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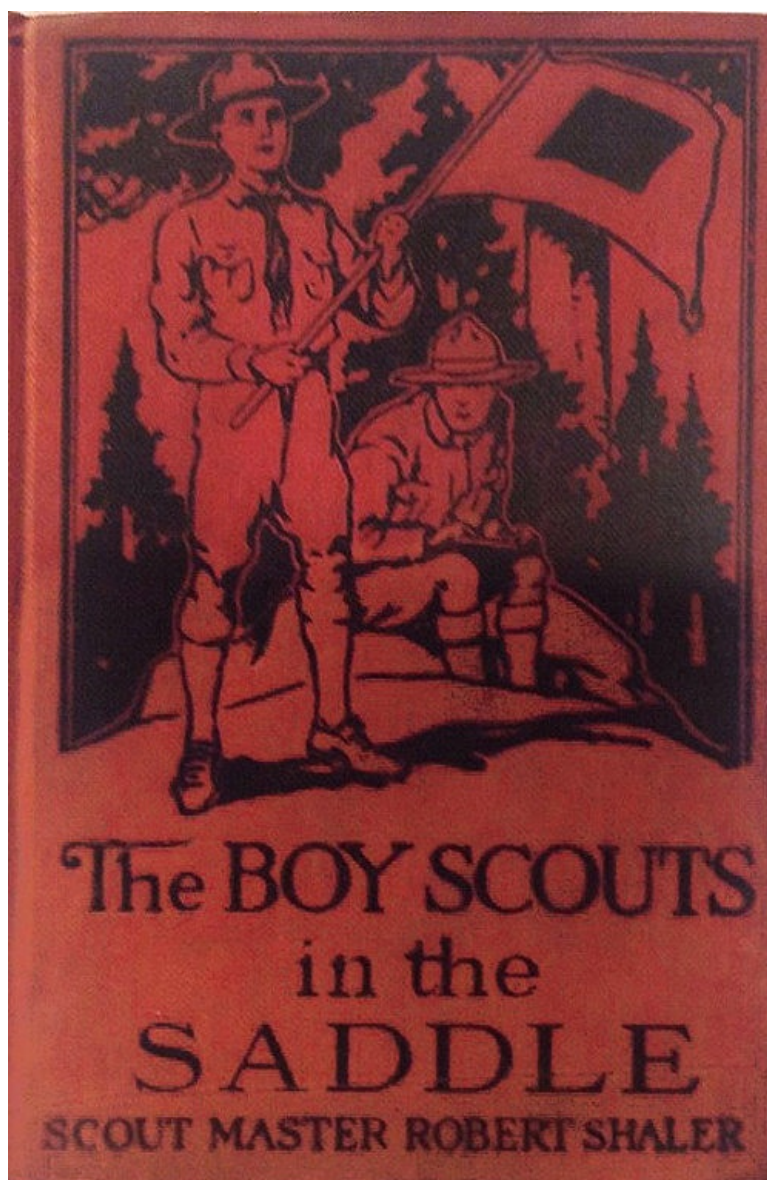
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THE BOY SCOUTS

IN THE SADDLE

BY
ROBERT SHALER

AUTHOR OF "BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS," "BOY SCOUTS OF PIONEER CAMP," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE LIFE SAVING CREW," "BOY SCOUTS ON PICKET DUTY," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE FLYING SQUADRON," "BOY SCOUTS AND THE PRIZE PENNANT," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE NAVAL RESERVE," "BOY SCOUTS FOR CITY IMPROVEMENT."

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The Boy Scouts in the Saddle.

CHAPTER I. THE SUPERIOR BOY.

"Hello! there, landlord, just put five gallons of gasoline in my tank, and charge it to dad, will you? I forgot to fill up before leaving our garage in town. I reckon there'd be a lot of trouble in the big granite quarry we own if Gusty Merrivale failed to show up to-day."

The speaker was a young fellow nattily attired, of about eighteen years of age. As he nimbly jumped out of the dusty runabout car, it could be seen that he was inclined to be rather arrogant in his manner. Indeed, one glance at his dark, handsome face betrayed the fact that he was more or less proud, and domineering.

Gustavus Merrivale was comparatively a newcomer in the pleasant town around which many of the adventures contained in this Scout Series happened. Somehow Gusty had not seemed to care to mix with the general run of boys, picking up only a few choice companions from among the "upper crust." His father was said to be a very wealthy man, and among other properties, he owned a logging camp far up among the hills together with a valuable granite quarry where fully five score of toilers were employed throughout the entire summer.

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The landlord of the village tavern apparently knew his customer. Several times before young Merrivale had motored through the village, and always just two weeks apart. By putting two and two together, the tavern keeper could easily surmise the nature of the errand that took Gus Merrivale up into that wild country so often. Had he been in doubt before, these last words of the boy must have enlightened him fully.

"Pay day in the quarry, hey?" he went on to say, as he unlocked the reservoir that doubtless contained the supply of gasoline which he sold to passing tourists and others. "Your pa's got quite a plenty of men employed up there, I understand, Mr. Merrivale; and just as you say, they'd kick up high jinks if their pay didn't show up on Monday twice a month."

7

"Why, hello! Where did that bunch of motorcycles come from, Mr. Tubbs?" demanded the rich man's son, pointing, as he spoke, to three up-to-date twin-cylinder machines standing in a cluster in a safe corner of the inn yard.

"Three young chaps from your town are sitting yonder on the porch awatchin' of us right now," returned the landlord, softly. "Mebbe you happen to know them, seeing as how they're Boy Scouts, and that Hugh Hardin has made somethin' of a name around this section, I'm told."

"Hugh Hardin, eh?" exclaimed young Merrivale with a swift glance toward the side piazza of the tavern, where he now discovered several sprawling figures occupying as many chairs, and evidently resting up while waiting for dinner to be announced. "Yes, and his shadow, that Worth fellow, is along with him, and also the chap they call Monkey Stallings, who came to town just a month after I did. He fell in with that common herd right away, and joined the troop, but none of that silly scout business for me! I can see myself taking orders from a patrol leader, nit. What are they doing away up here; and where did they get those expensive machines, I'd like to know?"

"It happens that I'm able to supply the information, Mr. Merrivale," remarked the landlord quickly. Like most of his class, he enjoyed a chance to gossip and disseminate news which he had picked up.

"Then I wish you'd be so kind and condescending as to inform me right away, sir. I was just speaking about getting a motorcycle myself; and even now I'm expecting a bunch of catalogues from which to select a machine. Those things cost all of two hundred apiece, and I fancy few boys have got as indulgent a father as I happen to own. So please go on and give me the facts, Mr. Tubbs."

"Why, you see, the Stallings boy has money of his own, and the others have been laying aside dollars right along, most of them earned by finding wild ginseng and golden rod roots in the woods. Besides, they say that Hardin boy did something not long ago that brought him in quite a fat reward, which he insisted on sharing with the chums who happened to be with him at the time. I kinder guess that Worth boy was along, and that helped *him* out. Anyhow, they're taking their first long run, and have come something like seventy miles since breakfast at home. I'm getting a dinner for them, you know. Perhaps you'd like to stay over a bit and see what kind of a cook my wife is?"

"What, me take pot luck with that crowd?" exclaimed Gus Merrivale with a curl of his upper lip. "Well, I hardly know them enough to speak to at home, and it isn't likely that I'll put myself out to improve the slight acquaintance. This scout business makes me sick. I don't understand what the fellows see in it to strut around in their old khaki suits, and salute whenever they meet some one who happens to be higher up in line. Bah! catch me standing at attention and raising my hand when Hugh Hardin chances to pass by. If I could be an assistant scout master in the start, I might get a little fun out of the game; but to commence at the lowest rung of the ladder—well, excuse me, that's all."

The landlord bent lower to hide the smile that flitted across his face. He knew just what type of high-strung boy young Merrivale was; and also had his own opinion as to how difficult it is to mix oil and water. From what he had observed, he understood how thoroughly those three lads lolling on his porch just then, were infatuated with the new life that had opened up to them since they threw in their fortunes with the scout movement. He had heard them talking, and

found himself deeply interested in what they told of discoveries. There was enough of the woodsman in Uriah Tubbs to appreciate the sentiments they expressed. He, too, many a time had listened to the voice of Nature when alone in the wilds, and could understand how fascinating it must be to the right kind of boy to be able to unravel many of her secrets.

Evidently young Merrivale would not bother investigating in order to find out what it was that lured these scouts on day after day. He saw only the surface indications, and resolutely refused to pry off the lid that hid the wonderful truth.

The landlord did not attempt to enlighten him. There was something about young Merrivale that he did not exactly fancy—a curl of disdain to his upper lip, just as though he considered himself a superior person and above the herd. So Mr. Tubbs simply applied himself to the task of measuring out the necessary liquid fuel for which his customer had asked.

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When Gusty Merrivale chanced to look toward the porch, one of the three loungers waved a hand at him after the customary free-masonry of youth. The driver of the runabout made a careless motion as though meaning to acknowledge the friendly salute, yet not wishing to allow any undue familiarity. As the trio of scouts seemed to be very well satisfied with each other's company, it was hardly likely that any one of them would go out of his way to scrape a closer acquaintance with so frigid and reserved a person.

And yet, Hugh Hardin, the tall, agile chap who wore the badge of patrol leader and assistant scout master on his khaki coat, had told himself more than once that the new arrival in town might make a splendid addition to the ranks of the troop, if only he could drop that superior air, and meet others on a level. Several times had Hugh endeavored to become better acquainted with Gus Merrivale, only to be rebuffed, and made to feel as though he were thrusting himself in where he was not wanted; so, in time, he had given the idea up.

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When the required amount of gasoline had been placed aboard, the young driver of the road car sprang into his seat. He knew that the three scouts on the porch were watching him closely, but not for worlds would he look that way, lest he be compelled to wave his hand again; and to his mind that would seem too much like saluting.

His car did not need cranking, having a self-starter installed.

"Good morning, Mr. Tubbs. I expect to pass back this way later on in the day. Those steep hills give my car quite a pull you know!" he sang out as he threw on the power and started out of the inn yard, presently to vanish amidst a cloud of dust up the road.

For some little distance young Merrivale made good time. He liked to fairly fly along, being possessed of a rather nervous disposition. As the ascent became more pronounced, his pace slackened considerably.

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The country had changed also. Instead of

farming land on either hand, he looked upon dense woods, and hills that seemed to be composed of almost solid rock, though trees managed to find lodgment in crevices, so that they hid the rough conformation of the ground. It had been somewhere in this neighborhood that members of the Boy Scout troop had come during the previous summer when deeply interested in geological study; and, indeed, they could hardly have found a place better fitted for the purpose of yielding up valuable information.

Gus Merrivale, however, only considered his surroundings in a mercenary way. His father owned thousands of acres of such land, as well as the logging camp, located there when snow covered the country. Five score of husky Italians labored in the granite quarry all through eight months of open weather.

By degrees his car began to climb steep grades. It had evidently been carefully selected with just this capacity for mounting hills in view; and steadily it kept pulling the lone occupant upward.

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Now and then he could catch splendid views of the lowlands, and from the eager way in which Gus looked out at such opportune moments, it seemed as though after all he had a touch of admiration for Nature.

In the course of half an hour he had arrived close to a peculiar spot where the road ran along near a steep precipice. A stout railing had been erected, under the supervision of the township freeholders who had charge of bridges and roads, in order to lessen the chances of any vehicle toppling over from that dizzy height. From this point, as Gus well knew, he would be able to obtain a splendid view not only of the road far below but of the distant country where several villages and towns lay, with their church spires showing above the trees.

For a short distance before arriving at this place, the road lay level, and here he naturally let out his car so as to make up for lost time.

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As he turned a bend, and leaned slightly forward with the intention of cutting down his rather reckless pace, he suddenly saw something that gave him a severe shock.

This was nothing less than a fallen tree across the road, hardly more than a sapling in fact, but enough of an impediment to have thrown his car aside and brought about a wreck, had he not noticed it in time. And even as he wildly threw on the brake, he saw the figure of a man, bearing a massive shining tin star on the left breast of his faded coat, spring out from the bushes waving his arms violently and shouting excitedly:

"Hi! hold up there, mister! You're exceeding the speed limit ahittin' up a pace like that! I'm the Squeehonk constable, and I kinder guess I'll have to run you in for breakin' the law! This is an ortomobile trap, understand?"

17

CHAPTER II.

LEFT ON THE LEDGE.

The runabout came to a standstill not five feet away from the sapling that had been thrown across the road in order to prevent him from slipping by. It was an angry boy who jumped out and faced the man, who seemed to enjoy his confusion, if the broad grin on his ugly face could be taken for any indication.

"What do you mean, stopping me like this away up here in the wilderness, and then telling me I'm exceeding the speed limit?" Gus hotly demanded. "You say you're a constable, but where is this village of Squeehonk, I'd like to know? I've been up here several times and never ran across so much as a cabin, let alone a village. Why, my father owns pretty near half of this country up this way, I'd like you to know. My name is Gustavus Merrivale, understand?"

That was just like Gusty, inclined to brag of the great possessions of his family. Perhaps he was under the false impression that, at the mere mention of his name, the country clodhopper would exhibit great alarm, and begin to beg his pardon for having dared to spring his automobile trap as he had.

18

Somehow the fellow failed to be dismayed at learning whom he had stopped on the public road. The grin even widened perceptibly, and on seeing this fact, the young driver of the roadster grew red in the face with increased anger.

"Are you going to take that tree off the highway and allow me to go on; or will I have to report this brazen hold-up to my father, and get you punished?" he exclaimed hotly, pointing as he spoke to the obstruction.

Then, as he happened to glance at the shining star that decorated the breast of the so-called constable, he discovered that it was made of *tin*, and very crudely fashioned in the bargain, as though some difficulty had been experienced in cutting out the insignia of office. This fact caused Gus to look at things in a new light. He even began to wonder whether the man who had stopped him might not be some escaped lunatic who fancied that his sole duty in life was to hold up speed cars and make the drivers recognize his authority.

19

Now that the boy took the trouble to observe the fellow more closely, he discovered that he seemed to be rather a hard looking customer. There was a cruel gleam in his pale eyes that gave promise of merciless treatment, should he once become aroused and infuriated.

"Go slow, younker," advised the man, with a noticeable sneer. "Cool your engine off a mite while you have the chance. I'll turn that sapling aside when I get good and ready, and not a minute before, even if you are in such a hurry. So, you say you're Old Merrivale's boy, do you? And like as not right now you're heading for the quarries up yonder with the payroll money along? How about it, younker?"

His words gave Gusty a thrill. For the first time a suspicion flashed through his brain that this hold-up might stand for something more serious

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than the mad whim of an escaped lunatic; or the silly design of a country constable to line his own pocket with graft money forced from the owners of passing cars, whom he might threaten to arrest for violating the speed limits.

The mention of the payroll money reminded the boy of his charge. There were several thousand dollars in bills and silver in the stout bag that he had placed under the seat of the runabout, enough to tempt many a desperate man to take the chances of robbery.

He had been given a revolver by his father to carry along with him whenever he had to take the semimonthly cash up to the quarries. Unfortunately, the weapon happened to be under the cushion of the seat. He wondered what the man would do if he started to try to get hold of this little gun, and if the fellow was desperate enough to strike him on the head with the stout stick he carried in his right hand.

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Another thing gave Gusty further cause for alarm. The bushes close by rustled, and a second fellow came into view. He was a shorter hobo than the one who had pretended to play the part of country constable; but if anything his face, rough with a week's stubble beard, looked more villainous than that of his companion.

Plainly, if anything was to be done, it was high time he started in to make a move before the others could join forces. At least Gusty Merrivale did not seem to be a coward, no matter if he did put on superior airs and imagine himself above the common run of boys who went to make up the rank and file of the scouts. His actions proved this fact, for without waiting to ask further questions, or figure on what the consequences might be, he made a quick whirl on his heel, and jumped toward the road car.

Of course, his intention was simply to arm himself, so as to meet the others on something like a fair footing. There was no way of escaping while that tree blocked the road, and certainly these rascals would not dream of allowing him to turn around and retire the way he had come.

22

Before the boy could throw back the cushion so as to seize upon the weapon that snuggled under it, a heavy figure came down full upon him. In vain did Gusty try to wriggle loose from the encircling arms that held him in a fierce hug resembling the clasp of a wrestling bear. Gusty was fully aroused and fought like a savage wildcat. All the while he was shouting out words that voiced his indignation, and carried wild threats as to what would happen to these scoundrels for daring to stop him on the road and rob him of his trust.

Despite his furious exertions, the man held him until his companion reached the spot, and more than a few heavy blows were dealt because the flying fists of the excited boy happened to land in the fellow's face.

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"Let up on that tomfoolery, younker," snarled the second man, scowling blackly in the face of the prisoner, "or me an' my pal'll have to give yuh some medicine that mebbe yuh won't like. Think as how we'd let yuh reach for a gun? Well, not any, I reckons. Pete, yuh started his nose tuh bleedin' lively last time yuh touched him up.

Hope yuh didn't break it and spile his good looks for keeps. Now, stand still, I tells yuh, 'less yuh wants us tuh kick yuh out o' your senses. We figgered on gittin' that bank roll, an' there's no way yuh kin save it, so let up and make the most o' a bad bargain. Reckon as how yuh dad he's got heaps more o' this stuff whar it kim from. We needs it in our business, Pete an' me. And this here kyar'll jest suit us tuh ride away in, see?"

Quivering with indignation, sore from his bruises, and almost out of breath after the furious struggle with his tall captor, young Merrivale realized that they intended to make a complete job of it.

"Do you mean that you'll steal my car as well as that bag of cash?" he demanded, aghast.

"Sure thing," replied the tall hobo yeggman, still holding him fast. "We'd be a nice pair of chumps now, wouldn't we, to give you a chance to make hot time up to the quarry, and start all that crowd of wild Italians after us? I happen to know something about running a gas wagon, so I guess we c'n make out to keep clear of ditches and jump-offs. Bill, get that rope we had in the bushes."

"What are you going to do with a rope?" asked Gus, turning a trifle pale as he noticed that there was a straight limb growing out from the trunk of the nearest tree close by, which would offer a very fine chance for raising any one off the ground, did lawless persons feel inclined that way.

"Just wait and see," the tall hobo replied; "but we ain't agoin' to risk our precious necks adoin' anything that'd call for capital punishment. We draw the line there, me'nd Bill. And hark to me, young Merrivale, all the kicking on earth won't help you a mite, and'll only cause us to bang you up some more. So if you're half as sensible as I take you to be, you'll just hold tight, and let us work our will. It's all planned out, and nothing'll make us change things the least bit. Let that soak in, and it'll pay you lots better than trying to fight back when you ain't got no chance at all. See?"

Gus only gave a groan of despair. Yes, he realized that it would be the utmost folly for him to try and fight two strong men. He could not hope to escape, and in their anger they would be apt to do him more bodily injury. The mention made of a broken nose rather tamed his aggressive spirit because Gus was very vain of his good looks, and would almost as soon die as be maimed in such a way as to render him hideous in the eyes of others.

Bill quickly reappeared from the bushes. He was carrying a stout rope that might have been twenty feet or so in length, and which these rogues had doubtless stolen from some person's backyard where it had served as a clothes line.

Perhaps it had originally been their design to make use of the rope in order to stop the pay car. The discovery of an overturned sapling however had suggested an easier method of proceeding. Bill hastened to arrange a loop at one end of the rope. This he passed over the head of the boy, and the touch of the noose on

his face sent a cold chill all through the body of the helpless prisoner.

"Fix it just under his arms, Bill," commanded the tall man. "I warn you to keep still, younker, if you know what's best for you. No matter what you say, or try to do, you can't change our plans. We mean to keep you here, so as to hold back the alarm as long as we can, which'll give us a chance to cover many miles, if your dinky old car holds out. Now, walk over here with us, and you'll grip on what the scheme is."

With one on either side Gusty was compelled to advance, and he noted with considerable trepidation that it was directly toward the precipice that they led him.

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"You wouldn't hang me over there like this, would you?" he ejaculated, as a terrible thought flashed into his mind. "Why, before long this rope would cut into me so I'd be crazy with pain. Tie me to a tree if you want, so I can't get away, but don't put me over there, please!"

It would have to be something beyond the common that could make a proud boy like Gusty Merrivale plead with anyone; but for the time being he forgot his haughty spirit, nor was it to be wondered at, considering the peril he faced.

"No use wastin' yer breath, kid," snarled the shorter hobo. "We laid out our plans an' we means tuh kerry the same through, don't we, Pete?"

"It ain't quite as bad as you thinks, younker," added the other man, who seemed to have just a grain of pity in his nature. "'Bout twelve or fifteen feet down the face of the precipice there's a ledge that runs along a little ways. No goat could ever get up or down from that same place. We're meaning to land you there, drop the short rope, and leave you till somebody happens to come along, which might be in one hour, and mebbe not till night sets in. The rope is ten times too short for you to use it in lowering yourself down, so you've just got to hold the fort. Now, lay back, and no kicking remember, because you might make us let go, and that'd mean a tumble on the rocks two hundred feet below here. Steady now, Bill, wait till I give the word, and lower away slow like. Make the best of a bad bargain, younker. Remember, we might a done worse by you."

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Afraid to struggle, and holding his very breath with dreadful suspense, the boy felt himself being lowered through empty space. He could look far down toward the winding road, and a wave of horror chilled him to the core as he contemplated his fate should the men let the rope slip through their hands, or should some weak spot in the line develop that would cause it to part.

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Foot by foot he was lowered, until he felt his feet strike the rock. He had reached the ledge spoken of, and eagerly he endeavored to secure a firm footing there, even sinking to his hands and knees and holding on.

The rope fell beside him, proving that the men had done as they had said they intended to. A minute or two later, the wretched youth heard the rapid working of the runabout's exhaust,

CHAPTER III. SURROUNDED BY PERILS.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish, I must say!" Gus muttered as he heard the last low grumble of the runabout die away up the ascent, proving that the hoboes had indeed abandoned him there to his fate.

He started in to examine his surroundings more carefully than before; but he found very little encouragement. The sheer wall arose for possibly a dozen feet above his head, with not the slightest sign of any projection that might serve him in an endeavor to reach the mountain road where the protecting railing lay.

It is a sudden emergency like this that shows what a fellow is made of. Young Merrivale had certain qualities about him that might be deemed objectionable in the eyes of boys who are ready to give and take. He wanted to be a leader, or not play. In the past, indeed, he had been more or less domineering in his treatment of those with whom he condescended to associate.

He was no coward, and while still burning with indignation toward the pair of rascals who had taken not only the pay money of the quarrymen but his runabout as well, his one thought was to get out of this scrape some way or other, and then follow them. He gritted his teeth as he thought of the glory that would be his could he only overtake the wretches and bring back the stolen property.

If not above, perhaps he might find safety below. It was, of course, a long way down to the bottom of the declivity. He had climbed steeps before, however, where the valuable granite had been blasted from the face of the mountain, leaving great gaps and towering cliffs where even a nimble-footed goat would find it difficult to discover safe footing.

So Gus crawled to the edge of the ledge and looked over.

"Whew! it would take a steeple-jack to make that drop without breaking every bone in his body!" he told himself when he saw how far below lay the rocky base of the precipice, and marked the lack of friendly crevices and protuberances.

With his teeth still firmly pressed together, he forced himself to examine every foot of the surface of the hard rock as far as it could be seen from his aerie. "If my rope were only two or three times as long as it is, I could see where I might make the riffle," he went on to say, disconsolately, "but with only ten or twelve feet to depend on, it looks mighty slim."

Crawling along the ledge, he tried to discover more hopeful signs from other vantage points, but with little success. A weak boy would have given it up then and there, and crouching on the

shelf waited for some one whose attention he could attract, to come along the road far below. Apparently, young Merrivale was not built that way. The stubborn streak was in evidence as shown by his continued activity. He was positively determined to take great chances, if only he could discover the spot where a promising start might be made.

"I've got to be careful," he told himself several times, "because once I break away from up here there's no coming back again. And it strikes me I'd feel like a fly on a window pane if I was flattened out against that rock down there, and no chance to go up or down. Ugh! this ledge is better than nothing at all. And if I made a miss, there'd be a heap of work for old Doctor Kane of Oakvale. So perhaps I ought to go slow, and not jump from the frying pan into the fire."

After all, it was the thought of those two grinning men riding away in his hill-climbing car that jarred him most of all. Every time he pictured them sitting there in his seat and enjoying themselves so hugely, Gus would make a wry face and say something under his breath. Accustomed to having his own way pretty much all of the time, he chafed under the restraint much more than most boys would have done.

"I'll follow them if I get out of this scrape—yes, to the end of the world, to get that car back again, and the money, too, if they haven't spent it. I'll never give it up, any more than they say the hungry wolf does once he strikes the trail of a stag in the snow. But somehow, I hate to climb over the edge of this little shelf and take the count. If only somebody would show up down there on the road, and give me a helping hand."

34

He sat and looked as far as he could see the road between the trees and bushes that encompassed its borders, but there did not seem to be as much as a rabbit or a hedgehog moving down there. A shadow flitted past and caused Gus to raise his eyes.

"Hello! that's an eagle, and a whipping big one at that!" he remarked as he saw a large bird swooping past, and heard a hoarse scream at the same time. "Oh! how easy he cuts through the air with those powerful wings of his. What wouldn't I give right now to be able to fly like that! Why, I'd be out of this nasty scrape in a jiffy! And say, wouldn't I overtake those fellows in a hustle, though?"

35

Just the bare thought gave him some satisfaction, and he smiled. It was the first time he had done anything but frown since the man beckoned to him to pull up at the fallen sapling laid across the narrow road.

His examination of the precipice had convinced Gus that, if he attempted anything at all, it would have to be through making use of his short rope to lower himself to the first crevice below. Here, if he could only manage to secure a slender hold for his feet, he might drag the doubled rope down and try again. The question was could this be done? If the task proved harder than he expected, his condition instead of improving would have become precarious.

He drew a long breath and tried to make up his mind. It was a struggle between his urgent

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desire for action, and the good sense that told him he would be foolish to undertake so terrible a risk.

Twice he started to let the rope trail over the edge of the rocky shelf; and then slowly he drew it up again as he found that it would not reach the first crevice unless let out at full length. And if he fastened it above in any way, it would be impossible to count on the rope for further work, so that he dared not venture to burn his bridges behind him.

As the minutes passed, he racked his brain trying to think up some clever method of overcoming the mountainous difficulties that stood in his way. The winding road looked further off than ever, in the simmering heat of the early afternoon. Never in all his life had Gus Merrivale wished for anything so much as that some one might show up down there, some one to whom he could make signals for help. Minute followed minute, without a break in the monotony.

“Seems like I’ve just *got* to choose between one of two things,” he finally declared with a ring of resolution in his voice. “It’s plain that I must stay on the ledge and wait and wait ever so long, or else climb over and try to skip down, hanging by my fingers and toes. I wish I could see ahead a little. It makes me dizzy to look down there and see what a pile of rocks I’d land on if I lost my hold. But I haven’t gone as far along the shelf over to the right as I might. Perhaps there’s a chance for me in that direction. Anyhow I’m going to crawl along and find out how things lie yonder.”

37

On hands and knees, the boy made slow progress, for the ledge kept getting narrower the further he proceeded. He knew that he must not continue until it would be a difficult job for him to turn around when he wished to retreat. Yet there was always the spur of hope goading him to keep creeping just a little further. He fancied that the surface of the precipice was not quite as smooth over this way, and had almost made up his mind that if he did attempt the risky descent it must be in this quarter.

Then that shadow flickered past him again. Of course, it was the eagle winging its way through space. Gus fancied that the great bird must have become curious about his presence there. Perhaps it had a nest back of some crag not far away, and might take a notion that this cliff climber was a venturesome egg hunter trying to rob its mate of the contents of his retreat.

38

This thought caused Gus to bring his forward progress to a sudden halt. He even turned his head to see what the eagle might be up to, and counted himself fortunate in so doing, for it gave him a chance to drop flat on his face, and thus escape being struck by the swooping bird.

“Here, get out, hang you!” shouted the now alarmed boy as he realized that in some way his actions were extremely objectionable to the eagle, which had started to make war upon him. “Don’t be a fool! I’m not after your nest this trip. Why, I wouldn’t give a snap for all the eagle’s eggs this side—whew! there he comes at me again. Seems like my troubles have only begun. And this ledge is mighty narrow over here!”

39

Again he flattened himself out, and only in time to miss connection with the passing bird. He could feel the wind made by those broad pinions as they swept through space just above him, and he shuddered to imagine what was likely to happen should he be struck fairly and squarely by such a heavy object.

The boy no longer thought of pushing on. His one desire now was to crawl back and reach a spot where the ledge, being wider, offered him better opportunities for defending himself, should the angry eagle persist in his attack.

Three other times did he have to duck and narrowly escape disaster before he arrived at the spot where his rope lay. An idea had come into his head, of which he hastened to avail himself. Quickly clutching the rope, he passed it around his body and then managed to slip a fold over a friendly knob of stone that projected from the hard face of the wall back of him.

40

In this way he fancied that he had insured himself against a sudden shove into space, should the eagle manage to strike him with its wing in swooping past. He also picked up a loose rock which he meant to use as a means of defense. If, by some lucky blow, he could disable that great bird, it would be to his advantage.

The next time an attack came, the boy struck out, for the first time taking the aggressive. He felt a shock that almost knocked all the breath from his body; but it gave him a keen sense of satisfaction to know that he had returned the blow of the eagle after a fashion, though his shoulder where that powerful pinion had struck home ached as though it had been broken.

How long could he hold out against the furious bird that was rapidly losing all sense of caution? Gus must have been a sight to have made his mother almost faint, could she have seen him. His nose had stopped bleeding, but there were gory marks in evidence all over his face. His cheek was more or less puffed up as the result of a glancing blow from the wing of the eagle at the time its full force descended upon his shoulder. Still, he was game to the core. With teeth tightly clenched and eyes blazing with excitement, he crouched there awaiting the next move of the attacking bird of prey.

41

"I got the hang of things that time," he said to himself, though even the sound of his own voice gave him a little encouragement, "and I know how to hit out better after this. Just come on and try it again, you crazy thing, and see what you get, that's all! Two can play at the give and take game, you'll find. Here's a bigger rock I'm going to use, and look out for yourself, old fellow!"

Despite his brave words, the cowering lad watched the evolutions of the monarch of the air with a sense of deep anxiety. He inwardly hoped and prayed that the eagle might determine it had had enough of the fight, and fly away. In fact, Gus was more than willing to call it a draw, so that he might be let alone to grapple with his other troubles.

42

"I sure believe he's going to swing in at me again!" muttered the lad, noticing the suggestive actions of the great bird.

He was not kept in doubt long for the eagle once more headed straight toward the spot where Gus crouched awaiting the attack. Gus drew in a full breath, and with every nerve strained to the utmost tension, raised the hand that gripped the rock, striving thus to protect his head against the stroke of that terrible pinion.

CHAPTER IV.

SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE.

When the collision came, the boy uttered a shout that was a curious commingling of pain and exultation. His arm and hand felt as though they had been given a severe galvanic shock, but he was conscious of the pleasing fact that he must have struck the eagle a hard blow with the rock, which had been knocked from his grasp and gone over the edge of the shelf, rattling down along the face of the precipice.

“Where did he go to?” stammered the boy, beginning to recover from the concussion, and casting about for another weapon in the shape of a fragment of granite. “Oh! there he is perched on that spur down below. And see how his wing hangs, will you? Perhaps it’s broken, for it struck my stone like a pile driver. Don’t I hope that’s a fact, though! I warned him he’d get the worst of the bargain if he kept on fooling with me. Serves the old pirate right. But now I’m worse off than ever, because with this lame shoulder I wouldn’t dare take the risk of hanging to a rope and flattening out against the face of the precipice.”

He kept rubbing his lame shoulder while talking. The immediate future did not look very promising. How much time had elapsed while he had been there in his predicament, Gus could not say, but no doubt it seemed many times longer in his mind than was actually the case.

Not being a scout, he had never learned how to tell time from the position of the sun, moon or stars, so that he could only give a rough guess as to how much of the summer afternoon had slipped away.

And now, new sources of dread began to assail him. The sun had crept around so that its scorching rays fell full upon the face of the cliff above, and this aroused Gus to the fact that he was beginning to get exceedingly thirsty. Once he allowed himself to think of this, he imagined that his tongue was trying to cling to the roof of his mouth for lack of a drink. Yes, and he even remembered reading a short time before of the terrible sufferings a boat load of shipwrecked people endured while adrift on the heaving ocean.

Supposing that no one appeared on the road below during the whole afternoon, how was he going to pass the coming night? He would not dare go to sleep for fear that he might roll from his insecure lodgment, unless he took the precaution to fasten himself with the friendly rope, which he was beginning to look upon as his most valued possession.

More time elapsed, during which Gus was recovering in some degree from the fatigue following his desperate battle with the eagle. He could still see the big bird perched on that lower crag, and he noticed, not without more or less savage satisfaction, that it seemed to be preening its feathers, paying particular attention to the drooping wing which had come in contact with the rock.

“For two cents, I’d start bombarding you, and see if you could fly,” he told the bird, as he shook his fist in that quarter, “but I suppose that would be a silly move, because if it turned out that the wing wasn’t broken after all, you might take a notion to start at me again. So I guess I’ll call it off, and try to forget all I owe you, old chap. Hello! what’s that I hear? Sounds as if a machine of some kind might be coming away off yonder!”

46

He strained his ear to better catch the sounds. As the fickle breeze came and went, he managed to make out that the queer rattle kept getting distincter each moment. This would indicate that whatever was giving vent to the sounds must be approaching, and not going the other way.

The boy prisoner on the rocky ledge began to thrill with excitement.

“But really, I never heard a car act like that,” he muttered as he heard the peculiar throbbing again welling up from below. “It might be the exhaust of a motorboat or of a motorcycle, only—oh! there *were* three of them at the inn. Yes, it must be those scouts heading up this way!”

47

At first, the very thought of possibly owing his rescue to Hugh Hardin and his two chums of the saddle, gave Gus a feeling of chagrin. If he had his choice, very naturally he would have much preferred that some stranger pull him up from the predicament in which a cruel fortune had thrust him. But then, after all he had gone through, the boy’s pride had been sadly battered, and he did not feel like looking a gift horse in the mouth. So long as he escaped from this miserable trap, he felt that he would be foolish to draw distinctions. Besides, somehow he did not seem to feel *quite* the same way toward the scouts as before. When worn by those who were in a position to do him a great favor, those jeered-at khaki uniforms might look even friendly.

And so, Gus Merrivale kept tabs on the dusty road far below, eagerly waiting to catch the first glimpse of the coming party.

48

As he looked, he suddenly saw a swiftly moving object appear around a bend in the road, the sun’s rays glinting from polished steel and nicked parts. It was one of the trio of scouts on his motorcycle, and heading directly toward the base of the cliff!

Filled with excitement, Gus made a megaphone out of both hands by cupping them, and shouted at the top of his lusty voice.

“Hello! hello! Help! help!”

He was pleased to see that the rider of the flashing wheel must have heard his loud call by the way he turned his head upward. Gus

immediately started waving his handkerchief, somewhat after the fashion he remembered seeing a scout do with his signal flag, and which, at the time, he had only thought was a silly procedure.

"He sees me! He lifted his hand and waved it!" the prisoner of the ledge exclaimed, thrilled with delight. "It's going to be all right after all! If only I can make them understand that they've got to get above so as to pull me up."

49

By now he had discovered a second and then a third speeding motor flash around the curve. Undoubtedly, the pacemaker must have made some prearranged signal, for the others immediately cut down their speed, and a minute later jumped from their saddles at the spot where the first rider had dismounted.

He was pointing upward toward the ledge, and the eager Gus was able to catch a few words that came trailing through space.

"What happened to you?" Hugh Hardin was shouting, also making use of his hands in order to help his voice along.

"On a ledge—can't get up or down—follow the road to log rail, and get me out of this—Gusty Merrivale—been stopped on the road and robbed!" was what the one above shouted down to them.

No doubt his words created something of a sensation, for he could see the three scouts putting their heads close together as though conferring. Then once more Hugh, who was looked upon as the leader by his comrades, called out.

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"All right—hold the fort a little while longer—we're coming up as fast as we can get there—take things easy—we'll sure yank you up off that ledge—so-long!"

Without wasting another minute, the speaker was seen to straddle his machine and start off, the others following his example shortly afterward.

With a warmer feeling in his heart toward the scouts than he had ever known before, Gus watched them shooting toward the foot of the rise. Now and then he would lose sight of this rider or that one, and for several minutes he could only trace their progress by the dust that arose. Then the last fellow had vanished from view. He knew from the sounds that came occasionally to his ears that they were climbing the ascent which had tried his little runabout's powers to the utmost.

It seemed a terribly long wait to the impatient boy. He tried to pass the time away by picturing to himself how he would immediately start off after those bold hoboos who had held him up on the road, evidently knowing that he was due with the money to settle with the quarry workers on the semimonthly pay day.

51

"Hello, down there, Gusty! We're here on deck, and ready to give you a helping hand!" called out a voice from directly above. The boy, aroused from his train of thought, looking directly up, saw a friendly face, which he

immediately recognized as belonging to Hugh Hardin, the leader of the Wolf Patrol.

Immediately another countenance appeared alongside, this time being the rosy one of Billy Worth, nor was the third scout long in showing up near by.

"How can you get me up there?" asked Gus anxiously. Now that another crisis in his affairs had arrived, he began to feel dubious again.

"I'm trying to figure it out," the other replied. "If it comes to the worst, we can use a sapling that I noticed lying alongside the road below here, and have you climb up that."

52

"Oh! that same sapling has already played a part in my troubles!" exclaimed the boy below, with something like a smile, "and perhaps it would be only evening it up if you used it to get me out of here. But I've got a mighty lame shoulder, you see. I had a fight with that eagle over there on that stone cap, and I reckon I nearly broke his wing, but first he gave me some ugly clips. Why, I had to tie myself to the rock with this piece of rope so I wouldn't be knocked off!"

"Did you say a rope?" quickly asked the scout leader.

"Yes, this short piece that the men lowered me down here with, and then threw after me, knowing that I couldn't use it to get any further down the precipice," and the boy on the shelf held it up as he spoke.

"Oh! that makes it as easy as falling off a log," came from Hugh cheerfully. "All you have to do is to fix the loop under your arms, and when I lower a cord, tie it to the other end of your rope. Then we'll get hold of it, and up you come!"

53

"That sounds good to me!" declared Gus, already warming toward the boy who it seemed was fated to become his rescuer.

A minute later and the dangling cord came within his reach, and as he had already made the noose secure around his body, Gus hastened to tie this to the end of his rope. He saw it mount speedily upward, and presently a shout from Billy announced that the rope had come into their hands.

"All ready there?" demanded the patrol leader. "Dead sure the loop will hold?"

"It did when they let me down," replied Gus with the utmost confidence. "Please hurry up and begin. And be sure not to slip, because it's pretty far down to the bottom. A fellow wouldn't know what hit him if he took that drop."

"Don't worry about us!" said Billy Worth. "We've practiced this same thing many a time just for fun. You never can tell when it pays to know how to get a fellow out of a hole. Scouts learn all kinds of clever stunts, you know, Gusty. This one is going to help you a heap, seems like."

54

Right then and there Gus Merrivale realized that he had been judging these boys from the wrong standpoint. Really, he had refused to give them credit for being other than a lot of silly chaps who wasted their time in camping out, and learning things that could never be of any

earthly good to anyone. After this he was bound to look deeper into the movement. And his heart warmed toward Hugh and his chums in a way he would have never believed possible a few hours before.

The rope grew taut, and then he felt himself being lifted from the ledge, and steadily raised foot by foot. Presently he could reach up and catch hold of the lowermost log that served as a barrier alongside the mountain road to prevent accidents to vehicles coming down the grade.

It was with a thankfulness he could hardly find words to express that the boy was assisted over the railing, and found his feet firmly planted on the roadway. He drew a long breath of relief, possibly the very first that he had dared indulge in since being held up by those two brazen rogues. And then, urged by some better element in his nature, Gusty Merrivale grasped the hand of the patrol leader and squeezed it in his own, passing from Hugh to each of the other scouts.

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CHAPTER V.

SEEING THINGS IN A NEW LIGHT.

"Now tell us what happened to you. We're all wired up about it," said Billy Worth when Gus had gone the rounds and shaken each of his rescuers most cordially by the hand, as though he meant them to feel that his gratitude was sincere.

"Yes, you said something that sounded like robbed, and we've been trying to figure out what it meant ever since," added Monkey Stallings, who was really a late addition to the troop, though making his way up the ladder by leaps and bounds, being a lad eager to learn all the things of which a first-class scout must have a knowledge in order to obtain his badge.

"Well," began Gusty with a whimsical grin, "it's just this way. I've been sent up here several times twice a month to carry the money used to pay the hundred Italians and other foreigners working in our granite quarries. I guess somebody must have spotted me this time. Two men, who looked like tramps but who may have been worse than that, lay in wait for me just below here. They had that sapling fixed so that it crossed the road, and I couldn't have got past even if I tried."

57

"Gee! what d'ye think of that! And right here within twenty miles of Oakvale, too?" ejaculated Billy, his face expressing the most intense interest, "but excuse my interrupting you, Gusty. Please go on. You've got me chained fast. Stopped you on the road did they, and robbed you of the pay money?"

"When I managed to pull up, I was right on the tree they had thrown across the road," continued the other. "At first the tall man pretended he was a country constable, meaning to arrest me because I was speeding, though of course, it was silly to think of such a thing away up here in the mountains. Then the other fellow

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showed up, and they let me know that they'd been waiting for me in order to steal the money I carried. I tried to jump into the runabout again to get hold of the gun dad makes me carry, but they battered me on the head, and nearly did me as you can see. In the end they lowered me to that ledge, so that I couldn't get anywhere and give the alarm. Oh! I've been having the time of my life, let me tell you! But if they think they're going to get away with this job so easy, they're barking up the wrong tree. Now I'm out of that hole, I mean to get after them lickety-split."

"How much of a start have they got?" asked Hugh soberly.

"Really I couldn't tell you," came the reply. "You see, that short rascal snatched my gold watch before they lowered me down the precipice. It seemed to me as if I must have been there for hours."

"It was just a little more than an hour and a half ago that you left the tavern where we were waiting to be called to dinner," Hugh told him. Gus expressed the greatest surprise, for he had never known time to drag so before.

"But let's talk of what can be done to overtake those men and get back all they took from me," he suggested doggedly.

"One of us might turn around and make a run for home to get the police on the track," ventured Billy, "though it would be taking big chances to start me over that course, because I'm a bum rider so far, and apt to take a header if I get a little rattled."

"How far away are the quarries you were making for, Gus?" asked Hugh.

"Oh, something like ten miles, I should say," came the reply. "Too far to go for help. Besides, what good would a dozen or two of those wild Italian laborers be in a thief chase? Chances are the men would make a clean getaway. No, something else will have to be tried if we hope to bring them up with a round turn."

"What's to hinder the lot of us whooping after them, and finding some chance either to have them arrested, or perhaps do the job as slick as you please, while they sleep?" demanded Monkey Stallings, who came by his name through his faculty for doings all sorts of antics, from climbing greased poles that no other boy could mount, to hanging from lofty limbs of trees by his toes, and pretending to sleep that way, just as though he were a simian in truth.

"If you only would, it might turn out to be the grandest thing ever!" exclaimed the Merrivale boy, his face lighting up with sudden hope as he contemplated the shining motorcycles nearby, and remembered what wonderful things they were capable of accomplishing in the right hands.

"You see, we were making our way up to a camp where a few of our fellow scouts have been spending a week," Hugh explained. "We declined to go along because we expected these machines to arrive, and were all fairly wild to get busy with them. And between ourselves we had secretly arranged to give the boys a big

surprise after all of us got so we could ride fairly well. But you must know that it is a part of a scout's education to give up his own pleasure whenever he can help anyone who is in trouble; and so, Gus, we will do what we can to assist you to recover your runabout, as well as the money they took from you."

"That's fine of you, Hugh!" declared the other boy, flushing with pleasure, as well as with shame at the recollection of how he had misjudged these splendid fellows in the past. "I'm beginning to get my eyes opened to a lot of things about this scout business, and if only you can help me out, I reckon I'll just have to join the troop, no matter if I start in as the worst tenderfoot you ever saw."

"Bully for you, Gusty!" cried the explosive Billy. "Take my word for it, you'll never have any reason to regret the step if you do hitch up with the scouts. Fact is you'll wonder how you ever got any fun in life before you knocked the scales off your eyes, and saw things everywhere around you. We know. Lots of us have been through the mill, haven't we, Monkey?"

"We sure have, Billy," answered the other solemnly, "and nothing could hire me to throw up my present job of gymnastic teacher to the troop. As to learning things, I've found out how to stow away a quarter more rations every meal by just watching you work your jaws, Billy."

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"We can follow after the runabout without much trouble once we examine the marks made by its tires in some muddy spot," Hugh said, speaking directly to the boy who had been taken from the ledge, "because in nearly every case you'll find there's a distinctive mark about the track left by a rubber-shod wheel. I can tell the trail my motorcycle makes among a dozen; both the others have individualities about them that all of us have learned to recognize. And I expect you may have noticed something about the marks your car leaves that would tell you which road it took, in case we came to a fork?"

"Well, I don't think I ever took the trouble to notice anything like that," Gus confessed not without more or less confusion, as though he might already be beginning to realize how lacking in practical information his education was, "but now that you speak of it, there was a patch put on one of the rear tires that I should think would leave an impression something like a diamond. Of course, though, that wouldn't show here where the road is rocky; but at the first chance we could watch out for it."

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Hugh looked at him with a half smile on his face.

"You talk as though you expected to go along with us, Gusty?" he observed.

"And to tell the truth I'm hoping you'll ask me to hang on behind," the other instantly replied. "You see, I've ridden a motorcycle before and I guess my shoulder isn't so lame but what I could keep my seat. Those men treated me about as mean as they knew how, and I've been telling myself all along that, if only I could have a hand in their apprehension, it'd go a great way to evening things up. Do you reckon now, Hugh, that if you took me on behind it would go?"

His whole manner was so imploring that even had the patrol leader felt inclined to hesitate he must have found it very difficult to disappoint Gusty. It chanced, however, that Hugh knew more about a motorcycle than either of his chums, or both together for that matter. And he believed that if the other boy had the nerve to keep his seat he could take him along.

"I'm willing to make the try, anyhow, Gusty," was what Hugh told him.

"Oh! thank you, thank you a dozen times, for you've made me feel ever so happy!" cried the Merrivale boy. Apparently he had made a clean sweep when he threw that pride of his overboard, for once again he reached out and shook the hand of Hugh, as though determined to look on him as his best friend. "And there's one other thing you ought to know, because it may cut some figure in the chase."

"What might that be?" asked Billy, evidently more or less relieved to know the patrol leader would not be wanting him to head back over their trail so as to carry the startling news of the hold-up to the authorities in distant Oakvale.

"I only took on five gallons of juice at the inn, you see," continued Gusty, eager to advance any item, however small, that might have a bearing on the successful pursuit of the two bad men, "and I don't believe there could have been much aboard at the time, either. So they couldn't run more than twenty miles before it would give out. If they fail to take on a new stock, perhaps we might find my runabout abandoned on the road somewhere."

"Either that, or wrecked," suggested Monkey, "because every fellow who thinks he can run a car doesn't succeed. I know, because it cost an uncle of mine a pile of hard cash to get his machine saved from the scrap heap after I'd turned over at the foot of a little hill where there was a sharp curve and lots of loose sand. See that scar under my hair—that makes me think of how hard a car can kick, every time I look at it when I'm brushing my locks."

"If we mean to start this chase, we'd better be making a move," Billy advised.

"The crown of the hill seems to be just a little way off," said Hugh, "and so I think we ought to push our machines up the rest of the way, and mount for a coast down the grade. Once we reach the bottom where there's a chance to find some moist clay, we'll try scout tactics, and get a clew about that mended tire you spoke of, Gusty. Come on, boys!"

"I tell you fellows I'm feeling two hundred per cent. better already," announced the boy who had been rescued from the ledge over the brow of the precipice. "If only we could lay those ugly scoundrels by the heels, I'd call it a thousand per cent. Your talking about tracking them by following the clew of my mended tire makes me see how much I've been missing all this while by thinking scouts were a foolish bunch of crack-brained boys, running after a leader like sheep after the bell wether. I guess I'm the chump after all who has allowed his prejudice to run away with his common sense. That's all in the past, let me tell you. I'm beginning to see a great

light, and this experience is going to change a lot of the ideas I've been hanging on to, believe me."

While talking in this strain, the four boys were pushing up the rise. Just as the patrol leader had remarked, the crown of the hill was in plain sight only a little distance beyond where Gusty had met with his strange adventure and passed through an experience he would not be likely to forget soon.

Under ordinary conditions Gusty might possibly have consented to adopt a sling for his bruised arm, and even walk around for a day or two while playing the part of martyr, but there was no time for such nonsense. The prospect of overtaking the two thieves, and at least making some sort of effort to recover what they had stolen, gave him unexpected strength to endure the pain without even a grimace. Why, he stood ready to grit his teeth, and make light of worse conditions than this while the hope of turning the tables on those hoboos continued to brighten!

When the boys arrived at the brow of the hill, they could see how the road was beginning to dip. Hugh asked a few questions of Gusty, who had been over it a number of times before, and was therefore competent to give advice. He wished to make sure that no sudden bend would crop out to serve as a trap for inexperienced riders. When this point had been settled, Hugh had the fourth boy mount behind him, clasp his arms around his waist, and then the descent of the hill was begun.

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CHAPTER VI.

TRACKING FROM THE SADDLE.

Hugh Hardin was accustomed to serving as pacemaker. Besides being leader of the Wolf Patrol, to which Billy also belonged, he had long ago been elected assistant scout master to the troop. When Lieutenant Denmead, a retired army officer who had taken great interest in the boys of the town, could not be present, Hugh served in his stead. Being a first-class scout, he had found no difficulty in securing his credentials to act in this important capacity from Boy Scout Headquarters off in New York City.

Consequently, when he led the procession of saddle boys down the slope of the ridge, he felt quite at home.

There was no attempt to make great speed. This would have been looked upon as the essence of folly on several accounts. In the first place there was good-natured Billy Worth who, being a novice with the motorcycle, was apt to get himself into trouble at any moment. Then they must remember that they were really tracking the two hoboos who had stolen the runabout as well as relieved Gusty Merrivale of the pay roll, which the Italian laborers up in his father's quarries were anxiously expecting. And if these two reasons were not enough, there was the fact that the pacemaker was carrying double on his

70

machine, which made things just a bit unwieldy.

Of course, there would be stretches along the road where they might reasonably expect to “hit her up,” as Billy was wont to say. These would occur where the ground happened to be fairly level, or slightly up-grade.

Nothing happened up to the time the boys arrived at the foot of the mountain. Hugh had not forgotten what he had said about taking a good look at the marks left by the tires of the runabout. He was desirous of seeing for himself what that diamond-shaped patch, mentioned by Gusty, would look like when reproduced in the soft soil at some point where moisture chanced to lie upon a low portion of the road, as, for instance, in the vicinity of some creek.

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The opportunity came much sooner than he had hoped would be the case. There, a little way ahead, Hugh discovered that the road crossed some depression by means of a bridge. This would indicate the presence of a small stream, perhaps a mere thread of water in midsummer, but capable of becoming a boiling torrent when the Spring rains were on.

He immediately threw up his hand several times in a suggestive way, which was a part of the code of signals understood by both his chums. It meant that he intended slowing up, and possibly stopping short. Motorcycle riders as a rule go at such a pace that they seldom travel any other way than tandem; and it is expected of each fellow to keep a wary eye from time to time on the one ahead of him so as to discover any sign, which he is expected to pass on down the line. In this way accidents due to speed are usually avoided.

A minute later both the other boys had come to a halt. Leaving their machines alongside the road, they hurried to where both Hugh and Gusty were stooping down searching for a positive imprint of the mended tire of the runabout.

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“Here’s a good impression,” remarked Monkey Stallings as soon as he arrived. He had the quickest eyes in the whole troop, and seemed able to discover things that it would have taken Billy many times as long to unearth.

“Couldn’t be better,” observed Hugh, hurrying to his side, “and, as usual, you’ve beaten us all out again, Monkey. How about this, Gusty? We’re looking at the sign of the patch, of course?”

“That was what I meant,” replied the other. “But, honest now, this is the first time I’ve so much as noticed what sort of a mark my old tire makes. I knew about the way the repair-shop man mended it, and that was all. Think we can recognize it if we see it again, do you, Hugh?”

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Even Billy snorted at that, as he quickly exclaimed:

“If you knew more about how scouts are trained to use their eyes, ears, and ditto, their thinking boxes, you wouldn’t ask that, my friend. Why, one of the first of experiments a tenderfoot has to pass through, is to take a quick look in at a store window where scores of different things are on exhibition, go away and immediately

write down all he can remember. The more exact he gets the higher his score. That influences him to begin to exercise his memory. It's queer how a fellow can increase his powers that way. Why, my capacity has fairly doubled since I joined the scouts, and I surprise my folks every day by remembering things they promised to get for me away back."

Monkey Stallings grinned as he caught Billy's eye, and quietly observed:

"Now I'm real glad to hear that, Billy, because there's some chance that you'll even remember that quarter you borrowed from me 'away back' when we were on the train coming home from our trip with the Naval Reserve. I'd clean given up hope; but I know it's all right now."

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"Take a good squint at this mark, everybody," said Hugh, pointing down to where the wheel which had the mended tire had passed through a yard or two of clay, making a splendid impression. "We'll want to look for it plenty of times as we go along, you understand."

When all of them announced that they had it engraved indelibly on their mind's eye, Hugh once more started off along the road.

"I'll keep tabs on the right," he had told Billy and Monkey before he left them, "while you two watch the other side of the road for any sign telling that the men turned in. There's no saying what trick they may be up to, and we don't want to go speeding along on a fool's errand. Get that, both of you?"

"Sure we do, Hugh," Billy replied. "Chances are they mean to cover a good many miles before they abandon the motor car."

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Gusty was in a position to speak whenever the spirit moved him, as his head came close to that of the one who sat in the saddle. They were as a rule going at quite a smart pace, and the dust was apt to get in his mouth whenever he opened it, so that he did not indulge in much useless talking.

Now and then, however, he would make some pertinent remark. This was usually in connection with the character of the road, or else had reference to the fact that a short distance ahead lay a hamlet which he remembered.

"There's a road branches off from this one, too," he went on to say, after giving this information, "and once I ran over it, having been told that while it didn't pass through the little village it had a smoother surface. And my information was correct to the dot, because it joined this road further on."

"If those men know the country as well as I think they do," Hugh turned partly in his saddle to say, "they'll as like as not take that same road, because it seems that after committing so daring a robbery they'll want to keep out of sight as much as they can. Yes, I can see where the fork lies ahead," and with that he held out his hand as a sign to the next in line, who happened to be Billy this time.

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It proved that Hugh's prediction was correct, for the runabout had certainly started into the other

road. This would indicate that the pair of precious rascals must be pretty well acquainted with the section of country. It afterward turned out that the taller fellow had been raised not many miles away from the village which was being left in the rear. Perhaps he feared that some one might happen to recognize him if he went through the place, for some of these countrymen have long memories.

Further on they again came back to the road that led to the quarries. A mile or so beyond the junction, however, another turn was made. After that Gusty could not venture to give the least information, because they were now covering ground that was entirely new to him.

Hugh had already made up his mind on one score. This was to the effect that those whom they were pursuing must be heading for some place which they had knowledge of, and where they believed they would be fairly safe from discovery.

As the boys proceeded steadily along, the pacemaker became aware of another fact that began to give him increasing satisfaction. He and his two chums had been heading for the distant spot where some of their fellow scouts were in camp on an island in the river. These other boys had come a long way by means of a motorboat loaned to them by an enthusiastic gentleman of the home town, who, being abroad for the summer, desired to show his appreciation for the manly conduct of the scouts.

Hugh had a map of the country with him. He had never been over some sections of it, but, having made a study of topography, he believed that they were by degrees drawing nearer to the river, and would, if they kept on, strike it not far away from Raccoon Island, where Don Miller, leader of the Fox Patrol, had the boys in charge in the absence of others in authority.

When they made a brief halt in order to slake their thirst at a gurgling spring that gushed up alongside the road, Hugh put his comrades in possession of this astonishing bit of information. Naturally they were greatly pleased, especially Billy, whose merry face glowed with a sudden inspiring thought.

"Whee! talk to me about the luck of the Wolf Patrol!" he exclaimed. "Isn't this just like the old story? Now, chances are those hobo footpads'll go into hiding in the woods not three miles away from the island camp. What's the answer? Why, we'll send a signal to the boys that they're wanted, and pretty soon one by one they'll line up till we'll be a baker's dozen all told. I'm sorry for the poor wretches that took your runabout when that comes about, Gusty. You'll get your first lesson on what it means to be a scout, when you see how we work this deal. Since Ralph Kenyon joined the troop, he's shown up a heap of new things connected with woodcraft and the like. Even Hugh here has admitted that the boy who used to spend his winters trapping wild animals for their pelts so he could lay by a store of money to take him to the School of Mines some day, knew more'n he ever did. And there's Arthur Cameron, Bud Morgan, Jack Durham, Spike Welling and a lot of other good fellows in camp up here, too. Hugh, I only hope she turns out like you say. Are we off again now?"

"Yes, and taking things fairly easy, too," replied the leader as he straddled his machine, and waited for Gusty to get in position before starting. "If they expect to hide somewhere around this region, we'll bump in on them soon enough. So, steady, everybody, from now on."

While at the spring, he had taken out his road map and allowed all of them to see their location. The river was not many miles away, and this road crossed it by means of a bridge. Raccoon Island lay some distance above, where the stream widened and formed quite a shallow lake-like lagoon with wild borders, an ideal spot for a boys' camp.

Billy managed to meet with some trifling trouble in making his getaway. This caused him to bring up the rear, a position he usually occupied, by the way, in most of their trips, for Billy was inclined to be sluggish in his movements, though his mind was active enough.

Motorcycles are splendid mounts to carry one swiftly along over fairly decent thoroughfares, but being more or less noisy, in spite of all efforts to stifle the explosions by means of the muffler, they can hardly be deemed just the thing to use when silence is necessary.

Hugh knew that if the men they were following had a camp near the road they would be apt to discover the approach of the boys long before he and his chums could lay any plans looking to their capture.

Accordingly, he had already decided in his own mind that whenever it looked as if the thieves were near the end of their journey, the noisy wheels would be temporarily abandoned, and the balance of the tracking necessary done afoot, where their knowledge of Indian tactics might be brought into successful play.

They could not have covered more than a mile, after leaving the cold spring at which they had refreshed themselves, when Monkey Stallings plainly heard a sound from the rear that announced the coming of some sort of trouble to the rider who brought up the tail end of the procession. Upon which, he instantly used his horn to let the leaders know that another halt must be called in order to assist Billy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SUNKEN ROAD.

Hugh came running back, with Gusty trailing after him, quite as anxious as the rest to learn what had happened to the one bringing up the rear of the motorcycle procession.

They found Billy bending down and examining his machine with a woe-begone look on his good-natured face. He glanced up at their approach. Monkey Stallings was on the other side, and still searching for the cause of the trouble, though he did not know much more than the stout boy about the intricate construction of motors.

"What ails you now, Billy?" asked Hugh, for he did not have to be told that the individual in question was the cause of the breakdown.

"Wish I knew," replied the other, dolefully, "that's the trouble. You see I've noticed for some little time that I had to make more or less of an effort to keep my place in the line. While you fellows were gliding along as smooth as silk, my balky engine had to be coaxed and kicked to hold its own. And now, after that last little halt she's gone back on me altogether. I keep losing ground right along, and would soon be hull down in the distance. That's why I let out the toot for help."

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Hugh looked serious.

"It means a delay while we examine things," he remarked, throwing off his coat as though getting ready for business.

"I'm sorry if I've gone and blundered again," Billy continued sadly. "It would serve me just about right if the rest of you went on and left me to my fate."

"Oh, rats, don't mention it," said Monkey indignantly. "What d'ye take us for, anyway? What's the use of being a scout if you won't hold out a helping hand to a comrade in distress? We'd expect you to do the same if one of our machines threw up the sponge, and sulked. Leave it to Hugh; he'll bring you around O. K."

That was an old story with the boys. "Leave it to Hugh" had become a sort of slogan with the members of the Wolf Patrol. Many a time had Billy, Bud Morgan, Arthur Cameron or some other member of the famous patrol, after trying in vain to solve a knotty problem, turned hopefully to the assistant scout master; and seldom had their sublime confidence in his ability to find a remedy been misplaced.

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As Hugh began to use his little monkey-wrench, unfastening several nuts, and testing one thing after another, the others watched with considerable interest. Minutes crept on until it began to look as though they had lost nearly half an hour on the road. "Billy Wolf," as he was often called by his chums, fretted terribly.

"Better leave me here while the rest of you go on," he said for the fourth time. He had hardly gotten the words out of his mouth when he heard Hugh give a little satisfied chuckle.

"Located the trouble?" asked Monkey eagerly, with a triumphant glance toward Gusty, as though to say: "There! what did I tell you; Hugh is the boss hand to see through things, isn't he?"

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"After all," explained Hugh, "it was a mighty simple thing, but it happened that I tried about seven other possible causes for a gradual slowing up of the motor before I reached the carburetor. Why, it was only the needle valve that stuck. I'll have it working as good as ever in a jiffy; and you'll not be bothered again from *that* cause in a hurry, Billy, old fellow."

"Oh! was that it?" remarked the relieved Billy. "I began to think the whole business must be on the bum, and that I'd have to walk and push the plagued machine along with me to the village

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three miles back. Huh! believe me, I'll keep an eye on that tricky valve after this. I may make lots of mistakes, but it's seldom I tumble into the same old hole twice. I'm on, Hugh; I see how you do it. I'm learning something new every hour of the day. Seems like there's an everlasting lot of things I don't grasp yet. The more I know the more I don't know. Laugh now, Monkey, but you're in the same boat yourself."

Hugh made short work of his job, and presently handed the motorcycle over to its owner.

On the way back to where his own machine had been left, he was pleased to hear Gusty remark with considerable vim, as though he meant it:

"I like the way you fellows carry on, honest I do. I've been with a set that would have left a chap in the lurch to take care of his own wheel while they rode on and told him they'd wait at the next wayside inn, where they could get a cool drink of mineral water, and lie around resting up till he came. You scouts stand by each other. And I understand now why they elected you assistant scout master of the troop. You're Johnny-on-the-spot for the job, all right, Hugh Hardin. Excuse me if I ask all sorts of foolish questions about the way scouts manage. I'm getting up to my ears interested in this game. I never dreamed it could be so fascinating. And the more you hear, the more you want to know."

"That's the secret of the rapid growth of the scout movement," Hugh told him. "As soon as you get the average boy interested he asks questions, and once that happens, he learns things that set him agoing. After that nothing can stop him; and in a year's time, you wouldn't know it was the same boy, because he takes such an interest in a thousand things that are happening all around him."

Soon they were moving on again, and from the signals that came from the rear, Hugh knew that all was well with Billy.

Perhaps two more miles had been placed behind them, when all of a sudden the pacemaker gave a short blast on his horn, and slowed up as though he had made a discovery of some sort. Immediately he and Gusty were off, he leaned his motorcycle up against a convenient tree, not waiting to make use of the stand, and leading the other through a fringe of bushes, observed:

"Is that your car, Gusty?"

The rich man's son gave a low cry of mingled surprise and joy.

"I declare if it isn't my runabout!" he exclaimed. "And to think how easily you glimpsed it ahead. But what do you expect they drew it in here for, Hugh? Has the gas given out, or was there a smash of some sort? Seems to be all right, as far's I can see at a glance."

"We'll have to figure that out in a minute or so," replied the other. "You keep on examining the car while I look around to see which way the two men went from here. That would be apt to give us a clew."

"In what way?" demanded Gusty, while he started to look his property over, in order to

learn the condition in which it had been left by the two robbers.

"Well, if they kept on along the road it would look as if they had been unable to use the runabout further," answered the patrol leader, as he stooped and began to use his practiced eyes to advantage. "On the other hand, if they plunged right into the woods I would think they had come as far as they expected to on wheels, and finished their journey afoot."

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"What a greenhorn I am not to have understood that!" declared the other boy, thoroughly disgusted with himself for not having taken the trouble to exercise his brain more in the past, so as to be alive to such situations as this; it galled his pride to have to depend on anyone else for information.

Monkey came along and dropped out of his saddle beside them. He was just as much surprised and tickled at seeing the car as the owner had been; but he did not immediately proceed to ask questions. He knew what Hugh was doing when he saw him bending down and examining the surrounding earth.

Just as Billy hove in sight and slowed down so that he could join his chums, the patrol leader remarked that the trail of the two men ran off directly into the thick of the woods, which at this particular spot grew rather densely.

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"And I can't find the least thing the matter with my car," Gusty observed. "There seems to be some gasoline in the tank, too. So that they could have gone a good many more miles if they'd wished. Yes, you were right, Hugh. They abandoned it for another reason. I'd even say they might know of some hiding place in this region, and right here is a short-cut to it."

"That was a time you struck the right nail on the head, Gusty," remarked Hugh. "I believe that's what it will turn out to be in the end."

"Of course we push through the woods, don't we?" queried Monkey.

"And that means we'll have to leave our machines hid away somewhere," Billy added, with a ring of solicitude in his voice. "I'd like to do something so as to make it impossible for anybody to ride away on my motorcycle while I'm gone. It would be a tough joke on us to chase after those rogues while they came back on the sly and hooked two of our precious wheels."

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"We can fix that all right. Meanwhile, Gusty, you disable your runabout in some temporary way, so that it couldn't be of any use to anybody until the missing part is supplied."

"A great idea, as sure as you're born! I can do it as easy as anything!" exclaimed the other boy, hastening to carry out the suggestion without even stopping to consider that only an hour or so back he would have laughed scornfully if some one had told him that before long he would be taking orders from Hugh Hardin as meekly as any private in the scout troop.

All this took but little time, and presently they were ready to advance along the forest trail. Gusty found himself quivering with eagerness to

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see how these boys would manage to carry out the tracking part of the business. Had it been left to him, he would have made a sorry mess of it, he admitted to himself. His pride was touched, and he began to reflect that never again would he allow himself to be placed in a position where even a boy like Billy Worth, whom he had previously looked on as rather stupid, could give him pointers. He would learn these things for himself. Perhaps he might even organize a new patrol, and be its leader, if he only busied himself, and stocked his head with useful knowledge along the line of scoutcraft.

"Here's what they were heading for!" said Hugh softly after they had been moving along for some ten minutes. He had several times pointed out faint indications of footprints to Gusty.

"Why, it looks like an old abandoned road all grown up with grass and briars!" declared Monkey.

"Just what it is," replied Hugh. "I've been expecting to run across it right along, because my map shows where it lies. You see, once ever so many years ago many wagons came along here every day, some loaded with corn or wheat or rye, and others taking flour back home to the farm."

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"Oh! I know now what you mean, Hugh," said Billy. "There was a spot marked on your map, and I read the words 'old mill.' Yes, and I remember hearing tell about some such place up here in the wilderness. Thirty years ago a miller used the water power of a creek that empties into the river to grind his grist. Do you think that's where these two thieves were heading for, Hugh?"

"Looks like it," nodded the patrol leader, pointing down. "You can see that as soon as they struck this sunken road they didn't even halt, but started right along it, heading that way. We'll do the same, and after this please speak in low whispers if you have to say anything. I don't believe that mill can be more than half a mile away if it's that."

They moved on, all of them half bent over as they sought to keep track of the footprints of the two men. It was quite thrilling, Gusty admitted to himself every little while. He was enjoying it very much. If Boy Scouts practiced this sort of stunt very often he did not wonder that so many fellows had joined the organization; and the resolution he had taken continued to grip him more and more the deeper he pried into the matter.

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"I think I hear water splashing ahead there, Hugh!" whispered Monkey, who had a very keen pair of ears.

"Yes, we must be getting close to the dam where the water falls," the patrol leader told him. "Pretty soon we'll know whether we've cornered the rats or not. Steady now, and keep under cover the best you can. Remember, not a sound, fellows!"

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CHAPTER VIII.

"There it is!"

Billy gripped the arm of the patrol leader when he said this in a faint tone. Indeed, all of them must have glimpsed the old mill at about the same time, for the trees had thinned out somewhat ahead; and that gurgle of dripping water drew their eyes toward the spot where the forlorn structure stood.

Having been neglected for many years, it was now only a tumble-down wreck. The big wheel was covered with green moss over which tiny streams of water trickled to drop with a splash into the pool beneath.

In the eyes of Billy, it had a haunted look. He admitted to himself that he would not much fancy paying a visit to the old mill after darkness had set in. Of course, he did not believe in *ghosts*, for what boy will admit that weakness? But even the presence of owls and bats, and perhaps a prowling mink from the stream, would be apt to make a fellow's flesh creep if he found himself left alone in such a place.

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"Think they're there, Hugh?" Monkey Stallings murmured in the other's ear.

"Somebody is, for a fact," came the ready response, "because if you look sharp you can see a little smoke curling up from the chimney."

Gusty had not thought to glance at that part of the mill before. Now he saw that this was so. Evidently there must be some sort of a fire within. And as the mill was said to have been deserted by its owner years back, the chances seemed to be that this blaze had been made by the tramps.

"Wait here for me while I take a scout and find out if it's so," Hugh told his companions, "and be sure to keep down, because one of them might step out suddenly and discover you. That would put the fat in the fire, and spoil all our fine plans. I depend on you, Billy, and Monkey."

"Count me in too, Hugh," urged Gusty, perhaps considerably to his own surprise, for it was a new role for him to play "second fiddle" to anybody.

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So Hugh crawled away. He went on his hands and knees, and avoiding the open road, chose rather to creep along where the wild growing bushes would shelter him from being observed. So cleverly did he advance, Gusty noticed, that even should one of the tramps be watching, there was little chance that he might discover anything amiss. Plainly these scouts had learned their little lesson and knew how to play the game, he told himself, as he saw Hugh sliding across a more exposed spot on his stomach, hitching himself along almost as a snake might have done.

Hugh was gone for some little time, and then he reappeared, returning over the same course he had taken before. Billy immediately read success upon the other's face.

"Then they are there, is that it, Hugh?" he queried when he could place his lips close to the other's ear.

"Yes, I managed to get a look-in. Both men are lying down, and I think they must have been cooking something to eat from the smell I got. One is smoking a pipe, and the other dozing, every now and then taking a nip from a black bottle that is passed between them. I saw the short one examining a wicked looking gun. I guess he's just the kind of a bad man to use it before he'd think of giving up to a pack of Boy Scouts. We've got to go slow if we hope to win out here."

"Well, what's the program, Hugh?" asked Gusty eagerly.

"I've figured it out this way," came the answer. "I'll leave the rest of you here on guard while I make my way to the river, and find the island where some of the scouts are in camp under charge of Don Miller. All you have to do is to lie low and never do the least thing to let them know they're watched."

"But what if they take a notion to skip out?" suggested Monkey Stallings.

"Then you must be ready to leave a message for us in a forked stick right here, while you try and follow after them. If that happens, make as broad a trail as you can, because it will save the rest of us heaps of hard work following. And above all things don't let them capture you, because from their looks I rather think it would go hard if you fell into their hands. They're a tough looking lot all told."

"I should say they were all of that, Hugh," admitted Gusty, who had reason to know.

Before he left them, Hugh again examined his pocket map of the country. It was fashioned only as a sort of road guide for tourists, but anyone could judge from the formation of things about how far it was between the old mill and the river at the place where a bridge spanned the stream. And not a great way above this particular spot, the island lay upon which the scouts were in camp.

Five minutes later, and Hugh replaced the map in his pocket.

"Got your bearings all right, have you?" asked Billy, with more or less solicitude, for everything depended on the leader finding the camp of their comrades.

"I reckon it'll be all right," Hugh assured him. "You see I expect to go back first of all to where we left our motorcycles. Once in the saddle I can soon find my way to that bridge across the river. The island is only half a mile or so above, where the river widens; and I hope to find some sort of trail along the bank where I can push my machine."

"Will you come back the same way?" asked Monkey.

"I don't know about that," Hugh replied. "The boys must have been tramping around more or less since they've been up the river, and perhaps

they may know of some short-cut over the hills to the mill. But I'm off. Don't expect us until late in the afternoon."

"Gee! I hope you get here before night sets in," muttered Billy with a quick glance toward the weird looking mill as seen through the scattered undergrowth.

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Hugh did not have the least difficulty in following the back trail. All he had to do was to keep to the road until he came to a couple of white birches which he had noticed hung out in a queer way just about the place where the trail had formed a junction with the overgrown mill road. After that he kept his eyes mostly on the ground, where he could readily pick up the various footprints left by all those who had passed along.

When he finally arrived at the place where the motorcycles had been hidden, he hastened to get his own machine in hand. Once he started along the back road, he made quick time of it. There was small danger that he would lose his bearings, as Billy might have done under similar conditions, for Hugh made sure of things as he went along.

In due time he reached the bridge that spanned the river, which was quite narrow at this point. Looking up the stream, Hugh found that it made a quick turn some little distance away. He could also see that it was beginning to widen at this point.

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"I guess it can't be very far to Raccoon Island," he told himself. Having jumped from the saddle, he started to push his machine toward the left side of the road.

As he had hoped might be the case, he found indications there to tell him that some sort of a trail ran along the river bank heading upstream. Doubtless, parties going fishing may have made it; and all sorts of people had used it in coming or going. Cows even followed the beaten track, for Hugh quickly discovered traces of their presence.

"Not half as bad as I expected," he told himself as he pushed on, though it was anything but fun to urge that heavy machine over roots and uneven ground.

Hugh generally looked at the bright side of things. He kept his spirits up when the clouds grew dark and forbidding by telling himself that it might easily be a great deal worse. That is the way with scouts; they are taught always to look for the silver lining of the cloud and never to despair.

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Twice the boy had to make a short halt in order to wipe his streaming brow with his red bandana handkerchief, and rest for a minute or so. But he always started on again with a grim determination to get there.

The third time he stopped it was to listen eagerly. Then he chuckled.

"I ought to know that voice among a hundred," he remarked. "No one can sing quite as well as Blake Merton. I must be pretty close to the island camp right now. One more push will do

the business, I expect. There's a fellow I know who won't be sorry, either."

As he continued to urge the weighty motorcycle onward, Hugh presently saw something moving ahead of him. It was very like a white flag, only in its center it had a blood red square. He certainly ought to know a signal flag, since he had learned to wigwag equal to the best in the troop, and there were several experts among the scouts at that, particularly Bud Morgan, who had once worked with a surveying party, Arthur Cameron, Blake Merton, Walter Osborne, Sam Winter and Cooper Fennimore.

Two boys clad in the familiar khaki of the scouts were standing on a little elevation that was hardly more than a mound. They seemed to be in communication with some one who must be over on the island. No doubt they were indulging in a little talk, partly for the fun of the thing, and to improve their knowledge of the Myers code at the same time.

Hugh stood still and gave the slogan of the Wolf patrol:

"How-oo-ooo!"

This weird, long-drawn-out cry startled the pair with the flags. When they craned their necks and looked around, Hugh waved his hand.

"Hello! Sam and Cooper, how d'ye do?" he called out, starting toward them.

"Why! it's Hugh!" cried one of the scouts as though rather taken aback by the sudden discovery. They had hardly been expecting that the assistant scout master would get up to Raccoon Island while they were in camp there.

"And say, look what he's got along with him, will you?" exclaimed the second boy astonished. "A splendid motorcycle as sure as you live! No wonder he had to stay home and wait for it to come along. Chances are that Billy Worth and Monkey Stallings have got the same kind of bully mount. Are they back of you, Hugh? What news do you bring to camp?"

"Plenty of things doing, boys," returned the patrol leader. "But you'll have to hold your horses until I can see all the rest of the boys. Time's too valuable for me to tell the story more than once."

"Whew! do you hear that, Sam?" cried Cooper Fennimore excitedly. "Hugh as much as says there's something going to happen to give us all a little whirl. Seemed to feel it in my bones this very morning when I turned out, that this day wouldn't go by as quietly as the others did. Tom Sherwood said it must be going to rain, and that was what affected me; and Jack Dunham asked me how many helps I'd taken of that stew last night, because it was a case of indigestion I had developed; but you see after all it was what you might call a premonition of trouble. Coming events cast their shadows before, they say; and now I know it."

"How do you get back and forth between the island and the shore?" demanded the newcomer impatiently, because Cooper Fennimore was known to be a great talker, and apt to waste

considerable precious time.

"Why," said Sam Winter, "we've got a cute little punt that they call a dinghy, which belongs to the big motorboat. You can push it with a pole in the shallow water, or use a paddle if it gets too deep for that. Here it is drawn up on the bank. It will just carry three of us, Hugh."

"Then let's be moving across as quick as we can," remarked Hugh, "because the afternoon is wearing away, and there's a lot to be done before sunset, if we expect to capture the two hoboes who held Gusty Merrivale up on the road and robbed him of the money he was taking to pay the men working in his father's granite quarry."

"Whee! listen to that, Sam!" gasped Cooper Fennimore, and then he hastened to push the flat-bottomed little tender into the water and take his place, ready to use the pole while Sam handled the paddle.

As they approached the island, there were evidences of considerable excitement ashore and a number of boys clad in the familiar khaki lined up to give their leader the customary scout salute. This, of course, pleased Hugh very much, for he was human enough to feel a thrill of pride in the affection his comrades seemed to entertain for him.

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CHAPTER IX. OVER THE RIDGE.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Scout Master!" called Bud Morgan as the dinghy drew in to the shore, and all the boys crowded down so as to be ready to shake hands with Hugh. "How'd you come up here, I'd like to know?"

"Oh! he's got the dandiest looking twin-cylinder motorcycle you ever laid eyes on!" burst out Cooper Fennimore.

"But there's something more than that he's got to tell us," added Sam as he threw his paddle ashore, and made ready to follow it personally. "He said there was no time to string the yarn more'n once, so we would have to wait till all the bunch had gathered around. Get ready to quiver, everybody, because there's a thrill coming for you!"

Of course these words aroused the curiosity of the scouts. Even as they shook hands with Hugh, they were beginning to watch his face as though under the impression that they might be able to read his secret there.

"I ought to start right in the beginning, boys," began the newcomer, "and tell you how we three, Billy Worth, Monkey Stallings and myself, planned to give you a surprise by running up here on our new motorcycles, which came the day after you left on the motorboat. That was why we said we couldn't go along, but might be up in time to share the homeward voyage. Well, we had a great time practicing, because Billy

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was bound to get into all sorts of trouble. But we managed to get off to-day. Somebody bring me a drink, please, I'm as dry as a bone."

Quickly his want was supplied, and then Hugh went on with his brief story. As it is already familiar to the reader, there is no need of repeating it here. Hugh wasted as little time as he could in bringing out the facts. From the way in which those boys hung on his every word, with eyes full of eagerness and wonder, it could be seen that he was making a decided sensation.

In a few minutes he had reached the conclusion by merely mentioning the fact of his coming to the island camp for help. Looking around him, he saw that there were just eleven boys present not counting himself. He also noticed that Arthur Cameron seemed to limp more or less whenever he had occasion to move, as though he might have sprained his ankle in some way; and that was an unfortunate thing for Arthur, since it marked him as one of those who would have to remain behind in order to watch the camp while the others were away on duty.

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"Call for volunteers to go back with you, and clean up those hoboies at the old mill, Hugh!" suggested Don Miller, who had been having his hands full keeping the boys in order during the absence of both Lieutenant Denmead and Hugh, and was only too well pleased at having some one come to relieve him.

"All who want to go, raise their right hand!" called out Walter Osborne, leader of the Hawk patrol.

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It seemed to be unanimous, for there were just eleven hands elevated. Hugh smiled and seemed pleased, though he knew that at least two among the scouts would be compelled to endure heart burnings through disappointment.

"Listen to me," he remarked quietly and seriously, so that the boys knew he meant every word that was said, "Several will have to stay in camp. Arthur, with that lame ankle, you would hardly be fit to take an over-hill hike, so make up your mind that this time you're not to be in the swim. And Ned Twyford will keep you company."

He selected the last named scout because he knew that Ned had been sick before coming on this trip, and was not overly stout at best. If there was apt to be a battle of any sort with those tramps, then only the strongest boys should be allowed to take part in it, Hugh concluded.

Ned bit his lips as though in protest; but he knew better than to give vent openly to his disappointment. A scout learns to obey without questioning when it is a superior who gives the order; and in this way he shows that he has some of the elements of a true soldier in him though fighting is foreign to his training, and it must be resorted to only when all other means fail.

112

"How will we go, Hugh?" asked Bud Morgan, who had stepped over to one of the tents and reappeared, bearing a baseball bat in his hands.

His example started the others to skirmishing around in search of clubs. One of the boys

strapped on his camp hatchet; another secured the belt that held his hunting knife. Still more found various-sized sticks to their liking. One and all looked grim and determined, as though they realized that this expedition was not in the nature of a picnic, but a serious undertaking, indeed.

"I was hoping that some of you might know a short-cut over the hill in the direction of that abandoned grist mill?" Hugh observed, looking straight at Don Miller.

113

The smile that immediately broke out on the face of the Fox leader told him that he was about to receive reassuring news.

"We do know a way over," Don hastened to say. "Fact is some of us had heard about that old mill, and knew about where it lay. So just the day before yesterday, Arthur coaxed me to go with him. He said he wanted to snap off a few photographs of the ruin, which was worth while seeing, somebody had told him. Well, we made a cut across, and found the mill all right, but the clouds had come up so black that he never took a single picture. Arthur was feeling pretty bad about it, and made me promise to go with him again before we broke camp. Then, on the way back, he wrenched his foot, and I had to half carry him the last mile."

"You saw no sign of anyone around the place when you were there, I suppose," Hugh remarked.

114

"Well, there were footprints enough," Don replied, "and we reckoned that parties sometimes wandered up that way to try the fishing in the pond above the mill or in the runway. But we didn't meet anybody, if that's what you mean, Hugh."

"And Don, couldn't you manage to carry my camera along, so if the sun shines you might find a chance to snap off those three views I showed you?" pleaded Arthur, as he held up the little black box.

Don gave a quick look toward the scout master.

"No harm carrying the camera," the latter told him. "If you get some decent views, we'd all like to have copies later on to remind us of the adventure. Better be getting ashore as fast as you can, boys. Every minute is going to count, you know. Ned, if you feel like it, act as ferryman, won't you? Three passengers might crowd aboard if you're careful how you sit."

"It's so shallow that you could almost wade with your trousers turned up to your knees," one of the boys declared, but since they all had their leggings on none of them started to try this method of getting ashore.

115

Hugh, ever thoughtful, gave a few more orders.

"We hope to be back some time to-night," he told Arthur, who would have to remain behind, "but, in case necessity keeps us from doing it, we ought to take something to eat along to serve as a snack."

"Well, that's sensible advice, I must say," remarked Walter Osborne. "It is tough to lie

down to sleep on an empty stomach.”

“I generally lie on my back!” put in Tom Sherwood quickly.

“And that accounts for your snoring so loud,” he was told by one of the others.

Meanwhile the ferrying process was in full blast. When Ned had landed three of the scouts, he hastened back for another lot. After all, it did not take a great while to get those who were going on the tramp ashore, there being four trips necessary, since ten were to make up the party that expected to hike over the hill to the region of the old mill.

116

“Now I’m going to put the trip in your hands, Don,” Hugh said, as the entire party stood on the bank. “Look out for my motorcycle, will you, Ned, while I’m off? And if there is any chance for rain get some sort of cover over it if you can. So long as it’s so new and shiny I hate to get any part rusty. So-long, and here’s hoping we’ll all come back as sound of limb as we start out!”

“Same here, Hugh, and fellows. The best of luck go with you. If you come home by way of the hill, give us the signal when you’re up there, so we can have the dinghy ashore and waiting,” and as the party trailed along by twos and threes, with Don and Hugh in the lead, Ned waved his hand after them.

They were soon busily engaged in climbing the hill. Don kept on the alert, for he did not want to make any error of judgment now that the scout master had given him free reign. He had paid strict attention to many features of the landscape when going and coming on that other day, as a true scout is always expected to do when on the move, and in this way it seemed almost as though he were following a blazed path.

117

Now and then they could look back when an opening occurred, and secure glimpses of the winding river and the broad stretch of water where Raccoon Island lay. Once they caught sight of the two scouts in camp, who had evidently glimpsed their moving forms, for they were waving their hats. The sound of their cheers also came, borne on the wind up to the high spot where Hugh and his comrades had stopped for a minute to get their breath, as the summit of the hill was still above.

All of the boys were young and vigorous. They had also had more or less experience in mountain climbing, so that their muscles were fairly hardened to the exercise.

118

“The top of the ridge!” announced the guide as he came to a fourth pause, and perhaps at another time some of the scouts might have thought it their duty to raise a cheer at hearing how they had surmounted the difficult climb; but they knew better than to start anything of that sort now without orders from the chief.

Scouts on duty must refrain from giving expression to their feelings, leaving all that to the time when they are at play. They are expected always to keep their wits about them, and to exercise judgment.

It was down-grade after that, and much easier for making their way along. Don was showing commendable ability in following the return tracks of himself and Arthur, for they had saved considerable time and distance in coming back, having learned where short cuts might be made.

"We are getting close to the mill, Hugh," announced the Fox leader, after some more time had elapsed, during which they had made good progress.

119

"Here, what's this right now over here?" asked Bud Morgan.

"It's a little stream," Ralph Kenyon volunteered, "and like as not the overflow of the mill pond. I've never happened to get over in this part of the country while setting my traps for mink, otter, skunk, foxes and the like in winter, so you see I can't post you as I might were we on my old stamping grounds. But from the specks of foam on the water here I should say it has come over a dam not far away from this spot."

"Just what I thought, Ralph," said Tom Sherwood. "If that's the case, I reckon we'd all of us better close our potato traps and talk low."

"The mill is still some distance away," Hugh told them. "I know because that foam comes from the creek tumbling down among those rocks yonder. Don, you've been here before, how about it?"

120

"Won't get there for nearly ten minutes according to my figuring," came the ready response that proved the reasoning of the scout master to be nearly accurate.

"And I should think we'd only have to follow up this little stream to strike the mill," suggested Walter Osborne.

"That was what we laid out the other day," Don told him, "and it turned out all right. So, as I've luckily managed to bring you over the rise and within touch of the mill, I'll only too gladly turn over things to Hugh here. He knows the lay of the land, I wager, and——"

"Sh! drop down, everybody, behind these bushes!" whispered Hugh. "I saw something moving over yonder, and chances are the hoboies have broken loose!"

121

CHAPTER X.

LYING IN AMBUSH.

These low words coming from the scout master caused a general "ducking" on the part of the scouts. Every fellow carried out the tactics of screening himself from observation according to his individual notion. This one dodged behind an adjacent tree, another curled up back of a friendly bush, while a third might have been seen hugging the ground, with his nose touching the virgin soil. Possibly this latter class believed, like the foolish ostrich, that, as long as they could not see anything, their bodies must also be concealed.

And after all it turned out to be a false alarm. Hugh himself was the first to ascertain that it had been a rabbit bounding away that had disturbed his peace of mind, and caused him to give that sudden warning.

"It's all over, fellows, and no damage done," the scout master told them in his cautious way, though at the same time he could not help smiling at the ridiculous attitudes assumed by some of the scouts in their wild endeavor to hide. "Only a scared little bunny, as it turns out. We'll go on where we left off."

122

Immediately every boy straightened up again, and tried to look as though he knew all along that it was nothing worth mentioning. Several pretended to be looking on the ground, just as though they believed they had dropped something. A few, however, colored up, and allowed sheepish grins to decorate their faces.

It was not very long before Hugh realized that the scenery began to look rather familiar to him. This would indicate that they were getting close to the place in which he had left Billy, Monkey, and Gusty Merrivale.

Now Hugh did not wish to lead the entire command too near the mill. Something might happen to betray their presence before things had been properly arranged to surprise the robbers.

Under such circumstances, if the "mountain will not come to Mahomet, why one must go to the mountain," an old Eastern proverb says. Accordingly, Hugh held up his hand to signify that every one was to drop down and lie low. Then he started in to make a sound that was similar to the grunt of a hedgehog searching for succulent roots under the trees.

123

Every once in so often the scout master would grunt, and then wait. He fancied that either Billy or his mate would catch the sound, for which they must have been listening more or less anxiously for a long time past. And as all these things had been arranged beforehand, the boys would know that it meant they should begin to back away, so as to place a little more distance between themselves and the ramshackle building that sheltered the enemy.

Five, six, seven minutes passed thus. Then, during one of the waits between the giving of the signals, there came a troubled grunting from a copse near by, which told Hugh the others must be coming. He encouraged them by getting part way up on his knees, and waving his red bandana handkerchief three times.

Immediately afterward a figure came stealing toward the concealed scouts, which turned out to be Monkey. When Hugh discovered two others following cautiously in the wake of the leader, he breathed easier. Perhaps, while on the way over to the island camp and back, he may have had more or less fear that some accident would betray the three boys to the wary tramps. The consequences would, of course, be very unpleasant.

124

Soon the trio had joined the balance of the boys, and, crouching among the bushes, they shook hands all around. Why, even Gusty Merrivale

persisted in clutching the digits of these friendly fellows! Circumstances beyond his control had placed the rich man's son in a position where things began to assume a new aspect in his eyes, and the sensation in his heart was so very gratifying that he allowed himself to give way to it entirely.

Hugh, believing that they should all work together, had Don Miller and Walter Osborne as leaders of the Foxes and Hawks get their heads close to his and discussed the situation from many angles.

125

On the way across country, while he and Don were keeping at the head of the hiking party, the scout master had asked many questions. Of course he knew something concerning the outside of the mill for, at the time he had taken that one scout around the place, he had made sure of surrounding conditions. Then Don had been all over inside when he and Arthur had roved this way, and he was in a position to tell how the place was arranged. Don was a careful, wideawake scout who had long since learned the value of keeping his wits about him, not knowing when it might prove advantageous to his interests to be able to describe what he had seen.

Consequently he had been able to draw something of a map of the interior of the mill, tell where the rusty and worthless machinery lay, and also just about where passing hoboies had always bunked, as the remains of many a cooking-fire proved.

Beckoning to Billy to draw near, Hugh asked him if anything out of the way had happened while he was gone. Nothing had apparently, according to the report of the Wolf scout. Once or twice they had seen a movement in the vicinity of the mill, as a hobo came out to take a suspicious look around, or perhaps gather up an armful of wood to keep the fire going until the time came to cook another scanty meal. But, as the three lads faithfully kept securely hidden, their presence in the vicinity had not been suspected so far as they could say.

126

The afternoon was pretty well gone. It began to look as though there was not the slightest chance for them to return to the island camp until another day had dawned, even if the shift might be made then. Billy understood this, and, as he was a great feeder, he became very solicitous to learn whether the boys had been thoughtful enough to provide against an enforced stay there by the mill. He also wanted to know if they had remembered that he and Monkey, and probably Gusty also, possessed something like an appetite; and whether the material to stop this squeamish feeling down below had been carried along.

127

He was made happy by having several of the boys assure him that they had stocked up with more than one ration, so that soon Billy figured he would have no end of a good time making way with the extra provisions.

"Nothing doing until it gets dark, seems like," Billy told some of the others, for having been in consultation with the patrol leaders, he had managed to pick up information in regard to the decision reached in the council of war.

"And that strikes me as a mighty clever thing," remarked Bud Morgan. "An attack like this is always apt to be successful when made under cover of the night."

"Yes," added Cooper Fennimore quickly, "in all the stories of border warfare I ever devoured, the Injuns always waited till a short time before dawn to rush the block-house. Seems like folks sleep heaviest just before day breaks, though any old time is good enough for me to get in seven winks."

"But I don't think Hugh means to wait till that late," Billy told them. "From the smattering I managed to pick up, it seemed that they had figured on creeping up as soon as night set in, and starting things to working."

Bud Morgan gripped his bat with vigor.

"Can't come any too soon to suit me," he muttered. As a rule Bud was not of a vindictive nature, but he could see that the Merrivale boy had not only been robbed but cruelly hammered by the fists of the two ugly hoboes and it riled the scout considerably.

"Let's see," mused Billy, while waiting for the patrol leaders to complete their plans and announce the method of working to the rank and file, "all told there are how many of us on deck?"

"A dozen, no, just thirteen, counting Gusty here, who looks as if he were in a humor to do his part in the fight, if there is one," observed Tom Sherwood.

"Um, thirteen is said to be an unlucky number, too," grumbled Billy.

"Don't let that bother you any," Jack Dunham told him. "I haven't a single ounce of superstition in my make-up, and only wish it was Friday, the thirteenth of the month, into the bargain. I hate all that clap-trap so much that I always try my best to start things on the bad luck day. And so far there hasn't any trouble swooped down on me. In fact, I've had more than my share of good luck."

"Mebbe you carry a charm in your pocket—the left hind leg of a rabbit that has been shot in a graveyard at midnight in the full of the moon," suggested Monkey Stallings mischievously, at which Jack only snorted and curled his upper lip, as though he could not find words to voice his contempt for such foolishness.

"There's the sun setting, boys," remarked Blake Merton uneasily, for he had never been very much of a hand in any rough and tumble game like football or hockey, and secretly would have remained just as well satisfied had Hugh picked him out to stick in camp with Arthur Cameron and Ned Twyford.

"Bully for the sun!" Bud declared, shaking his head aggressively. "The old chap knows when he isn't wanted."

"He knows a good thing when he sees it, anyhow," added Billy yawning, for he dearly loved to sleep, and the idea of the sun going to rest for something like nine hours appealed to him very much.

"The council is breaking up," Ralph Kenyon whispered.

"That's right!" said Sam Winter of the Otters. He picked up the rather tough looking cudgel, which he had managed to secure while on the way across the ridge, and at the same time a flash of excitement came into his eyes.

"I'm going to make a very important suggestion to the scout master when he has told us what our part in the game will be," Billy remarked. The others eyed him respectfully, wondering what sagacious idea had come into the mind of this comrade who was a boon companion of Hugh's.

131

But now the three patrol leaders came up. Hugh made motions intended to gather all the others in a close clump, because he did not wish to speak any louder than could be helped. Though they had selected a retired spot in which to gather and consult, there was always more or less danger of being overheard. Sounds sometimes travel remarkably far in the woods, especially just as dusk steals out from the shadows and starts to envelop all Nature in her mantle.

"This is what we've fixed on, fellows," began Hugh, who never made a practice of using twenty words when ten would answer the same purpose. "Don knows a way by which some of us can crawl into a sort of loft that lies just above the place the two tramps will use for sleeping, because of a layer of straw he saw there. I'll let him take four of the best climbers with him—they will be Monkey, Ralph, Sam, and Blake Merton. The rest of you will stick by me, and we hope to get fixed so that when the signal is given the scouts will drop and tumble in on those hoboies, hobbling them by sheer numbers, so that they won't have so much as a chance even to use their fists, much less their guns. Get that, do you?"

132

"As plain as print, Hugh," advised Bud Morgan, "but what's the battle sign going to be, so every one of us may be keen to sense the signal and act on the flash?"

"When Don has placed his force just as he wants it, he'll scratch four times on the floor just like a gnawing rat might happen to do—four times, no more or less, remember, Don. Then, after waiting about a minute or so for every fellow to get a full breath, I'll give a whistle. Of course that will startle the men, but we calculate to be tumbling in on them pell-mell before they can begin to get up. Divide your squad, Don, so that at least two will drop with a squash on that short rascal, because I rather think he'll prove the harder one to knuckle under."

133

"And do we have the privilege of using these, if necessary?" asked Bud, holding up the home-run bat which was his special property, and had been brought along on the camping trip in anticipation of some lucky chance for a game.

"Only in case of absolute necessity," Hugh replied soberly. "Don't forget that you are first of all scouts, and pledged to try every other means before resorting to force."

"Is that all settled then, Mr. Scout Master?"

asked Billy eagerly. "Because if you've no other directions to give us, I'd like mighty well to make what I consider a very important suggestion."

The rest of the boys pricked up their ears. It was not often that good-natured Billy Worth conjured up any important idea in that rather easy-going brain of his, and they were more than curious to hear what it might be.

134

"All right, Billy, let us have it," the scout master told him, "and if it sounds good to me, I'll be only too glad to incorporate it in the program."

"Then if you stop and think what time of day this is, Mr. Scout Master, perhaps you'll remember that some of the boys are right now lugging a whole lot of stuff around with them that would be doing a heap more good if placed where it properly belongs. In other words, what's to hinder us from eating our suppers while waiting for it to get dark enough to cover our move?"

Several of the scouts began to snicker, but no one looked unhappy. The truth of the matter was that every fellow was willing to confess that he had a vacancy in his system that was crying out to be filled, and they had long ago learned in school that Nature abhors a vacuum.

Even Hugh chuckled, as though the idea was not displeasing.

135

"That's a sensible remark of yours, Billy," he said readily enough, "and after all, we'll feel better qualified to do great deeds if we strengthen our systems with our regular feed that comes along about this time every evening. So I'll appoint you a committee of one to ask the fellows to divvy up. And, please, no talking while we eat, unless it's in whispers. This is no time for joking, you know."

Billy found no great difficulty in getting the boys who carried the "snacks" to place them in a great heap in front of Hugh. It looked like a tremendous amount of provisions when every fellow had unloaded; but when one remembered that thirteen lusty boyish appetites had to be satisfied, that mountain of bread and crackers and cheese did not seem so alarming after all. In fact, it would be next door to a miracle if a shred of food remained when all would announce themselves contented.

There was a busy time for thirteen pairs of jaws for the next quarter of an hour. And, after that, no one found any reason to complain because of having to carry rations, since there wasn't so much as a single sandwich left to give them trouble.

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CHAPTER XI.

WHEN THE RAT SCRATCHED.

It was almost dark.

These lads were accustomed to camping out, and believed that they knew nearly all about the many sounds likely to be heard in the woods

around that region. However, the fact that stories had been told about the old mill being haunted gave several of them an uneasy feeling.

Since few persons ever came up here, there having been no grist in the hopper of the mill for many years, Nature had taken back her own. Everywhere bushes, vines, briars and weeds abounded, and the little wild animals frisked about under the trees as though they looked upon that spot as their especial domain.

Night birds, too, began to croak and utter their various doleful cries, particularly a family of screech owls that called to one another with whinnies and long-drawn loving notes.

138

Then there was the constant fretful murmur of the water, dripping over the moss-covered wheel of the mill, or forcing a passage through crevices of the dam. Taken all together, things conspired to make some of the boys shrug their shoulders, and keep rather close to their mates under the conviction that there is strength in union.

Besides all this they could not forget that they meant to assail a couple of "tough nuts," as Billy called the pair of hobo yeggmen in the mill. This alone was sufficient to strain their courage, for they were but boys.

Every one was pleased though, when the word came to start moving. Action is far preferable to lying idle and suffering the pangs of anxiety and uncertainty.

Each scout seemed to feel that he was on his mettle to do his level best. Gusty Merrivale took pattern from the rest, and really acquitted himself in a way to satisfy Hugh that he had the elements to make a good member of the troop, if he still continued to cherish his present desire to join them later on.

139

Soon they could catch fugitive glimpses of a faint gleam of light ahead. Every one knew without being told that this must proceed from some dusty window of the mill. The men inside had a fire going in place of a lamp or a candle. They possibly did not like the cobwebbed interior of the place any too well, and did their best to make it seem a bit more cheery by keeping the blaze going, even after their supper had been disposed of.

This pleased the scouts very much, for it showed them how things lay. There was less likelihood of any slip happening when those against whom they were opposed arranged matters so that they could be constantly seen.

Gradually the entire squad had gained a place close beside the mill. Those who had been picked out to accompany the leader of the Foxes had been warned to be very careful of their footing. In order to reach the outer shed from which they expected to attain the loft, they would be compelled to pass over the wet and slippery apron of the dam for several yards.

140

Should an unlucky scout manage to lose his footing, while crossing the heavy planks at this point, he might take a plunge that he would never forget. Instead of capturing the tramps, his mates would have their work cut out for them in rescuing him from a watery grave in the

deep pool that lay below.

There was one thing on which Hugh relied to help him out. This was the constant noise of running water which he expected would cover up any misplay on the part of a clumsy scout.

Leading his own detachment, Hugh made his way carefully to the broken-down door of the mill. No one of the various casual lodgers entertained of recent years in the abandoned structure had ever made the slightest effort to repair the door or smashed windows. All they cared for was a fairly decent roof over their heads that would shed water in a heavy rain.

In consequence, there was no trouble in finding an entrance to the building. Hugh, of course, did not push in without first taking an observation. He had learned caution as one of the first things after joining the scouts, and he knew the folly of not looking before leaping in the dark.

141

The fire was at the other end of the mill. He could see moving figures there as though the tramps were not yet ready to settle down to sleep. Hugh only hoped that no sudden thirst would cause one of the men to think of starting outside while he and the eager squad at his back were creeping stealthily toward the fire.

One by one, the boys crossed the doorsill like so many shadows. Gusty came last of all, not that he was asked to bring up the rear, but simply because he realized that he did not know as much about these things as the fellows who had been practicing scout tactics for months. It was a new departure for Gusty to admit so much even to himself, and showed the startling change that was being effected in his once overbearing disposition.

142

Now they were all inside, and so far everything had gone well. Not a fellow had tripped, or as much as made the least sound that could have reached the ears of the two tramps. Counting himself, Hugh had eight fellows in his bunch; Don carried just five. Surely they ought to be able to overwhelm the enemy by sheer force of numbers unless they managed unfortunately to get in each other's way. This was what Hugh wished to avoid most of all. He had even tried to give each member of his force a certain place in the line so as not to interfere with the rest.

Hugh led the advance. He used his eyes to good advantage in order to locate each and every possible source of cover, so as to profit by the same. Trailing in his wake came the others, striving to copy every movement made by their leader, for they knew that Hugh was a master hand at such things.

143

The hoboes seemed to be taking things as easy as they possibly could. They lay there stretched out at full length, smoking their black pipes, and exchanging occasional words. No doubt they had canvassed their plans for the immediate future, and had everything laid out ahead, never dreaming that danger lay near at hand.

Gusty, coming along in the rear, found himself unaccountably moved as he crept after one of the scouts. His initiation into some of the exciting episodes that are likely to come the way of active members of a patrol had been

unusually thrilling. He was having the best time of his life, and he realized that after all he had it in him right along to participate in such delightful happenings, though never until the present awakening to the fact.

Meanwhile Hugh, in the van, had decided just where he and his followers must come to a halt. They could not get quite as close to the lounging men as he would have liked. He expected the scouts in the loft to be in a position to strike the first blow.

144

They were no longer moving at the pace which had marked their entrance into the old mill. A snail could hardly have wriggled along slower than Hugh was doing at this stage of the proceedings, so at least Bud Morgan thought. Bud, however, had always been inclined toward haste in most things he undertook. Therefore, he could be hardly looked upon as a good judge.

At a previous time there had been a half-hearted attempt made to start operations, looking to rebuilding the falling walls of the abandoned mill. It had been given up as hopeless, but, at the same time, quite a pile of stones had been carried into the place. By good luck it came about that this heap was just where it could be utilized by the scouts. Indeed, it had served them as a splendid cover more than half the time while they were creeping forward.

Behind it they ranged, still on their hands and knees. The fire flickered, and occasionally snapped as some brittle section of wood was greedily seized upon by the flames. Deep and harsh sounded the voices of the lounging tramps. Lazily the wreaths of smoke curled upward from their pipes.

145

Hugh was fully awake to making his arrangements while the chance remained. He had it fixed so that about half of his force hovered near one end of the rock pile, while the rest waited close to the other termination.

Some of the scouts were holding themselves in just such positions as they would have assumed had they been entered for a fifty-yard sprint, and at the sound of the pistol expected to fairly shoot away. They crouched low, with their finger tips placed on the rough deal planks of the floor of the mill.

Every fellow was wondering how Don Miller and his four climbers might be making out. They had had ample time, it would seem, to cover the ground; and it was to be hoped that not many more minutes would elapse before the scratching of the imaginary rat four times would tell Hugh that all was ready.

146

If ever boys were keyed up to top-notch fever, those seven were who lay back of the friendly rock pile, and counted the passing seconds. Every nerve in their whole bodies seemed on edge. Small sounds were terribly magnified; and several times one or the other of them would fancy that he had caught the eagerly expected signal from the leader of the Fox patrol up there in the dense gloom of the loft just above where the tramps lay on their hay.

Oh! it was cruel the way Don Miller held off! Could anything have happened to upset his

share in the general plan? Had one of his command slipped on those mossy and slimy planks of the dam, and fallen in? Since they had heard nothing that sounded like an alarm it did not seem possible.

And then at last it came—one, two, three, four—plain scratches, as though an industrious rat had set himself a gigantic task.

147

It was time!

148

CHAPTER XII. WHAT THE SCOUTS DID.

Every one of those eight boys plainly heard the long awaited sounds, even Gusty, who was quite as anxious as any of his new friends. Immediately each wearer of a soiled khaki suit followed the instructions of their leader, and drew in a full round breath so as to be ready for the next act in the little drama. This would come in the form of action, if their program could be followed out as closely as it was intended to be.

A few seconds ensued. Plainly Hugh had himself well in hand, and would not allow anything to rattle him. Before giving the signal that would precipitate a startling change in the situation, he wished to make sure that the two lounging tramps had not taken the alarm because of the scratching sounds.

This was quickly settled. The shorter fellow did raise his head a trifle as if he may have considered that it was an unusually methodical rodent that bit into the wood with such regularity. But then as the men had been eating, and doubtless crumbs of food must have been scattered about on the floor, perhaps it was this that had excited the sleek little animal on the other side of the wall.

149

Wandering Willies as a rule become accustomed to having rats for bed fellows on many occasions, so that there is nothing about the presence of such vermin to dismay them. The shorter tramp only maintained that listening attitude for a brief spell; then he once more dropped back and resumed his easy position.

Hugh knew it was time. He felt sure that Don Miller and those with him up in the dark loft had measured their distance, and were in a position to drop directly upon the recumbent rascals underneath.

He had pursed up his lips ready to give the whistle agreed on, and no sooner was the squatty hobo reclining again at full length than it came. Clear and sharp the sound rang out. No bugle call, ever blown, brought about a speedier result.

150

Every scout was instantly in action. The boys who were so impatiently waiting in the shelter of that rock pile, shot forward like so many agile panthers, and every fellow was aiming to project his form straight at the spot where the tramps had been stretched out at their ease.

Of course the wary rogues realized that they were about to become the victims of some sort of cleverly arranged trap. The first glimpse they had of khaki-clad figures bouncing up like a flock of sheep, and even filling the very air must have given them the startling idea that they were attacked by a regiment of State's troops. They had no time to grasp the situation, for already boys were plunging recklessly down from the loft over their heads, and alighting full upon the men, not giving them a chance to get to their knees, much less their feet.

In three seconds the scene was a wild one, indeed. Half a dozen scouts seemed to be fairly covering each of the tramps, striking and dragging and hanging on like crazy leeches. The strong men tried as hard as they could to get up, but to no avail. Above the tumult the clear trumpet tones of the scout master could be heard urging his followers to hold on like grim death, and cheering them on, at the same time doing his level best to keep the flail-like arms of the hoboes from damaging any of the boys.

151

"Surrender, both of you, or you'll get the worst pounding you ever knew!" shrilled Billy Worth, as he kept bringing both his fists down on the head of the shorter rascal very much after the style of a rapid-action pile-driver.

Bud Morgan was much in evidence with that baseball bat of his. He did not have the heart to use it upon the craniums of the men, but kept shoving them backward again and again when it looked as though they might get to their feet in spite of the various figures clinging to their arms and legs.

152

This sort of thing lasted for perhaps a full minute. It may have been much more than that, for no one was in a position to take note of the passage of time, being wholly occupied with the work of attack and defense.

With half a dozen-boys busily employed in mixing things up for each of the men, the tramps soon had enough of the *mêlée*. First the tall fellow gave tongue to indicate that he would be glad to surrender, at which Hugh told him to fall flat on his face so they could secure his arms behind him. Then the other, seeing how hopeless it was to try and ward off a reinforced army, hastened to do likewise.

After they had both been secured with the stout cords Hugh had been wise enough to carry along, being parts of the very rope used to lower Gusty to the ledge where the scouts found him, all of the boys breathed easier.

Billy fairly hugged the scout master in the exuberance of joy.

"We did it!" he panted, not having yet been able to recover fully from his violent exertions. "They're our prisoners of war, Hugh, taken in fair battle! Hurrah for the Boy Scouts, say I!"

153

Up to this point things had been so dreadfully mixed that the hoboes had not been able to understand what it all meant. When Billy thus gave voice to his pent-up feelings, the shorter rascal rolled over on his back, raised his head as well as his bound condition would allow, and took a good look at their captors. Then he

laughed harshly as though completely disgusted.

"Say, wot d'ye know about it, Pete? We've gone an' got cotched by a parcel o' kids, arter all! Me to the pen arter this. I'd be afraid o' bein' left alone in the dark for fear o' ghosts. Sure we're a couple o' greenies to let Boy Scouts round us up. I wish somebody'd kick me, so's to find out if I'm awake or only dreamin'."

Nobody volunteered to perform this kind office for him. The scouts were quite willing, but had some consideration for the feelings of those whom the fortunes of war chanced to throw into their hands.

154

"Gusty, do you know how much money they took from you?" asked the scout master as he looked up from searching the pockets and clothing of the pair.

He had his hands full of bills, and quite a hefty pile of silver lay on the floor of the mill.

"I drew exactly fourteen hundred and sixty-three dollars from the bank," replied the other, his face lighted up with a happy smile; "thirty of it was in silver, so as to make change in the pay of the men, who are on piece work."

"Count this then," continued Hugh, "and as they haven't had any chance to get rid of a red cent, I should think you'd find it all here."

To their surprise it turned out that there was considerably more than that amount, some sixty-two dollars in fact. This proved that Pete and Bill could not have been "dead broke" at the time they laid that trap in order to stop the rich man's son on the road, and rob him of the quarrymen's wages.

155

Gusty was greatly pleased. It was not altogether because he had recovered both his runabout and the money taken from him. There was something even more delightful in the knowledge that he himself had shared in the capture of the robbers, having done his part of the work of pulling the tall man down. And the new sensation gave him such a splendid feeling that he was already looking on every one of the scouts as a brother, whose further acquaintance he meant to zealously cultivate.

As it was unreasonable to think of returning to the island camp that night, the boys set about making themselves as comfortable as the conditions allowed. When the fire had been replenished, things began to take on a more cheerful air. Even the sad murmur of the dropping water outside no longer inspired Billy and a few more of the boys with thoughts of haunted houses and the like. In fact they rather liked it now, though sticking close to the inside of the mill.

Still that was a very long night. Few of the scouts save Billy Worth secured any sleep to mention; but nothing could ever keep him from losing himself to the world.

156

Hugh often went over to where the two men were, and examined their bonds so as to make sure that they were not breaking loose. He had taken a wicked-looking gun from each tramp, and managed to let them understand that he

carried one of these with him for better protection.

When day broke, the scouts were early astir. It had been planned to start over the ridge toward the river so as to reach the island camp by breakfast time.

Although all of them were ferociously hungry, the boys made merry as they trailed along. They felt that they had managed to do something that would add another triumph to the already long list of praiseworthy deeds credited to the troop.

In due time they passed over the divide. As agreed on, Hugh immediately gave the signal to the two boys in camp that they were coming, so that they might get busy with a bumper breakfast. Billy declared that he was ready to eat them out of house and home, such was the sharp appetite this early morning climb had given him.

157

The scout salute met the victorious army on its arrival, and for a brief time the air was filled with the totem cries of the various patrols, Wolf, Hawk, Fox and Otter combined in one grand pæan of victory.

Arthur Cameron was delighted because the friendly scout to whom he had entrusted his camera had made sure to take several pictures of the group with their prisoners at the mill, and again on the way over the wild uplift that separated the scene of their late adventure from the river.

First of all, Hugh, after breakfast had been enjoyed, carried Monkey to the place where the other two motorcycles had been left. Then he went back and conveyed Billy the same way. This left only the runabout to be looked after, and as they must use this in order to get their prisoners to town, the scout master once more made the trip with a passenger seated behind his saddle.

158

It promised to be a busy day indeed for some of the scouts. Hugh decided to accompany Gusty when the two prisoners were taken to town. Then the latter meant to start once more for the quarries with the money for the semimonthly payroll. Doubtless there would be more or less anxiety up there on account of his failure to arrive on the specified day.

Seeing that they were so near the quarries, Hugh finally changed his mind and had Gusty first of all run over with the money. After that they loaded the two bound men into the car, and managed to find places for themselves.

The hoboes were delivered safely to the police, and were promptly recognized as men long wanted for other crimes along the line of looting country stores. Once again praise of the scouts was on everybody's lips, and they made new friends all around their home town.

159

Gusty pleaded with Hugh to be taken back to the island camp in order to get better acquainted with those whom he meant to join later on; and, pleased with the way things had turned out, the scout master was only too glad to accommodate him.

They still had several days ahead of them before the return voyage was to be undertaken, down the river and home by a circuitous route. Hugh decided to manage to take his motorcycle aboard and keep company with the others, for he wished to show Gusty so many things connected with scoutcraft that he begrudged losing any time. Besides, Hugh believed in striking while the iron was hot; and he did not mean that this eagerness on the part of Gusty should find a chance to wane until he was a full-fledged tenderfoot scout.

The return journey was made safely, though of course, not without excitement and fun. As vacation time was now near its close, the boys fancied that they would have to turn their thoughts somewhere else for amusement. It happened, however, that events were shaping throughout the home town in a manner to enlist Hugh and his comrades in an enterprise calculated to show the scouts in quite another light than that of the past, in which they had figured so prominently.

Just what these events were, and how well the wearers of the honored khaki bore themselves in the test, will be made plain in the next story of this series, under the name of "Boy Scouts for City Improvement."

THE END.

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