the task was somehow accomplished.

In the midst of their labors they paused, hearing the sound of wheels along the road.

"Perhaps that's your son returning?" suggested Spike.

"No, it ain't him," declared Mrs. Walsh, putting her hand to her ear. "Tom took ther heavy farm waggin, and it would make a louder noise than that. Besides, Polly always whinnies when she's

nearin' home, an' ther ol' mare answers her."

"It's a horse and buggy," Hugh announced from his look-out. "There comes another, with three men in it. Hand me one more bucket-full, Spike, old scout. Now! I guess we've soused the stack enough."

He slid down the slippery side of the straw-stack, and the three workers awaited the coming of the first arrivals from the village.

"I'm goin' back to see how my ol' man's gettin' on; he's like to be fussin' an' frettin'," said Mrs. Walsh. "If Tom's come back in thet buggy, leavin' the waggin ter be fetched later, he'll know what ter do now."

So saying, she walked slowly away to the warm, dry cellar where her husband directed the proceedings like a general on a battlefield.

In a few minutes the buggy rattled into the farmyard, and Tom Walsh and his two companions sprang from it to pour a volley of questions and thanks upon the two boys. It was not long before the farmyard became the scene of a motley gathering of Oakvale's livelier inhabitants, men, women, and children, who drove up in all sorts of vehicles, including automobiles, and brought every conceivable implement for fighting a forest fire. Most of them did not linger there long, but set out for the woods.

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Billy Worth arrived on horseback.

"'Twasn't possible to fetch the hosecart all this way up here," explained Tom, "but we got everything else we could lay hands on."

Presently, in a large touring-car owned by a resident of Oakvale, came Lieutenant Denmead, Walter, Arthur, and Cooper, and they brought with them Alec and Blake, whom they had picked up on the way. By unanimous wish, the scouts lost no time in hurrying to the woods after the other fire-fighters, and all did yeoman service in putting out the blaze.

Late in the afternoon the fire was finally extinguished. Fortunately the Walsh farm escaped damage, except for a blaze in a thatched cow-shed, and the farmer and his wife and son were deeply grateful. Mrs. Walsh insisted on serving supper to all who had remained until the danger was over; and when it was generally learned that the prompt arrival of the motley fire brigade was due to the warning given by the young signalers,—for, strange to say, the smoke in the woods had not been considered alarming by the village folk, who were used to camping parties among the hills,—Lieutenant Denmead's corps were the guests of honor at that "spread."

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And such a feast it was! After all the work and excitement, they were as hungry as wolves, and the simple supper of ham and eggs, crisp fried potatoes, pancakes and honey, washed down with copious glasses of fresh milk, was a banquet fit for the gods! Afterward, they were invited to spend the night in the hayloft of the barn, if they chose; but the Scout Master thought it best to decline this kindly, apologetic invitation and to resume the trip back to camp.

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Accordingly they took leave of the Walshes, and set forth, with well-filled stomachs and light hearts, glad of another opportunity to camp out in the open that night.

Before noon of the following day they reached Pioneer Camp and were hailed as conquering heroes by their friends.

On the return march, Hugh discovered the loss of his note-book. However, he said nothing to anyone, not even to Billy. The blow was hard to bear, the accident crushing to his hopes of leadership; but he knew he had only himself to blame, and he resolved to accept the mischance with a good grace.

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CHAPTER VIII. AN UNEXPECTED REPROOF.

"Hist, old man!" Dick Bellamy whispered, slipping out of his bunk. "Something is up, and I can't make out what it is. Don't say anything,—just keep quiet and use your ears."

Alec, strangely thrilled, listened intently. The sounds Dick had heard, and which now came to Alec distinctly, consisted of a muffled scraping outside the side wall of the cabin, at the window. Some one was working at the catch.

It was long after "taps" and all the other scouts of the Otter and the Fox patrols were sound asleep in the cabin; that is, all save Alec, who, being restless because of a troubled conscience, had been startled by the vision of his friend bending over him in the darkness.

"What d'you think it is?" was Dick's question.

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"Go to sleep again, Dick; it's nothing," Alec retorted scornfully. And the next instant he marred the effect of his own words by asking: "What on earth do you suppose it can be?"

"A bear, perhaps,—or the mate of Hugh's bobcat."

"Nonsense! There are no bears around here, Joe says, and you ought to know that a bob——"

"Speak lower, Alec. It may be one of those Canuk lumberjacks from the camp in the backwoods. You remember, Pioneer Camp was robbed last summer, and there was a row over the affair."

"You certainly have a lively imagination, Dick! Do you think a thing like that is going to happen again so soon?"

"Well, why not? You can't trust any one of those toughs. I heard cook say so once, and then he shut up like a clam 'cause he thought Joe might hear him. Joe's respected father was a Canuk, you know. Someone is up to some treachery."

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The last word grated upon Alec's ears. "Treachery?" he repeated. "You mean——? You accuse—Joe?"

"You were foolish to show off that roll of bills your father sent you to buy camera supplies with, this afternoon," was the whispered response.

Alec gave a low laugh.

"What's eating you, Dick, anyway? You're twice as foolish to talk that way. Joe might hear you. Besides, he's as honest as the daylight. Do you think the Chief would employ him if——"

"Hark! There's that noise again. I'll bet someone is stealing into the cabin."

"Why doesn't he steal in through the door, then?"

"Afraid he'll make too much noise, I guess. He'd rather take his chance of coming through a hole in the wall."

"He's making more noise than he would by using the door," said Alec. "We'll nail him when he gets inside. If it's some of the fellows from the other cabin, Dick, we'll force them to——Get up, then, and get ready for business."

Silently the two lads swung to a sitting posture on the edge of their bunks, and, with straining eyes, peered through the thick gloom toward the wall from which the muffled sounds were coming. Suddenly, as they watched and waited, the lower sash of the window,—which, by the way, was next to Alec's bunk,—was raised slowly, and a man's head and shoulders appeared against the lighter background of silvery moonbeams. This human figure silhouetted itself sharply in the opening, evidently not striving for concealment, and an arm was thrust through. It seemed to be groping around in the darkness of the log-house, and finally a hand rapped softly on Alec's bunk, almost touching his leg.

Alec crawled to the foot of his bed, slipped down, and stepped to Dick's side. Dick also rose, and the two moved noiselessly upon the prowler.

The man grunted and breathed hard, while crawling through the window. Just as he was on the point of tugging at Alec's pillow, both Alec and Dick seized him. Like a flash, he turned, without making a sound; it seemed that he was astounded, for a moment.

Yet his amazement was quite apart from the surprise of the unexpected seizure. A gurgling laugh sounded in his throat.

"You got me! You th' boy I want to see," he chuckled, turning to Alec.

The moonlight fell full upon his swarthy face.

"Joe!" gasped Alec. "What are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Want to see you," explained the half breed, in a whisper.

"Me? What for? Why didn't you tell me what you want after we got back yesterday?" Alec's nervousness betrayed itself in the tones of his voice. "You could have spoken to me last evening at the council-fire. What's the——?"

"No time then, no time to-morrow."

"That's so. I forgot we—the signal corps—are going to Oakvale to-morrow. The Chief told us last night, Dick, that Major Brookfield invited us to join his headquarters' staff of signalers in the maneuvers, and so we're going to the National Guard camp for a few days. Major Brookfield was in Oakvale yesterday, and the Chief saw him there. The major was pleased with the signal work we did during the fire."

Dick Bellamy heard only a few words of Alec's news. He kept his eyes fixed upon the face of the guide, wondering if by any unlucky chance Joe had overheard any of the insinuations which he, Dick, had uttered. At heart Dick was afraid of "Injun Joe," as he called him—behind his back.

"Want to see you, Alec," repeated Joe, moving toward the door, which, as Alec and Dick had forgotten, was locked on the inside. "Come out with me—out there."

Something authoritative in his voice and manner made Alec obey without protest. Unbolting the door as noiselessly as possible in order not to waken the sleepers, and leaving Dick to crawl back to his bunk, the Indian and the white boy glided out into the open space between the two cabins, and stood facing each other in the moonlight.

"Joe find somethin' to-day," began the guide, fumbling in the pocket of his coat.

"Something of mine? Something that belongs to me?"

"No."

"Why do you give it to me, then?"

"Becos you're a scout, becos Joe a scout, too!" Joe's unusually stolid features relaxed in a grim smile. "You no un'erstan'?"

Clad only in his pajamas, Alec shivered; but not entirely because of the chill night air on his body. The presence of the man before him, the vague reproach conveyed in Joe's softly guttural tones, gave him a curious "creepy" sensation of cold and a weakness in the knees.

"What-what is it?" he questioned, extending his hand.

"Here. You take this."

Joe handed the boy a small, thin, oblong thing that felt damp and gritty to Alec's touch.

"What is it? What shall I do with it? Oh, Joe, is it that book of trout flies you promised to sell me?" asked Alec eagerly.

Joe grunted, and gave his broad shoulders an expressive shrug.

"Wait," he mumbled; "wait and see."

Whereupon, with another shrug, he turned and strode rapidly away in the direction of his tent.

Alec looked down at the object in his hand. In the moonbeams he could scarcely make out what it was, for it was covered with mud-stains.

Mechanically he opened it and turned what seemed to be pages soiled and crumpled and badly torn. All at once he uttered a little exclamation of astonishment.

"Oh!" he breathed. "It's Hugh Hardin's notebook!"

* * * * *

When the signal corps reached the camp of the National Guard, late in the following afternoon,—having made the trip over to the Oakvale meadows on foot as far as Rainbow Lake, and thence in Tom Walsh's farm wagon,—they were at once taken to Major Brookfield's quarters and introduced to that officer. He received them with a genuine cordiality that straightway won their hearts, and he assigned them to the Blue Army.

"There is to be a sham battle next Saturday," he told them, "and the Blues feel that they will be beaten because they are fighting the regulars, who compose the majority of the Reds, though they, the Blues, outnumber their foes. I want you boys to do all you can to save the day. Who is the leader of this corps, Lieutenant?"

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"We have not yet elected a leader, Major Brookfield," answered Scout Master Denmead, "owing to the fact that we hadn't time, before coming here, to apply the last test which I had decided upon. You see, we left camp rather hurriedly this morning, in order to be here on time for the beginning of the maneuvers."

"I understand. Well, it won't make any difference, anyway. Perhaps the work these lads are going to do with us may be counted further toward some one's election."

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"That's an excellent idea."

"The first 'job' you'll have," continued the Major, addressing his attentive listeners, "is to go out ahead with a detachment of Blues and help lay telegraph wires. I presume most of you are pretty well grounded in elementary surveying?"

The scouts replied by saluting.

"Well, then, follow my aide here, and he'll put you in charge of the captain."

In orderly array, the eight scouts of the signal corps left headquarters and were duly presented to the captain in command of the detachment of Blues. Their work began that very evening, for they were ordered to proceed from camp and take possession of a high mound east of the village, a strategic point which the Reds coveted, because it commanded telegraphic communication with Oakvale.

By the time this mound had been scaled and captured, after a skirmish with a few Red defenders, the eight new recruits, albeit thrilled by their first experience of mock warfare, were thoroughly tired. Wrapped in their blankets, they stretched themselves on the grassy slope of the mound.

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"We're safe enough here, and we can be comfortable," said Alec to Walter Osborne.

"Good fun, this," was Walter's sleepy comment. "I'm going to sleep with one eye open." He

pulled the blanket over him, and yawned. "Forty winks for me, this night!"

"Forty-four thousand, you mean! I have a life-size picture of you sleeping with one eye open, after all we've been through to-day! Well, I'm dog-weary. Good night, old scout, and pleasant dreams."

"Same to you, Alec."

"You fellows shut up and go to sleep!" came Cooper Fennimore's voice: out of the darkness. "Hi, there, Arthur! Quit punching me in the ribs!"

"Never touched you," protested Arthur, in a drowsy drawl.

"Hugh, why so silent?" demanded Sam.

"Hugh is studying astronomy, fellows," Blake Merton declared.

"No, I'm not," said Hugh. "I was just thinking that 'way off in Pioneer Camp 'taps' is sounding now, and Billy the Wolf is wishing he were here with us. Good old Billy! Hope he wasn't *very* much disappointed about not making the corps."

It was characteristic of Hugh Hardin to wish that his chum might share adventures and good-fortune with him.

Suddenly, across Alec's drowsy consciousness stole a slight jealousy of Billy Worth. Never had he felt this before; never had he wished that he and Hugh might be friends with no indifference on Hugh's part toward him, and no hostility on his own. Surely if Billy Worth, whom Alec really liked, found Hugh worthy of respect and regard, Hugh must be a friend worth claiming. Yet what had he done to make of Hugh a friend? Nothing. On the contrary, he had been guilty of a mean and selfish act which, if Hugh suspected it, could not easily be forgiven.

"A scout is friendly. He is a friend to all and a brother to every other scout."

So ran the fourth law which Alec had promised to obey when he took the scout oath. And how had he kept that law? By treachery to another!

"Guess I must be tireder than I thought," he told himself, trying to account for these disturbing reflections. "If I want to, I can return Hugh's notes to him when we go back to camp; they're hidden in my locker now. I suppose Joe meant that it was up to me to return them. Why didn't he do it himself? It would be more like him, the sly dog! I wish he had! I don't want to return them; they're so much better than mine. Oh, well, perhaps——"

But here his brain and body seemed to yield all at once to the overpowering spell of tired youth, and he sank into dreamless slumber.

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CHAPTER IX. THE SHAM BATTLE.

Such half-formed resolutions, good or bad, as those which had troubled Alec that night were naturally lost sight of in the stirring events of the next three days. Like the others in the signal corps, he was absorbed in the work assigned to them: surveying the countryside, working with the linemen who were sent on ahead to lay wires, sending and receiving telegraphic and signal messages concerning the movements of "the enemy." It was a wonderful experience for the eight young scouts, and they entered into it with a will and with credit to themselves for their part in the general scheme.

Lieutenant Denmead was proud of them and delighted at the success of his idea in forming the corps.

Friday came all too soon, in spite of the fact that the eagerly awaited battle was to be fought on the morrow. When the Blues pitched camp that evening, they had advanced several miles into the territory supposed to be defended by the Red Army, and they found themselves in a rather advantageous position.

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The Blues had selected their position with care. Two roads, one a highway, the other the logging road which skirted the Walsh farm, approached the town of Oakvale like the two halves of a wishbone, the best position being at the meeting point. Thus the Blues were so placed that the men were able to see down the valley and to cover the advance of the Reds whichever way they came.

When the camp was quiet and no sounds could be heard except the measured tread of a sentry going his rounds, Hugh, being warm and dusty after the day's skirmishing and marching, longed to go for a dip in the nearby stream. The longing grew upon him to such a degree that he rose from his cot and stole forth beyond the picket line, going straight toward the place where the stream formed a deep and narrow pool between some rocks.

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The night was warm for that season, and a crescent moon hung low in the heavens, only a little way above the tops of the tallest trees. Hugh found the light sufficient to guide him through the wood, and, reaching the pool, he shed his garments, and plunged in.

For a few minutes he swam lazily to and fro; then, all of a sudden he was startled by hearing a splash near him and a sound of spluttering, as someone else took the plunge. The next moment a head appeared above the inky ripples of the pool and with a vigorous shake came swimming toward him, the body to which it belonged being propelled swiftly and silently through the water.

"Is that you, Sam?" whispered Hugh.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I recognized your crawl stroke, Sam; there isn't one to beat it in Pioneer Camp."

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"I guessed where you were going, old man, and followed you here. Isn't this great! Gee! I wish we could get up a set of swimming matches at night when we go back to camp."

"What a crazy idea! The Chief wouldn't consider

it for a moment; it's too dangerous."

"Spouse it is," admitted Sam. "I was only thinking what fun this is, and not of—Say, Hugh, did you hear footsteps just now?"

"I thought I did, but wasn't sure. Listen."

Floating easily on their backs, the two lads lay motionless in the water under the overhanging rock, and strained their ears to catch a suspicious sound. To their intense surprise, a man's voice broke the silence.

"Captain Groome's division is just beyond here," it said softly. "He intends to meet your colonel half a mile beyond the intersection of two trails in the wood, at the rear of the Blue camp, and advance upon them from that point, early tomorrow morning. The Blues have no idea that we're so close to them."

"They're looking for us down the valley," responded a deeper voice. "Thanks for the information, sir. I'll go back now and report it at once to the colonel."

"And so will we, Sam!" added Hugh, in an excited whisper, when the unknown speakers had returned whence they had come. "Do you know what this means? Why, we've overheard two Red officers confiding plans for an attack on us to-morrow!"

"Sure this war game hasn't turned your head, Hugh?"

"Of course it hasn't! Didn't you hear them with your own ears?"

"Yes, but I couldn't make much sense out of what they were saying."

"No matter; it's important, all the same. The thing that puzzled me was: Why did they choose this spot so near our lines for their meeting just now?"

"Perhaps they couldn't arrange for a safer place."

"Come on, Sam, let's go back. We've got to tell what we've just learned."

A few strokes carried them to the edge of the pool; they scrambled out, dressed hastily, and hurried to the tent where Lieutenant Denmead was sleeping.

"Hate to wake you up, sir," said Hugh, when they entered.

"But we've got most important news!" supplemented Sam, forgetting his previous scoffing at the war game.

"Let's hear it, boys," said Denmead, sitting up attentively.

They told him, not hesitating to confess their breach of discipline in stealing out of camp for a swim. When they had finished, the Scout Master smiled.

"The importance of the news excuses the offense—this once," he said grimly. "Go back to your cots and get a few hours of good sound sleep in

preparation for the work cut out for you tomorrow. But report this plan to Major Brookfield, the first thing you do. I'll go with you now."

* * * * *

In the gray light of Saturday morning the "battle" began, with a rush of two troops of Red infantry upon the camp of the Blues.

The ground surrounding the camp was very uneven, and the advance of the Reds was impeded by thick bushes, trailing vines, and slippery stones embedded in the soil. Through these vines and thorny bushes the Reds fought their way, falling, stumbling, wet with perspiration, panting for breath, but obeying their colonel's commands instantly,—only to be met by an alert and determined resistance on the part of the Blue Army.

The Blues disproved all that had been said in criticism of them when the maneuvers were first organized. They observed perfect discipline and acted with coolness and intelligence. Indeed, thanks to the information Hugh and Sam had been enabled to bring, they gave the attacking forces the greatest surprise of the whole "campaign," by receiving them fully prepared and with a decimating fire of blank cartridges, under which, according to military tactics, the Reds might reasonably have retreated.

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But they did not retreat. Instead, there was a steady, bold, cool advance, as the Reds poured out of the woods like a swarm of angry bees.

Although surprised by the number of the Reds, the Blues drove back one attack and successfully foiled another by sending a company to block the march of Red reinforcements up the valley. Not for one minute during the next two hours did the strain slacken, nor did the officers on either side call a halt. The action, both in the vicinity of the camp and further down in the valley, was fast and incessant, as at a good football game. The conduct of all the men in the "fight" was worthy of the highest praise.

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It was when "the tide of battle" was at the full that Hugh and Alec, who had been sent to a lookout high up on the side of the hill, observed that no more Reds were coming from the valley along either road of the wishbone, and that the company of Blues who had gone out to check their advance were returning, triumphant.

By means of their semaphore flags, they signaled this news down to the other scouts, as well as to the regular signal men of the Blue Army, with the result that a new movement was decided upon:

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The Blues made an unexpected sortie from their position, and prepared to charge the Reds.

In front of the border of woods were a hundred yards or so of open ground covered with high grass. At the edge of this grass, the Colonel commanding the Reds ordered the line to cease firing, drop, and wait for some movement on the part of the enemy.

They had not long to wait. Major Brookfield ordered his lines to charge across, and the Blue

men did so under a heavy but ineffectual fire from the Reds. It looked like a skirmish line thrown out in advance of a regiment.

The Reds could not believe that so few men would advance with such confidence unless they momentarily expected large reinforcements, so, without attempting to stop them, they turned and ran. As their fire slackened, those who were returning from the valley saw them retreating, and the men in blue cheered—a long, derisive, parting cheer.

This charge ended the fight and won the day for the Blues.

* * * * *

"Where are Hugh Hardin and Alec Sands?" inquired Denmead, a few hours later, when the divided armies had returned to their common camp on Oakvale meadows. "Hasn't anyone seen them in camp?"

"No, sir," replied Walter, giving the scout salute.

"Do they know we're going back to our own camp to-day, by automobile as far as the railroad station nearest camp?"

"Yes, sir, they know it; but they haven't showed up yet."

"Can anything have happened to them, do you think, Chief?" queried Sam Winter.

"I should hardly suppose so. They may be lost in the woods; but, in that case, each one is capable of finding his way to Rainbow Lake, and thence to Pioneer Camp. However, if we don't see them or receive any message from them before we start, I'll send out a search-party, and we'll make the trip home on foot, to see if we can find them."

CHAPTER X. AROUND THE COUNCIL-FIRE.

A misfortune had indeed overtaken Alec and Hugh soon after they had turned the tide in favor of the Blue Army.

In descending from a ledge of rock that overhung the valley to a lower level where a path wound along the side of the hill, Alec, carrying his flags in one hand, and clinging to saplings that grew in the crevices of the rock with the other, slipped and fell, barely saving himself from tumbling headlong over the cliff.

When he attempted to rise, an excruciating stab of pain in his left ankle gave warning of a bad sprain.

"I've twisted my ankle, Hugh," he said ruefully, gazing up where Hugh knelt on the ledge above him. "I can't bear my weight on it just now."

He spoke lightly, but there was a catch in his voice.

Admiring his pluck, Hugh looked at him with an expression of deep concern.

"Wait a second, Alec. I'll help you up out of that little ravine you've fallen into. Jingo! I thought you would surely slide over the edge when I saw you fall! I was so thankful that you had the sense to stop short!"

"Were you?"

"You bet I was!" While he was speaking, Hugh was lowering himself cautiously down from the ledge, and creeping along until he stood beside Alec. "At last! Are you badly hurt? Let's see your ankle. Why, it's beginning to swell already! Here, let me take off your heavy shoe."

"If you do, I'll never be able to get it on again! As things are now, I don't see how I'm going to get down to Oakvale. And as for getting back to Pioneer Camp!—it seems to be at the other end of nowhere, so far away!"

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"Don't despair. As a matter of fact, I believe our camp is nearer this spot than Oakvale is. What do you say, Alec, to trying to make our way back to Rainbow Lake? I remember Joe left an old canoe there, and we can paddle across and then find the trail back to camp."

"Go ahead," responded Alec. "Sorry I can't go with you."

"Oh, yes, you can. And you're coming with me, too."

"I tell you I *can't walk*! This darned ankle hurts like sin! It may be broken, for all I know."

"I can tell in a moment," said Hugh, reassuringly, and with no touch of boasting.

While he carefully felt the injured member, Alec was suddenly reminded of a remark of his own, a sneer at Hugh's qualifications in first-aid. "At my expense," Alec had said, and now here was Hugh turning his knowledge to Alec's benefit, very modestly and simply, quite as a matter of course!

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"No bones broken," announced Hugh, "but you must let me bind it up with a handkerchief soaked in cold water, and then put on one of my sneakers. Then we'll start for camp, before it gets any worse."

Alec plucked up a little more courage at this.

"If I could only get up out of this ravine," he said, glancing around him in search of foothold, "I might——"

"I'm going to carry you," said Hugh quietly. But first he followed his own directions for binding Alec's ankle firmly.

"Now!" he exclaimed, when that was done to his satisfaction and to Alec's relief, "I'm going to get you out of here. Just drape yourself across my right shoulder, will you, and let your legs hang down in front so that I——"

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"But, Hugh, you'll never be able to haul me up out of this! I weigh as much as you do, though I'm not quite so tall!"

"You'll see. Please do just as I tell you, and let's not waste any more time about it." To his own surprise, Alec obeyed. Hugh knelt on the ground while Alec slid forward over his shoulder, throwing his right arm back over Hugh's left shoulder. Then Hugh passed his right arm between Alec's legs, seizing Alec's right hand; then, shifting his burden a little, he rose slowly. In this manner he staggered up the sloping sides of the ravine, and reached level ground and the path.

"Pretty tough on you!" he ejaculated, breathing hard, as he placed Alec gently on the ground. "How much farther do you think you can stand it."

"Look here, Hugh," cried Alec, "what are you thinking of? You can't carry me any farther. I won't have it! I'll be ever so much obliged to you if you'll break off that branch of ash over there,—the one with a long knob at one end of it,—so that I can use it for a crutch,—and then please make tracks toward Pioneer Camp as fast as you can."

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"And leave you here alone? Not much! What do you think I am?"

"There's no danger, Hugh. Besides, the sooner you get to camp and send Joe and a search-party out after me, the sooner I'll get there, too."

Hugh shook his head decisively.

"Sorry, but I won't do that. But, speaking of search-parties, why can't we signal to the National Guard camp and ask them to send one? Where are the flags?"

"They dropped out of my hand and fell over the cliff," replied Alec.

"Too bad! Well, it can't be helped." Hugh broke off the branch Alec had pointed out, whittled it smooth, and gave it to his companion. "There you are! Now, do you think we can stagger on?"

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"I guess so. I'll try, anyway."

Together, they did stagger on, Hugh assisting Alec over the rough places, or going before him to sweep aside the entangling vines and brakes and low-hanging boughs that obstructed their path. The sun and their little pocket compasses were their guides through the mazes of the forest, and the fact that they were never hopelessly lost was proof that they were good woodsmen.

Time and time again, during that long, tedious, wearisome, painful journey, Alec urged Hugh not to wait for him but to go ahead and return for him with friends from camp. Finally, seeing that Alec was in great distress, Hugh resolved to comply with this wish.

"I will leave you just as soon as we come to Rainbow Lake, if you insist," he promised reluctantly. "But if you are attacked by any wild animal, or if you should trip and have another bad fall, I'm not responsible."

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As it happened, they had followed an old Indian trail through the woods, one which led them to the northern end of Rainbow Lake in less time than they had counted on. This trail must have

saved them at least four miles and twice as many hours.

But twilight had begun to fold in the hills and to creep across the surface of the lake like a veil, when they at last stood upon its shore. It was too late to go to Pioneer Camp that night, even had the canoe been on hand for Hugh to use, instead of lying beached on the bare pebbly shingle at the other end of the lake.

"We'll have to camp out again to-night, here," said Hugh. "Have you any matches to light a fire with, Alec?"

"No, but I always carry my fire-stick, drill, and bow with me. You get some good tinder, Hugh, and I'll make a fire in two shakes."

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In a few minutes Hugh returned with a handful of pounded cedar wood, dry and sweet-smelling, and while he went to try and gather a few berries for their supper, Alec prepared to start the fire. First he gave a few strokes with the drill, then rearranged the tiny sticks he had placed over the tinder, and tried a few more strokes. No success. He gave half a dozen deft twirls to the drill—the smoke burst forth. He covered it with the tinder, fanned it a few seconds, and then a bright flame arose, just as Hugh returned with his cap full of luscious blackberries.

The berries were all they had to eat that night, but both youths were so tired they did not complain. Long before actual night had fallen, they were sound asleep, wrapped in their blankets, side by side.

And still Alec had said nothing, as yet, about the rebuke which Joe, the half breed, had given him. Time enough for that, when they were safe at Pioneer Camp once more.

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The next morning Hugh went in quest of the canoe, which he secured after considerable delay. Then he paddled back to the place where Alec awaited him, and soon the pair were gliding swiftly over Rainbow Lake and down the brawling stream which connected it with Pioneer Lake.

When at last they burst upon the waters of the larger lake and sent a yell of joy echoing across it, their cry was answered by another yell from camp, and soon the shore and the pier and the raft were crowded with eager friends waiting to welcome them.

Around the council-fire that evening sat the entire troop, for the leader of the signal corps was to be elected, after the reports of the hike had been read.

Alec, pale as a ghost, had sought Hugh after mess, and told him all he had tried to do to thwart his rival and to deprive him of the chance for leadership. It was bitterly hard to make that confession, but, in spite of his faults, Alec Sands "came up to the scratch" in the final test, and acquitted himself by telling the truth.

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"I'm heartily ashamed of my actions and my thoughts concerning you, Hugh," he said, in a low, shaky voice. "In the future, after your kindness to me yesterday, I'll be all the more

ashamed, and sorry, too."

"Well, I'm sure I don't want you to remember anything unpleasant between us!" laughed Hugh. "Let's forget it, Alec, and be friends!"

They shook hands upon that compact.

"Hugh, I hope—I feel sure—that I'm shaking hands with the leader of the signal corps!"

And Alec's remark was indeed true, for Lieutenant Denmead announced that evening that Hugh Hardin was appointed leader of the corps.

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Thereafter, with Alec's former hostility removed, there was not a scout in Pioneer Camp who did not congratulate Hugh with genuine pleasure,—for, when the history of the maneuvers was told, all felt that Hugh's reward had been fairly won.

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CHAPTER XI.

A MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE.

Early one morning in the following week, Hugh and Alec, moved by a spirit of newly cemented friendship, asked that they, attended by Indian Joe and accompanied by Billy Worth and Sam Winter, be permitted to make a trip on foot through the wilderness, to a mountain about five miles east of old Stormberg.

This request Lieutenant Denmead readily granted, after giving each of the four young "mountaineers," as he called them, a physical examination, testing heart, lungs, muscle, etc. "It ought to be a rule in all camps," said he, "that no boy whose heart is not first examined should attempt a mountain climb over a thousand feet, or a long march,—that is, no boy in his teens. You fellows, with the exception of Alec, are 'sound in wind and limb.'"

"What's the matter with me, sir?" queried Alec.

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"How about that ankle of yours, my boy?"

"Oh, that's all right, Chief! It's quite strong again. I had forgotten all about it."

"All right, then. But be careful. By the way, I think I'll ask Rawson to go with you."

"Fine!" "Great!" "Wish he would come!" the boys responded enthusiastically.

Accordingly, George Rawson joined the expedition that set forth bright and early next morning. Each member carried a haversack filled with provisions, in addition to the regular equipment for camping-out in fine weather.

The peak which they intended to climb was locally known as the Pinnacle. Higher than old Stormberg, it rose in the heart of the forest, and was approached from camp, first by a long-disused logging road that skirted the lower end of Pioneer Lake, then by trails and bridle-paths, and finally by a single trail that wound up its rocky sides. Though not remote from camp, it

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was nearly nightfall when the little party arrived at a farmer's barn nestling at the foot of the mountain, and, as a reward for helping him with the last of the day's "chores," were allowed to sleep in his hayloft. Much as they preferred to sleep in the open, a heavy rain—which had begun suddenly during the last two hours of their march—forced them to seek the shelter of the barn.

The morrow dawned in a heavy fog, and the Scouts were astir early in anticipation of clear weather. After a breakfast of oatmeal cakes, hard-boiled eggs, and cereal coffee, Hugh and Billy approached Joe, who was packing the cooking outfit, and said, "Rawson says we can go ahead a little if you will show us the trail, Joe. He has climbed the Pinnacle before, and will follow later."

Joe gave a grunt of assent, and the three strapped on their haversacks once more, left the barnyard, and struck out into the woods.

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As they began to ascend the mountain the wreaths of fog floated higher and higher above them, until the sun came forth in full splendor and all the moist, dripping woods were bathed again in light. In a few minutes Hugh realized, with a thrill of excitement, that the slopes of the magic peak were actually under his feet! He stumbled frequently over the broken rocks, helping himself up with the aid of trees, saplings, and undergrowth. Billy, less lithe and agile than Hugh, found it more difficult to keep in Joe's wake; and further, he was encumbered with a camera, which he had insisted on taking with him on this trip. How he managed to carry the thing along without smashing it, he could never afterward explain; but in the course of that day he got some remarkable photographs, and thereby added several points to the credit score of the Wolf Patrol.

Occasionally they were obliged to swing by their arms, like apes, from roots or branches projecting over the edge of some miniature precipice. Their faces were scratched by brambles, their hands cut by the sharp edges of rocks, and their clothing torn by the jagged limbs of broken pines and hemlocks.

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It was after ten o'clock before they reached a broad ledge, where they paused to rest and wait for the others. And it was twilight again before the reunited party reached the summit.

Stunted evergreen trees covered the top of the mountain, but the weary Scouts found a comparatively open space in an angle of rocks on one side, a few yards down, and there they made a bed of pine twigs. Then, collecting a heap of dead branches, they soon had a roaring fire. On all sides lay the wilderness, a great dark gulf beneath them. From among the trees came the nocturnal cries of wild animals, the hoot of a great horned owl, and the sougning of the fitful wind in the pines. In an hour the moon rose and shed a faint illumination over the weird scene.

In the morning the wilderness was like a green ocean surrounding that island peak, even the sharp, spiky tops of trees blending softly in a light haze. After disposing of breakfast, the party started to descend the mountain on another side, attracted by a lake that they had

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noticed shining in the light of the moon. But unwittingly they chose the worst possible place for descent, and that, in spite of Joe's general knowledge of the locality. In about an hour they found themselves involved in perpendicular cliffs and headlong pitches of the mountainside, which seemed to their inexperience truly frightful. At last they came out upon the dizzy brow of a precipice which was too smooth to afford any foothold.

The cliffs towering behind them seemed to forbid return, and they searched anxiously for a place where they dared attempt to descend.

"Look!" exclaimed Joe, at last, pointing to a dead pine which had fallen against the face of the precipice and remained leaning there. "We got to climb down that tree. Come."

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He crawled forward until half of his body was over the smooth ledge, then reaching down, he grasped the topmost branch of the leaning pine and swung himself over, landing on the trunk of the tree. After that it was easy to crawl along the trunk to its roots, which rested upon more level ground. The feat was not without peril, but it was the only way out of the difficulty. Each member of the party in turn followed Joe's example, crawling, clinging, scrambling to safety. Then they looked back at the sheer cliff and rejoiced that they had had even this chance of escape.

Another danger, however, soon became evident. They had lost their way! Wandering in the intricacies of a "windfall," they struggled desperately with a tangled mass of broken branches and uptorn roots. After spending the greater part of the forenoon in advancing perhaps half a mile, Sam climbed a tree, gave a searching look around, and announced that he had his bearings.

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The half-breed climbed up, also, and surveyed the landscape with his keen black eyes.

"Right!" he grunted positively. "Sam guess right. Joe know Pioneer Lake."

Nevertheless, when by slow stages they approached the lake, they found they still had to traverse broad swamps. At last, they came upon the backwoods trail which had grown familiar in many stalking games and signaling tests, and all their difficulties blended into the single one of tramping for an hour or two without food on a path that was wearisomely long, though it led out of the wilderness. Presently they emerged into the open, breaking into a cheer at the welcome sight of the council-fire of Pioneer Camp.

The "mountaineers" were quickly surrounded by a mob of curious boys and bombarded with eager questions. Rawson, however, demanded water and food for the hungry travelers first of all, and not until their exhausted comrades were amply refreshed did the other Scouts beg again to hear their experiences. Then Hugh and Alec, supplemented by Billy and Sam and endorsed by Rawson, told the story of their mountain climb. When it was finished, the council-fire had crumbled into ashes, and the last sparks had died out in the light of the stars.

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Another day of camp-life was ended. As the boys fell asleep, they smiled with content at their lot, and wondered what new happenings awaited them in the Land of Tomorrow, at dawn to become another Today!

That there *were* new and strangely unforeseen experiences before them, proof now exists, for the record may be found in "THE BOY SCOUTS OF PIONEER CAMP."

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos (including once exchanging the order of two entire lines); left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.
- Retained the probable typo "stertorious" for its portmanteau-word potential.
- In the text versions, delimited italics text in underscores (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS ***

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