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the Prize Pennant, by Robert
Shaler**

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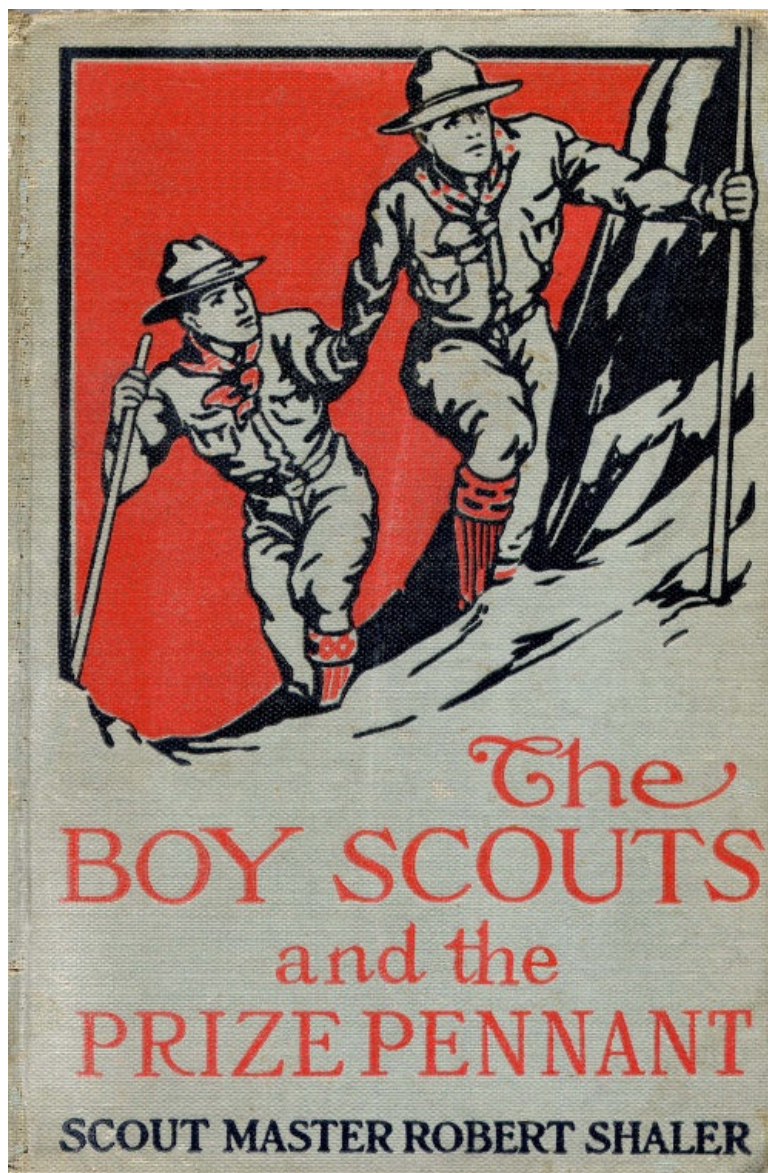
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS AND THE PRIZE PENNANT ***



THE BOY SCOUTS AND THE PRIZE PENNANT

BY
SCOUT MASTER ROBERT SHALER

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS," "THE
BOY SCOUTS OF PIONEER CAMP," "THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY," "THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE LIFE
SAVING CREW," ETC., ETC.

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Boy Scouts and the Prize Pennant.

CHAPTER I. THE VALUE OF WOODCRAFT.

"Wasn't that the far-away hoot of an owl just then, Mr. Scout Master?"

"I wonder if it could be one of those tenderfoot recruits that expect to make up the new Owl patrol of our troop? How about that, Hugh?"

"As you've put it up to me straight, Billy, I'll tell you what I think. It's out of the question for one of those greenhorns to be away up here in the woods; and it was too deep and heavy to be the call of even a big Virginia horned owl. If you

fellows will take the trouble to look up through the treetops you'll notice that there's a lot of queer flying clouds racing overhead right now."

"Whew! do you mean it's going to *storm*, Hugh?" demanded the boy who had answered to the name of Billy. He seemed to be a good-natured, easy-going lad, though just now his face bore an expression of sudden concern.

6

"I'm sure that was the distant growl of thunder we heard," came the answer from Hugh Hardin, an athletic fellow who had long been the leader of the Wolf patrol. Very lately, on the resignation of the assistant scout master of the troop, Hugh had been elected to that office, receiving a certificate from Boy Scout Headquarters in New York City that fully qualified him to serve in place of the real chief should the latter be unable to accompany the troop.

There were just four of the lads up in the woods, where they had come to spy out the chances for gathering a bountiful nut crop later on in the fall. Incidentally they practiced certain maneuvers that had to do with scout lore and knowledge of woodcraft.

7

Besides Hugh and Billy Worth, there were Bud Morgan and Arthur Cameron, the latter of whom had made rapid progress to the grade of a second-class scout, with aspirations for even better things.

All of these boys belonged to the Wolf patrol, the doings of which have been told in the various stories preceding this volume. And though they were by this time pretty well versed in a knowledge of the great outdoors, the fact that a storm was sweeping toward them, with not a single house within a radius of several miles, was enough to create considerable consternation among them.

"We ought to do something right away, hadn't we, Hugh?" demanded Arthur, possibly a trifle more inclined to be timid than any of his mates.

"If we only had plenty of time," spoke up confident Billy, "we might make a lean-to out of branches that would shed rain. I've helped do it before, and we didn't get wet, so you could notice. But listen to that growl, will you? No time for us to cut brush and branches, because before we got her half done the old rain would be howling down on top of us. Let's cut and run for it, fellows!"

8

"That's all right, but run where?" demanded Hugh. "It would be silly for us to think we could make as fast time as the storm."

"Whoop! I've guessed a way out of the trouble!" ejaculated Arthur, beginning to show signs of sudden excitement.

"Then, for goodness sake, tell us what it is," urged Bud, as a third peal of thunder broke in upon their hearing, considerably louder than either that had gone before.

"There, look at that whopping big oak tree, fellows! Don't you see that it's hollow to the core?" declared Arthur, pointing as he spoke. "Why, chances are the whole kitting lot of us could squeeze inside; and if the storm comes

9

from the direction of that thunder, not a drop of rain would beat in on us. Well, why don't somebody say what you think of my bully scheme?"

"How about that, Hugh?" asked Billy, as if in doubt. "Seems to me I've been given to understand that a big tree isn't the best place to get under when a thunder and lightning storm is buzzing around. Hope I'm mistaken, though, because that idea seems to be our best hold just now."

"Well, Hugh doesn't think so, you notice," suggested Bud, who had been watching the face of the acting scout master all the while, as well as the gathering gloom that preceded the passage of the heavy black clouds would permit.

"It would be the very last thing we ought to do, boys," remarked Hugh, with resolution marking his whole manner. "Of course, that tree might never be struck, for it's stood through heaps and heaps of other storms; but all the same the risk is there. Many a foolish man has been killed just by doing something like that. No, we've either got to take our ducking and stand for it, or else find some other place under shelter."

10

"But just where could we go, Hugh?" Arthur questioned uneasily, as all of them saw a vivid flash of lightning shoot across the heavens where a small clearing permitted a view. It was soon followed by a detonating crash that seemed to make the very ground tremble underfoot.

"A barn would be just as bad as a tree, wouldn't it, Hugh?" asked Bud, who, it appeared, knew something about such things.

"Every whit as bad," the other told him; "but hurry and come along after me, fellows. I've got a little scheme that it may pay to try and work. All depends on how long that rain pleases to hold off. Given five minutes, and I reckon we might make shelter. This way, everybody, and take care you don't get your feet caught in some root or vine that will throw you!"

11

Somehow all of the other scouts seemed to have the utmost confidence in their young leader. Hugh had been tested many a time, and seldom failed his chums when a sudden necessity like the present arose.

They went stumbling along through the woods, with Arthur bringing up the rear, as he did not seem to be quite as expert at this sort of thing as the balance of the scouts. Evidently Hugh was taking them on the back trail, because presently Billy recognized a fine white birch that he had marked down when passing, meaning to come back one of these days and strip that splendid mottled bark from its trunk, for some purpose he had in mind.

This fact told him that Hugh must have noticed some feature of the landscape, as he was always keeping his eyes about him, that offered a bare chance of safety from the storm that was chasing after them so swiftly.

12

"It'll have to bob up mighty quick, then," Billy was saying to himself, as he felt the first drop of rain splash against his neck, "for we are going to get it like cats and dogs right away. Hello!

where's Arthur?"

The thunder had been rolling just before, but ceased in time for Hugh to hear this last startled exclamation from Billy. He instantly stopped short in his tracks, and the three scouts came together in a bunch.

"Arthur! Whooe!" shouted Billy.

A rather faint voice answered him from back on the trail.

"Here I am; got caught by the ankle, and had all the breath knocked out of me! Go along, and leave me to look out for myself, fellows!"

13

"Not much we will," said Hugh, as he immediately started back again on the run. "We Wolves stick together, come what will. Sink or swim, we never desert a comrade, do we, boys?"

"I guess not," added Billy, and then quailed as a fierce flash dazzled his eyes; "but this settles it for our dry suits. We're up against it, all right, boys!"

They quickly reached the place where their unlucky chum was sitting up, trying to work his foot loose from the grip of the vine that had caught him fast. Perhaps Arthur would have succeeded in doing this in due time; but he was out of breath now, and trembling so with excitement that he did not seem able to go at the job the right way.

After taking one look, Hugh gave the imprisoned foot a backward wrench and it came free.

14

"Hurrah for you, Hugh!" gasped the relieved scout, as he scrambled to his feet; "but you oughtn't to have come back. I was to blame, and stood ready to take my medicine."

"Scouts always stand by each other," said Billy, who now proceeded to occupy a place in the rear, so as to keep an eye on the one who seemed prone to do what he had been warned against.

Either the way was freer of obstacles from that point on, or else Arthur had had his lesson and watched his steps more carefully; at any rate, he managed to keep up with those ahead of him, and did not again come to grief.

Two minutes later, and Hugh turned abruptly to the right.

"Here she comes, fellows!" cried Billy, as he heard an ominous rushing sound some little distance in the rear, which he knew must be made by the descending rain.

15

"And here's where we score a mark in our favor in the contest for the prize banner!" Hugh added. "Don't you see where the rocks crop up on this little rise? I noticed several ledges standing out that ought to shelter us from most of the rain, unless the storm shifts and comes back again. Now, each fellow find a place to crawl under the rock!"

Encouraged by these words, the other three scouts hurried forward. Hugh generously pointed out the first refuge, and told Arthur and Bud to get under shelter as fast as they could

manage it.

"How about you and Billy?" cried Arthur, unwilling to profit in this way from the scout master's discovery.

"Move along in here; a scout's first duty is to obey orders!" Hugh called back over his shoulder as he hurried on.

It was beginning to rain in earnest, and that rushing sound told that within half a minute they might expect to be fairly overwhelmed by the deluge that was coming with that mighty wind and terrific bombardment of thunder.

16

Talking was no longer possible. One could not have heard distinctly even if a speaker's lips were pressed against one's ear. Hugh understood this, and so he clutched Billy's arm, dragging him toward a spot where he had discovered another shelf of rock, when that last brilliant flash lighted up their surroundings.

They were not a second too soon; for even as the two boys scrambled hastily under the friendly shelter, down came the rain with such a rush that it seemed as if a cloud must have burst.

Crouching there in the semi-gloom, the two boys looked out on such a spectacle as doubtless neither of them had ever seen before.

It did not seem to be a mere summer storm, but very much after the type of a cyclone, such as sweeps irresistibly over sections of the country at times, tearing up great trees by the roots, and carrying off everything that happens to be in its narrow path.

17

Right before their eyes they saw several trees crash down. All around them the forest bent far over before the howling wind. By pressing back as far as they were able, the boys managed to keep beyond the reach of the downpour. Had it caught them napping, it would have soaked them to the skin "in three shakes of a wolf's tail," as Billy confidently remarked in his chum's ear, during a brief interval when the awful clamor eased up a little.

18

CHAPTER II.

THE LESSON OF THE RIVEN OAK.

The minutes dragged slowly along. For some time it seemed as though there was going to be no let-up to the sudden storm; and already Billy was worrying over how they would get home without a soaking. But Hugh had noticed that it was less dark and gloomy than before, and he drew his own conclusions from this fact. Besides, the crashes of thunder certainly came from further away now, and that was convincing as well as encouraging to the young leader of the Wolf patrol.

"Do we have to stay here all night, or take our dose walking home, Hugh?" asked Billy, who apparently had failed to notice all these favorable signs.

"Oh! hardly as bad as that," came the confident answer. "You can see that the worst is past by the way the clouds lighten; and that last thunder clap was surely a mile away, for I counted half a dozen seconds between the flash and the beginning of the crash. Let's be satisfied with the way we've managed to cheat the rain and kept our jackets fairly dry. I believe in letting well enough alone."

Billy began to notice the various indications, since his attention had been called to them by his more observing companion; and he quickly found reason to agree with Hugh that they would soon see the last of the rain.

"Jiminy! if it came down as heavy as this near home," he said humorously, for Billy could joke, no matter what the conditions were, "we'll need a boat to paddle along the pike. And say, think of little Pioneer Lake, will you? Won't it be over the dam and rushing down like a mill race, though?"

The boys could now exchange remarks, because the thunder had rolled further away, although occasionally a terrific crash near at hand startled Billy, who liked to thrust his head out from under his shelter, just as a tortoise might from his shell, only to jerk it back again when a dazzling flash was instantly succeeded by a stunning bang.

"Whew! that was the worst knock of all we've had!" he ejaculated the next moment, shivering so that Hugh could feel his form tremble.

"You have to watch out in a bad storm for those same after-claps," the other informed him. "They nearly always come, and do a heap of damage. There's something in the air that draws the lightning back again to repeat. And chances are *that* bolt shattered a tree into splinters, because I'm sure I heard the sound of falling limbs and branches."

"Oh! Hugh, don't you think it came right from the quarter where that big hollow oak stood which Arthur wanted all of us to use as a shelter from the storm?" Billy asked, considerable awe in his voice.

"I was thinking that myself," replied the other soberly; "and when we go on, we'll find out. If it should happen that way, the sight of it would be the greatest object lesson ever to Arthur; yes, to all of us."

"I should say yes," muttered Billy, as in imagination he pictured that lofty oak lying in ruins; "and I guess you did us all a great favor, Hugh, when you refused to let any scout find shelter under its branches, even if they did look mighty tempting."

That one grand crash seemed to mark the winding up of the furious storm; for the rain stopped altogether, and gradually the surrounding woods became lighter. Still, no scout ventured to crawl forth, such was the spirit of obedience which had been fostered in the Wolf patrol in times past, when all manner of strange adventures had been the portion of the eight boys constituting it. Until the leader gave the signal, they must remain where they were; although one and all of them secretly confessed to being heartily tired of crouching in that

strained attitude.

When Arthur and Bud heard the peculiar howl of the wolf—"How-oo-ooo"—softly repeated three times, they knew that this was the signal for release; and accordingly both boys came crawling out from their place of concealment, stretching their cramped limbs with more or less animation and gratitude.

"Let me tell you it's few scouts who would have noticed these rocky shelves in the formation of the hill," Billy told the others impressively, "and then have remembered them just when a hiding-place from the storm was needed! When we report this adventure to the committee in charge of that banner, I hope they'll agree that our patrol deserves a good big ten-point mark placed on record, for doing the right thing at the right time."

"And let me tell you, the other patrol leaders'll be warm under the collar when they hear about it, especially Alec Sands," Bud went on to say reflectively. "Time was when he just hated Hugh here like everything. Then for a while Alec turned right around, so that he seemed to be as good a friend as Hugh had in the whole troop; but I've taken notice lately that Alec's showing signs of his old trouble. You know he's a spoiled darling at home and thinks everything ought to come his way. He's straining every nerve to count points, and says he's got that fine banner as good as won. Huh! like fun he has! Wait till the Wolf patrol is heard from!"

23

"That's the way to talk, Bud," commented Billy; "it gives us all a nice warm feeling. I only wish we could manage to get a photograph of these shelter caves that came in so handy. Nothing like being able to show the proof, when you're going to make a report to the committee."

24

"Well, you'll have to come back here on a clear day, then," said Hugh; "because there isn't half enough light now to take them, and we haven't any flashlight apparatus along. If all of you are ready, let's be making tracks toward home."

Billy noticed that the leader took great pains to walk along the same trail they had used in advancing, and he could give a pretty fair guess why this should be so.

That was characteristic of Billy; he often acted as though sleepy; but, once he was aroused, he could make as good use of his eyes and ears as the next fellow. Just then he fancied that Hugh expected to spring a considerable surprise on his chums before they had gone many rods.

"Looks as if we would be pretty wet, after all, the way the drops come down from the trees," Arthur remarked, as he started to draw the collar of his coat up about his neck. "But then, none of us are made of salt, are we, boys?"

25

"Well, I should say not," declared Bud, "after all we've been through since the Wolf patrol was first started, and Lieutenant Denmead consented to serve as our Scout Master. And he's worked wonders for the lot of us, everybody says. Some of the boys in the troop have improved five hundred per cent. since they joined the scouts. They've learned that a fellow can get heaps and heaps of fun out of life without playing mean

tricks or being cruel to birds and animals."

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Billy, softly clapping his hands in applause.

"If to-morrow is fine, I hope the whole bunch will come up here again," urged Arthur at this point. "We surely must get photographs of those queer rocky shelters, to show the judges when we put in our claim for ten points. Hugh, will you come, for one?"

26

"I certainly will, Arthur, and hope both the other fellows will be along, for they ought to be in the pictures."

"Oh! there's only going to be one, you know, Hugh; unless we happen to strike a bevy of young partridges with their mother. I've got a quail sitting on her nest, but always wanted a group picture of the partridge family."

"Well, we'll have to order up one for you, then, Arthur," chuckled Bud.

Just then Arthur, not looking very closely where he stepped, stumbled over something that lay in the trail.

"Look here, fellows, what does this mean?" he exclaimed, stooping to pick up the object. "A splinter of wood torn from a tree, and as fresh as anything! Why, I wonder if the lightning could have done that? Look around, fellows, and—oh! just see what happened to that tree! Why, the whole ground's covered with the wreckage! What a terrible thing a bolt of lightning is, isn't it, Hugh?"

27

"One of the most fearful things known," Hugh replied; "but look again, Arthur, and tell me if you think you ever saw this same tree before!"

Billy fairly held his breath as he waited to hear what the other's reply would be, for he had already seen that which told him the truth.

"Why, you don't expect me to have a speaking acquaintance with every tree in the woods, do you, Hugh?" remarked Arthur. And then, seeing that the other was really in earnest, he looked again, and more closely, after which he continued: "Well, now that you mention it, seems to me there *is* something familiar about that riven stump. My stars! Hugh, it's the big oak with the hollow trunk!"

There was a vein of awe in the boy's voice when he said this, and his eyes were staring as hard as could be at the telltale evidence before him.

28

"And, Arthur, it doesn't look quite so cozy in that hollow as when you wanted us to hide there from the storm, does it?" Hugh asked him.

The boy turned a white face toward the patrol leader, and there actually were tears in his eyes as he said slowly:

"Just to think what would have happened to the bunch of us boys if everybody else had been as foolish as I was! It scares me just to look at the awful smash that bolt made of the big oak. And that shows how valuable it is to know what is safe and what isn't. Hugh, after this I'm going in for woodcraft and everything connected with it. I've been fiddling too much with this camera

business, perhaps.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, Arthur,” the patrol leader rejoined. “Photography happens to be your hobby, just as geology and surveying are Bud’s. You’ve made some cracking good pictures, too, since you put your mind on it. I’m sure that when you turn in the ones you expect to show of flashlight views of wild animals, taken in their native haunts, the series will bring quite a few points to the Wolf patrol for that prize banner.”

29

“I hope so,” said Arthur, “but that does not change my resolution about woodcraft. You must have guessed it was this tree that the last bolt struck, Hugh. I can see now why you kept following our back tracks so closely, even when there was a better trail at hand. You wanted to show me this sight, so it could be an object lesson. Well, let me tell you all I’ll never forget it as long as I live; and some fine day p’r’aps I can keep other foolish boys from getting under a big tree when a storm is coming up.”

“I was just thinking of something, Hugh,” remarked Billy, who had indeed been looking unusually serious for him while this conversation was going on.

30

“Well, give us the benefit of your wisdom, then, Billy Wolf,” Bud entreated.

“Here’s where we’ve got a fighting chance to pull down the biggest wad of points you ever heard of. Wasn’t it two hundred and fifty that was to go to the patrol containing a scout who had been instrumental in saving a human life since the contest started? Well, what’s the matter with our claiming a thousand? Hasn’t our leader saved all our lives by his judgment in this hollow tree business? How about that, Hugh? Think we’d stand any show of getting our claim admitted by the committee?”

“Well, that’s too fine a question for me to settle offhand,” the other replied with a laugh; “but I rather think it meant saving a life at the risk of one’s own; and you know that it was only my knowledge of these things that counted in this case. Still, Arthur must take a picture of this tree to-morrow, and we can put in a claim for points in woodcraft. It will be a good thing for every scout in the troop to hear about; and when they see what happened to the big oak with the fine hollow in its trunk, they’ll never allow themselves to be tempted to crawl into such a trap when lightning is in the air.”

31

As the four boys hurried on Bud remarked drily: “A little common sense went a long way this time.”

32

CHAPTER III.

SCOUT LAW.

No doubt in four families that same evening, while the good people of the house gathered about the board, there was considerable interest taken in certain versions of that day’s

adventures. More than one mother's cheeks grew pale as she learned how close her boy had been to a sudden death, while the father nodded his head and remarked in this wise:

"Now, I shouldn't be surprised if Boy Scout training did amount to considerable, after all. That was a simple thing to know, but it proved to be mighty practical in application. Beware of trees and barns during a thunder storm. I'm glad you showed such good sense, son."

The account given in Hugh Hardin's home was much more modest than in any of the others. He shared the credit for discovering the wonderful shelves of rocks and the determination not to stay under the tree, so that any one listening might have received the impression that all four lads had simultaneously settled upon those important points. Hugh used the word "we" constantly, and it was not until later, when his folks met with the parents of the other boys, that they learned just where all the thoughtfulness lay.

33

The following day dawned as "fine as silk," as Arthur gleefully told Hugh over the 'phone, when asking what would be the best time for them to start out on their second trip to the woods.

"This is just the dandiest day for taking pictures that ever could be, Hugh," he went on to say. "The air is as clear as a bell, and you know that counts for a heap. My book of instructions says that's why they get such fine views out in California, where the atmosphere is extremely rarefied."

"Whew! does it say all that?" laughed Hugh. "Then I don't wonder you're anxious to take advantage of a day like this. That storm has cleared the air in a great way, for a fact."

34

"Well, if they'd had it as severe here as we did up there in the woods," continued Arthur, "it would have been tough on church steeples and such. I believe there wouldn't have been one left in town. But only a few trees were blown down, and one house struck."

"Where was that?" asked Hugh. "I hadn't heard about any such thing."

"Luckiest thing ever," said Arthur; "it happened to be that old deserted building that was called Sutton's Folly. Lightning set it afire, and in the storm the Excelsior Company couldn't get out there to do their little business; so it burned to the ground, some people say. Others speak of the ruins standing, and looking queer. I'm bound out that way right now to try for a picture. How about the time we start up into the woods, Hugh? Would one o'clock do?"

"Make it one, and if either of the other boys can't get off I'll let you know, Arthur," the other informed him.

35

"That goes, then, and meet at the church as before. By the way, Mr. Assistant Scout Master, although it's only seven o'clock, you'll be interested to know that I'm wearing my badge right-side up already. Haven't missed connections now for twelve days; but it never came so early in the morning before."

"Good for you, Arthur; how did it happen?" asked Hugh, always interested in anything that had to do with the application of scout principles. "Help the hired girl up with a bucket of coal, or run an errand for the folks?"

"Well, I did go on an errand before breakfast, but as that is a part of my regular home duties I never count it as worth while mentioning. I'd be pretty small to change my badge on that account. It was this way, Hugh. I have to go for milk, you see, because we get our supply now from old Mrs. Grady. She keeps just one cow, and it helps her out to sell all she can spare; but she's so crippled with the rheumatics that she can't walk much and people have to come to her. Are you listening, Hugh?"

36

"Sure I am; go right along, Arthur, but cut the story short. I think I'm wanted about now to carry a message downtown for my mother. What happened?"

"Why, it isn't much to tell. You know the Sprawl family that live in the old shack down near the blacksmith shop? The man is a cobbler when he cares to work at all, and there are about forty-eleven youngsters flocking around the door all the time, barefooted and dirty."

"Yes, I've often carried them things from our house," Hugh assured him.

37

"Well, I came on one of the little Sprawl girls a-cryin' on the road and searching in the grass. She carried an old battered pitcher in her hand, and when I asked her what was the matter she said she had been sent for five cents' worth of milk and had lost the money. You ought to have seen how her face lighted up through the tears and the dirt when I drew out a nickel and gave it to her! Guess that entitled me to turn my badge, even if it wasn't much, didn't it, Chief?"

"I should say it did, and you'll get a heap more satisfaction out of remembering the look on that little girl's face than you'd ever have had from spending your nickel for a glass of soda water. But I'll have to break away, Arthur. Look for us at one, alongside the church. I have a few stunts for us to practice while up there among the cliffs of the mountainside. So-long!"

When Hugh had attended to his errand downtown, he walked around to the sporting-goods store, in the window of which was exposed the handsome silk banner which had been offered by a leading gentleman of the town as a prize to the patrol winning the highest number of points in the competition that had been arranged by the efficient Scout Master.

38

There was hardly a time throughout each day that one or more lads did not have their noses pressed against the glass of that window, while they indulged in all manner of talk and speculations concerning the possible destination of that beautiful prize.

Doubtless many unique, and perhaps even remarkable, expedients would be resorted to by the energetic and ambitious members of the Hawk, the Otter, the Fox and the Wolf patrols of the Boy Scout Troop, in order to sum up the largest number of points in the contest. And when the time came to read off the list of things

39

accomplished and to award the prize to the lucky patrol, there would be surprises all along the line.

Two boys were standing at the window as Hugh approached: Billy Worth and Bud Morgan. They turned toward Hugh with something like a mixture of indignation and amusement written upon their faces; and Billy immediately fired the first shot, as usual, for he was ready with his speech, if sometimes hesitating when it came to quick action.

"What do you think, Hugh? Alec Sands and Sam Winter of the Otters were just here, and you should have heard them talk! It was 'our' banner, and 'how proud we'll be when we march with that waving over the Otters!' I tell you, I was mad enough at first to eat my hat; and then Bud whispered that they were doing it just to get my goat, so I cooled down and added to the merriment by asking all sorts of questions about just *how* they felt so dead sure of winning."

"Yes," added Bud, "but it didn't work, Billy. Alec was too sly to give his secret away. He only put on that wise look of his, winked his eye, and said: 'You Wolves just wait and hear something drop. You're going to get the biggest surprise of your lives before long. And let me tell you right here, we've got that banner *cinched!*' And then they walked away, chuckling and looking back at us as though they might be having lots of fun."

40

"Well, chances are they were, if you fellows let them see you were worried any by their big claims," Hugh declared.

"What do you think about it, Hugh?" asked Billy. "Have they found out some way to add a lot of tallies to their string,—an easy way, and yet one that would come inside the restrictions set by the committee? If that's so, then the rest of the patrols might only be wasting their time trying."

"Don't you believe that," the other instantly told him. "No matter if they are beaten in the race, there's no discounting the good the patrols will get out of the effort they make to roll up a strong count. Lots of things are bound to be attempted that would never have been thought of only for this keen competition. In my opinion, this is going to be the best thing that ever happened for the troop. And the whole town has got the fever by now, so that even men and women are interested. When the time comes for counting the tallies and telling how each bunch was won, there won't be standing room in the biggest hall in town for the crowd that'll want to be there."

41

"Then you think Alec might have been boasting, just to rub it into us, knowing all the time we'd tell you about it?" remarked Billy.

"We all know that Alec is as smart as a steel trap," said Hugh thoughtfully. "Now, it's just barely possible that the Otters haven't any wonderful run of luck at all, and that he's adopted this scheme, thinking he may discourage the rest of us. You know, if some boys once get the notion in their heads that they're beaten long before the end of the race, they're apt to throw up the sponge and quit. He may think that we are that kind."

42

Billy snorted with disdain as he said hastily,

"Huh! guess Alec isn't much on reading character, then, if he thinks Hugh Hardin would get weak-kneed for a little thing like that. And every one of the Wolves are made of the stuff that fights harder than ever when they see that they're up against a tough job. But anyway, you've made me feel better, Hugh. Someway I always do seem to look at things in a different light when you are around."

"How are you fellows fixed for meeting Arthur and myself at one o'clock to-day?" the other calmly asked, though it must have given him a flash of pleasure to hear Billy's remark.

43

"Does that mean we're going for another hike to-day?" asked Bud. "I'm on deck, you may be sure; only I hope we won't run across another storm like that one yesterday. It was the worst I ever struck."

"No danger of that, with this fine bracing air and that cloudless sky," Hugh replied. "Arthur is wild to get pictures of those places where we met our adventure yesterday; and I have a few tests connected with cliff climbing that I'd like to put through while up there in that rough country. Can you go, Billy?"

"Count on my being there at one, prompt, Chief," came the immediate reply. "You know I'm never half so happy as when out in the woods. We might have another lesson in that Injun picture writing while we're at it, Hugh. Never thought I could be so wrapped up in anything as that study's turned out for me."

"If we have time we will," said Hugh. "By the way, I notice that neither of you scouts have turned your badges yet for to-day. Arthur was telling me over the 'phone of a nice little stunt he'd pulled off that let him make the change; and while he's out a drink of soda water, he's in a whole bushel of good feeling in his heart. No, I won't tell you how it was; you must ask him that. And I've got to be off now, as my folks will be wanting what I came downtown after. Better get busy, Billy, and you too, Bud. The sooner it's done, the quicker your mind will be free for the whole day."

44

"Oh! I've got that all down fine," laughed Billy. "All this week I've agreed to help our old gardener weed his onion bed, working half an hour a day, because he gets such a stiff back bending over, you know. And I'll move along home to do my stunt right away."

45

"And as for me," added Bud, "I think I know how I can surprise my mother by doing a number of things to lighten her work this morning. You'll see me wearing this old badge right-side up when I get to the church at one!"

It was odd how many opportunities came to these scouts, alertly watching for chances, to live up to that law of their organization that required a daily good deed. And, regarding their acts in the light of duty, they reported them to one another quite without boastfulness. Each scout felt it a reflection upon himself if he were long seen wearing his badge upside-down, the position in which he was obliged to place it at the beginning of the day. And as his own

judgment decided when he might conscientiously reverse the badge, he was careful to merit the privilege.

CHAPTER IV. GETTING CONVINCING PROOF.

"Here's where we'll have to leave the wheels, fellows, and climb the rest of the way," said Hugh, at about two o'clock that same afternoon.

The four members of the Wolf patrol had concluded that they could save themselves considerable time by making use of their bicycles; it had been Bud's suggestion, and being duly O.K.'d by the leader, the order went forth to come to the place of meeting prepared for a run along the good road that would take them pretty nearly three-fourths of the way to where they had planned to go.

So, dismounting, they looked for a convenient hiding-place, where the wheels might be considered safe until they came that way again, homeward bound.

Arthur carried his dearly loved camera, with which he had become very expert of late; and, as has been said before, the really fine pictures he was turning out proved that he had a natural bent in that direction worth cultivating. He was forever trying new experiments, and, with the assistance of Hugh, had already managed to obtain quite a few clever photographs of wild animals, such as could be found in that neighborhood. Indeed, they had several times arranged a sort of trap, so that a mink or muskrat in starting to carry off the bait, actually took its own picture by setting off a flashlight cartridge.

As the four boys started up the steep road, talking vigorously about the happenings of the previous day, it was noticed that Hugh was carrying a coil of rope over his shoulder. He had brought it along fastened to the handle-bars of his wheel, and, remembering what he had said about practicing cliff-climbing, Billy and Bud could readily guess what this might be for.

As for Arthur, he seemed so engrossed with what he expected to do in taking a number of views calculated to back up their story about the storm, that he paid no attention to anything else. That was the trouble with Arthur; once he got interested in any particular line of work, he threw his whole energies into it, perhaps to the neglect of other equally important matters.

They were soon climbing the trail that led to the scene of their previous adventure. Billy seemed unusually wideawake on this afternoon, and full of animation. His eyes were on the alert all the time, and if there was a squirrel that leaped from one tree to another in making for its hole, a rabbit that suddenly flashed out of sight among the bushes, or a red-headed woodpecker hammering at some rotten treetop, Billy was the one to discover it first of all.

Several times Arthur manifested a disposition to stop and take pictures. There were trees that had been blown down which seemed to offer an inviting field, and might have made good views; but Hugh advised that he "hold his horses" awhile.

"You can take plenty of pictures of fallen trees whenever you feel like it," the patrol leader told the artist; "and just now you ought to make every film count for the Wolf patrol. Perhaps you may want to snap off several shots at the wreck of the big hollow oak; and then there are the rocks that made us such a fine shelter. They ought to show up just right in this afternoon sun, for they face the west."

"I do believe you even thought of that when you agreed to the time for this hike, Hugh," Arthur returned thoughtfully. "It seems to me you just look away ahead pretty much all the time, and figure things out long before they happen."

"Oh! hardly all that," laughed Hugh; "and in this case you're away off, because it never occurred to me until I spoke. But besides those pictures, there may be some other things turn up before we get back that will be worth while snapping. I've got a few stunts figured out, you know, that will give you a chance to do some quick work, if you want to finish out a film."

"We must be getting close to where that old tree went to smash when the lightning struck it, Hugh," remarked Bud.

"There she is, right ahead there!" cried Billy, before the leader could answer. "And say, boys, let me tell you the wreck looks just as fierce as it did yesterday. I've been wondering whether we mightn't have magnified things a little, seeing we were so worked up over the escape; but just look at the way the limbs are scattered around! It's going to be a hard thing for you to get a proper focus on all that stuff, Art, and us grouped in the bargain."

But the experienced photographer had already cast a quick look around, and seemed fully confident that he could manage nicely.

"Plenty of sunlight at this early hour," he remarked first of all; "but by three o'clock the shadows of those other trees would have bothered me. And now, you fellows stand just by that little open place, where you won't be in the line of the riven stump. The hole must show that I wanted you to crawl into before the storm broke. After I get you well focussed, I expect to join you. I've got an extra long rubber tube, you notice, connected with my rapid drop-shutter; so when we're all fixed, I'll press the bulb, and the thing's done."

He was very particular how he placed them all, and after he had viewed the scene from under his light-proof cloth, he came back several times to make alterations.

Finally, even the particular artist seemed to be satisfied.

"Nobody move a hand or foot, or more than breathe, till I come back and join you," he told them, as he hurried to his camera which he had mounted on its tripod. "That's going to be a Jim

Dandy view, I'm giving it to you straight, fellows; and above all, the *hole* shows up fine. You see, that's what will gain us points in this game, if anything will, and the committee must be able to tell that the oak tree struck by lightning was hollow, so that they can know how close a call we had. Steady there, Billy Worth; don't act so frisky. We don't want to spoil this picture, let me tell you; and I'm going to take a second snap, to make doubly sure of it."

When the official photographer of the Wolf patrol had rejoined his three waiting chums, he stooped to secure possession of the bulb that completed the long thin line of rubber tubing.

"Now, look natural, everybody!" he remarked. "I'm going to press her. All ready? Here she goes! There, that counts for one snapshot! Now wait here where you are till I turn another exposure, and we'll make a second picture."

53

This was soon accomplished, and Arthur declared that he would have excellent results to show for all their work.

"You've got to print a copy for each one of us, too," remarked Billy seriously. "I'm going to have an enlargement made, which I can frame and hang over the desk in my den at home. Every time I look up at it I'll remember what it means, and feel thankful that I joined the scouts and that Hugh was along with us! It gives me a cold shiver to think what *might* have happened if the other three of us had been by ourselves. Neither Bud nor myself would have known enough to put up any objection when you made your bid for shelter, Arthur."

"Oh! forget that, can't you?" pleaded Bud. "Let's move on, fellows, and find something more cheerful to look at than heaps of kindling wood, great splinters, and broken branches every-which-way."

54

"Do we start for the bully rocks now, Hugh?" asked Billy, when the artist had gathered his traps together and seemed ready to continue the tramp.

"That's the next thing on the program; and after we've taken what views we want there, why, I'll show you what I want to try out. It struck me yesterday as we were looking for new nut trees up here, and I saw how fine the cliffs stood up in several places."

"P'r'aps, Hugh," chuckled Billy, "you might be aiming to give the Excelsior fire-fighters a few object lessons on how to save people from ten-story tenement buildings; but as we haven't anything taller than three stories in our town, I don't see just how they'll profit by it."

"Of course I wasn't thinking of the fire company when I laid out these plans," the patrol leader said; "but this rope-climbing business is like a good many other things scouts learn: they don't ever *expect* to have to depend on such a thing to save either their own life, or that of another person; but if the time ever does come, it's handy to know how."

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"You're right there, Hugh," admitted Billy; "it's just like a man insuring his house against fire. I don't reckon anybody ever believes his house *is*

going to burn down; but he only wants to have his mind easy."

"Well, lots of the stunts scouts learn are just so much insurance, as you might say," Hugh declared. "And the more a boy stocks up with this stuff, the better he's equipped for life. That's where it counts big, I'm telling you."

"And there is where we tucked ourselves away from the cloud-burst!" announced Billy, being the first to glimpse the queer rocky formations in the shape of shelves, that jutted out for six feet or so from the face of the hill.

Again Arthur "got busy" and made his arrangements. Hugh seldom offered any suggestion, for he saw that the other was better qualified to manage this thing than any of the rest. Once more they posed while the proper focus was being secured; and then Arthur injected himself into the group, gave the customary warning, and finally pressed the magic bulb that completed the circuit.

56

Since so much depended on getting a sure-shot of the queer shelter which Hugh had discovered, Arthur repeated the attempt once more; in case one exposure should have some mishap come to it, he could turn to the other. He had learned that in all important cases, where extra value is placed on a picture, it is a good thing to make doubly sure; because it is often utterly impossible to secure the same conditions twice, and a valuable opportunity may be lost.

After this, Hugh assumed charge of things. He was really anxious to try out several ideas of his own connected with cliff climbing, which had been one of the features of past contests in which the scouts had indulged to a limited degree. Now he believed he had hit on a series of experiments that would not only prove fascinating sport, but give them all considerable training in rope-climbing, as well as a knowledge of how Alpine guides manage to keep from falling when mounting dizzy heights.

57

Twenty minutes after taking the last picture, the four scouts were climbing the rugged mountainside. Far above them they could see the bare ridges of a higher peak, where many of their earlier outings had been conducted in the days when the troop was still young.

They were chattering like a flock of magpies, when Billy suddenly gave a cry of excitement. As before, those quick eyes of his had been roving to the right, to the left and straight ahead, always discovering new things.

58

"Oh! what in Sam Hill is that thing over yonder coming straight this way?" he yelled, clutching Hugh by the arm. "If I'd been reading 'Baron Munchausen' or 'Sinbad the Sailor,' I'd think it was a giant roc flying toward us; but it seems more like a battered old balloon dropping down to the ground."

"It *is* a balloon," said Hugh, after looking intently; "and I believe I can see a man in the swinging basket, waving his arms to us, as though he might have lost all control and wanted us to help save him!"

The other scouts were of the same mind when

they had looked closer. It gave them a thrill to realize that all of a sudden, out of the clear sky, an opportunity had arisen whereby they might be of use to one in great peril.

CHAPTER V. THE WRECKED BALLOON.

"It's sinking right along, isn't it, Hugh?" exclaimed Bud in an awed tone, as he kept his eyes fastened on the strange object that had so unexpectedly dawned upon their vision.

As it happened that the trees grew sparsely in that quarter, they were able to watch the approach of the sky traveler in his disabled balloon. All of the boys took it for granted that he must have ascended at some fair ground, and met with an accident that had prevented a return to earth under normal conditions.

"There's no question about that," the patrol leader replied to Bud's question; "and now it is easy to see that there is a man in that wobbling basket."

"Yes, and as you said, he's making motions to us to do something," added Arthur, as he hurriedly opened his camera and prepared to take a snapshot of the balloon.

"What can we do to help him, Hugh?" Billy demanded, apparently ready to dash forward at headlong speed if only the order came from the patrol leader.

"Nothing just now, the way things stand," came the reply. "He is coming as straight toward us as if we had a line and were pulling him. Wait till the balloon gets here, and if there happens to be a trailing rope, we'll grab hold of that, and wind it around a stump or a rock to anchor the old runaway."

"That sounds sensible, Hugh," admitted Billy, always ready to agree with the leader.

"Look at the thing swing up and down, will you?" cried Bud. "Boys, it will be a lucky thing for the professor if he gets out of that scrape with his life. As for me, you'd have to ring the bell lots of times before I'd go up a mile high in one of those flimsy silk bags. Wow! did you see how close it came to that tall tree right then? That would have done the business, I reckon. And there are lots more of the same kind ahead of him yet."

"Do you see a trailing rope, boys?" asked Hugh. "Sometimes they let one down and have a weight on it for a drag anchor. Seems to me I can glimpse something of the kind now and then."

"You're right, Hugh, it's there!" ejaculated Arthur, who had already snapped off one view of the advancing balloon.

"Everybody get ready to lay hold and fight like everything to check the runaway," Billy remarked, squaring himself for action in a way he had, just as if he expected to enter a contest

of skill and endurance with a prize at stake.

"Isn't she rising again?" shrilled the excited Bud anxiously.

"Course not, Bud," Billy told him; "you're just imagining things again! Hugh, give us a tip if there's any chance of the old balloon slipping past to one side!"

62

"Spread out a little, fellows, like a fan; that's all we need do," the patrol leader directed. "It looks to me as if we were in the direct line of her flight, and if the wind doesn't change or a sudden flaw strike in, why, inside of two minutes we'll either have grabbed that rope or missed connections."

"Oh! don't let us make a fozzle of it like that!" exclaimed Arthur, who sometimes played golf with an uncle who was very fond of the sport.

He had not dropped his camera, for he meant to take another snapshot when the oncoming balloon had reached a certain large tree that he had selected and for which he had set his focus.

It was this same tree that Hugh was observing with more or less concern. He feared that should there prove to be only a little slant of wind that way, it might catch the drifting balloon and bring about a terrible catastrophe.

63

As it was, the escape must be a narrow one, for the balloon was heading so as barely to pass the obstruction. And just then, to Hugh's dismay, he actually felt a puff of air on his right cheek! Up to that moment, the breeze had been coming directly from a quarter in front; but this variation would seem to indicate that a "flaw" could be expected. In mountainous regions there is never any reliance to be placed on the wind, which may seem to blow from half a dozen points of the compass in as many minutes, owing, of course, to the gullies and defiles and cliffs that obstruct a free passage.

"Hugh, she's veering!" shouted Bud.

"And starting to head straight for that other big tree there, too!" yelped Billy, in turn.

If any one could have seen those boys at that moment, he would surely have realized what an intense interest they were taking in the advance of the drifting balloon and its ill-fated aeronaut. Every face had lost its color, and every eye was bright with excitement.

64

Now the body of the tree in question was almost in line with the spot where the boys were standing, and were the balloon so lucky as to clear this obstacle, it might pass close enough for these agile lads to race over and make a try for the dangling drag rope.

Hugh himself began to believe it was going to prove otherwise; and that after safely passing through all sorts of other perils, the man who had been a sky pilot was fated to be thrown out of his basket by a collision with that miserable tall and bushy tree that blocked the way.

Still, none of them dared make a start, until they saw what would happen. They could do nothing to prevent a collision; and should there be none, they wanted to remain where they were, so as to

65

be ready for the rescue act that they had quickly planned.

Already the drifting balloon was close to the tree, and seemed to be setting toward it more and more, just as though there might be a great magnet attracting it; or, as Billy later on described it, "It was like a silly moth plunging straight for a lighted candle that was sure to singe its wings."

Just as the collision actually came, all of the boys seemed to hold their very breath with awe. Arthur, however, having that instinct for securing all manner of strange pictures, mechanically raised his camera and prepared to take another snapshot view at the most critical second.

They could all plainly hear the dreadful scraping sound as the balloon dragged through the treetop. The silken covering must have been badly torn in its passage, for the rush of escaping gas came to the ears of the scouts, and they could see how quickly the immense bag began to collapse after it had dragged away from the tree.

66

"Come on, boys; we've got to get there in a big hurry!" exclaimed Hugh, as he started running with might and main, the others trooping after him. Arthur, of course, brought up the rear, since he had been compelled to snatch up certain parts of his photographic outfit from the ground where he had dropped them.

The balloon was rapidly falling to the ground, the basket being more or less enveloped in the voluminous folds of the immense silk bag.

Indeed, before the boys could reach the spot, the whole fabric had collapsed and grounded there, coming down with such force that it would seem as though the unfortunate pilot must either have been killed outright or at least suffered serious injuries.

67

In the latter case, perhaps the scouts might find themselves called upon to show "first aid to the injured." Indeed, on a number of other occasions they had proved themselves apt pupils in the art; and it would be a lucky thing for the balloonist, should he be badly hurt, that fortune had allowed him to fall into the hands of trained boys. Ignorant countrymen would let him bleed to death, simply through a lack of knowledge of the essential things that should be promptly done.

Hugh led the van, with Billy a close second, while Bud kept pretty close at the latter's heels. And in this manner they arrived at the place where the remains of the wrecked balloon lay in a great pile.

"Get busy, everybody!" called the patrol leader excitedly. "He might be smothered if he lay under that stuff long, with its smell of gas!"

68

"Whew! isn't it rank, though?" gasped Billy, as he tugged away at the folds of the heavy silk gas envelope, and fell several times while struggling to lift more than his share of the burden.

Then Bud arrived to lend his assistance; and the way those three boys struggled to turn the

entire mass over was worth seeing. Arthur was struck with the possibilities for a new picture as he saw them fighting with the remnants of the once great balloon; and obedient to his instinct, he halted and busied himself getting the proper focus.

The "click" of his camera told Hugh what had happened; but just then he made a discovery that put both Arthur and his propensity for securing "worth-while" pictures out of his mind.

As he feverishly worked alongside the other two scouts, Hugh had expected at any second to uncover the white face of the aeronaut, lying there where he might have fainted at receiving such hard treatment. And the patrol leader had kept his jaws set very tight, so that he might be prepared for any pitiful sight.

69

His surprise had rapidly grown as they had neared the end of the pile of crumpled silk, and without discovering the first sign of a human being.

"Why, Hugh, he isn't here, after all!" cried Billy, in what must be confessed was a relieved tone of voice, as though he, too, might have been dreading what they might presently uncover.

"We all of us got fooled, that's what!" added Bud, trying to laugh, though the effort sounded a bit hysterical.

"What's all that?" demanded Arthur, who had arrived just in time to hear this last remark.

"Why, there wasn't any man in the basket after all, don't you see?" Billy explained, indicating how they had carefully gone over the entire pile of wreckage, even overturning the basket, as though it might have hidden something.

70

"That's where you're mistaken, then, because I saw him as plain as anything," the newcomer asserted, and Arthur could be pretty stubborn when he wished.

"All right, then, get busy and find him, if you can," Bud told him. "We throw up the job, don't we, fellows? Hello! what's Hugh going to do now?" Their attention being called to the leader by this remark from Bud, the others saw that Hugh had hurried back and up the rise a little.

Presently he stopped, and seemed to be looking earnestly toward the crest of the big tree, about where the basket of the runaway balloon had crashed through when that flaw came in the wind.

The other scouts stared hard, as they began to comprehend what this act on the part of their leader might mean; and presently they were thrilled to hear Hugh call out:

71

"Boys, there *was* a man in the basket, and he's caught fast in the tree near the very top! Yes, and he lies there as if he might be dead, or else had swooned away!"

72

CHAPTER VI. ENGINEERING IN A TREETOP.

What the patrol leader had called out, as he hurriedly returned to them, gave the other three scouts a great surprise. They stepped back a few paces and strained their eyes in the effort to locate the object mentioned by Hugh.

It is always much easier to see and do things when some other person has first marked out the way. Columbus had an experience along those lines, you will remember, after he returned from discovering America. The jealous Spanish courtiers and sea commanders sneeringly declared that his task had been very simple, as all he had had to do was just to "keep on steering straight westward"!

So it was that when Hugh had found out the truth and imparted the information to the rest of the boys, Billy and Arthur quickly discovered, also, the unlucky aeronaut.

73

"Show me, won't you?" begged Bud, who appeared unable to locate the exact spot in his excitement. So they bent their heads close together, allowing him to get the range of their extended fingers.

"There he is," said Billy, "just where that last fair-sized branch shoots out toward the left. Look hard, and you'll be sure to see something caught in the crotch. That's the man, Bud. And believe me, it must have been a whopper of a jar when he struck there, after being dragged by that runaway balloon."

"I wonder if he is dead?" said Arthur in an awed half whisper.

"Don't you believe it," Billy declared.

"But he might be, Billy," added Bud, taking sides with Arthur, "because, as you just said, he must have been slammed into that crotch terribly hard."

"But you never saw anybody that was dead move his arm, did you?" demanded the positive Billy.

74

At that the others showed signs of surrender.

"Course not," remarked Bud; "and if you saw him do that, he must be alive. What do you think, Hugh?"

"I'm not so sure as Billy," returned the patrol leader, "but I thought I saw his arm move once. That might have been only when it slipped down from some position. But I'm going to find out right away, boys."

"Hugh's going to climb the tree," suggested Bud quickly, taking it for granted that this was what the other meant when he made his last remark.

"But whether the poor fellow's alive or not, how are we going to get him down from away up there?" asked Arthur.

"Leave that to Hugh," said Billy wisely.

The first thing Hugh did was to glance hastily around him, as though looking for something he expected to need.

75

"Oh! it's that long rope he brought with him to use in the cliff-climbing experiments!" exclaimed Arthur, as he saw the other bend down and

secure the article in question, which he must have dropped when he arrived under the tree where the wandering balloon had met its final Waterloo.

Billy looked relieved. His faith, then, had not been misplaced, for Hugh now had means in his possession for lowering the unfortunate aeronaut. Just how the boy would go about it, of course Billy did not exactly know; but he smiled, and took a new interest in the matter.

"Somebody cut away that rope from the basket," Hugh directed first of all.

"You mean the one that was trailing down?" asked Bud, as he immediately produced his pocket knife, the blades of which he always kept in prime condition.

76

"Yes, be quick, Bud. I'm going to knot it to my rope, if it seems stout enough," the leader told him. "That ought to give me a long enough line to double from the ground up to that place."

"Oh! I see how you mean to do it, Hugh!" observed Billy, wagging his head as though understanding Hugh's solution for the puzzle.

Already Bud had cut the trailer rope just where it was fastened to the overturned basket. As he did so, he could not fail to notice that a number of seemingly valuable instruments, such as are used by aeronauts in their daring voyages among the clouds, were scattered about, and that a little box lay near them.

"Here it is, Hugh!" he remarked, coming up on the run with the line coiled on his left arm, where he had hurriedly placed it while on the move.

"Stretch it out, while I make a safe knot, one of the best we had to learn before we could be tenderfeet," Hugh told him.

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Bud hastened to cast the coils down, while Billy picked up one end and ran off with it.

While the leader was undoubtedly in something of a hurry, he did not mean in the least to neglect his duty; and never was a knot made more amply secure than the one that united those two ropes. Hugh tested it to his heart's content, and then appeared satisfied that it would easily bear all the weight that must be placed upon it when they started to lower the aeronaut.

"Next thing is to examine the rope from the balloon, to make sure it's all right," Hugh said; "I know mine is up to standard, because before I came out to-day I tested it with a weight three times as heavy as Billy here, and that's going some, let me tell you."

He quickly ran over the rope, looking for defects and straining at each portion. In this way possibly precious seconds passed; but it was Hugh's policy that "haste often makes waste." He agreed with the backwoods Congressman, Davy Crockett, that it was always better to be sure he was right before going ahead.

78

"All right, is she, Hugh?" asked Bud eagerly, as the other reached the end of the second rope.

"Yes," came the reply; "and now I want you fellows to keep hold of this end down here. You understand what I expect to do, don't you?"

"I reckon it's to pass the rope over a limb above the man, and then fasten it snug and tight to his body the best way you can," replied Billy.

"Then we are to haul in the slack, till we get a tight rope," added Arthur, taking up the thread of the explanation.

And finally Bud broke in with his share,

79

"And after you manage to get him started out of the crotch, which we'll help by pulling on the rope, why, all we have to do is to lower away, you keeping him free from other branches till we get him safe down."

"That's the ticket," announced Hugh; "and I'm off!"

Most boys are good climbers, and Hugh was especially at home in a tree. He could do all sorts of agile tricks, using some convenient limb as his trapeze, when he felt in the humor for exercising. But just now he was out for business, and once the boys had boosted him up to the first limb, in order to hasten his progress, he had but one object in view, which was to reach the spot where the man who had been torn from the basket of the balloon was caught and held fast.

The others stood below, in as good positions as they could find, where they might watch his progress. It was hardly a minute after his start before Billy announced that he had arrived close to the dark spot that told of the unlucky aeronaut's presence.

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"Hurrah! he's up to the place, boys!" he announced joyously; and then, elevating his voice until you would have thought he was trying to address some one on a distant mountain peak instead of a chum just sixty feet away, he roared out: "Say, how is it, Hugh? Can you make it with the rope?"

There was a brief silence, and they understood that the comrade aloft was investigating to ascertain just the best way to manage. Billy guessed what might be the trouble, for at that distance from the ground the branches must be rather small, and Hugh was finding some difficulty in selecting one that could be depended on to bear a good weight, above the burden to be lowered.

Waiting for a signal from above, the three scouts bunched together down on the ground. Billy and Bud had taken possession of the rope, but Arthur did not seem to object. Perhaps he realized that there was only room for two to retain a firm hold, and as both fellows were stout and strong, they could manage better alone. Besides, Arthur had a little scheme of his own which he wanted very much to put through; and he was patiently waiting his opportunity.

81

"Ready down there?" called the boy in the treetop.

"Yes. Tell us what to do first, Hugh!" answered Billy promptly.

"Strain on the rope, gently, you know, at first.

We've got to raise him a foot or so before I can swing him out of the crotch. Start away hauling, boys!" came down from above in distinct tones.

So Billy and Bud took in what small amount of slack there was, and, when the rope became taut, they started to pull. The resistance was considerable; but then, Hugh was up there engineering the job and they had the utmost confidence in his ability to run things.

82

"Stop! That's enough!" sounded suddenly. "Now wait a second till I get things free. Start lowering very slowly, remember, and no slipping! Go on! That's the way, boys! A little more, now! Careful, you're going a bit too fast! Easy! Easy now!"

So encouraging and admonishing, Hugh kept along with the descending burden. This was necessary because the branches were thick, and there was always a possibility of things getting clogged.

Now they could plainly see the man held in the folds of rope. He seemed to dangle there just as Hugh had caught him in the loop, and it was utterly impossible to tell whether he were alive or dead. The boys experienced a strange feeling at the very thought of lowering a *body* out of a treetop; surely such a happening could never before have come the way of any Boy Scout.

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Both Billy and Bud stuck to their duty manfully, however, despite their intense anxiety. They had been given their share in the rescue work by the patrol leader, and both were firmly resolved that no accident should happen through any fault on their part.

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CHAPTER VII.

"FIRST AID TO THE INJURED."

"Oh! that is going to be a regular dandy picture, I tell you, fellows!" Arthur burst out suddenly, while the others were "resting on their oars" for a brief interval. Hugh was clambering down from one limb to another, in order to keep in touch with the descending weight.

"Say, if he hasn't gone and snapped the whole business, just as we stand!" ejaculated Bud, apparently disgusted that Arthur could bother with such a minor thing when matters of so serious a nature gripped their attention.

"Why shouldn't I?" demanded the official photographer warmly. "Why, the sun fell full on the poor fellow's swinging form, and I could see Hugh's face as plain as print; while you two were in the finest pose ever. You just wait and see how it turns out!—Besides, don't we want something to show how Hugh engineered this job so finely? Suppose Alec tries to say that it was all made up: You watch me give him a shock when I hold up a print of this splendid rescue work! Oh, I'm not so green as you'd think. I sometimes look ahead a little."

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But the boys were not paying any further

attention to Arthur. Hugh had given a signal to commence lowering once more, and the two, who had braced their feet against a convenient root so as to secure a better foundation, let the rope slip softly through their hands, already burning from having felt the contact so long.

Things had apparently arrived at the last stage, for there was the patrol leader crouching on the lower limb, so that he could drop to the ground and receive the oncoming body of the unfortunate aeronaut. As Hugh jumped he gave the word to those at the rope, who continued to lower away carefully, with the air of veterans who knew their business from beginning to end.

A click announced that Arthur could not resist the fascinating prospect of still another picture to add to the value of those he had already secured. All that would be needed now, to make it a complete story, was a photograph of the aeronaut himself at the end, signed with his autograph!

When finally their task was completed, Billy and Bud found that they did not have more than a yard of rope left, showing that Hugh's calculations had been pretty close.

Hugh was already bending over the figure of the aeronaut, releasing the tightened loop of the rope, which had been cruelly pressing in around his chest under his arms.

The man seemed to be of middle age and medium stature. His thin face was perfectly colorless just then, and it gave the boys a creepy feeling to look at it, so ghastly did it appear.

"How about him, Hugh?" asked Arthur, who had by this time joined the little group around the patrol leader and the wrecked air pilot.

"He's alive, all right, for I can feel him breathing," came the welcome response; "but I'm afraid that one arm is broken and badly bruised. You see, he was caught by that crotch up above,—yet perhaps, after all, it served him a good turn, boys."

"Wow! I should say, yes," muttered Billy, glancing up as though mentally figuring with what terrific force the man must have struck the hard ground had he dropped the additional sixty feet.

"Better even a fractured arm than a broken neck, I'd say!" ventured Bud sagely.

Meanwhile, in order to make sure of the extent of the man's injuries, Hugh was trying to get his heavy jacket off. The aeronaut had undoubtedly found no chance to exchange this for anything lighter while rapidly descending from the colder upper regions of space, after his accident in the first place.

Billy hastened to help the patrol leader, and between them they managed to remove the coat, which was so thick in texture that it must have protected the poor fellow's arm more or less when so violently caught by the crotch in the tree.

After that, Hugh began to open his shirt sleeve. He already knew that it was going to prove a

bad job, for this was saturated with fresh blood. The sight made Bud set his teeth together and draw a long breath; while even Billy made a grimace, as though he did not particularly fancy his work, though sticking bravely to it.

Arthur was of course busying himself as usual, fussing with that eternal camera again; and had any of the other three been paying the least attention to him, they must surely have heard that suggestive "click" that told he had secured yet another picture of the wounded man and his attendants.

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When he had torn back the discolored sleeve of the man's shirt, Hugh made a quick, gentle examination, while the others watched all he did with deepest interest. As every scout is supposed to learn more or less in connection with field surgery, especially how to manage a broken or sprained limb so as to give relief until a regular doctor can take charge, Billy and Bud understood just what their comrade was trying to do when they saw him fearlessly working at the dangling arm, the very sight of which gave them a cold chill.

He seemed to have managed to get the fractured bones somewhat in place, for his next movement was to pull out a small package from an inner pocket of his khaki coat, and quickly remove the wrapping paper and rubber band that protected it.

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With a wisdom that would have done credit to an older head, Hugh had carried a roll of broad, surgical, bandage tape along with him when starting out on the trip. Probably he had had it along on the preceding day also, though there had been no call for its services. His experience and training had led him to "be prepared" for any accident that might happen to his comrades as they tramped and climbed in the woods.

"Give me a helping hand, Billy, won't you?" asked the patrol leader.

"Sure thing," muttered the other, steeling himself for the effort and trying to look as though he enjoyed the experience.

"I'd like to wash all this blood off, if I could, only there's no water handy," remarked Hugh, regretfully.

"There's that brook we crossed, where I stopped to get a drink," suggested Arthur. "I could run all the way and back, filling my hat full."

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After a slight hesitation, Hugh shook his head in the negative.

"It would take too long, Arthur," he said. "The sooner I get this arm bandaged up and a splint made to keep it in place, the better; because I've seen signs that tell me the gentleman is going to come out of his faint pretty soon. Take hold here, Billy, and do what I tell you. We can pull pretty tight on the tape and it will hold the fractured bones about the way I fixed them."

All the while he was talking, Hugh had been winding the broad linen tape around the injured arm as neatly as any surgeon would do, and possibly as well, for his whole heart was in his work. And the more the bandage covered the

arm, the better it looked in the eyes of the three chums who were watching his labor with considerable pride and approval.

Had the Scout Master been present, he must have smiled with satisfaction to see how his constant endeavors to teach these lads the necessity of being prepared for an emergency were thus bearing ripe fruit, and of excellent quality into the bargain. But then, perhaps he would yet be given the chance to examine the work of Hugh's hands and to hear the story of the rescue from the boys' lips.

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When the patrol leader had said that the aeronaut was recovering his senses, he had told the exact condition of affairs. They could detect a fluttering of his eyelids now and then; and presently his lips moved whimsically, as though the muscles were first of all beginning to work.

"He opened his eyes then, sure he did, Hugh!" whispered Bud suddenly, just when the other was securing the end of the tape with several stout safety pins that were also discovered deep in one of his pockets.

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"That's good news!" replied Hugh; but he did not take his attention from his work for a single second; he wished to have the job completed before leaving it.

He had fastened the last safety pin, and was patting the arm softly as if congratulating himself on having done at least a decent job, when, on turning toward the aeronaut's face, he saw that the other's eyes were now wide open. The man was staring at the boys gathered around him, evidently still half dazed and unable to grasp what it all meant.

"You had an accident in your balloon, sir, and were caught in the top of this tree," Hugh told him, thinking that the best way to start his brain to working in its proper fashion.

"Oh! now I recollect!" the man cried faintly, as though beginning to clutch at the solution of the mystery. "I was trying to signal to some soldiers to take hold of the rope. Then that tree caught the basket. I was suddenly torn out, and that is the last thing I remember. But how did you get me down here, my boys?"

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"We happened to have a long rope, to be used in cliff climbing," explained the patrol leader; "for we're Boy Scouts out for practice, you see, sir. By adding your rope to ours we had plenty to lower you over a limb, all of sixty feet. I've bandaged your broken arm the best I could, and we'll get you to town some way or other, sir, you may rest easy on that."

The aeronaut was about to make some sort of reply, as he started to raise himself with Hugh's assistance and the use of his well arm, when suddenly Arthur was heard to give a cry of consternation.

"Oh! looky at what's happening to his things over there by the balloon, Hugh!" he shrieked. And as the other scouts turned their heads, they saw a sight that made them rub their eyes and wonder if they might not be dreaming.

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CHAPTER VIII. THE VALUE OF STRATEGY.

No wonder that the four scouts were staring with all their might. Surely it was enough to make any one believe he had the nightmare to see two figures in strangely striped clothes, very like the barred sides of the zebra in the circus, feverishly picking up the articles that had been scattered around when the basket of the balloon struck the ground.

"Gee whiz! what is it?" gasped Billy, as motionless as a marble statue in his surprise.

"The clothes—just like I saw on the convicts, when I was visiting my aunt over in the next county!" Bud said faintly; but his words gave them all a distinct clue, and they realized that it was not a bad dream, after all.

"That's what they are, escaped convicts!" declared Hugh, emphatically.

"But they're hooking all the professor's things, Hugh!" Billy found voice to add. "Are we going to stand for that?"

"Not for a minute!" responded the leader quickly. "Hunt a club, each one of you!" he ordered. "Arthur, drop that camera, and lend a hand. We may have to fight for it yet, there's no telling."

Apparently Arthur had added another triumph to his already swelling list of wonderful pictures, if that happy grin on his face went for anything. But all the same, he did carefully lay his precious camera down close beside the wounded man, and then look around for a suitable stick that would come under the name of club.

When Hugh had seen that all of them had managed to find some sort of a weapon, he gave the word to move forward. The two queer figures in the faded striped garments were still bending this way and that, apparently so eager not to miss a single object of value from the overturned balloon basket that they were paying little attention to what was passing close by.

No doubt they had sized the situation up before showing themselves, and figured that all they had to contend with were a badly hurt aeronaut and a pack of half-grown lads, who would not dare come to hand-grips with so desperate a pair as themselves.

"Surround them, boys!" Hugh said the last thing. "Billy, you and Bud take to the right, and we'll hold the left flank. If you have to hit, do it with a vim, remember!"

Of course the two men would never have lingered as long as they did had they suspected that they were in any danger; but the greed for gain was strong upon them; and no doubt they believed they might be able to sell those instruments somewhere and somehow, so as to get money with which to buy clothes that would conceal the fact that they were escaped jailbirds.

On this account, then, the boys were actually able to form a square about them before either

of the men noticed what was happening. The wounded aeronaut was trying the best he could to get upon his feet, though what he could do to help, in his present weakened condition, was a mystery.

One of the criminals, catching sight of Billy with his big bludgeon, gave the alarm. Their arms were filled with all sorts of things, for it seemed a sin to neglect a golden opportunity that had come down to them, as it were, from the sky. And while they looked ready to clear out, at the same time they declined to throw down as much as a pair of field glasses.

Every boy started to circulate his club with as fierce an air as he could muster. Perhaps this was done as a method of alarming the convicts, and showing them what they must expect if rash enough to come too near, or if they neglected to fling away what they were carrying off. Then again it may have been that the scouts were getting their muscles into full play; just as a heavy home-run hitter likes to swing two bats around before stepping up to the rubber.

"Drop all that stuff, do you hear?" demanded Hugh as savagely as possible.

"Aw! clear out with you!" snarled one of the men. He was shorter than his companion, and had a gorilla-like face that just then looked to Arthur as though he could gnaw a file, it was so lined with a scowl.

"Yes, clear the track, kids, if you don't want to get hurted bad!" added the other, who was not so hard looking a specimen.

Perhaps they expected that this would be enough. If so they were doomed to disappointment, because not a boy moved from his tracks. The men hardly knew which way to turn, for whether they faced west, east, north or south there was a whizzing stick cutting all sorts of wonderful figures in the air, and seeming to promise pretty tough treatment, should they try to rush the possessor.

Hugh was wise enough to realize that, given a little time, the two desperate men would manage to outwit himself and comrades. They might have to take a few savage blows, but then no doubt they were quite used to such trifling methods of punishment, after having been in the penitentiary for some time. A furious rush would carry the boys off their feet, and before they could be stopped, doubtless the convicts would be stretching their legs at a tremendous pace, making their escape.

Hugh had a sudden inspiration. He fancied that if there was one thing these bad men had reason to be afraid of it was recapture; because, should that happen, they must expect severe punishment at the hands of the wardens, to whom they had given so much trouble. Why not make out that they, the scouts, were in league with those same officials in blue, whose brass buttons would set the hearts of their former charges in a flutter of fear? He decided it was an idea worth trying.

"Hold them where they are, boys, till the wardens can get here!" the patrol leader called out just as loud as he could; and then, to the

astonishment of his comrades, Hugh began to make violent gestures in a certain direction that might mean only one thing, and this, that some persons unseen were being urged to hurry.

That gave the men the first scare they had felt. Up to then, they had considered that they only had to deal with a pack of school-boys, dressed in khaki and campaign hats and leggings, to imitate the National Guard. Now it really began to look as though these Boy Scouts might have come up to this part of the country to help the wardens find the missing convicts; because in these latter days patrols are being found useful in many fields of endeavor.

All the same, they did hate to drop any of that plunder, which might mean so much to them later on if they found a chance to dispose of it. Hugh's clever stratagem had certainly given them a fright; but it might have failed of its purpose, for the men who wore the striped suits were preparing to hurl themselves against the surrounding line, had not a new actor appeared on the scene.

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This was the wounded aeronaut. Weak as he appeared to be, he looked very determined just at that moment. No doubt he did not much fancy seeing a pair of jailbirds run off with all his aerial possessions.

But what astonished Hugh most of all was the fact that the professor, as they had somehow come to call the man who had fallen from aloft, held something in his uninjured right hand which he must have extracted from an inner pocket. It did not make much of a showing, but the sun glinted from the blued steel of a short barrel that could only belong to an automatic, quick-firing weapon.

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A daring aeronaut who takes his life in his hand and never knows where he may alight, no doubt learns to put himself in a position so that he can defend himself against possible dangers. And while the boys had been holding up the two thieves, he was, with more or less agony, no doubt, extracting this little "persuader" from its hiding-place and advancing toward the scene of action.

Here was something well calculated to awe the two convicts. They might feel more or less contempt for a few boys, even if armed with wicked-looking cudgels of various shapes and patterns; but the owner of the property they were trying to carry off was another matter, especially when backed up with a dangerous up-to-date weapon of which they, if anybody, should know the value.

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"Drop everything you've picked up there and clear out, before I open fire on you!" was what the nervy professor told them. And if his voice lacked power on account of what he had recently passed through, surely the fire flashing from his eyes must have told the two miserable men that he was accustomed to having his words obeyed.

Hugh thought he saw a chance to put in a clinching argument just then.

"And be quick about it, too, if you hope to get out of sight before the wardens come up," he urged, just as though his boyish heart had begun

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to pity the condition of the hunted wretches. He was looking again and again in the same direction, so that Arthur, yes, and both of the other scouts, actually began to wonder if this was, after all, only a clever piece of acting on his part, or if he really glimpsed several husky fellows in the uniform of prison guards coming on the run.

The men saw that their little game was up. Circumstances had turned out unfavorable to their plan for securing all that valuable plunder, and surely to remain at liberty was the most desirable thing they could now hope for.

First one man flung down something he held, half angrily.

"Easy there!" cried the aeronaut, who was covering them all the while. "Don't you try to smash what the fall of the balloon spared, or I'll hold you here prisoners and hand you over to the wardens when they come up. Put the rest down gently; do you hear me?"

They hastened to drop everything they held; and then, fearful lest he might be tempted to carry out his terrible threat, they started on the full run,—“scouted like scared rabbits,” Billy said later. A quick “click” announced that Arthur had scored again with his camera, hastily secured while the runners were yet in full sight.

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CHAPTER IX. OUT FOR A RECORD.

"Talk to me about luck, I'm having the greatest string of successes you ever heard of!" the enthusiastic photographer laughingly declared, as he saw the others staring hard at him.

"Well, of all the nerve I ever struck, Arthur," said Billy solemnly, "you certainly take the cake! Why, you've got the artistic fever so bad that I believe if a big bear was chasing after us all, you'd want to stop and ask him to look pleasant while you snapped him off. There's getting to be no limit to your—"

"Just hold on there, Billy," broke in Hugh. "I think this time Arthur deserves the thanks of the whole Wolf patrol for his stick-at-it-tiveness, as Walter Osborne always calls stubbornness. Think of what a heap of satisfaction it's going to be to all of us, when we look over some of these thrillers he's snatched with that snapshot box of his! Leave Arthur alone. While we're all making history, he's going to be the one to keep it fresh in our hearts and eyes. We're proud of him."

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"And I'm wondering, if these pictures turn out anything like the originals," remarked Bud, "what Don Miller of the Foxes will say. You know he's been going in strong of late along the same lines as our chum here; and they do say he shows more or less talent about taking queer things. But my stars! he never could even dream of such re-markable stunts as have been crowding in on us of late, commencing with that storm yesterday!"

"Well, Blake Merton has done some good work for the Hawks, too, they tell me," Arthur admitted, for he was a modest boy and always willing to give a friend credit when it was due. "I know that he's been staying nights up on his uncle's farm, just to be able to use a flashlight on the animals in that swamp. I own up that the idea of the thing came to me through him. Blake is all wool and a yard wide; nothing small about him. He said, 'No matter who wins out, let's get the greatest lot of queer pictures together that ever were.'"

"And I reckon we will," declared Billy positively, "as long as you're able to toddle around with us Wolves, Arthur."

"I'm wondering what next we'll run across," remarked Bud reflectively, as they watched Hugh assisting the wounded aeronaut to gather his scattered traps together. "According to my mind it only needs a runaway horse, with a lovely child to be rescued, or a mad dog scare in town, with our Hugh getting in the limelight as the hero who stands in the breach and knocks the beast on the head with a baseball bat, to complete the whole schedule."

"Oh! that would be too old-fashioned these days," said Arthur, as he patted his beloved camera in its leather case, which he had slung by a strap over his shoulder. "To be up-to-date a rescue would have to be where, mounted on a motorcycle, you pursue a runaway car, and jump into it just before it reaches the crossing at the railroad, where a limited express is coming tearing along. I saw one like that at the movies the other night, and it glued me to my seat with both hands holding on to the rests at the sides, until it was over. I don't believe I could even breathe for excitement."

"Or else you'd have to chase an unmanageable aeroplane mounted on another sky flier and in some way bring it to a stop, just like the mounted police hold up runaway riding horses in Central Park," Billy added, for he could be depended on to match one story with another every time.

"But here comes Hugh with the professor," said Bud just then. "I reckon he has picked up all he wants to tote away with him. However do you think we'll get to town with him, boys? He must feel pretty weak after what he went through, and his arm must pain him, too. We may have to make a litter and carry him."

"Well, for one thing, let me tell you he's got a heap of grit," said Billy softly, for he did not want the others to hear what he was saying as they came up. "You bet every man that goes up in the clouds has got to be full to the brim of nerve. If we let him rest every little while, you'll see that he'll make the raffle, all correct. I've sized him up already."

Hugh and the aeronaut now came up.

"I want to shake hands with each one of you boys," the gentleman began promptly, "and tell you how much I feel indebted to you all for what you've done for me this day. Only for your gallant work, the chances are ten to one I would have lost my life in this hazardous pleasure sailing of mine."

He went from one to the other, and from the vigorous way he squeezed each hand that was extended to him frankly, it seemed that he must still have considerable stored-up energy left in him.

"Oh! that wasn't so much, Professor," Billy said in return. "We're scouts, you see, and it is one of the rules of the organization never to refuse to put out a helping hand to any one in trouble. I guess it is getting to be a disease with some of us, because we're on the lookout most of the time for a chance to do something that'll satisfy a sort of craving to be useful. So if you feel that thanks are due, sir, the whole troop ought to share 'em."

"The whole troop wasn't on hand this time to climb trees and lower a poor chap who had a broken arm and would have fallen sixty feet if he worked loose from that crotch," the gentleman remarked with kindling eyes, as though this modesty on the part of the khaki-clad boys aroused his admiration more than ever. "And if no one had happened to see me meet with my accident, I'm afraid I'd have remained in that treetop until the end came."

"When you feel like walking, sir," Hugh told him, "we'll set out for town. I know of a fine spring of cold water only half a mile away, and you'll be refreshed after you get a good drink of that."

"Let me sit here about ten minutes, Hugh," said the gentleman, and his mention of the young leader's name showed that he had already asked questions and learned who they all were; "then I think I'll be equal to the task of starting. Meanwhile, I'll tell you who I am, and what I was aiming to do with my balloon when I met with a crowning disaster. I also want to hear all about your patrol, and why you came up here on this particular day, when it was fated you should be of such vital assistance to me."

This suited the boys, for they had a natural curiosity to learn something about the ambitions of a daring aeronaut. Accordingly, they found as comfortable seats as they could, after fixing for Mr. Perkins, as he gave his name, a seat of hemlock browse that was hastily pulled from a neighboring tree.

"In the first place," said the gentleman, "I'm not a professional aeronaut. That is, I never have made a flight for money, because I have not felt the necessity. But my fancy for such things has been gradually growing into a craze, and possibly my name is among a few who have worked hard to advance the sport of balloon ascents. I've taken part in numerous long distance races, and held the record for several years. Yes, they call me Professor, though I hardly deserve the title."

"I should say you do, if any one could, sir," observed Hugh, admiringly.

"On this present unfortunate occasion, I have been quietly trying to pass entirely across the continent, from the shore of the Pacific to the Atlantic, by a series of dashes. I'd hardly like to tell you how many failures I made of it, and what a series of thrilling, hair-breadth escapes I had, before I was finally able to cross over the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains; but I finally

managed to do it, and the rest of my journey was like a tame picnic until now, just when I expected to make the coast and was wrecked near port."

"That was a shame!" burst out Billy impulsively.

"Oh! not at all," laughed the gentleman, partly to hide the pain he suffered as he chanced to move his broken arm a little too abruptly. "We men who pit ourselves against the forces of Nature, learn to take the good with the bad and call it all a day's work. I've really accomplished what I set out to perform, because only for a change of wind I'd have dropped down on the coast before this hour. You'll not hear me complain. And now tell me something about yourselves and your Wolf patrol. If the other four members are anything like the ones I've come to know, it must be what a friend of mine would call a hummer."

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The boys were already quite won by the genial aeronaut, who, suffering as he was, could show such a deep interest in their affairs.

In the chatter that followed, he learned a great deal about what had happened to the members of the troop since the first patrol was organized. And of course, among other things, he was told of the wonderful prize pennant and the adventures of the preceding day, when Hugh's thoughtfulness had in all probability saved their lives.

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The aeronaut was plainly aroused by the vivid description given of their feelings at discovering that hollow oak lying there, shattered by the bolt of lightning.

"I have not appreciated what a helpful thing this scout movement could be until now," he exclaimed. "If it continues to spread as fast as it seems to be doing now, I can see where the coming American young man will be many times over better fitted and equipped for the battle of life than those that are in the field to-day, fighting for a living. But it is too bad if my coming causes you boys to go back to town without trying out those cliff-climbing stunts that Hugh had in mind. If you set me on the trail, I've no doubt I could follow it, somehow, till I got to the road; and then some farmer would give me a lift."

This raised an immediate storm of protest, which made evident that the boys did not believe in doing things halfway.

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"We couldn't think of it, Mr. Perkins," said Hugh resolutely. "You've been badly hurt, and we would never forgive ourselves if anything happened to you. Make up your mind that we're going to see you safely into the doctor's office, where that arm can have the right kind of attention."

"Permit me to say, however, my dear boy, that from the way it feels and from the appearance of the splint and the neat bandage you've put around it, it would have been hard for any surgeon to improve on the work under such crude conditions as those up here in the woods."

"So say we all of us, Mr. Perkins!" burst out Billy. "We think our assistant scout master is

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about right when it comes to first aid to the injured. If you could have seen how he brought one of the boys to, when we all believed he was surely a goner, after being under water so long, you'd understand our feelings. I guess we were ready to stop the artificial pumping to induce respiration, but Hugh ordered us to keep on and on. He would not give up hope. And the boy is alive and kicking, as big as ever to-day. They sent Hugh a medal from Scout Headquarters down in little old New York."

"He ought to be proud of that medal," said the gentleman, with considerable feeling. "And you can depend on it that every one of you will be wearing a similar one before long. I happen to know several of the head men who are deeply interested in this scout movement, and I shall see them personally. You have aroused my interest, and I'm feeling inclined to give up the dangerous sport of ballooning for something that will benefit my fellow men more, and this Boy Scout movement strikes me as just what would fill the bill."

"That makes us feel happier than ever, sir," said Hugh. "If we have made a new friend for the movement by what we happened to do to-day we shouldn't ask any better reward."

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"Just leave that to me, Hugh, that is my affair," said the gentleman, as he made a movement with his well arm to signify that he desired assistance in gaining his feet. "Now I'm feeling rested, and perhaps we had better be making a start. We can do our talking as we move along. I'm hankering after a drink from that cold spring you were telling me about, too."

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CHAPTER X.

A BIG COUNT FOR THE WOLF PATROL.

They were soon on the way back, though of course the boys had to walk rather slowly, on account of the weak condition of the aeronaut.

"I'll send some one later to gather up what is left of my faithful balloon," he told them; "because, though I fancy I'll never go up again, it must always have pleasant associations for me."

Hugh, leading the rest, followed the trail closely. Still, he used those eyes of his to wonderful advantage and seemed to see everything that moved around them on the ground, in the air high above, or among the branches of the trees. No chipmunk sprang for its hole at the base of a stump, no squirrel flew like a red or gray streak of light to the opposite side of a tree-trunk, no thrush whirred through a thicket, but that Hugh knew all about it. He had long studied the small birds and animals of these woods, and was well acquainted with their habits and haunts.

After a while they arrived at the cold spring, and when Mr. Perkins had been given a drink of water in a coiled leaf made into a cornucopia cup, he pronounced it "nectar fit for the gods." The boys considered that it suited them all right,

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though they would never have thought of describing it that way.

"And let me tell you, son," said the gentleman to Billy, when the latter had for the fourth time leaned far down and filled the green cup for him to empty, "this clear cold water that bubbles up out of the pure white sand is a thousand times more healthful for us all than anything brewed or distilled by human hands, I care not what it may be. Yes, and although I've drunk water from a thousand wells, often in African deserts where it meant life itself, none ever tasted sweeter than this does to me now, taken from a primitive cup made out of a big leaf."

He lay back to rest a while, and Hugh thought it well not to hurry him. They had another stretch of nearly a mile before the road could be reached, where in case of necessity they could find some farmer who would be willing, for a consideration, to hitch up and carry the gentleman, and, perhaps, Hugh himself, the balance of the way to town.

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And as he thus took his ease in the shade of the forest trees, Mr. Perkins presently became interested in watching a little thing that happened. Having just learned how scouts are ever on the watch for ways to do a good turn, either to man or beast or even smaller living creatures, he was beginning to study boy nature as it had never before occurred to him to do, with most pleasant results.

Bud had apparently discovered something that interested him, for he lay on his stomach, boy fashion, with his head held up by his hands and both elbows planted on the ground.

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Hugh had also observed his attitude, for presently he called out:

"What have you struck there, Bud, that makes you forget you've got three good chums close at hand? I've asked you a question several times, and you have never so much as given me an answer."

"Oh! excuse me, Chief," replied Bud, without even turning his head or changing his attitude the least bit; "you see, I've been watching about as game an exhibition of pluck and determination as you'd ever expect to find anywhere; and when I am stuck fast on anything like that, I'm next door to deaf."

"What might it be?" asked Arthur, busy with his camera strap, which he was shortening to rid it of a worn place.

Mr. Perkins knew, for he chanced to be close enough to discover what it was at which Bud was gaping with eager eyes.

125

"Why, you see," remarked the other scout, just as if it might be the most natural thing in the world for him to show such an interest in small things about him, "it is one of those big black ants. He has a pack about three times as large as himself, which he wants to carry up a sand hill about six inches high that leads to his home, I guess. And I've counted eleven times now that he has made a balk of it."

"Whee! that's going some," admitted Billy,

showing a certain amount of interest. "And he doesn't like to give up, does he, Bud? He is like some fellows I know."

"Give up? Why, that ant never will quit trying!" was the enthusiastic reply. "Every time he misses connections, and then ant and pack roll down to the very bottom again. But he holds on like grim death to his prize, which, I take it, must be the biggest dinner he ever tried to tote home, and he's some proud of it."

126

"What else does he do?" asked Hugh, smiling at the gentleman, who had looked toward him and nodded.

"Why, he lets go and runs around the pack to see what's the matter," continued Bud. "Then he just grabs hold once more and starts up the old track. Mebbe he's been doing that same thing all morning. Blamed if I can stand it to go away and never know that he *did* get up in the end! Here, you poor, game little runt, I'm just going to *lift* both you and the prize pack to the top of the heap, hanged if I'm not!"

And picking up a strong leaf, he proceeded to do as he said, after which he gave a satisfied chuckle and muttered:

"Run out of sight like you was scared, did you? But I guess you'll come back after your prize, and it'll please you to find that it's up on top. But you deserve all you got, that's right; and I'm glad to help you."

127

Mr. Perkins drew in a long breath. There was a look on his face that expressed volumes as he watched Bud getting ready to shoulder some of his traps. No doubt this trifling exhibition of the interest a boy could take in the small things around him, and the sympathy that game little ant's actions had aroused in one who was naturally as heedless as most boys, determined the gentleman more than ever to investigate the movement that could cause such a happy condition of mind.

They were soon on the move again. If Mr. Perkins felt pain or weakness, he managed skillfully to conceal the fact from his young friends, for he kept up a running fire of talk all the while they were tramping along the trail.

Hugh guessed that he must be suffering, and as if incidentally, he would every little while mention the fact that they were getting closer to the road. Finally he pointed out the place where they would strike it, and added:

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"There is a farm just a little way below, sir,—near where we left our wheels this afternoon,—and I know Mr. Appleby pretty well. If he is at home, we'll be able to get him to drive you to town, all right."

"I think I'm getting along marvelously, Hugh," the wounded man replied, "though a cup of warm coffee right now would brace me up very much. It always acts as a stimulant with me, you know, as I use nothing stronger, and that only in moderation."

"I'm sorry, then, we didn't happen to have any," Hugh told him; "but Mrs. Appleby will be only too glad to brew you a pot."

"If you had happened in on our troop when we were camping," Bud asserted proudly, "you would say we knew how to make the best coffee ever."

"Well, here's the road just ahead," said Hugh; "and we may be lucky enough to have some one overtake us with a rig."

129

"There's one coming from town," declared sharp-eyed Billy; "but that's the wrong direction. Why, what's this? Do my eyes deceive me, or is it our brave police force coming in that rig? I see blue coats and shiny brass buttons!"

"No, they're strangers to me," Hugh told him after a look. "I wonder if they can have anything to do with those two men in stripes?"

"Ginger! you're right!" ejaculated Billy. "Why, these parties must be wardens from the penitentiary, out looking for the escaped convicts. Say, what ought we to do about it, Hugh? Would it be fair to tell on the poor wretches?"

Hugh considered a brief time, and then remarked:

"If they ask us questions, we will be bound to answer, and so tell them that we have seen their men. And from the style of those two fellows, I rather think the good people around here will be better off if they're shut up again. That short one looked as if he wouldn't mind smashing open a country bank."

130

"He was hungry enough looking, seemed to me," Bud broke in, "to burglarize a hen-roost or a smokehouse first. The bluecoats are slowing up, so I guess they mean to ask us square up and down if we know anything about stripes."

In another minute they were halting alongside the vehicle which contained two athletic-looking men with strong faces, who were apparently well fitted for dealing with desperate characters.

"Howdy, boys, and you, sir!" said one of the officials. "Now, I don't suppose you've seen anything of a precious pair of escaped convicts around this section of country? We've traced 'em this far, and we've got a hound in the back of the rig here that can run a trail, if only he gets a start; but we want to find their tracks first."

131

"Why yes, we can tell you where they were about an hour or so back," said Hugh; and then as rapidly as he could he narrated how the two rascals had tried to steal the valuable instruments of the wrecked aeronaut they had been rescuing.

"I noticed, too, that one of the men had lost his cap, and you'll find it lying there under a tree," Hugh finished. "That will do for your hound to sniff, so as to get the scent he needs. And I hope you'll cage the fellows again, because they look like hard cases."

The men asked a few more questions, and then proceeded to tie their horse to a tree back a little from the road. Hugh was tempted to ask the loan of the rig, with a promise that it would be returned in an hour. But as the farmhouse was now only a short distance away and as Mr.

Perkins needed some sort of stimulant to sustain him through the remainder of the trip, he concluded that he had better not.

The last they saw of those officers, they were hurrying along the trail that would take them past the spring, and up to the spot where the stranded balloon told the tale of the wreck and rescue.

132

Five minutes later the little party arrived at Farmer Appleby's place. He was in the field, but the good woman of the house sent a child out to call him, meanwhile starting to brew a pot of strong coffee and setting a table, after the generous way of farmers' wives.

Mr. Appleby immediately consented to hitch up his team and take the injured man into town, nor would he hear of being paid for such a little service.

The boys managed to eat more or less of the good things put before them, while first one and then another of the party told the story of the balloonist's rescue. And then, as Mr. Perkins declared himself feeling fit to make the last run of the journey to a doctor, the scouts went back for the hidden wheels,—all but Hugh, who sat up on the driver's seat with the wounded aeronaut between himself and Mr. Appleby.

133

At Hugh's request the farmer promised to keep the secret of the rescue, for the leader, having reasons of his own, did not want it known just yet.

In due time they arrived at the doctor's place, where they had to wait half an hour until he came back from his afternoon round. When he arrived and unwound the bandage from the wounded man's arm and examined what Hugh had done, listening the while to what Mr. Perkins was telling him of his adventure, the doctor turned to Hugh and said to him, with a sparkle in his eyes:

"Let me tell you, my boy, you'll make the mistake of your life if you choose any other profession than that of surgeon. You've got a great future there."

134

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIELD TESTS.

On the day of the field tests between the selected members of each patrol among the scouts, there was a large attendance of friends to witness the fun. While every boy and girl in town seemed to have come out to the baseball green, there were also many grown-ups on hand, curious to see what the scouts would do in their ambition to win certain "points."

Mr. Perkins, the aeronaut, still lingered in town. That his arm was in a sling did not prevent his taking the liveliest kind of interest in the outcome of the prize banner contest. He had made certain that his rescue was known in influential circles, and was quite satisfied that

Hugh and his fellows of the Wolf patrol were sure to win the prize, notwithstanding the field tests yet to be tried.

Besides, his interest had been so thoroughly aroused that he was more determined than ever to devote time and attention to scout matters. And with this resolution, where could he find a better field to learn facts than right among those lads with whom he had become acquainted in such a remarkable fashion?

135

The committee, consisting of several of the ministers and others who had the best interests of the boys at heart, was early on hand to make final arrangements in conjunction with Hugh. It happened, unfortunately, that the regular Scout Master had been called away from town on important business. Hugh had to act in his stead, which made it rather hard for him, as he had his share in the various contests as well.

The program of events covered about all the activities of scouts in general, as practiced in the open.

There were competitions in tent-raising and taking down, with points for rapidity and general cleverness in carrying through this important feature of camping.

136

Then came the equally interesting water-boiling tests, where the contestants were each supplied with just the same number of good matches, three, in fact, apiece, and at a given signal were supposed to hasten to some point near at hand, where dead wood could be secured under the trees, start a fire, and have a pint of cold water brought to a boil ahead of all the others.

That was a very exciting scene, with nervous boys hurrying to the brook, filling their little stewpans, and getting back to make a fire, without being allowed a shred of paper for a starter.

One managed to knock over his supply of water and had to go all the way back to replenish it; and then the feeble little blaze he had coaxed to burn had fluttered out, calling for new exertions and more anxiety.

Another used up his supply of matches, and then had to sit there watching some of the rest getting right along with their work.

137

When the victory in this contest came to the Wolf boys, it must have been a popular decision, to judge from the cheers that rang out.

There were athletic rivalries, too, more in the way of running than any other thing, because that savored of the old time Indian life, and after all many of the pursuits encouraged by the scout movement hinge on just those things primitive man must have occupied himself with doing, long years ago, when only the red race occupied this broad land.

The signaling tests were very fine, and excited much comment among all who witnessed them. Some of the boys showed a remarkable skill in transmitting messages that had been arranged by the committee, and which were, of course, utterly unknown to any of the contestants until given, a new one every time, to each patrol.

It was a close race in this affair. Bud Morgan had once worked with a surveying party, and Blake Merton was a good second to him in relaying; but Sam Winter of the Otters proved himself a marvel for speed and accuracy, and in the end gained the victory for Alec Sands and his fellows.

When it came to camp cookery, there were some queer things done that must have greatly amused the many girls present. They crowded around the amateur cooks and seemed to be enjoying it very much, if their merry peals of laughter stood for anything. And yet, after all, the flapjacks that took the prize were pretty fair pancakes, not *very* heavy, and just suited to a hungry boy's appetite—when out in camp, not at home.

Other contests there were, lots of them, and one of the most comical was the human fish game. They had to have plenty of water for this, because a good strong swimmer of a rival patrol was always chosen to play the part of the fish, the end of the line being made fast around his chest.

The game, of course, was for the one who held the stout rod to tire the swimmer out through superior tactics, until he could reel him to a certain point, from which the other would do all he could to escape.

Well were the Otters named, it seemed, for they certainly carried off more than their share of the water games. Alec Sands appeared to be very well pleased with the way things were turning out. He went around from time to time with a broad grin on his face, and had a knowing wink for all of his friends whenever he chanced to meet them. It was as much as saying that the whole affair was a walkover for the Otters, who were far superior to any other patrol in the troop.

Whenever Hugh had to exercise his authority as acting scout master, Alec's face took on a sneering look. Billy observed this several times, and he was fully convinced that the smart leader of the Otter patrol had once more allowed the spirit of envy to eat into his heart.

"He's sore because we elected Hugh to fill the place of the assistant scout master instead of him," he told Bud, as they prepared for the tracking game, in which they felt sure the Wolf boys would come out ahead, thanks to the knowledge Hugh had along these lines.

"I wouldn't be much surprised if what you say turns out to be so, Billy," was the other's reply; "and it's a burning shame, too, because he's a really clever scout, only for that failing."

Billy heaved a sigh.

"It seems as though we all have a failing of some kind," he lamented. "They say that with me it's a propensity to eat too much,—that's the word my father uses to explain it,—so I reckon that is my weak spot; but let me tell you privately, Bud, I'm not straining myself trying to reform."

"But how do you think we're going to come out of these contests?" asked Bud. "The Otters had a regular cinch on points this afternoon. They've

certainly worked hard enough, and I give them credit for all they've done."

"Oh! we'll just walk away with the tracking contests, and that will help boost our count some," Billy confidently told him. "Besides, what's the use of worrying over things and losing your appetite?"

"It's a pity they didn't have an eating contest, Billy," laughed Bud. "We all know who can lead the troop there."

"Those flapjacks did smell mighty good to me, Bud; and I had a couple on the sly!"

"There's Hugh calling to us, so come along, Billy. The trackers are getting busy with their work, I guess."

142

Although this part of the competition was of the deepest interest to the scouts themselves and to many of the men present, the girls cared little for it. They did not seem to be able to understand what could be so intensely exciting about a few "scratches" on the ground, a clip of fur, and other similar things. Then the full story followed of how a rabbit had ventured out, been chased by some enemy, as was evidenced by its way of running and dodging, and finally met with a sudden end, marked by blood spots and fur again. And after all others had given the puzzle up in despair, it was Hugh who proved to the committee what sort of enemy it had actually been, through whom poor bunny had come to his untimely end:

A hungry owl, he said, had been foraging for his supper, and in the darkness the unlucky rabbit had been readily discovered by the yellow eyes of the big bird. Then had begun that chase. Hugh easily showed the committee where he had found a mark of the bird's wing-tips in the soft mud at the time it made an unsuccessful swoop down with the intention of securing its prey with its curved claws.

143

He also gave them a feather he had picked up near where the tragedy had happened, which a number of the other scouts admitted had certainly fallen from the plumage of a Virginia horned owl, such as usually hunts at night time for its food and destroys many pests like field mice.

By degrees the series of contests simmered down until finally the end came. The vigilant committee had kept accurate tally, and after summing up, it was formally announced that the Otters had come out ahead by a score of points.

Of course there was a tremendous amount of cheering by the adherents of that lively bunch of fellows, headed by Alec Sands. Don Miller and his Foxes, as well generous Walter Osborne with the Hawk boys, swung their hats and joined in the racket, because after all it was a family affair. And people said that Hugh Hardin, with the members of the Wolf patrol, which had given the Otters the hardest rub of all, certainly cheered as loud as anybody could, as they congratulated the winners of the open air contests.

144

"But this doesn't mean that that banner is already yours, remember, Alec," warned Billy

Worth, as he came upon the excited leader of the Otters, moving up and down and starting new salvos of cheering, which was of course sweet music in his ears. "To-night comes the gathering at the hall, where in the presence of all the scouts, and as many outsiders as can crowd in, the head of the committee will announce what things the several patrols have been doing these weeks past to merit points, according to the schedule laid out."

"Yes," added "Spike" Welling, one of the Foxes, "and Blake Merton has promised to sing several of his best songs between the readings, so as to sort of break up the monotony."

145

"Which is about the only prime thing the poor Hawks will show up in this trip," remarked Cooper Fennimore, his chum; "but I hear they've determined to wake up and do better next time. Better bottle up some of that enthusiasm, Alec, till you hear what the returns to-night tell. Then if you win you'll have breath to shout; and if you get left at the stake, you'll be glad you didn't count your chickens before they were hatched."

"Oh! I'm not worrying about that," came the quick answer from the confident Alec. "We've got it all cut and dried long ago. Wait till you hear how we picked up points by fives and tens here and there, doing lots of wonderful things that count. You'll be willing to give me credit for being a good general; and perhaps you'll wish a certain election had gone differently."

146

Spike and Cooper, getting the wink from Billy, and seeing how Alec frowned as he followed Hugh's form around, seemed to understand how the matter lay. They knew Alec's failing of old, and saw that envy was again torturing him.

"One thing has been settled," observed Billy just then. "You know that there's a chance for eight scouts to be allowed to accompany the members of the Naval Reserve aboard the vessel that the U. S. Government puts at their disposal for practice week after next. And one of the rewards given by the committee is that the highest individual marks, two to each patrol, are going to entitle those lucky fellows to the great honor of going to sea with our Coast Guard. If I strike that prize I'll be the happiest boy in seven counties, you hear me mention it; but I've got little hope myself even before the individual records are made up."

147

Alec walked away with his head held high in the air, looking very important; but all the same he cast many uneasy glances in the direction of his rival leader.

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CHAPTER XII.

VICTORY WELL WON.

As early as seven o'clock that evening there was a decided movement toward the big town hall, where all the important gatherings were held, although it was generally known that the doors would not be opened until half an hour later. It was guessed that there would be a crush, and

consequently word had been quietly circulated among the families connected with the scouts, so that most of them might come early and get seats.

As this was a meeting of particular interest to boys, as many would be admitted as could be accommodated. Others might be expected to climb to the outside of the windows and perch there like so many monkeys, eager to hear and see what wonderful things were done.

Like magic the hall began to fill after the doors had once been opened, and by a quarter to eight chairs were being placed cautiously along the aisles. There had really been no such excitement in town since it was falsely reported that the big-top circus tent had collapsed, and the wild animals were loose; and that had been a night of storm and anxiety few persons would ever forget.

149

Places had been reserved on the stage back of the committee of leading citizens for the entire membership of the Boy Scout Troop; and when they came marching down the aisle, two and two, in their neat khaki uniforms, with the glorious Stars and Stripes at the head and a bugler and drummer following, the entire assemblage broke out into a roar of applause that must have been very gratifying to the hearts of those lads.

Besides the members in uniform, there were a number of other fellows who were the latest additions, forming the new Owl patrol. None of them had as yet received his suit, and therefore could not quite feel the same sensation of importance that entered into the hearts of the older members, whose exploits were already very well known throughout the town.

150

As each patrol was grouped under its totem flag, this brought Billy, Bud and Arthur close together, an arrangement that was very satisfactory to the first named, as he could turn from one to the other of his chums and whisper. Billy would have been an unhappy boy if compelled to remain mute for any great length of time.

When the meeting was opened in the customary way, it was a most impressive sight as seen from the stage. And the first speaker, in telling a few reasons why this magnificent movement had been started by public spirited men, called attention to this fact. Anything that could create such widespread interest as the scout movement, and was for the upbuilding of boys in the best sense, should have the unqualified backing of every thinking man and woman in the whole United States, he declared. Such cheering following this statement, that the speaker had to wait a full minute before he could proceed.

151

The next to address that fine audience was a leading citizen whose heart and soul had always been with the rising generation, so that he had taken part in many movements that were calculated to benefit the coming men of the country.

He assured those who were eagerly listening to all he said that never yet had anything been started that gave one-tenth the promise of glorious success this Boy Scout organization did.

Then he went on fully to explain the duties of those who belonged, what they vowed to do when they took the oath, and what splendid results had already been recorded.

"I hope that the time is near at hand," he continued, "when every boy in all these United States may, upon arriving at the proper age, be given the chance to enlist in a Boy Scout patrol. Through means of its privileges he will be trained to know, to discover, and to *live* in a new and glorious realm of Nature, a life of well-directed freedom."

152

There was a flutter throughout the big hall when the next speaker arose, for every boy knew that the Judge had been selected for the principal event of the occasion. He began by telling of the healthful competition that had been arranged between the four patrols by the prize offer of the beautiful banner which the audience could see in plain sight upon the stage.

This had been contributed by a generous citizen who wished his name to remain unknown. It bore an inscription in letters of gold, with a blank space to be filled in later with the name of the successful patrol. Then he told just how the committee had wrestled with the matter and finally arranged a schedule to show what points were to be awarded for each of scores of things successfully accomplished to the satisfaction of the governing board.

153

The field competition had already been carried to a splendid finish, and those who had watched the busy scouts had been ten times repaid for their attendance. After announcing the results that had been awarded the several patrols on the strength of their showing, he expected to take up the many claims settled by the committee. These would be shown in "points" upon the large blackboard by his assistant, as he called them off, and in some cases he would enter into explanations that might be found more or less interesting.

Every scout drew a long breath. He knew that at last the final score was about to be settled. Even Alec had a serious look on his face as he sat there at the head of the Otters. Boasting was all very well, but since no one might wholly know what the rival patrols had been doing during these weeks of endeavor in order to gain merit points, it was impossible to predict successfully the result until the last name had been called.

154

As it happened, the speaker took up the Fox patrol first of all. They had not succeeded in doing a great deal, though there were several ripples of applause over certain accounts that showed how the boys had occasionally awakened to their opportunities, and had a brief spell of working like beavers. They had relapsed frequently, however, Don Miller not being fully qualified to keep the enthusiasm at boiling pitch.

Next came the Hawks, who made a little better showing, though truth to tell it was pretty much the labor of the leader, Walter Osborne, that counted; and then the speaker called attention to the fact that they were being pleasantly entertained between speeches with camp songs by a member of this patrol, Blake Merton.

155

As he mentioned that next on the list came the

Otters, there was tremendous applause; and while the hand-clapping was going on, with Alec smiling and the rest of the patrol trying to look unconscious of their extreme popularity, Billy leaned over and said in Bud's ear:

"Don't you see he's climbing up step by step, Bud? First the lowly Foxes, then the more wideawake Hawks; after them the hustling Otters; and after that, the deluge,—which means the Wolf patrol. He's saving the best till the last, I tell you!"

Whereupon Bud took heart of grace and breathed freely once more, for he had almost felt as though that wild applause foretold the end, with Alec and his seven Otters carrying off the banner.

The list of wonderful things those eight boys had managed to accomplish certainly interested the audience, to judge from the frequent clapping of hands when incident after incident was narrated, as proven and accepted by the committee. It was early apparent that Alec had closely studied the possibilities offered by the program set forth by those in charge of the competition, and devoted the whole energies of himself and comrades to doing only those things that offered the best results in points.

156

It seemed as though the narrator would never get through telling what they had carried out. Billy fidgeted in his seat, and every time a new exploit was described he would feverishly count up the points in that long string seen upon the elevated blackboard, holding tight to his chair and struggling between hope and fear.

Finally the last of the doings of that gallant band of Otters had been told, and it was to be noted that it had taken place only that afternoon, showing how brimful of determination to excel Alec and his chums had been.

157

Then came the last patrol on the list. Every one knew how there had been constant rivalry between the Otters and the Wolves, although usually carried on in the friendly way scout competitions should be. They also knew what a clever leader Hugh Hardin had proven himself in times past, for the town had cheered the boy's name on more than a few occasions.

It was also pretty generally understood that Alec had felt terribly hurt when, at the choice of a new assistant scout master from among the thirty-two boys constituting the troop at the time, he had received just seven votes, and these his own faithful Otters. This would in a measure account for his feverish desire to win out in this contest, and carry off the prize banner. It would in some sense show that the boys had made a terrible blunder when they had failed to put him in the position of assistant scout master.

As the committeeman told of the numerous ingenious ways in which the boys of the Wolf patrol had won their points, there were just as many bursts of applause as before. And when after a time the gentleman announced that he was all through except a single mention, a hush fell on the audience, for most of those present had counted up, and knew that the Otters were still *seventy points* in the lead.

158

Then a call was made for Professor Perkins, who, with the air of a man accustomed to addressing audiences, mounted the platform. He began by telling who he was, and what he had attempted to accomplish. Then, amidst a great silence, he gave a thrilling account of his accident; how he had signaled to a party of boys in the khaki he had now come to love; how he was thrown out of the basket of the balloon and held fast in the treetop; how the lads had rescued him; how Hugh had set his broken arm, and after that, with the help of his chums, saved his valuable effects from the escaped convicts.

“But for their prompt aid,” he said finally, “there is not the least doubt in my mind that I should have lost my life. There were many photographs taken which go to prove every step in this wonderful rescue; and the committee, I am pleased to say, *unanimously* agree that these gallant members of the Wolf patrol, under the guidance of their leader, Hugh Hardin, saved a human life at peril to themselves, and are therefore awarded the highest number of points possible under this agreement. So that I have the pleasure of adding *two hundred and fifty* honor marks to the score of the Wolf patrol; and the beautiful banner will——”

159

The deafening applause, that made the rafters of that big town hall quiver, drowned whatever else the gentleman meant to say; but while the tumult was still going on, the banner was placed in the hands of the happy leader of the Wolf patrol; and after that, there was no getting the meeting under control again.

160

So ended the exciting competition for the lead among the four patrols of the troop. There were heart burnings, of course, for boys can feel bitter disappointment as well as any one; but as scouts, they were bound to banish all envy and try to rejoice with the fortunate ones.

That other and even more exciting times lay ahead for some of the scouts may be incidentally mentioned here. We can also assure those readers who have become interested in the doings of Hugh, Billy, Alec and the rest, that they may find their further adventures related in the next book of this series, entitled: “The Boy Scouts of the Naval Reserve.”

THE END.

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