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Mobilization Camp, by
Robert Shaler**

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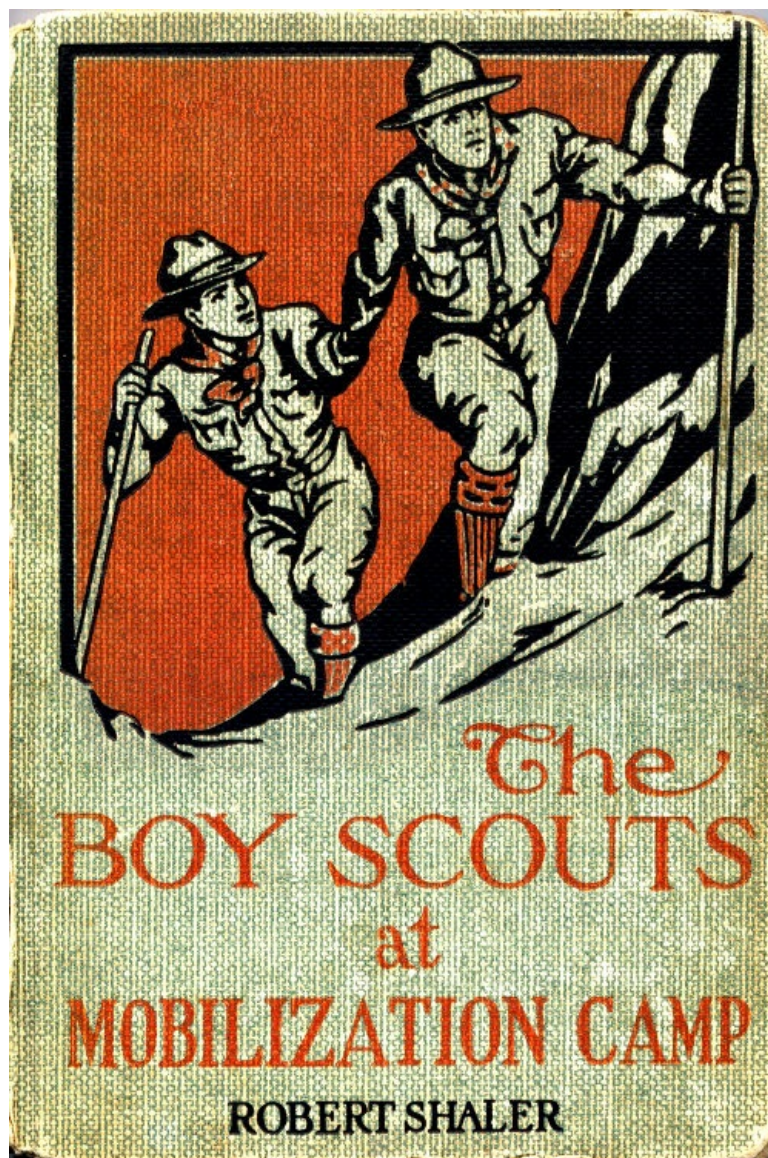
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS AT MOBILIZATION CAMP ***



THE BOY SCOUTS

AT MOBILIZATION CAMP

BY
ROBERT SHALER

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS," "THE
BOY SCOUTS OF PIONEER CAMP," ETC., ETC.

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The Boy Scouts at Mobilization Camp

CHAPTER I GOOD LUCK

"Honest Injun, Hugh, I never wanted to go anywhere half so much as I do right now to drop in at that State camp where the militia has started mobilizing."

"Just so, Bud, and, to tell you the truth, I'm feeling the same way myself. Ever since we scouts waved good-bye to our gallant Battery K some five miles up the road, and watched the last gun, caisson and supply wagon disappear over the crown of Kettledrum Hill, I've had that

picture in my mind.”

“Say, I wager things are just *humming* over at that same camp, Hugh,” sighed the first boy in faded khaki, “Bud” Morgan by name, and a member of Oakvale’s famous Boy Scout Troop.

“They certainly must be,” admitted his comrade, who wore the insignia of rank that marks not only a patrol leader, but an assistant scout master as well. “This morning’s paper says that besides our fellows, there is a full regiment already in camp, not to mention other commands, such as the Engineers’, Signal Corps and Red Cross detachments.”

“Don’t forget to count the Aviation Squad, Hugh,” added Bud, eagerly. “You know, I’m head over ears interested in the birdmen and their doings, as well as in signaling, surveying and inventions.”

“Yes, it certainly must be a glorious sight,” Hugh said enviously. “To tell you the truth, old fellow, I’m lying awake nights trying to think up some reasonable excuse for paying a flying visit to the concentration camp.”

“Anyhow,” remarked Bud, brightening up a little, “we can squeeze some satisfaction out of the fact that the scouts had a heap to do with getting Battery K off to the camp with their roster on a full war footing.”^[1]

“We’ve undertaken an all-summer job helping to run the Pastor farm for the crippled old man, so his boy, Corporal Tony, could go to the Mexican border with his company. That’s one way scouts can help Uncle Sam when trouble comes along. It’s partly on account of that promise I’m holding back about leaving Oakvale.”

“Oh! so far as that goes, Hugh,” said Bud, slyly, after the manner of a tempter, “you’ve got the programme all laid out, and Alec Sands could take your place for a week. The site for the camp we expect to start up there near the Pastor farm has been arranged, so the boys would make the hike, and then be handy in getting the hay crop cut, and have it taken to the barn inside of ten days. If you took a notion, Hugh, don’t you think the two of us might manage to get away? Try hard and think up some good excuse for making the trip. A dozen people here in Oakvale would want to send messages and packages to their boys, you know.”

Hugh Hardin laughed at the entreating manner of his companion. They were standing at the time in front of the post office building, where people kept coming and going in squads and singly, for that was one of the busiest places in the mill town of Oakvale.

Hugh and Bud both belonged to the *Wolf* Patrol of the troop, which was in a most flourishing condition, having four full patrols, and another well along. These enterprising lads of Oakvale had been more or less in the limelight for several seasons past. Circumstances had allowed them to engineer quite a number of really successful enterprises that were one and all to their credit. Those readers who may be only making their acquaintance with Hugh and his friends in this story, if at all curious to know what some of those stirring adventures were,

should secure previous volumes in this series, and enjoy reading accounts of scout activities as related therein.

One thing certain, those same enterprising and ambitious scouts had succeeded in convincing the most skeptical persons that the coming to town of such an organization had been the means of a regeneration among the boys of Oakvale. Many things had been tolerated under the old order, with the familiar excuse that "boys will be boys, and you must expect them to play practical pranks, and do all manner of shocking things in order to work off their extra enthusiasm," but such outbreaks were quite unknown in these later days. The reason was that a new means for allowing the high-spirited lads to "let off steam" had been found.

On the morning the call of the President came summoning the National Guard to mobilize, with a view to being sworn into the service of the Government, so as to proceed forthwith to the Mexican border, and guard the same against aggression, it sent a thrill across the entire country from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

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Tens of thousands of young fellows flocked to the armories, and the most intense excitement followed, as hurried preparations were started looking toward increasing these various military organizations from a peace to a war footing.

Oakvale had a battery of four guns, together with such equipment as was necessary for utilizing these field pieces; but just then it happened, as in many similar organizations, that the roster contained just enough names to prevent the company from being disbanded under the law by the State authorities.

Consequently a feverish hunt began to enlist new units, or, what was better yet, former members who had left the ranks to sign again, so as to swell the number to a high level of which the town might be proud.

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In this little drama it chanced that Hugh and his fellow scouts bore themselves right handsomely, so that it was chiefly owing to their manly efforts that a number of former members came forward again to put their names down.

After a very eventful period of preparation, which lasted for several days, Battery K had started for the mobilization camp. As connections on the railroad did not happen to favor them, they concluded to make the trip overland, knowing that it would take less than two full days, and must prove of considerable benefit to both men and horses in the way of practice, which they greatly needed.

Once more Oakvale had settled down to the humdrum monotony of customary life. Things resumed their former conditions, but after the feverish outburst of patriotism people found it difficult to attend to business. They missed the faces of those gallant young fellows who had gone to serve their country. So, too, they found things terribly dull after all that exhilarating music which the fine Oakvale brass band had provided while the battery lay encamped on the grass-covered public square. They missed the enlisting officers' tent, surrounded day and evening by a curious throng, where the khaki-

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clad men urged their friends to sign the muster roll so as to bring the local company up to a war footing.

Some of the boys had been inconsolable ever since they watched the last of the troop vanish over the hill, as Hugh had described. Being ambitious and patriotic lads, they would have liked nothing better than a chance to accompany those artillerymen to camp, and even to the far distant Southwest border where the followers of the Mexican bandit, Villa, were threatening further bold raids across the international line.

Never dreaming of having their ardent wishes suddenly realized, the two boys continued to stand there, chatting of scout affairs in general, and what they expected to do while in camp in particular. Bud, upon turning his head, discovered something which he communicated to Hugh in his breezy fashion:

"Unless I miss my guess, Hugh, we're going to hear some news worth while. There's our comrade, Blake Merton, heading this way like a schooner with all sails set. He looks considerably worked up, too. I wonder what ails him? Perhaps something's happened to keep him from joining the bunch when we start on our hike tomorrow for that camp up near the Pastor farm?"

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Hugh, taking a look, remarked calmly:

"We'll soon know what's up, for he's heading our way, and making signals that he wants us to wait for him. I hope it hasn't anything to do with that case of scarlet fever my folks were talking about this morning, because it happens that the Werner house is close to where Blake lives. If one of his younger sisters came down with the disease they'd have to quarantine the Mertons, and so Blake couldn't go with us."

"Wee whiz! that *would* be tough luck—with vacation just starting in!" the sympathetic Bud went on to say.

"Hello! Hugh!" remarked the newcomer as he arrived, partly out of breath from hurrying so fast, and looking excited as well, "I've been searching for you all over town. They put me on several false scents, but I'm awful glad to find you at last!"

13

"What's the trouble, Blake?" asked the patrol leader; for, although the Merton boy belonged to the *Hawk* Patrol, somehow, when he wanted counsel and advice, he turned to the assistant scout master rather than to Walter Osborne, who was the *Hawk* leader.

Blake glanced toward Bud, and then, as though making up his mind, quickly exclaimed:

"I guess Bud can be depended on to keep a secret as tight as a drum, and so I'm going to speak up. Fact is, Hugh, I'm in a peck of trouble about my cousin, Felix Platt."

"Oh! I remember that he went away with the battery, being a member of the same," Hugh observed. "What ails Felix? Has his mother fallen sick, and ought he come home again before being mustered into Uncle Sam's service?"

Blake Merton shook his head.

"No, it isn't that, Hugh, worse than that, even, I should say!" he declared.

"Well, you've got us worked up, all right, Blake," exclaimed Bud, feverishly, "so please explain what you mean when you say that. I hope your cousin hasn't gone and done something wrong?"

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"He's made a fool of himself, I'm sorry to say, and stands a good chance of losing all his uncle's property. You must know that Uncle Reuben is his guardian as well, and has made his will in favor of Felix, so as to cut off that bad son of his who disgraced him several times."

"Yes, we know all about what Luther Gregory has done to worry his father," admitted Bud, encouragingly. "But Reuben isn't any blood relation of yours, is he?"

"Oh! no, though Felix happens to be my second cousin. You see, they had some warm words the night before the battery left town, and Felix, being a hot-blooded young fellow, said something he shouldn't, and which has cut Uncle Reuben to the quick. Just this morning the old gentleman had his lawyer, Judge Marshall, to change his will once more, cutting off Felix. The good old judge managed to coax him to wait a bit; and so Uncle Reuben has vowed that if he doesn't receive an apology from Felix by sundown of tomorrow, nothing will keep him from doing as he threatens, much as he has cared for the boy since his own son failed him. Yes, he threatens to leave every dollar of his big fortune to charity."

"That's too bad," mused Hugh, shaking his head, for he had always liked Felix, who was a pretty fine sort of a young chap, as they go in these days. "But how is it you come to know about this matter, Blake?"

15

"Just this way, Hugh," came the ready reply. "Uncle Reuben made Judge Marshall promise that he wouldn't communicate with Felix, or send him any direct word; but, having the best interests of all parties at stake, and, believing the old man would secretly applaud his action if ever he knew it, the judge called to me over the wire to drop in right away and see him. Then he told me about it, not suggesting a single thing, mind you, but leaving it up to me to do what I thought best, because he knew how fond of Felix I've always been."

"Well, then," said Hugh, beaming on him, "why don't you get busy, and write Felix a letter right away, explaining the case, and begging him to send the apology? By now he's cooled down, and ten chances to one is mighty sorry for speaking as he did."

16

"Hugh, I thought of that the first thing, but what if the letter didn't reach him?" objected Blake, frowning as he spoke.

"You could register it, or send with a quick delivery stamp," remarked Bud.

"Even then there would always be a lot of uncertainty about it," continued the other, stubbornly.

"Evidently, then, you've got some other dandy scheme up your sleeve!" exclaimed Bud, suspiciously. "Let's hear about it, Blake, if you need any advice."

"Well, I've always believed that when you want anything done, the only safe way is to do it yourself. You remember the bird telling her young ones in the nest that so long as the farmer depended on his relatives and friends to help cut the wheat there was no need for worry; but when finally he told his son they'd start in and do the job themselves the mother bird admitted it was time for flitting. Now, Hugh, I've got a hunch that if only you'd go along with me to give advice, I'd make a start for the mobilization camp right away, and tell Felix face to face what a fool he has been, as well as fetch back a letter for Uncle Reuben that would heal all the bitter feelings in the old gentleman's heart. What do you say to that, Hugh?"

17

18

CHAPTER II

A BREAKDOWN ON THE ROAD

Hugh and Bud exchanged glances, and then the latter burst into a laugh.

"Blake, bless your heart, of course Hugh will be glad to go along with you over to the big State camp so you can tell Felix what a silly he's made of himself. You know, scouts are always ready to perform a good deed, and bringing Uncle Reuben and his favorite nephew together again would be just bully. And, say, you've got to count me in the deal, ditto, understand?"

"Why, I don't know just how that might be?" stammered Blake; when energetic Bud broke in upon him with a vigor that would brook no refusal.

"I'll tell you several reasons for my going along, Blake," he said, tapping one finger after another. "First off, it happens that Hugh and myself were just saying we only wanted some half-way decent excuse for deserting the other fellows right now, and heading straight for the big camp. Then, secondly, I c'n get a sort of decent old car in which we could make the run, if nothing happened to ditch us on the road. Then, last, but far from least, I want to go! And that settles it."

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"All right, Bud," agreed the other, carried away by this enthusiasm and desire to serve a comrade in trouble, "what you say goes. That idea about the car is a good one. Hugh, you haven't told me what you think yet; please help me out of this pickle, won't you?"

"Oh! just as Bud here remarked," laughed the patrol leader. "I'm like a hungry fish biting at the first baited hook I see ahead of me. I certainly do want to go over to that mobilization camp the worst way, and the only thing that kept me from starting was the want of a decent excuse. Now that a comrade has called on me to assist him, there's no further reason for holding back!"

"Bully for you, Hugh!" exclaimed Bud Morgan, beaming happily on his two comrades.

"I just knew I could depend on you to help me tide over this trouble, Hugh," said Blake, grasping the other's hand, and squeezing it warmly. "Now that we've got all that fixed, let's make the necessary arrangements as soon as we can; time counts in a game like this; and, besides, I've got certain reasons for fearing there may be interruptions."

20

He did not choose to enter into any explanation for these rather strange words, seeing which Hugh presently went on to say:

"I'll get in touch with Alec Sands, the leader of the *Otters*, and tell him that he must take charge of things for some days while I'm away. Alec can see about the hike tomorrow; making camp up there near the Pastor farm; and even starting in at the hay-cutting if we're not back in time. Fortunately, Alec knows considerable along the line of farm work; and then, too, old Mr. Pastor can coach the boys."

"But, Hugh, please don't drop a hint about why you've got to go over to the big camp," pleaded Blake. "You see, it might happen to get to the ears of Uncle Reuben, and offend him. That's got to be a dead secret between the three of us until I can put a letter from Felix in his guardian's hand, and know the old gentleman's really forgiven him for his hasty words."

"We'll both shake hands with you on that, Blake," said Hugh, wishing to make sure that Bud would be willing to take the same vow of secrecy on himself.

21

When this operation had been completed, Blake appeared to be much relieved.

"How long do you expect it will take you to see Alec, and arrange other things, Hugh?" he asked.

"Oh!" the patrol leader immediately replied, "so far as that goes, I believe an hour ought to cover everything, such as telling my folks at home, and getting Alec to take charge. How about you two?"

"I can do it in far less time," admitted Blake.

"Same here, unless the old car has to be fixed in some way. Generally the tires aren't holding any too well," explained Bud. "But, then, a fellow mustn't look a gift horse in the mouth; all it'll cost us is the gas and lubricating oil. We c'n fix that up among us easy enough, eh, boys?"

So it was agreed that they should rendezvous at a certain spot as soon as possible. If Hugh could accomplish his several errands in any shorter time so much the better, he remarked. The three boys hastened away in as many different directions, each one making all possible speed, for their hearts were evidently in the work that now engaged their attention.

22

So well did luck stand by them, that before three-quarters of an hour had passed by the trio met again at the appointed place. Each carried a small package, and, besides, Bud had driven up in a rather dilapidated looking old car that

doubtless had a past history, and now quite out of the running where speed was considered a prime requisite.

Still, as Bud himself had remarked, it was not polite to be too particular of a gift. The car might carry them in safety over the forty miles or more that lay between Oakvale and the mobilization camp; then, again, they might have a few punctures or blowouts, for the tires were certainly in poor condition.

Hugh looked the machine over, and raised his eyebrows expressively; whereat Bud hastened to say:

"Don't condemn the old rattletrap yet awhile, Hugh. Sometimes things turn out mighty deceptive, you remember. She's seen heaps of service in her day, for a fact, and been pretty dependable, too, I wager. May be she'll behave scrumptuously for us on this trip. We're going on an errand of mercy, and deserve encouragement, for a fact. Jump in, fellows, and we'll get started."

So they were soon off. The car groaned and wheezed when power was applied, and Blake looked pretty anxious until finally they began to move along the road out of Oakvale at a fair clip.

"Say, she seems to go pretty decent, after all!" declared the driver, for Bud, likewise Hugh, knew much about the mechanism of cars, and could pilot one as well as any boy around Oakvale. Blake was a novice at such things.

"We must be making as much as ten miles an hour right now!" laughed Hugh.

"Which rate of speed, if continued, would fetch us to the camp in less than five hours, wouldn't it?" demanded the now sanguine Blake.

"Oh! well, the worst is yet to come!" grinned Bud Morgan. "You see, we're going on the level now, and there happens to be some pretty tough old hills which have to be surmounted before we reach our haven. Hills can play hob with most old worn-out cars. I'm not boasting any yet, Blake, you notice; hold your horses, and we'll see what happens."

For some little time they continued to move along fairly well, and a number of miles were placed behind them. Indeed, they had even managed to climb several good-sized elevations; and, although once it seemed as though the machinery was about to give up with a last groan, clever Bud managed to pull the machine to the top of the rise, so that they could coast down the declivity, which they did in great style.

"She can run like a bird, once you cut the power off, and let her coast," shrilled the enthusiastic pilot, as they continued to "scoot" along the level below.

"Whee! but look what's ahead of us?" cried Blake, in an appalled tone.

"Oh! that hill isn't half as bad as it seems," Bud told him. "I'm going to take it on the run, and get to the top, all right, watch me!"

He made an heroic effort to accomplish the end he had in view, and, in fact, did manage to

negotiate more than three-fourths of the climb. Then suddenly the engine gave up the ghost, and only through a frantic use of the brake did the pilot keep the car from starting backward down the steep incline.

"Well, here we are, held up!" he remarked, calmly; "it's up to me to get busy and see what's wrong."

"I'll help you to it, Bud," Hugh told him, stripping off his coat, and donning one of the old linen dusters Bud had thoughtfully fetched along for just this purpose, since he suspected they would find good use for it.

They were a busy bunch for the next hour, the two boys most of the time working under the car and Blake hovering near, growing more and more anxious as the precious minutes slipped past.

"How far have we come, do you reckon, Hugh?" he asked once.

"I should say about seventeen miles," the other replied, after mental figuring; "though that's only a guess, because we don't happen to have any way of telling. This car isn't equipped with a cyclometer, you know, or any other thing that costs money. I'm surprised that the tires have held out so well."

26

"That isn't much more than one-third of the way to camp, either," declared Blake, disconsolately. "I'm wondering what I could do in case, after all your work, you fail to coax the poor old engine into going again. It'll be too bad if we get to the camp too late to carry that letter back to Uncle Reuben in time; for he is a terrible man to keep his word, and he'll make that new will tomorrow night as sure as anything, unless he hears from Felix by sundown."

"Well, if it comes to the worst," Hugh told him, soothingly, "you could wire Uncle Reuben to hold up, and that a letter was on the way with an ample apology. I suppose you don't have any doubt about Felix giving you such a letter, Blake?"

"No, I don't, Hugh. Not that he cares so much about the old gentleman's money, because, you see, he has some of his own coming to him in another year or so; but Felix is a good-hearted fellow, and really cares a heap for his guardian."

Meanwhile, Bud Morgan was working with all his might, trying to locate and cure the engine trouble. Bud was a very determined fellow, as his chums had learned many a time in the past. Once he set his mind on accomplishing anything he would persist everlastingly at the job, even when it seemed next door to hopeless.

27

"I'm beginning to get on to it, boys, I want to tell you," he finally said, as he crawled out from under the car so as to stretch his cramped limbs, and wipe the perspiration from his forehead with a bandanna that had once upon a time been a beautiful red, but was now sadly faded.

"But almost two hours have slipped by since our plug engine balked on us," complained Blake Merton, painfully. "Not that I'm trying to rub it into you fellows, because both of you are doing

the work, while a greenhorn like me has to sit around and grunt, and count the minutes. If only some other motorist would come along about now maybe he might be able to lend us a hand."

"Wish to gracious one would show up," sighed Bud. "What a fellow doesn't know about pesky engines like this would fill a book. Another pilot might just happen to be familiar with this particular kind of trouble. 'Many men, many minds,' you remember. But don't think I'm going to give it up. There's a little of the old U. S. Grant about me, and I purpose 'fighting it out on this line if it takes all summer.'"

28

"That's a bully way of looking at it, Bud, and I give you lots of credit," said Blake, shrugging his shoulders. "If we stick here until tomorrow I might just as well head back toward Oakvale, for all the good a visit to camp will do me."

"Listen!" warned Hugh, holding up a finger.

"Ginger! some one coming, as sure as anything!" ejaculated Bud, looking inexpressibly relieved.

The plain sound of an approaching car could now be heard. It was also coming from the same direction as their course had just covered, that is, from distant Oakvale.

"I can see him starting to take the hill," announced Blake, eagerly, "and, say, if it is only a flivver, it tackles the rise as if no ascent had any terrors for it. One man is in the little car, but, then, he may be an angel in disguise. I hope so, I certainly do."

29

So the trio of anxious scouts waited for the coming of the lone motorist whose small car was already courageously mounting the elevation.

30

CHAPTER III RISING SUSPICIONS

The oncoming car soon reached the spot where Hugh, Bud and Blake were stalled. Hugh threw up his arm as a signal that they would be greatly obliged to the party in the lone machine if he would stop for a brief time to hear their tale of woe, and either assist them, or at least give advice.

The occupant of the little car was a dark-faced man of middle age with what seemed to be a perpetual smile on his face, or was it a leer? Hugh did not like his looks any too well, he confessed to himself. When motorists are in trouble they have no business to find any fault with the looks of a possible Moses who might lead them out of the wilderness. Whether he is handsome or homely, pleasant-looking or a sour-visaged man matters little if only he is accommodating.

"We're in a mess, it happens, sir," Hugh commenced saying.

31

"So I see," sneered the man, looking suggestively at Bud's grimy hands, and then toward the stalled ramshackle car.

"Our knowledge of mechanics isn't all it should be," continued Hugh, determined not to be daunted by this poor beginning, "and if you could spare five minutes to take a look at the cause of our trouble, perhaps you might tell us how to remedy the same. I'm sure we'd feel under heavy obligations, sir."

"We certainly would," added Blake; "it's of prime importance that we get along just now, because we're heading for the mobilization camp, on an important errand, sir. Please oblige us, won't you?"

He tried to throw all the pathos possible into his application. Hugh thought the man was laughing in his sleeve, so to say. At any rate, he failed to make the first movement toward getting out of his still throbbing car.

As a general thing, motorists are most accommodating toward those in distress. It seems to be a rule of the road that when the signal is given, any one passing by must be adjudged next door to a criminal. A fellow feeling makes all men who drive motors sympathize with one another, for there is no telling just how soon they may themselves be in dire need of the same help.

32

"Sorry to say I'm in a desperate hurry myself, boys," snapped the man, between his set teeth. "I'd like to help you, but any delay just now might cost me a big amount in money. I reckon you'll get her going, some way or other. At the worst, you could let her drop back down the hill. I think there's a farmhouse up that little dirt road half a mile or so where you could stay overnight. So I'll have to push along and leave you. Sorry, too, for I'd like to help you."

With that he once more started along, and the three scouts stared after him struggling under various emotions.

"The mean skunk!" gritted Bud. "I'll fix my old engine if it takes a leg. Course, he might have shown me a better way, but I'm coming along."

Blake Merton was shaking his head as though some new thought had taken possession of his mind.

"This means *something*, I tell you, Hugh!" he burst out with. "It isn't just one of those accidents that bob up now and then. That chap was chuckling to himself all the while, just because he had come on us stalled here."

33

"What's that?" asked Hugh, somewhat startled by such an assertion. "Why should a stranger care whether a pack of scouts were held up with engine trouble or not?"

"I'll try and tell you, Hugh," came the quick reply, as Blake's eyes snapped. "I didn't think to mention it before because—well, so many other things chased through my brain, you know. But this is the same fellow I saw talking to Luther Gregory."

"You mean the degenerate son of Uncle Reuben, the tough case he threw over, and vowed never to have anything to do with again?" gasped Bud Morgan, stopping when about to once more crawl under the stalled car.

"No other," came the quick reply.

"Has he been seen again in Oakvale lately?" demanded Hugh. "I remember that he got mixed up in some row, and his father paid the bill only on condition that Luke promised to shake the dust of the home town off his feet, and never show up again. If the slippery fellow hadn't agreed to this, Mr. Gregory was going to let the law take its course, for his patience had reached the limit."

34

"Listen," said Blake, earnestly. "I saw Luke this very morning while getting my little package, after leaving you fellows, and going home to say good-bye to my folks. I, too, was surprised to set eyes on him, knowing about that promise to stay away from Oakvale. He was talking with that very man we just saw pass us. Hugh, they seemed to be on good terms, for I saw them shake hands as if to bind some sort of bargain. Then Luke discovered me, and gave the other a nudge. I thought that man stared mighty hard at me as I passed, just like he meant to remember my face. Now, I'm wondering what all that could mean."

Hugh was silent for a brief spell. His mind was endeavoring to grapple with the problem that confronted him.

"It seems almost too big a thing to be true, Blake," he finally remarked; "but if Luke Gregory could have in some way learned what his father was meaning to do about making another will, and cutting Felix out entirely, why, he might think it worth his while to plot so as to keep you from seeing your cousin in Battery K."

35

Bud Morgan whistled to indicate his deep interest in the matter.

"Now, I happen to know that Luke Gregory used to be a right smart sort of a chap when he lived in Oakvale," Bud observed. "I wager he's up to just that kind of a game. However he could have learned the news we'll never find out. He may have a spy among the servants in the Gregory house, some one who used to care for him when he lived at home, and who reported the interview his father had with Judge Marshall. Then, again, it might be that same spy followed the lawyer, and saw him talking with Blake here."

"That's pretty far-fetched," admitted Hugh. "You must remember that it was over the 'phone the judge asked Blake to come and see him. Possibly, though, this spy in watching the lawyer's house noticed Blake going in, and guessed why he had been sent for. But, no matter, there seems to be a chance that Luke *did* know, and that he believes it to be to his interest to prevent a meeting between Blake and Felix until the time set has expired."

"It might be," mused Blake, "that Luke has never stopped hoping he might yet be able to make up with his father, and that he thinks his first move should be to get Felix out of the running. This, then, would be too good a chance to be lost. He has started that man toward the camp, knowing about our coming. So, now, we can understand why he seemed to be grinning all the while."

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"It did seem to tickle him, seeing us stalled here, and likely to stay for goodness knows how long," admitted Bud, frowning.

Hugh took more stock in the theory the longer he considered it. Although at first it may have seemed far-fetched, just as he had remarked, "familiarity did not breed contempt" in this case.

"Well, there's nothing to be done but, get our engine running again, if we can," he said, while Bud was hammering noisily under the body of the car. "If, in the end, that fails, we'll try and think up some other scheme, for the more difficulties that crop up in our path, the more stubborn we become."

"Oh! thank you for saying that, Hugh!" exclaimed Blake. "I know mighty well that when you've set your teeth, and start in to win, something is bound to come from it. I was beginning to get discouraged, but, say, that's passing away now, and I seem to be drawing in my second wind."

37

Just then there came a whoop from underneath the car.

"Cheer up, fellows!" called out a muffled voice.

"Do you think you've found out how to fix her up so she'll work again, Bud?" cried Blake, his face aglow with renewed hope.

"Watch my smoke, that's all," was the reassuring reply, followed by additional pounding; and presently Bud wriggled out from his confined quarters, a sight to behold, so far as face and hands and discolored duster were concerned; but Hugh paid little or no attention to these things, because he saw that a huge grin decorated the greasy countenance of his chum.

Some more pottering followed. Then Bud gave the crank a few turns. There was no response, and evidently the balky engine still declined to behave itself. Nothing daunted, Bud tried a second, and then a third time. When still once more he flirted with the crank there came a sudden roar, and sure enough the car rocked under the pulsations of the conquered motor.

38

"Hurrah! you've done it, Bud, sure you have!" cried the happy Blake, as he danced up and down in his excitement.

"Wait till I get these things back again, and wipe some of this mess from my face and hands," said the mechanic, "and then we'll start right up the hill with a push that can do next door to anything."

"I really believe she's working better than ever before," suggested Blake.

"Well, considering what I did in cleaning things up," grinned Bud, holding out his grimy hands, "that isn't to be wondered at. She was fairly clogged with dirt. Give me just another minute, boys, and then we'll be on the jump!"

39

CHAPTER IV THE HOLD-UP

"This is something like living," Blake remarked, after they had easily made the top of the hill, and were coasting down the other side with increased celerity, though Bud apparently did not dare allow full speed for fear lest something would happen to a dilapidated part of the worn machinery, and cause a bad accident.

All of them were pleased. Although much time had been lost, still, with anything like decent luck, they should easily be able to make the camp while the sun still hung above the western horizon. Blake asked for nothing better.

"That scamp in the flivver had nearly an hour's start of us, boys," Blake later on observed. "By rights he ought to be ten miles and more ahead of us, I say; but do you know I half thought I caught a glimpse of his car when we came over the top of the last rise, and not so very far away, either."

40

"I certainly heard a sound that might have been made by a car dashing across a short bridge ahead, there," admitted Hugh.

"All of which looks queer to me," continued Blake. "Do you think, Hugh, he might have held back to see how we came out of that scrape? Would he be figuring on doing something to hold us up on the way?"

"I don't know," was the reply of the patrol leader. "All we can do is to keep a good lookout as we go along, and fight shy of breakers. If only Bud can keep that engine going, we're bound to arrive, some time or other. If that man tries to bother us, he may wish he hadn't," and the light that shone in Hugh's eyes as he said this told how he meant every word.

"Huh! he wouldn't be the first fellow who felt sorry he'd fooled with the scouts of Oakvale," boasted Bud, with memories of previous exploits crowding his brain. "If a silly bear will monkey with a buzz-saw, he c'n expect to get hurt, that's all."

"Pull up!" hastily ejaculated Hugh as he saw something glisten in the road ahead of them.

41

They had just started around a bend, and were going at a fair pace at the time. Bud put on the brake, and the car speedily came to a stand, but, alas! just a trifle too late to avoid the breakers. There was a sudden explosion.

"Gee! a tire's busted!" cried Blake, in dire dismay.

All of the boys jumped out, and it needed only one look to tell them the truth, for the left front tire lay flat.

"Glass!" snapped Bud, wrathfully, as he glanced around. "Just think of anybody heaving a bottle overboard like that, when there are so many stones around. Seems to me the least the rascal could have done would be to throw the same into the bushes here."

Hugh was bending over as though deeply interested, and just then he electrified his two companions by crying out:

"It was no accident, after all, fellows, but a part of a cleverly arranged plot! These bottles were

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fetched along purposely. They were broken right on this rock, where you can see all the fine glass; and the pieces were put on the road so that a car couldn't pass along without being terribly cut. See here, and here, and here!"

Bud was furious. He gritted his teeth, and growled like a "bear with a sore head," as he himself afterwards explained it.

"Hugh! you're right, hang the luck if you ain't!" he went on to say, as he looked the ground over. "That miserable skunk laid the plot, and I'm sorry to say it worked like a charm. See how he chose a place just around a bend, so we mightn't get warning in time by the sun glinting from the broken glass? Oh! he's a corker of a schemer, that chap is; and I'd like to get my hands on him! Say, what I wouldn't do to him would be hardly worth mentioning."

"Forget all that, Bud," cautioned wise Hugh. "That sort of talk never mends cut tires. All of us must get busy, and see what we can do. Luckily enough you made out to have an extra tire along, even if it's a tough proposition. Let's make the change in double-quick time."

All the while they worked the boys exchanged opinions, and if that man could only have heard what they thought of him surely his ears would have burned.

"One thing certain," Hugh was saying later on, as the job progressed fairly well, "this thing has settled the question about his being interested in keeping us out of the mobilization camp."

"Just what it has, Hugh," admitted Blake, jubilantly. "When once you know what you're up against, the chances of winning out are stronger; anyway, that's always been my opinion."

"Have you cleaned off the road ahead of us, Blake?" asked Bud, "because we'll be on the move again as soon as I get a little more air in this tire."

"I walked along the road for a hundred yards," replied the other, "and found no more of the glass. I reckon he bunched it all around here, so we couldn't dodge running smack into the same."

"After this," said Bud, grimly, "I'll slow up whenever we come to a turn. You never can tell what a wretch like that may have fixed around the bend. Once bit, twice shy, isn't a bad motto. I don't mean to get trapped in the same way again, if I know it."

"So I was right, wasn't I?" Blake remarked, with a touch of satisfaction in his voice, "when I said I felt sure I had seen that flivver a mile or two ahead of us, when it should have been at least ten miles further along?"

"That's correct, Blake," assented Hugh; "your eyes told you the truth. All of us will have to keep on the watch right along. The man who could play such a mean trick on people in a car with such bad tires as this one has would be equal to anything, in my opinion. Ready now, Bud?"

"Yes, and that tire seems to be pretty snug," came from the hard-worked pilot, who, however, never once complained, for Bud was not a shirker, if he did have certain faults of his own to contend with. "I only hope the others don't turn out to have been cut so they'll go back on us sooner or later. Glass like this is a bad proposition when you're running on worn rubber."

Once more they were moving along. How keenly they kept their eyes on the lookout for further trouble ahead could be detected by the manner in which all three forgot to observe the scenery around them, the dusty road monopolizing their attention.

45

As the minutes continued to slip past they had the satisfaction of knowing that they were putting the miles behind them. Five and more had been dropped since that last accident. Blake asked further questions concerning the probable distance over which they had now come, and as usual Hugh was able to give a conservative guess.

"All of twenty-five miles from Oakvale by now, I should say," he announced. "If you want to know how I'm able to say that, let me explain. I have a rough map of the country up here. I copied it hastily from one they had at the recruiting tent, for you know the battery must have come along this same road we're now on. A mile back we saw a crossroads. That was marked on the map with the figures twenty-four; so after all it was easy to add another mile to that score; and there you are."

"Only for your long head in making a rough copy of that road map, Hugh," declared the admiring Blake, "we would certainly be up against it now. Well, that leaves some fifteen or twenty more miles. Can we fetch it by sundown, do you believe, Bud?"

46

"Oh! easy going!" came the flippant reply, though accompanied by a side wink in the direction of Hugh, which was possibly intended to convey the meaning that the aforesaid result could be attained if they were fortunate, and met with no further mishaps such as had already delayed them on two occasions.

"I think we're coming to some sort of village," observed Hugh, later on, "for I can see a small house on one side of the road, with some chickens and a dog in the way. Slow up, Bud; we don't want to race through here, and be hauled up for exceeding the speed limit; or else have to stop and pay for some silly hens that were bound to get under our wheels."

Several cottages were passed. Then they came to a stretch of woodland, beyond which, doubtless, the town proper lay, for they could see signs of smoke rising, and there was also a sound as of an engine working in some sort of mill.

Suspecting no immediate trouble, the boys were running along quite smoothly when, without the slightest warning, they received a sudden shock. Again it came to them just around a bend in the road, though Bud had kept his word, and was moving slowly at the time.

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A rope was stretched directly across from one tree to another. To make the hold-up even more positive, a log had been rolled out, and lay there, blocking the road, so that even should a swiftly-going car have broken the rope, it was bound to come to grief against that other obstacle.

"Pull up, Bud! quick!" almost shrieked Blake Merton, but he might just as well have spared himself the trouble of letting out this frantic appeal, for the driver had his car well under control, and was easily able to bring it to a halt some ten feet away from the obstructions.

No sooner had they halted than a gruff voice was heard calling out:

"Throw up your hands and surrender, you three young raskels! I've got yuh covered, all right, and yuh might as well give in peaceable like, because you're up against the strong arm of the law!"

CHAPTER V

AN ECHO FROM THE PAST

The boys, following up this rasping voice, stared to see the figure that broke out of the scrub close to the barrier, and approached them. No wonder they almost felt their breath taken away, for had this been a scene from some ridiculous motion picture play, the representative of the majesty of the law as met with in a country marshal or constable, could not have seemed more ridiculous.

The man was old, and spare of figure. He was dressed in gray garments, and wore a large soft hat built after the Western sombrero model. It had a gilt cord around the crown, and was tilted up rakishly on one side. Even to the glistening nickel star, that decorated his left breast, was this representative of law and order, gotten up to shame one of those stage sheriffs at whose antics youngsters in the cheap "movies" scream with laughter.

"Don't laugh, fellows, on your lives!" whispered Hugh, instantly, afraid lest rash Bud, for instance, should break out into a loud roar that would seriously offend the officer, and mean further trouble for them.

He raised his hands, as did the other two boys, though Blake was complaining after his customary fashion.

"But, say, we couldn't have broken any speed law, Mister, because you saw yourself we were just fairly *crawling* along?" he protested, weakly.

The officer was holding a tremendous horse pistol of an ancient vintage; it had an ominous look, and doubtless could give a fair account of itself if fired, for they made good weapons in old-time days.

"I never said as how yuh was pinched for speedin', did I?" he went on to observe, with a grim smile hovering about his stern mouth, while his beady eyes continued to rove from one

boyish face to another. "Huh! I guess now it's somethin' a heap worse nor *that* you're wanted for. Where did yuh git this car?"

"Why, it belongs back in Oakvale," stammered Bud, hardly knowing what it meant when the man with the nickel star shot this question directly at him as the pilot of the expedition, or at least the one who was handling the wheel.

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"K'rect. That corresponds with the information I had given tuh me," continued their strange captor, nodding his head until his goatee made him resemble a pugnacious billy-goat.

Hugh instantly began to see a faint glimpse of light. Something about the words which the constable had just uttered gave him a suspicion as to the possible truth. He began to take a deeper interest in the hold-up, which could turn out to be of an altogether different character from what they had up to that moment believed.

"My friend," he started to say, giving the constable one of his frank smiles, "after all, don't you think you may have made a mistake in holding us up as you have? Honest, now, do we look like fellows who would steal a car; and even if we ever had such a scheme afoot, wouldn't we be apt to pick out a machine worth taking, rather than a rattle-trap like this ramshackle thing?"

The constable somehow seemed a bit impressed. There might have been that in the manly bearing of the boy who was speaking, as well as something in his voice that touched a responsive chord in his old heart. He stroked his straggly chin whiskers with his unemployed hand, and continued to ogle the three lads so eagerly leaning toward him from the car.

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"Uh! waal, it does seem like yuh'd be a passel o' fools tuh grab a rattle-trap car as this un when yuh might a had your pick. But then he says tuh me there was a reason why yuh did it."

"Oh! then some one put you wise to our coming along this road, did they?" Bud flashed out. "Guess we can hit on the skunk, all right, Mister. He was a little ornery reptile, wasn't he, with a grin on his black face all the time? Tell me, doesn't that cover his description all right, sir?"

"My name is Eben Wheezer, and I am the reg'lar authorized constable of Halle'sburg," the other went on to explain. "I'm free to confess that I was give a pointer concernin' yuh boys. Mebbe it's jest a lark you're playin', but, all the same, when a car has been taken without the owner's knowledge or permission, the eye of the law looks on it as a *bony fide* theft. It becomes the duty of a constable to pinch the offenders."

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"Listen, Mr. Wheezer, please," urged Hugh. "Delay of even an hour would mean a serious thing to us just now. We are on our way to the mobilization camp, and it is of extreme importance that we get there some time this evening. That man you talked with seems to be an enemy of ours. He is connected with a scamp back in Oakvale who would be glad if we failed to get to the camp, because it might mean money in his pocket. He has already done his best to knock us out, even filling the roadway with glass from broken bottles, so as to cut our

weak tires, and keep us from getting on.”

“Which happened, too, as you can see if you glimpse that tire we’re carrying, and which is slashed something terrible,” interjected Bud, impulsively.

The country constable was interested, seeing which Hugh returned to the attack on the principle that when you have the enemy started a vigorous offensive should be carried out to get him on the run.

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“Besides, Mr. Wheezer,” Hugh went on to say, confidently, “we are, as you see, scouts. Our uniforms will tell you that, our badges too; and, if you want, I can show you a number of clippings from the papers that tell of certain things of merit the Oakvale scouts have done in the past.”

“By gum! what’s that shiny medal you’re wearin’, son, stand fur?” suddenly demanded the constable, fixing his glittering eyes on Hugh’s left breast. “She looks a heap like the real stuff to me, an’ gold, at that!”

Hugh at once took it off and passed it over. If ever he felt proud on account of the possession of such a fine medal, that time was then and there, because he believed it was going to save himself and chums a good deal of trouble and time.

The constable put on a pair of glasses with huge horn rims, and peered at the inscription, turning the neat little medal over in his hands. When he looked again at the owner there was a marked interest in his thin and pinched face.

“Tell me, air yuh this same Hugh Hardin it speaks of here?” he demanded, hoarsely, taking a step nearer the halted car.

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“That happens to be my name, sir,” replied Hugh.

“Did yuh git this here medal fur savin’ lives when that flood was rampagin’ through the town of Lawrence?” continued the officer, his voice now showing signs of hoarseness that might have come from excess emotion.

“Why, yes. Several of my chums and I were visiting there when that dam up the valley broke, and the bridge over the river was carried away. We had a pretty lively time of it during the few days we were detained there, on account of no trains running. We managed to hold out a helping hand to some of the poor people caught in the flood. You know, sir, that’s what scouts live for, to assist others not so well off as themselves.”

Eben Wheezer heard the boy through. Then he did a number of queer things, first of all ramming that ancient pistol out of sight in one of his pockets, and then actually holding out a thin and trembling hand to Hugh.

“Say, son, I want tuh shake hands with yuh, that’s what I do!” he startled them by saying, enthusiastically. “This hold-up is all off, yuh understand. I was an old fool tuh take that rascal’s seegar, and b’lieve half he says tuh me ‘bout some boys comin’ along the road here as

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how he reckoned had stole a car, and that there was likely tuh be a reward offered fur their apprehension, which I might jest as well rake in as the next un. But I kin see it all now, an' I'm right glad tuh meet up with Hugh Hardin."

"What do you know about me, Mr. Wheezer?" asked the patrol leader, flushing at the same time with pleasure as he felt the cordial grip of that lean hand.

"Oh! only this, son," laughed the old constable, pumping the boy's hand as though he might be the milkman making up a deficiency in his cans, "it happens that I had an ole wife a visitin' over there in Lawrence at the time that dam broke. Yes, and, what's more, she told me it was a boy named Hugh Hardin that kim along with some other scouts in a rowboat and saved her from a house that was a-floatin' off in the flood. Huh! think I'd ever forgit *that* name when it belonged to the lad who kept me from bein' a forlorn widower? This here is a joyous occasion for me, I tell yuh."

Bud gave a whoop, and danced around like a crazy thing.

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"Talk to me about bread cast upon the waters returning before many days," he was crying excitedly. "Did anybody ever hear the equal of this! See, Hugh, how your good deeds repay you heaps of times over. We thought we had run across another enemy, and he turns out to be a bully sort of a friend. Won't you shake hands with me, Mr. Wheezer, even if I wasn't lucky enough to be in that bunch that did such good work at Lawrence—the honor of that exploit goes to Hugh, here, Billy Worth and Monkey Stallings. But, then, we're all chums, you know, sir, and in the same boat."

The delighted constable was only too glad to oblige Bud, and so warm was his grip that possibly the other felt a tinge of regret at insisting upon being given a hand-shake. Blake Merton felt that it would not do for him to be left out in the cold, so he had to grimace and bear it when Eben got to working his lean fingers.

Indeed, all of the boys felt they had good reason for feeling thankful. What had threatened to prove a disaster and promised to overwhelm their plans was now working in their favor. The wearing of his badge, given by Scout Headquarters to those members of the organization who have saved human life at great peril to themselves, had turned out to be a most wonderful blessing to them. Instead of being held up, perhaps thrust into a miserable country lock-up until the next day, with their plans ruined, they were now free to proceed along their way.

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Hugh did not want to lose any more time than could be avoided, so instead of entering into a long conversation with the constable, he hastened to say:

"If we were not in such a great hurry, Mr. Wheezer, it would give me great pleasure to stop over with you, and visit your home, to meet your wife. I reckon I would know her again if I saw her. I'd be glad to tell you the story of what happened over in Lawrence when the flood swept down the valley. But we have a big stake

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in trying to make that camp by tonight. One of my chums here has a cousin in the battery who stands to lose a fortune if we are kept back; and the man who hired that rascal you met hopes to win it. So you'll excuse us if we say good-bye now, and thank you for being so kind."

The constable had already removed the log from the road, and now he unfastened his stout rope from the tree to which he had attached it.

"No apologies needed, son," he hastened to say, cheerily. "Yuh knows your business best, and if yuh chase after it in the same way yuh won your spurs over tuh Lawrence, I reckons now yuh'll upset all the kalculations o' thet schemer. Good-bye an' good luck tuh yuh, boys!"

He waved his official hand to them as they shot forward, and the last Blake saw of the odd, though good-hearted country constable, he was standing there in the road looking after the retreating car, and still waving his sombrero, while that bright nickel star on his manly breast gleamed in the rays of the westering sun.

"Congratulations, Hugh!" cried Blake, bubbling over with delight over their recent narrow escape. "They say chickens come home to roost, and that good deeds will pay a fellow back a thousand fold. Well, I want to tell you there never was such a positive illustration of their truth as this."

59

"The best of it is," laughed Hugh, happily, "that no matter how much our enemy plots against us, something comes along to upset all his calculations. He thought we were stuck there all afternoon, with an engine out of joint, but Bud here fooled him. Then there was that broken bottle game, which did hold us up a bit; but in spite of a slit tire we got started again. Last, but far from least, he fixed up this clever trick of telling the old constable three boys had stolen a car, and were coming along the road a ways back; also hinting that there might be a good reward offered for capturing the rascals and holding them over-night in the town cooler. But again our luck held good, and we slipped through."

"I'm satisfied now," asserted Blake Merton, "that nothing is going to keep us from getting there some time tonight. I'll hunt up Felix right away, talk to him like a Dutch uncle, get him to write that letter, and then the first thing in the morning we can start back home again."

"If anything goes wrong with the car, we'll find some other way of returning, make up your mind to that, Blake," Hugh assured him.

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It was in this happy frame of mind that the three scouts passed through the little town of Hallettsburg, and continued onward. As they went they could frequently discover plain signs that to their practiced eyes assured them the battery had traversed the same road they were now on. Perhaps a boy untrained in the art of using his eyes, and seeing small things that told a story, would never have been able to accomplish this thing; but Hugh, Bud and Blake had served their time at studying woodcraft, as practiced by the Indians from the days of Daniel Boone, and they knew dozens of things that would, when noticed and examined, tell an

interesting story.

The sun was getting pretty low in the west, and evening was coming on. It was about the last quarter of the moon, which had been full on the fifteenth of the month, so that no help from this source could be expected until toward midnight, when the silvery remnant would be seen rising in the East. That was one reason why the boys were anxious to be getting on as fast as they dared chance it, because, once night settled in, their progress would be blocked.

61

"The sun's going down, Hugh," announced Blake, with a touch of dismay in his voice.

"That's all very true," replied the scout master, "but we'll have half an hour of light yet, perhaps more, and I think we ought to make the camp in that time!"

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CHAPTER VI

THE BURNING BRIDGE

"Hugh!" called out Blake Merton a short time later, "did you see that light flash up ahead of us there?"

"Just what I did," came the immediate reply.

"Do you think it could be one of the camp fires of the boys, a sort of vidette post, you might say?" further questioned Blake, eagerly.

"There it goes again, as sure as you live!" ejaculated Bud Morgan at the wheel, "and, say, it's a fire, all right—growing stronger all the while. I wonder what it can mean for us?"

"We'll soon find out," remarked Hugh, confidently. "We're advancing, and will come to a clear stretch in a minute or so, where the trees happen to be sparse, and we can see ahead."

"Perhaps, after all, it's only some cabin alongside the road, with the people doing their cooking outdoors," observed Bud. "I saw that done heaps of times when my folks took me down to Florida that winter I was sick."

63

Their curiosity grew by leaps and bounds as they proceeded along the road. The closer they drew to the scene of the illumination, the more puzzled all of the boys found themselves.

Then suddenly it broke upon them. They must have turned a bend in the road, for just as though a wave of a magician's wand had caused the picture to appear before their eyes, they saw it all.

"Oh! look at that, will you?" shrilled Blake, aghast at the vision. "It's a bridge afire!"

"It sure is!" echoed Bud, staring as though he could hardly believe his eyes.

"See how the flames are creeping along the wooden sides!" continued the Merton boy, hysterically. "Why, they look like red snakes, that's what they do. Hugh, what can we do to

get across that river if the bridge goes down?"

"I can't tell you just yet, Blake!" snapped the other. "Let her out some more, Bud. Never mind the risk to the old plug of an engine; we've *got* to get there so as to fight that fire, or we'll be dished. I know what stream that is, and it's a deep one, too, far too deep for us to ever hope to ford it with this car. Faster, Bud, faster, I tell you!"

64

Bud Morgan never accepted anything that bordered on a dare. He had held in thus far principally because he knew Hugh would not be apt to countenance speed when it necessitated additional risk. Now he "let out another notch," as he himself would have expressed it.

The old car shambled along with dizzying celerity, making all manner of ridiculous sounds, as though protesting against such haste. Still nothing happened to indicate another breakdown; and at least they were advancing toward the burning bridge with accelerated speed.

All the while Hugh was wondering what could have caused the fire. It was very strange, he concluded, that a country bridge should take a notion to start up in a blaze like this, and just when it became a most important link in their drive to the concentration camp.

So they arrived on the scene. Bud was evidently for trying to run the gantlet with a mad rush, but Hugh called upon him to draw up short, which he did, stopping the car close to the near end of the wooden structure.

65

"We might have made it, Hugh!" urged Bud, reproachfully, as though he regretted the cautious policy of the scout master.

"But there would always be a chance that our gas tank would explode!" cried Hugh; "look how the flames are driven straight across the bridge by the wind. Then the fire is along both sides, so we'd have to run a regular gantlet. No, Bud, old fellow, we couldn't afford to take the chances. Out with you all, and let's see if we can't save the old bridge yet."

"Go to it, boys!" shouted Bud, instantly on the move, for he was a lad of action, and never happier than when doing things.

"Work on the windward side first!" ordered Hugh, with the sagacity that leadership in an energetic scout organization is apt to bestow upon any wideawake youth. "Here, snatch up these old lap-ropes, and souse them in the water. If you beat at the flames just as we did when the woods on fire that time, you'll find they can be mastered. Everybody get busy!"

"Whoop! watch my smoke, will you!" cried Bud, starting off with a rush.

66

There chanced to be some old lap-ropes in the car that Bud had managed to secure, not of any great value, to be sure, so far as things of beauty went, but bound to be of great value in an emergency like the present. Each of the three scouts managed to secure possession of one of these, and it required but a brief time to submerge the same in the swift flowing and

deep stream.

With this soaking cloth in hand the energetic boys started to fight the fire, slapping at the running flames as they curled along the side of the bridge in long spirals that resembled creeping snakes.

When three lively fellows get started at a task of this sort it is wonderful what remarkable progress they can attain. With each stout blow it seemed as though the fire that was threatening to demolish the entire wooden structure received a serious setback. The boys fought their way completely across the bridge, which was not of any great length.

“Good enough for us!” cried the panting Bud. “We’ve licked that line of skirmishers; do we tackle the other side now, Hugh?”

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“One good turn deserves another, so go for it!” advised the leader, setting a pace himself that kept the others hustling to continue in the same class.

Success is always encouraging, and, having found that they could get the better of those creeping flames, the three boys fought all the harder, determined to crush the fire completely.

“A little more elbow grease, boys, and victory is going to perch on our banner!” Bud was crying, while he slapped that scorched laprobe again and again on the railing of the bridge, even mopping up the floor with it when occasion demanded.

The boys were past masters at this sort of thing. They had served their time at it on another occasion, when the woods, catching fire not many miles from Oakvale, they had been called upon to help save certain isolated farmhouses and crops that were threatened with destruction.^[2]

Breathing heavily, the three lads finally had the satisfaction of seeing the last zigzag line of fire succumb to the vigor of their attack. Still, Hugh would not be wholly satisfied.

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“Let’s go down and wet these rags again,” he told his chums, “and hunt out every crack where the least bit of fire hides, so that after we go on it isn’t going to spring up again.”

“Might as well make a clean job of it while we’re about it,” agreed Bud, as he followed Hugh down to the edge of the river, there to immerse their “fighting togs” again in the water.

As they walked along, carefully scanning both sides of the bridge for any evidences of hidden peril, Bud once more broke out, voicing some suspicion that he had evidently been harboring in his brain.

“Hugh, don’t you think it’s mighty funny how this old bridge could get afire? Suppose a threshing machine traction engine could have passed over here lately; but, then, it’s too early in the season for anything like that to be going around. If a man on a wagon threw a burning match aside after lighting his pipe, would it start things to burning? Somehow I just can’t believe this is an accident at all.”

"Oh! do you really mean you suspect it was done *on purpose*, perhaps to keep us from crossing this deep river, and making us miss connections with the camp?" asked Blake, apparently thrilled with the thought.

"I'm certain of it," asserted Hugh, positively. "I'll tell you why. Just bend your heads closer here, and take a whiff where this rail has been only a little charred; what does it smell like?"

"Why, Hugh, it makes me think of home, when the girl is starting our oil stove going!"

"That's a fact," added Bud, gritting his teeth ferociously, "and somebody's gone and saturated both sides of this bridge with kerosene, so as to give the fire a good send-off. Oh! the low-down wretch, what wouldn't I give to have a chance to choke him."

"Try it again over here, and you get the same odor," Hugh observed, impressively; "yes, and right there you can see where some of the stuff spilled, for the spot looks greasy. He must have had a can of kerosene along with him in his car for just such a purpose as this."

Each boy in turn dropped on his hands and knees, the better to take a "sniff" at the discolored spot on the floor boards of the bridge that had such a "close call." As they once more regained their feet they nodded their heads, unanimous in their opinion as to the origin of that greasy mark.

"Which shows that our good luck still haunts our footsteps," Blake said, trying to smile happily, though there was a deep-seated look of apprehension to be detected in his eyes.

Truth to tell, all of them were more or less impressed with the malignity shown by this party whom they believed to be in the pay of Luther Gregory. He was evidently bent upon earning the sum promised him in case he, by hook or crook, prevented the boys from reaching the mobilization camp until it was too late to secure that apology from the quick-tempered Felix.

"Well, do we cross over now, and move along our way?" asked Blake, unable to conceal the anxiety he naturally felt because of these numerous delays.

"Nothing to hinder that I can see," replied Hugh.

"I'll drive the old car across, presently, while you two wait for me at the other side," Bud said, as he climbed aboard. "Take a good look as you go, and tell me if any of the flooring is burned through."

As they crossed over, Hugh and Blake kept a good lookout, and reported all safe; so presently Bud, having coaxed the engine to start again after some effort, joined his mates on the further side of the stream.

"I certainly do hope," ventured Blake Merton, with a sigh, as he proceeded to settle down in his old seat again, "that we've run up against the last obstacle. It's certain that chap can't think up much more evil to turn against us."

"What's coming now?" cried Bud. "I can hear

shouts, and, Hugh, there seems to be men running around that clump of undergrowth alongside the road."

"I bet you there's a village along there, and that the people have just discovered the smoke of the fire here," advanced Blake. "They know about the bridge, and are coming to save it. They would have been just too late if not for us."

"They ought to give us a vote of thanks, then, for our services," said Bud.

"Listen to 'em shouting, will you?" continued Blake. "Why, it sounds to me like they were real mad at something. Hugh, don't it strike you that way, too? Look at some of the fellows in the lead shaking their fists at us, just as if we'd gone and done something mean. Gee whiz! I hope now they don't get the notion into their silly heads that we started this bridge to burning."

72

Quite a crowd was coming wildly toward them, consisting of men and boys, though there were also a few energetic women. Some of them carried clubs, and waved these in a suggestive fashion.

"Sit tight," warned Hugh, sternly; "it means that we're up against it again. Above all things, don't do or say anything to start a fight!"

73

CHAPTER VII THE ACCUSATION

If one of the three scouts entertained doubts as to the hostility of the mob that came running along the country road, these were quickly dispelled. In another minute the car was surrounded by an angry crowd. A dozen voices shrilled at them, and sticks were shaken in their faces.

"Stand back, everybody!" shouted a burly man, who seemed to be invested with more or less authority. "I'm the sheriff of this county, it happens, and I don't allow any interference with my business. Three of my posse being present, I call on them to stand by me. The rest of you hold your peace. I'll do what talking is necessary."

Hugh was glad to know this. He could deal with a single individual, where it was utterly impossible in the case of an excitable mob. So Hugh hastened to speak up, addressing his remarks to the man of authority.

"Will you kindly tell us what all the row is about?" he asked, pleasantly. "We are heading for the camp where the State militia is mobilizing, and, discovering this bridge afire, worked with all our might to put out the flames. If you look at those dirty cloths lying there, you'll find that they were once lap-robbers. We soaked them in the water, and slapped the flames out as we were trained to do in fighting a forest fire."

74

A few of the villagers may have been impressed with the words spoken by Hugh, as well as his manly bearing; but they were vastly in the

minority. Most of those present were so worked up by anger that they seemed blind to the facts.

"Don't believe him, Sheriff," urged one man, venomously; "he's only lying. All boys'll lie whenever they get a chanct. I know these here scouts, how they like to strut around like heroes. And, Sheriff, you c'n depend on it they set fire to our bridge just a purpose to make believe they did a big thing whipping the flames out."

"That's what he told us they'd like enough say," called out another man, whose small face and vinegary looks told of a mind that was below the mediocre. "He says he saw 'em running around like they was pourin' something on the sides of the bridge from a bottle. Say, I kin smell coal oil, by Jimminy crickets; if I can't now."

75

"Lock the young rascals up, Sheriff!"

"Larn 'em a lesson they'll never forget. 'Cordin' to my mind, there's a heap too much talk nowadays 'bout boys doin' great stunts. It's jest upso't a lot o' 'em, so they're lookin' around all the time for ways to make people think they're jest like little David when he knocked over that Goliath chap long ago."

So several other men had their say. Hugh listened to it all, and waited for an opportunity to get a chance to explain. He knew that he must depend on the sheriff, and so he kept him in mind when he finally started in to speak.

"Please listen to me, Mr. Sheriff," he began to say, impressively. "We belong in the town of Oakvale, where you'll find, if you telephone the Chief of Police, that our reputation is gilt-edged. We are on our way to the big camp over beyond the hills yonder, where Battery K, from Oakvale, is located. We have very important business with one of the members, who is a cousin of this boy here. It will cost him his inheritance if we are unable to talk with him by tomorrow. There is a man whose interest it is to keep us from doing this. He has tried through an agent of his in a number of ways to hold us back; and, if you wish, I would take pleasure in telling you all about these things. Sir, we have good reason to believe that this setting fire to your bridge was a part of his scheme to detain us."

76

"What's that, boy?" asked the sheriff, hastily. "Can you tell us what this man you're speaking of looks like?"

"A man passed us while we were fixing our engine on the road hours ago," Hugh readily explained, "and when we asked him to lend us a hand he said he was in too big a hurry to stop. He seemed to be grinning all the while, as though tickled at finding us in such a bad mess. We believe that man is the agent sent out to hold us back from arriving at the camp until it is too late to do any good."

"Was he a little man, with a sharp face, and eyes that glittered like a snake's?" called out one of the more friendly disposed men.

"Yes, and he was in a flivver, a small machine with the top down," explained Bud, taking part in the affair now. "He wore a suit that looked as near green as you could find, and had on a leather cap with goggles pushed up above the

77

peak.”

The sheriff was impressed by what he heard. At the same time, he did not appear disposed to drop the case against the three lads. Perhaps the knowledge that some of those in the crowd refused to take any stock in the story of the boys influenced him more or less; for murmurs were heard rising here and there.

“Don’t you believe half he says, Sheriff,” one man called out.

“Boys c’n be all-fired tricky,” another remarked, sharply, “and he’s certainly got a smooth tongue. Better run the lot of ’em in, and make ’em prove their innocence. That’s the best way to fix it, ’cordin’ to my mind.”

Hugh felt uneasy. If the sheriff were so disposed he could, of course, lock them up on suspicion; and while nothing might eventually be done toward convicting them for the crime of setting fire to the bridge, the delay would cost them dear.

But it happened that once more in their extremity fortune worked what almost seemed like a miracle in their behalf. Hugh noticed that two children had joined the crowd. He also knew that they had certainly not come along the road with the runners, for they could never have kept pace with the mob racing toward the river.

78

A sudden thought struck him. He turned to the sheriff and began to suggest a plan of action that would possibly prove the truth or falsity of the charges against them.

“Listen, Mr. Sheriff,” Hugh began. “I think that small boy and girl there must have been somewhere near by, because they came up out of the bushes here just now. Ask them questions, won’t you, sir, and find out if they saw anything of what took place here? It may be they were in hiding, and saw us come up while the bridge was burning. It’s only a fair deal we want, sir, and I’m sure you’ll agree to that.”

The sheriff was more impressed than ever with the bearing of the boy who addressed him. Besides, the plea he advanced seemed very plausible. He turned upon the two children, a bright-looking boy and girl of about ten. They were barefooted.

79

“Look here, Billy Burt, and you, too, Sally, were you hiding in the bushes here when we came up?”

“Yep, that’s what we was,” said the boy, urged to speak by sundry punches in his side, given by the elbow of his girl companion.

“Why did you hide there?”

“We was skeered when we got here, and seen the fire,” came the answer.

“Then the bridge was burning, was it, when you came along?” continued the sheriff.

“It shore was,” the boy told him, positively.

“Were these boys around at that time?”

The boy stared at Hugh and Blake and Bud, then

he grinned. "Nixey, they wasn't. They kim hurryin' along, and fit the fire like wildcats. Yuh jest orter seen how they slashed and slashed around till every bit o' flames was done fur. Me'n Sally jest hid there in the bushes an' watched the fun. It was better'n the movin' picture fire I seen down in Hallettsburg."

"Huh! that ought to settle the case against us, I should think," laughed Bud as the boy finished his recital, which, though framed in ungrammatical language, loomed as high as any speech ever delivered before a judge in an appeal to free the accused before the bar.

80

The sheriff threw up his hands.

"Boys," said he, briskly, "you win. Instead of plucking you, and running you in for attempted arson, I'm goin' to thank you most heartily on behalf of the village of Scroggs Corners, which I happened to be visiting this afternoon on business. Only for your efficient work we'd have been a bridge shy tonight. Shake hands with me, and kindly excuse my excess zeal that might have worked you all an injury."

Well, the boys bore no malice. They were only too happy to know that nothing was going to interfere with their onward progress. In fact, they felt as though victors in the brisk engagement between this clever foe and themselves. It was likely to be the last expiring effort of the unscrupulous schemer; after this he would have to give up the attempt to keep them from the camp until sufficient time had elapsed to destroy all hopes of Felix making his peace with his uncle.

"If you could only manage to round up that smart rascal who did set this fire, Mr. Sheriff," Bud could not help saying, when shaking hands with the official, now very friendly toward their cause, "it might be possible to prove the crime against him. Perhaps you may discover he had been carrying kerosene in his car, and that would be a strong piece of evidence against him. He's given us heaps of trouble, which is partly why I'm showing such a rattlesnake spirit toward him."

81

"I mean to send word along the line, and round him up if he can be headed," the sheriff admitted, though Hugh really believed he had not dreamed of such an idea until Bud made his suggestion.

Of course, even those who had been most disposed to believe the boys guilty of arson had now been convinced of their innocence by the statement of the boy who had seen all that went on from his hiding-place. So when Bud started the car once more there was no sign of opposition; indeed, only cries of goodwill followed the scouts as they proceeded.

Passing through the village, which they found to be laboring under more or less excitement, the trio continued on their course. Later on, when they came to a steep hill, the engine balked again, so that half an hour was lost in coaxing it to be good.

82

Blake had been sighing with impatience through the operation. Once he had even gone so far as to suggest that he and Hugh start on foot, since

it could only be a matter of a few miles at the most that lay between them and their intended destination. The working mechanic, however, nipped this scheme in the bud by declaring that he was getting the upper hand of the balky engine, and hoped to be able to make a fresh start before ten minutes more had passed.

Still, that half-hour delay was fated to have some effect upon their fortunes.

When the engine trouble had been mastered, and they were again on the way, Blake seemed content. The persistent manner in which his comrades managed to meet each new crisis as it appeared, and win out through any and every kind of trouble, elicited his ardent admiration. Blake was ready to declare that the day's reckoning would only redound to the credit of scout efficiency.

Hugh suspected that they were now close upon the big camp. He must have caught certain sounds to tell him this. At least, as they drew near the top of the slope, he bade both his chums keep on the lookout, because he believed they were due for a pleasant surprise.

Loud exclamations broke from their lips when, on reaching the summit, they beheld a wonderful spectacle spread before them. Night was gathering, and already the broad valley beyond the ridge lay in semi-darkness, for the moon would not rise until very late.

Scores, almost hundreds of fires, were burning a mile or more away, looking weird to the startled eyes of the three scouts. They could also discover a myriad of the same kind of khaki waterproof tents that Battery K had used in Oakvale when endeavoring to drum up recruits at the station in the public square.

There lay the great mobilization camp of the State before them, with some thousands of stalwart young men training so as to be accepted by the Government for service along the far distant Mexico, where the threatening shadow of war hovered.

83

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE MOBILIZATION CAMP

"Well, this sure pleases me!" exclaimed Bud, as he stopped the car on the summit of the ridge, so that they could feast their eyes on the remarkable spectacle of all camp fires burning in the near distance.

"It is wonderful," breathed Blake, "and well worth all the trouble it's cost us to get here. I reckon that we must be close to the border of the camp, and can expect to be held up by a sentry any minute."

"I'm going to start up my headlights going down this decline," admitted the pilot. "The more we drop into the valley the darker it'll be; and we can't afford to meet with a smash-up at this stage of the game, when we've about won out."

84

He took especial pains in going down the slope, and finally the bottom was reached in safety. Here they were suddenly greeted with a gruff command to halt, and discovered a soldier in khaki bearing a gun standing alongside the road.

"Say, this does look like war-times, doesn't it?" said Blake, in a low tone, "when you get hauled up by a vidette post. Hugh, please fix it so we can go on."

85

Some conversation followed between Hugh and the guard. Then a non-commissioned officer was called, and more talk ensued. Hugh had laid out his plan in advance, and so sagaciously that in the end he was given permission to move on, although a soldier was placed upon the footboard of the car to accompany the scouts to the quarters of Battery K.

Possibly the fact that they too wore the khaki had something to do with their being allowed to enter the camp at this late hour, so long after the time when soldiers were given a chance to see relatives and friends. No matter what the reason, all of the boys felt as though they had won fresh laurels in making that run from the home town in such a rack of a car, and also being obliged to overcome baneful opposition of an unscrupulous enemy.

They followed the road and were soon amidst some of the glowing fires. Here they found guardsmen sitting around, and eating their supper, which had evidently been prepared by the company cooks according to the rules that govern the summer training camps.

86

So far as Hugh and his chums could see, they were a jolly crowd, laughing and carrying on as though they did not have a care in the wide world. Once the bitterness of parting from their loved ones had been passed over, these healthy-minded young soldiers could play their part like men, and meet every situation that was likely to arise.

"I tell you I'm nearly tickled to death because I came," Bud was saying as they rolled along the road between two rows of fires that crackled and sent up myriads of sparks. "Talk about camping out, this has got all our experiences knocked to flinders. Why, there must be millions of soldiers here in this big valley."

"Better say thousands, and be nearer the truth, Bud," cautioned Blake. "But it is a great sight, and one we'll never forget, either. If a fellow needed to have his patriotism stirred to the bone, he'd get it done here. See how Old Glory is fastened up over that big tent yonder. Now I wouldn't be surprised if that was the colonel's tent; or it might even be Headquarters for the general in charge of all these forces of the State."

87

"We've got to pass through the whole camp before we come to where Battery K is located, so the sergeant said," Hugh remarked, as they moved slowly on.

Numbers of the soldiers came forward to have a look at those in the car. Possibly some of them may have entertained vague hopes that the newcomers might turn out to be friends or relatives, urged to make the trip by a desire to

glimpse a dear face once more before the guardsmen were ordered South. Hugh believed there was a wistful expression on many of the faces he saw turned their way.

As for Blake, he could hardly restrain his impatience. The fact that inside of a comparatively few minutes more he was to see his cousin, and that there was still plenty of time for accomplishing his mission before another day dawned, filled him with ecstasy.

"Don't you think we must be nearly there, Hugh?" he would say, pleadingly. "There couldn't be any mistake now, could there, so that we're going the wrong way to strike our boys of Battery K? Are you sure it's directly along this road, Bud, we ought to keep on going?"

88

"That's what the *non-com.* told us," replied the driver of the car, "and we must abide by orders when we're in a military camp. Besides, we've got some one along with us to show us the way; so ease up, Blake, or you'll crack sure."

"Guess you're right, Bud," admitted the other, "and I'll try to hold myself in; but somehow I can't feel dead sure till I'm shaking hands with Felix, and know it's going to be all right."

The fact of the matter was, as Hugh suspected, Blake was now beginning to fear that his impulsive cousin might prove obdurate, after all, and absolutely decline to humble himself so as to write a letter of apology to his uncle and guardian. Of course this would settle the matter just as positively as though that agent of Luther Gregory had succeeded in holding them up by having them arrested and kept for twenty-four hours in some village jail.

"Look yonder, will you?" suddenly exclaimed Bud, nodding his head, and using one hand to point to the left with, "there's a battery of field-pieces, but it isn't the one from Oakland. Just beyond must be the camp of the Engineers, because you can see a heap of picks and shovels and such tools lying there. You know the Engineer Corps have to make roads, build cook-houses, lay tent-floors for the officers' quarters, and do heaps of things like that. A fellow told me about it who used to belong, and quit because he said it was such hard work."

89

"Look over on this side, Bud, and you'll see something that tickles you," called out Blake.

"The Signal Corps' headquarters, I'll be bound!" ejaculated the other in sudden admiration. "See the wires they've run out. I warrant you every command in the whole camp has a telephone in its headquarters, with a Central station to boot. Now, if only I could run across the aviation field, and see a few hangers for aeroplanes in evidence, I'd be happy."

"Oh! they're further away, over to the right," explained the soldier who stood on the footboard of the car. "We have three 'planes working every day now, and more coming along. My brother is one of the air pilots, you know, so what I'm giving you is straight goods, boys."

90

They were by this time gradually approaching the other end of the great camp, as could be told

from the fact that the fires were becoming less numerous beyond them.

"Your battery lies just ahead of us now," announced the soldier, who seemed to be thoroughly acquainted with the lay of the camp, and able to direct any one to the location of each and every unit composing the entire mobilization centre.

Yes, they could already begin to see guns posted in a clump, or "parked," to use a military term. These seemed to have a familiar look to the Oakvale scouts, because they had many times handled the dull-finished modern field-pieces, doubtless envious of the luck of those whom they chanced to know as members of the company.

Leaving the car alongside the road, the boys followed after their guide, who led them directly over to where the battery had its tents, Immediately Hugh and his two chums began to recognize familiar faces. A number of the men jumped to their feet and hurried toward the newcomers. Hugh noticed that in some cases it was a look of sudden concern that came upon the reddened faces of the young artillerymen; and he could give a pretty good guess why this should be so. They were assailed with sudden fears lest something terrible might have happened to those left behind in the home town, and that the scouts had been dispatched to carry the sad news.

"Hello! Hugh. Hello, boys. What fetches you away off here?" called out one of the Battery K members; and his question must have voiced what was on the minds of several others, since they all waited anxiously to hear what Hugh might say in reply.

"We've come to have a little chat with Blake Merton's cousin, Felix Gregory, that's all," the patrol leader answered, at which something like a look of relief passed over several faces.

"Well, it must be something pretty important to fetch the three of you forty and more miles in a car?" suggested one fellow.

"Just what it is," jauntily admitted Blake. "Now, can any of you direct us to where we'll find my cousin Felix?"

"I was talking with him about half an hour back, but haven't seen him since, now you mention it!" one called out.

"I'd advise you boys to look up Captain Barclay, and he'll put you in touch with Felix, who must be around somewhere, because we have orders not to wander beyond bounds. There's the captain's tent over yonder, Hugh."

The speaker was big Hank Partridge, a cousin of Lige Corbley, and quite well known to Hugh. As the advice seemed sound, the scout master immediately turned his face toward the tent thus pointed out.

"Come along, boys, and we'll see what the captain can do for us," he told his two mates, at the same time starting forward.

Blake was by now beginning to have that worried expression steal back upon his face. His

old fears had awakened again, as was evidenced by the remark he made almost immediately after they started toward the captain's tent.

"It's mighty queer, I think, how not a single one of all those fellows could remember seeing my cousin inside of half an hour. Things have been happening so contrary lately I'm beginning to be afraid that something may have come along to whisk Felix out of the old camp here so I never will find him."

93

"Oh! how silly to let yourself borrow trouble in that way, Blake," Bud told him, scornfully. "What could carry him off but an aeroplane, and I'm pretty sure they haven't yet got to ducking down in the heart of a camp, and snatching a fellow up bodily. Just hold your horses, and we'll run on him pretty soon now."

They reached the tent of the commanding officer, where a sentry always stood on guard. Hugh, knowing the rules that applied, asked to see Captain Barclay, with whom he was, of course, well acquainted. In another minute the captain himself came forth.

He shook hands with Hugh and the other two scouts. Then the story was briefly told, particular emphasis being laid on the numerous attempts that had been made to keep them from meeting Felix Gregory. The officer was, of course, deeply interested. To lose such a fortune as Uncle Reuben owned would, he felt sure, be a calamity for any young fellow.

"You deserve every encouragement, boys, after what you've done to save Felix from the folly of his quick temper," he told them at the close of the recital. "I'm sure he must have been sorry long before. I know his generous nature well. I'll send out and have him come here to you. Then Blake can talk with him aside, and, if my influence is worth anything, you can depend on it I'll only too gladly say a good word."

94

So he gave an order, and the soldier to whom it was delivered hastened away. While he was gone the boys continued their chat with the captain. Finally the messenger returned, made his salute to his superior officer, and said something. Hugh was watching and saw the other look grave. Blake clutched the arm of his chum when the captain of Battery K, advancing slowly toward them, went on to explain.

"Strange to say, boys, so far no one can be found who has seen Private Gregory inside of half an hour. He seems to have mysteriously disappeared; but, of course, he can be found, and if you will wait for me here I'll go the rounds myself and rout him out. Don't worry while I'm gone, for it'll be all right."

95

CHAPTER IX

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF FELIX

When the captain turned and left them again, the three scouts exchanged uneasy glances. Blake suffered more than either of his chums,

for his heart had been wrapped up in his task. It meant much to him whether he failed or won out in his self-imposed mission to the camp.

"Hugh, do you know I expected something like this would happen," was the way he expressed himself. "Somehow, even when we had beaten that scheming rascal at his game several times, I seemed to have a feeling that in the end he might be too smart for us."

"Apparently, then," remarked Bud Morgan, "you've already made up your mind that this queer disappearance of your cousin Felix can be laid at the door of the same man we had so much trouble with on the road, the chap in the flivver?"

"Doesn't it stand to reason it must be that way?" demanded Blake. "Why should Felix clear out of camp here otherwise? These fellows of Battery K are in for the war, and wouldn't desert for all the money going. Felix is as loyal as they make 'em; he'd sooner cut his hand off than be thought a coward or a quitter. So there's only one way of explaining his vanishing; which is through this man."

96

"How about it, Hugh?" and Bud turned toward the patrol leader, as had become a chronic habit with most of the members of the troop whenever anything arose to bother or mystify them.

"All I can say as yet," replied the other, steadily, "is that it begins to look a whole lot that way. We had better wait a bit before deciding. The captain may pick up some information that will give us a pointer. Men don't disappear from a mobilization camp, as easy as all this, without leaving some traces behind them."

Blake shook his head dismally. Apparently he was losing heart, for so many things had arisen to balk his ambition that the strain was telling on him.

"Well, all I can say is I wish this business was all over," he observed, plaintively, "and we were on our way back home with that precious letter to Uncle Reuben. I tell you I'll feel like shouting if we do win!"

97

"Victory is always sweeter when you've had to fight hard to get it," Bud declared, with boyish philosophy. "Don't we all remember that when we've been up against a tough proposition, and had to take the bit between our teeth before we could land? Never lose faith in what you're doing, Blake. For one thing, you've got a couple of comrades along that mean to stand back of you through thick and thin. That ought to be some comfort to you."

"It is, Bud, it certainly gives me a heap of satisfaction, the way both of you stick to me. I'm going to take a brace up! We'll get there yet, we've just *got* to, and that's all there is about it."

Brave words, those, and possibly Blake Merton meant them, but, nevertheless, there were times when that anxious look would creep over his face again, as fresh difficulties kept piling up before them, and the desired end seemed as far away as ever.

They continued to stand there and talk for some

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little time, all the while eagerly awaiting the return of the friendly captain, whom all of them knew very well, since he was a prominent business man in Oakvale.

"There he comes!" asserted Bud, suddenly.

Blake lost color, and his hand trembled when he accidentally touched the sleeve of Hugh's khaki coat—perhaps, after all, it was through some design that this contact came about, for a positive realization that the scout master was standing by him must have given Blake renewed confidence, of which he was evidently in great need just then.

Captain Lawrence Barclay came hastily toward them. Hugh, discovering the look of annoyance still on his face, guessed that he bore bad news.

"Brace up, Blake, and show that you can stand whatever may be coming," he managed to say in a low tone to his companion.

Then the commander of Battery K arrived. He was a bluff sort of a man, not much given to beating around the bush when he had anything to say; nor could he smooth over disagreeable news as some men might.

"I'm sorry to report that young Gregory seems to have disappeared from camp altogether," he immediately remarked. "It is a most extraordinary occurrence. In fact, several officers with whom I've spoken say they would never have believed a man could vanish from the midst of a thousand or two of his fellows, with sentries posted, and camp rules in force. But I've sent out in every direction to find Gregory, but without any success so far."

99

Both Blake and Bud left things pretty much to Hugh, knowing his ability to handle such a case. Like a wise scout, the patrol leader immediately began to ask questions, with the design of getting facts that might give them a clue to the solution of the camp mystery.

"Captain," he started in to say, "would you mind telling us when Felix Gregory was last seen about here?"

"Several men seemed to agree on that point," replied the accommodating officer, "and I am inclined to say that it was just about half an hour back. At the time he was talking with a civilian who had managed in some way to gain permission to enter the camp in his car. From what I have learned, I believe Felix appeared to be considerably excited while he held this conversation with the stranger."

100

"Hugh, just as we suspected, it must have been that man!" gasped Blake. Bud Morgan nodded his head, and pinched the other to keep him quiet.

"Did any of them describe the man and his car, Captain?" continued Hugh. "You remember what we told you about the party who gave us so much trouble on the road? He was a small fellow, with a dark face, and snappy eyes, and his car was one of that cheap class called a flivver. Does that agree with what any of the men said, sir?"

"It seems to cover the case exactly, Hugh," the officer hastened to admit; "and, taken in conjunction with your remarkable story, makes the matter seem more mysterious than ever. Apparently, then, that man who tried to prevent you from getting to camp, finding that all his schemes had failed, turned another tack, and now aims to keep Felix from seeing you. How he has been able to get him out of the camp beats me; it would seem to be an impossible task."

Hugh was on his mettle now; his fighting blood aroused. The gleam in his eyes told that, as he shut his teeth together with a snap, and went on to say:

"There will be some way of tracking them, and we'll find it out by hook or by crook, Captain Barclay. If that man succeeds in keeping Felix hidden away for the next twenty-four hours our goose is cooked, because then it's going to be too late for any reconciliation between him and his guardian. But there will be hours before that happens, and every minute of that time the three of us here will be working like beavers to find out the truth. We never give up until the last gasp; that's a slogan of the scouts, you know, sir."

"A mighty fine rule for any one to go by, I must say," remarked the officer, looking admiringly at the speaker's flushed and determined face. "I've heard lots of good things said about you Oakvale scouts, and now I can understand why you've always met with such splendid success. I want to say, Hugh, that you can count on me to render any assistance in my power. What can I do for you now?"

Hugh was equal to the occasion. Although he had had little time in which to map out his course, owing to the sudden surprise by which they had been confronted, he knew that one thing would be needed.

"If you could manage it, Captain Barclay, so that we three might go about camp without being held up, and put to a whole lot of inconvenience, it would help us a heap."

"That can be arranged, I think, Hugh," said the other, after a brief period of reflection. "I'll try and get the general to write out three passes, such as they may be, and word them so that you'll be likely to have no trouble moving about. It is something unusual, of course, to allow civilians to remain in camp at a time like this, especially over night; but I think I can manage it all right."

Leaving the three lads again, the captain entered his tent to start operations looking to securing the passes. There was more or less sending of messages, possibly between Battery K and Headquarters, while Hugh and his companions tried to possess their souls in patience.

Finally, after a long delay, Captain Barclay again made his appearance, and in his hand he bore several folded papers.

"I've had more trouble than I expected, boys," he told them pleasantly; "but I believe everything is smoothed over now, and you will find little trouble in moving about. Only a few

newspaper correspondents have so far been given the same privileges; but when the general learned what fine things you scouts had to your credit in and around Oakvale, he obliged me with his signature. Which shows again how a good reputation pays every one a high rate of interest."

Each of the boys received one of the "passes" that would allow them to wander at will through the mobilization camp for the next twenty-four hours, the privilege expiring with the setting of the following day's sun; for after that time Hugh and his comrades would have no longer any desire to remain there, since their mission before then must be either a success or a failure.

"You didn't tell us what others thought of the disappearance of Felix Gregory, Captain?" Hugh remarked, as though anxious to learn this fact, since it might have a bearing on the solution of the mystery.

"Well, I interviewed one man in particular who was rather chummy with Felix," replied the officer. "His name is Andrew Burtis, and you all know him well. He told me he felt sure there was something on the mind of Felix, for he brooded over something, and acted strangely for a fellow of his happy disposition. In fact, it was Andrew who suggested that possibly the young chap had gone out of his mind over some trouble, and while in this condition had managed to leave the camp, for some purpose or other."

"But we know what it was troubling Felix, sir, as we have told you," burst out Blake Merton, eagerly. "I guess he was worrying about that quarrel with his uncle, because they had thought a good deal of each other. But it would never cause Felix to go out of his mind, Captain, you can believe me. No, that man was responsible for his going away; and Hugh here will get on the track, some way or other, I'm certain."

"Well, you have my best wishes, boys," said the officer. "I must leave you now, as I have duties to look after; but if I can do anything to assist you later on, be sure and look me up."

He shook hands most cordially with each one of them in turn, and there could be no question about his sincerity when he made that assertion. Left to themselves, the scouts faced a situation calculated to try their mettle to the utmost. Poor Blake in particular looked woe-begone as he turned a beseeching eye on Hugh, fully conscious that the last lingering hope of finding his missing cousin rested with the scout leader's dogged pertinacity. Belonging to the *Wolf* Patrol meant a good deal to Hugh Hardin; for in a case of this kind he knew that it would be necessary to emulate the example of the wolf that follows the track of a deer over hill and through valley, hour after hour, day and night, until by sheer persistence he has run the tired quarry to earth, and so secures the meal he sought.

So Hugh would never give up so long as a shred of hope remained. He was determined to start out and seek for a clue capable of leading him to success. Yet, after all, it happened that accident had considerable to do with the final outcome of the big game upon which the three scouts had embarked.

CHAPTER X

BUD MORGAN ON THE SCENT

"What's our plan of campaign, Hugh?" asked Bud Morgan.

"I was just going to say," remarked the scout master, "that if we separated, and covered as broad a field as possible, the chances for picking up some sort of clue would be all the better. In that way we could agree to meet here, say in an hour or so, and compare notes. Then if by good luck one of us managed to strike a warm scent we could lay out a scheme for taking up the trail. What do you say to that, fellows?"

Both of the others admitted that what Hugh proposed would be the wisest move. Doubtless, Blake would have been happier had Hugh decided to keep him in his company; but, then, he was too proud to hint at such a thing. Besides, he realized that the greater field they covered, just as Hugh had said, the better would be their chances for picking up news.

So they separated, with the understanding that in about an hour from that time they were to come together again near the tent of Captain Barclay, so as to compare notes and decide on the next step.

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Bud Morgan was more than eager to wander about the big, bustling camp. There were a thousand interesting things he wanted to see for himself. This was a golden opportunity which he meant to utilize to the utmost. He had been yearning for just such a legacy of good luck; and it had really come to him. That magical paper, signed by the general himself, would allow him to move at will. If any sentinel challenged his right to be amidst the tents of the assembled guardsmen representing the sovereign power of the State, all he had to do was to flash that document before his eyes, and the sight of the name signed at the end of the pass would end the detention instantly.

So Bud started forth with high hopes. He really meant to do all that lay in his power to assist poor Blake find his missing relative; but, then, while thus engaged there was no reason that Bud could see why he should not have a look-in at those things in which his heart were was bound up.

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For a short while, then, he talked with some of the Battery K boys whom he knew, and who were naturally delighted to see any face from the home town.

Bud managed to show nice discretion. He was averse to telling the story of Felix, and his silly quarrel with his rich uncle and guardian to every one; and so, when by a few judicious questions, he found that those with whom he chatted had no information to give him, he soon broke away and resumed his wanderings.

In this fashion he soon exhausted the limited fund of information that could be picked up among the artillerymen of Battery K. The result was so meagre that Bud felt disgusted. He must

branch out and seek other fields. Far and wide he would continue his investigations, ask his leading questions, and seek by every possible means in his power to get a clue worth having.

By degrees, however, his ambition began to wane. He met with so little success that he began to allow himself to grow slack in his efforts. Hugh would be almost certain to unearth some clue, for he most always did accomplish whatever he set out to perform. Then Bud was wild to spend a little time with the Aviation Corps, for deep down in his boyish heart he cherished an ambition to some day be an air pilot.

This would account for his fetching up in the distant section of the camp where he had been told the aviation squad had their hangars. More than half an hour had passed since parting from his chums, and Bud could truly say that he had worked faithfully to unearth a few crumbs of comfort for Blake.

"I deserve a little recreation," he told himself. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. I may never get another such a fine chance to talk with fellows of the aviation class."

Having thus relieved his mind of any remorse he might have felt, Bud hurried his steps, and before long found himself in the region of the odd-looking hangars, or sheds, hastily constructed, in which several aeroplanes rested when not in use.

He had met with little obstruction thus far. Several times a sentinel had stopped him, acting under orders, but the sight of the magic paper had always sufficed to cause the man with the bayonet and gun to wave him along; so that by this time Bud was under the impression he could go anywhere he pleased.

Arriving at the ground where the birdmen held forth, he found a number of bronzed young fellows squatting around a fire, and swapping stories of possible past experiences. As Bud came up and stood there, curious glances were cast upon him. Perhaps most of them jumped to the conclusion that he must be the representative of some important newspaper, for Bud was a pretty husky sort of a fellow for his age; and young blood is often sought after by the great metropolitan dailies.

So Bud presently dropped down, and sat there listening. He drank in all he heard those aviators saying. One of them, it seemed, had been across the sea, and taken part in some of the dangerous forays, when Allied aeroplanes made daring raids on fortified towns or military concentration camps in the rear of the enemy forces, and his reminiscences of the thrilling scenes upon which he had gazed held Bud spellbound.

Others in the little group had not been so fortunate in seeing actual hostilities, but each man in turn narrated certain adventures that had befallen him; for even in piping times of peace aviators meet with perils calculated to make a stirring story.

One man in particular interested Bud. At the time he hardly knew why this should be so, for they were all strangers to him. Afterwards he

was inclined to believe there must have been some sort of intuition about it, causing him to listen to everything this air pilot was saying.

His name seemed to be Johnson, for Bud heard him called that several times. The conversation had turned upon odd incidents connected with meeting people under peculiar conditions, and as he listened Bud heard Johnson saying:

“Queer how people bob up that you’d never expect to meet. Now, today while we were on the road here from the station, with the truck carrying our ‘plane, I had a thing like that happen to me. Two years back it came about that I was flying at county fairs down in Florida. I did it as a means for making ready money, because I wanted to get hold of a new model hydroaeroplane that I was wild to own. My companion in the Fair venture was a fellow I never really liked, though he certainly had plenty of grit, and knew a heap about this flying business.

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“Well, we separated in the end, because I couldn’t stand for some of his crooked ways. From that day to this I did not see him once; yet today, when we passed a little old house on the road here from the railway station, who should I see looking from the second-story window, and staring at all the aviation squad moving along, but my former partner of the Florida county fair flights. Which shows how small this old world is, after all. Why, I wouldn’t have been any more surprised if I’d landed on top of Mount Washington, and come face to face there with Luther Gregory!”

Bud almost fell over, he received such a shock at hearing the aviator calmly mention that name. Luther Gregory, the wild son of Uncle Reuben, the very man whose scheming had caused the scouts all that trouble while on the road to the mobilization camp—it came to Bud almost like an inspiration that in this astonishing way he had struck a clue.

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Through his brain chased a dozen brilliant thoughts. Why, if Luther Gregory had really been the employer whose money had hired that clever trickster in the flivver to do everything in his power to obstruct the progress of Blake and his chums, didn’t it stand to reason that the chief plotter must have come on the ground in order to have a hand in the final attempt to keep Felix from making up with his uncle?

Bud wanted to shake hands with himself, he felt so tickled. For some little time he sat there and communed with himself, laying out various plans whereby he and Hugh and Blake might yet win the game that had seemed to be going against them.

He was suddenly aroused by seeing Johnson getting on his feet, and yawning, as if he felt sleepy, and thought of turning in, although “taps” had not yet sounded.

Bud came to a quick determination. He must have a little chat with the air pilot, and learn a few facts from him. In order to accomplish his end it would be necessary for him to relate the story of Felix, but he could bind the other to secrecy. So he also arose and followed the aviator.

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When a tap came on his shoulder, and Johnson turned to find himself confronted by the boy, he may have noticed sitting near the fire, listening, no doubt he felt a little curiosity as to why he had been picked out for an interview.

"Guess you've selected the wrong man, young fellow," he went on to say with a jolly laugh, "if you're expecting a thrilling yarn for your paper. Better tackle Tom Sherlock, who's seen exciting adventures over the big drink. He can spin you a story that will make your readers' hair stand on end."

"But I want to have a little chat with you, Mr. Johnson," urged Bud. "I would thank you to give me just a few minutes of your time. It is on a matter that means a whole lot to a chum of mine. The queer part of it is that the mention of Luke Gregory's name by you is the whole cause of my asking this favor."

The aviator, naturally enough, was surprised.

"Well, you've managed to arouse my curiosity from the start, my boy!" he exclaimed, heartily. "I'll be only too glad to listen to anything you may have to say. Come over here to my tent and sit down on a bench there; we can talk better at our ease. Right from the beginning let me say that if Luther Gregory has any share in your story, I'd wager it isn't going to be to his credit."

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"You hit the nail right on the head when you say that, Mr. Johnson!" declared Bud, mentally hugging himself with delight over the wonderful success that had come his way.

He started in by telling how he and Hugh had been trying to find some reasonable excuse for visiting the mobilization camp, when Blake came along and told about the unfortunate quarrel between Felix and his uncle. Then Bud went on to relate how they had started for the camp in the old car. Step by step he narrated the difficulties they had to surmount, and how they felt positive most of their troubles came through the plotting of the man in the flivver, and who had been seen talking in a mysterious fashion with Luther Gregory in Oakvale.

It was an altogether thrilling story, and the aviator listened with rapt attention until Bud had come down to the point where he heard him mention that name of Uncle Reuben's profligate son, and tell how he had actually seen him close to the border of the camp.

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"All I want you to tell me, Mr. Lawrence," Bud wound up with, "is the location of that little old house where Luther Gregory, you say, was looking out of the second story window as your Aviation Corps passed this afternoon. Don't you see, if they have managed somehow to sneak Felix out of camp, it stands to reason he would be taken to that place, and kept hidden for twenty-four hours or so, until the time limit was past. Oh! please tell me, so I can carry the news to my chums, who will be tickled half to death to hear it."

The air pilot saw the point, and proceeded forthwith to enter into such explanations that Bud felt sure he could not miss finding the place; and after that he hastened to break away, being fairly wild to see Hugh, and tell him the great

CHAPTER XI

THE VALUE OF A GOOD REPUTATION

When Bud presently arrived at the appointed rendezvous neither of his comrades were in sight. He was nervously walking up and down when a few minutes later Blake put in an appearance.

Blake looked particularly woe-begone. Evidently all his efforts to pick up a promising clue to the solution of the great mystery had failed miserably. Seeing Bud's nervous stride, he eyed him hungrily.

"Something ails you, Bud, I'm sure it does from the way you act!" he exclaimed, fresh hope struggling to gain a new grip on his heart. "Please tell me if you've found out anything at all, because I haven't had the least bit of luck."

"Well, I've nosed around like a regular bloodhound on the scent," observed Bud, with perhaps a little pardonable pride, "and I reckon now I've got some *important* news for Hugh when he shows up here."

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"Oh! have you found Felix?" burst from Blake, excitedly.

"Er, hardly as strong as that," admitted the other, "but I've run across a man who saw Luther Gregory looking from the second-story window of a house not two miles from the border of this camp, and only this afternoon, in the bargain; which you'll have to own up is some evidence that he knows what's happened to your cousin."

Blake proceeded forthwith to pump the hand of his wideawake chum as though in this fashion alone could he show his sincere appreciation of the wonderful news Bud had brought in.

"There comes Hugh right now," added Bud, with the smile of conscious superiority spread across his face, "and there'll be something doing soon, believe me."

The scout master approached. He did not look particularly happy himself, for, to tell the truth, Hugh had failed to succeed in finding any conclusive evidence that promised to take them to where the absent Felix might be found. When he saw how his two comrades were beckoning to hasten his steps, and discovered their triumphant manner, Hugh lost no time in joining them.

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"Glad to see that you've had more success this time than fell to my lot," was his salutation as he came up; "now string it off, and tell me what's happened to make you both look so oh-be-joyful."

Bud waited for no second invitation. It did not happen every day that he was given such a

splendid chance to shine in the limelight, and he would not have been a genuine boy had he failed to take advantage of the golden opportunity. So, in as terse terms as he could possibly summon to the front, he told the story of how, after a myriad of efforts, he had finally run across what seemed to be a most promising clue.

Hugh listened and made little comment until the story had been ended. Then he gripped the other's hand.

"Bud, old man, I'm beginning to think that the luck of this deal is running strongly in your direction!" he exclaimed, heartily. "If that master schemer of a Luther Gregory is close by, the man he hired must know where to find him; and it stands to reason that if he succeeded in bundling Felix out of camp, even if no one is able to tell how it could be done, why the first thing he'd do would be to take him to that house."

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"Oh! and then all we've got to do," broke in the delighted Blake, who was hardly able to keep from dancing on his tiptoes, such was his increasing happiness, "is to get a detail of the guardsmen, and go there to arrest the whole bunch."

"Of course that's our move," admitted Hugh, "though we mustn't be too fast about carrying it out. The whole night is before us, you know. They won't hurt Felix, if our theory is correct. All they want to do is to keep him out of our reach for twenty-four hours."

"But we ought to see Captain Barclay again, hadn't we, Hugh?" questioned Bud.

"That would be our wisest move," agreed the patrol leader, "because we'll need some help to round up those rascals; and it can only be gotten through an order signed by our friend, the artillery captain."

"No sleep for me tonight, I wager," said Blake; but somehow he seemed to glory in the fact rather than put on a doleful expression. Action meant a fresh possibility for a successful ending of his search.

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Hugh looked around him. The camp of the guardsmen still presented a wonderfully fascinating picture in his eyes, even though some of the tired militiamen had sought their tents in order to try and get a little sleep, having had their rest broken more or less since leaving their widely separated homes.

"There's the captain heading this way now!" exclaimed Bud, with sudden zeal. "P'r'aps we had better tackle him while we have the chance, Hugh. He's got a heap of camp duties to look after, and, according to military rules, they'd have to take precedence above any private business."

"Come on, then, and we'll start the ball rolling," the scout master agreed.

When Captain Barclay saw his trio of boy friends from Oakvale heading toward him, he smiled amiably, and nodded his head.

"Any good news, boys?" he immediately asked, showing that he still remembered about their

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mission; "heard of Felix Gregory anywhere, and was he visiting in some other part of the camp?"

"No, sir, nothing can be learned about him from any of the men," replied Hugh, and then immediately adding: "Our chum here, Bud Morgan, happened to learn something that we believe may offer a strong clue."

"Tell me about it, then," the officer commanded. "I'm very interested in the result of your noble mission; and this strange disappearance of an enlisted man from camp is bothering some of us. I haven't mentioned it to any one higher up, but was just thinking of seeing the general about it. Things like that reflect upon the management of a military camp, where it is expected that discipline governs every movement, so that it would appear to be impossible for a single individual to drop out. Now proceed, please."

Hugh told the story, giving Bud due honors for having made the wonderful discovery that Luther Gregory was hovering near by, evidently bent on sharing some of the foul work with the man whom his money had hired.

Captain Barclay asked several sharp questions. It could be seen that he was intensely interested. Bud made haste to enlighten him on the points that did not appear to be quite clear in his mind.

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"Just as you say, Hugh," he finally remarked, decisively, "things begin to look promising. The chances are ten to one that if Felix has been coaxed or smuggled out of the camp here, he was taken to that lonely house on the road. I believe I can remember noticing the place as we passed from the station this afternoon, where I went to look after some additional baggage that had been shipped by rail from the home town."

"You'll help us, won't you, Captain?"

"I certainly will, to the full extent of my power," came the hearty response, "though before anything can really be done in the matter I must have a talk with my commanding officer at Headquarters. Fortunately there seems to be nothing of moment to demand my attention. So, if you will once more wait for me here, I'll see the general again. He was interested in you before, after I had told him some things I knew, and how Oakvale held the scouts in such high esteem."

"Oh! I hope he agrees to let you help us surround that house, and see if Felix is held a prisoner there," remarked Blake.

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"I don't have the slightest doubt about the ultimate outcome," said the officer, "so far as the general's co-operation goes. Whether we find your cousin there or not is another thing; but I believe the chances are fairly good. Look for me inside of half an hour, boys."

With that he hastened away, turning his back upon his comfortable tent with its inviting camp cot, which must have appealed strongly to a tired soldier.

"Half an hour he said, didn't he?" sighed Blake. "Gee whiz! that's a whole thirty long minutes. It'll seem like a week to me, I guess. But what's the use looking a gift horse in the mouth. I ought

to be thanking my lucky stars that there's such a bully chance ahead. I'm going to quit grumbling."

"What do you expect he meant by saying the general was interested in us as scouts, Hugh?" asked Bud.

"Oh! just what he explained by telling us he'd mentioned some of the things we Oakvale scouts had hung up to our credit," the patrol leader answered. "I suppose there are few troops in the East that can point with pride to a record like ours. We've been a whole lot lucky to have such chances to do things come along."

"At a time like this," Bud continued, a look of satisfaction covering his face, "it certainly does make a fellow feel good to know he hasn't any reason to be ashamed of his past record."

"There, I saw a soldier stop the captain and salute, after which he handed him something," Blake burst out with, excitedly. "Now Captain Barclay is pointing straight toward us, boys; and see, he's handed the thing back again. Looks to me as if he had ordered him to deliver the same to us. I wonder what under the sun it can be?"

"We'll soon know," advised Bud, "because here comes the soldier; and by the same token it's Burch Shafter, Hugh, whom you got to join the battery after convincing his mother it was a duty he owed his country."^[3]

They watched the man in uniform approach them with growing interest. It struck the scouts as having some sort of connection with their mission in the mobilization camp. Perhaps the young fellow was bringing them fresh news—Blake even began to speculate upon the most improbable things, to the extent of wondering whether this might not be some audacious communication from Luther Gregory telling him that his quest would be fruitless, and that he might just as well return to Oakvale, since he could not find Felix within the given time.

Then the artilleryman arrived. Young Shafter recognized them all, and he looked particularly at Hugh with a gleam of affection in his eyes, because the scout master had been mainly instrumental in getting his mother's consent to his enlistment. Nevertheless, he made a stiff military salute upon first arriving, and then dropped his hand at his side "at attention."

"Huh! that doesn't go among old friends, Burch," chuckled Bud. "Nobody's watching you now, so you c'n drop your camp manners, and be sociable."

With that he clutched the other's hand and shook it. The "rookie" laughed, and from that moment became companionable. Hugh and Blake in turn greeted him; for up to then they had not chanced to run across young Shafter, as he had been in another part of the camp, possibly sent on official business.

"Something was found in Felix Gregory's tent, and they dispatched me with it to the captain," he went on to explain. "When he looked it over he said Blake here ought to take charge of the same, and so I'm turning it over to him."

When Blake glanced at the object that was placed in his hand he gave a cry of astonishment.

"Look here, Hugh, Bud!" he commenced to say, deeply moved, "it's a letter written by Felix, and sealed; and, would you believe it, the same is directed to Uncle Reuben. Oh! I wonder now did Felix repent of his own accord of those ugly things he said in his hasty temper, and write to apologize? Wouldn't that be a great thing, though, and a bully ending of the whole silly affair?"

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CHAPTER XII

THE SEARCH SQUAD

"Don't be hasty about opening that letter, Blake," cautioned the scout master, who saw that such a move was indeed contemplated by his chum.

Blake held his hand before he had started to tear an end off the sealed envelope.

"Why, I thought it would be only right to find out if Felix had said he was sorry, Hugh," he hastened to explain, looking somewhat disappointed. "Because if things did turn out that way, you see I could get this letter to Uncle Reuben, and then the object of our run up here to camp would be accomplished."

"Yes, I understand all that, Blake," answered the other, quietly, "but we mustn't forget that a seal should be considered inviolate, and a letter like this not opened except as a last resort. He hadn't mailed it, and might reconsider writing the same, no matter what the contents are. Then, again, you can't be sure that he did repent, and was wanting Uncle Reuben to forgive him."

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Blake gave a big sigh.

"I suppose you're right about that, Hugh," he admitted, reluctantly, "though I'd certainly like to see what's inside of this the worst kind."

"Better let Hugh keep it in his pocket," suggested Bud.

"Which means that maybe I might yield to a strong temptation and slit the envelope open some time or other," Blake remarked, quickly. "Well, it might be just as good that I didn't have the chance, so here, you keep it, Hugh."

Accordingly, the patrol leader took the letter addressed to Mr. Reuben Gregory at Oakvale.

"I'll tell you how we'll settle this thing," he proposed, thinking it best to have it decided, and wishing to give poor Blake what measure of comfort he could; "suppose we say we'll leave the letter unopened until nine tomorrow morning. Then, if nothing comes from our hunt for your cousin tonight, and the mystery of his disappearance is still unexplained, why, I'll take chances and we'll see what he wrote."

"All right, Hugh," agreed Blake, instantly. "That's about as good a programme as we could arrange. Still, we have all admitted that it looks promising that Felix went to the trouble of writing a letter to Uncle Reuben, Something must have been worrying him—we've heard from one of his comrades here that he hasn't been himself ever since the battery left Oakvale. It was an uneasy conscience, I'm sure; I know Felix pretty well, and I'm certain that if he began to believe he had acted in a mean way he would get no peace of mind until he had done all in his power to rectify his error."

Apparently Blake was in a decidedly "chipper" frame of mind since this last odd happening. He seemed to feel that things were finally working out to serve their ends, and that success must soon perch on their banner.

"Well," remarked the philosophical Bud, "nothing like having two strings to your bow, I've always believed. Never put all your eggs in one basket. Now, in case our little excursion along the road to the railway station turns out a complete failure, you see we've always got this letter to turn to."

"And, of course," added Blake, "when the time limit has expired those men won't bother trying to hold poor Felix any longer. They'll believe their game is won, and turn him loose. Now, just ten minutes have dragged by since Captain Barclay left us, and he said half an hour, didn't he?"

All this was like so much Greek to young Shafter, and, seeing the look of bewilderment on his face, Hugh took pity on him. Besides, since the story was getting to be in general circulation through devious channels, one guardsman taken into their confidence would not matter. Then, again, the telling might serve to kill a little of the time that promised to hang so heavily on their hands.

Accordingly he started in to entertain Burch Shafter with a remarkable story that held his attention closely all the way through. Hugh was not the one to waste words, and so he kept "hewing close to the line" until he had arrived at the point where they were waiting for Captain Barclay to return with permission from Headquarters to take a detail of armed men and ascertain who the inmates of that old house on the roadside were; likewise, whether Private Gregory were detained there against his will.

"All I can say," remarked the deeply interested listener, after the stirring account of their adventures on the road had been brought to a finish, "is that it beats the Dutch how you scouts do have thrilling happenings come your way. Why, there's a list as long as my arm of fine things you fellows have done. Here you promise to add another laurel to the wreath you've won. I take off my hat to Hugh Hardin and the boys of Oakvale Troop. They are trump cards, every one of them, and that's the truth."

He suddenly remembered he was a soldier, and that his time could not be called his own; so, saying a hasty good-bye, Burch Shafter strode away. His coming, and what he had brought with him, had given them all new reasons for gratitude, and the rainbow of promise was once

more shining brilliantly in the heavens above.

The time dragged horribly after that, although they talked of many things, so that Blake might not give way to impatience. There was a never-ending source of delight in just glancing around them at all the queer sights by which they found themselves surrounded, with veterans and rookies carrying on a multitude of camp duties. Had it been in the daytime instead of about nine o'clock at night, doubtless the visitors would have witnessed a multitude of intensely interesting things, such as are born of camp life, from comrades being shaved by fresh barbers, to others engaged in taking their first lesson in the art of washing their own clothes under very primitive conditions.

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Finally, when Blake had sighed for about the hundredth time, and Bud himself took to yawning because of the inaction, Hugh announced that he believed he had seen an officer hurrying in their direction.

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken, it's our friend the captain," he added.

"Sure it is, and no mistake," chuckled Bud; while Blake drew in a long breath that spelled relief because his "watchful waiting" period was over.

As the officer approached they took new hope upon seeing the look spread upon his face. Surely he would not smile so broadly if he were bringing them bad news.

"It's all right, boys, all right," he told them, immediately.

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"Then the general has given permission for us to carry out the scheme, has he, sir?" asked Hugh, greatly pleased.

"He told me to take charge of it personally, and leave no stone unturned to ascertain how Private Gregory could be taken out of the camp undetected; also to bring before him those guilty of the outrage, if they could be caught. That house, it seems, comes within the boundaries of the camp, and hence any one living there, or occupying the premises, is amenable to military discipline and rules."

"Then if by good luck we trap that schemer and good-for-nothing Luther Gregory," exclaimed Blake, rubbing his hands in joy, "it's going to be hard for him because he's interfered with the liberty of one of Uncle Sam's recruits? Well, I guess on the whole he'll get only what he deserves, and I'll be glad of it."

"Are you going with us, Captain?" asked Bud.

"Yes, and I shall take a detail of men, so as to make doubly sure," explained the officer, as though he had mapped out his plan of campaign, like a wise soldier, as he came along. "The moon will soon be rising, and we may get some benefit of her light, though that does not matter much."

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He was told about the letter, and seemed to feel a good deal like Hugh in that it had better not be opened, save as a last resort. If other things failed them, and no signs of the missing Felix could be found, then it would be time enough to think of breaking the seal.

"You know," he went on to say, particularly directing the words toward Blake, whom he guessed had been the one desirous of reading the letter, "there's always a mean feeling comes on any one when you open a sealed envelope surreptitiously. It's like a thief breaking into a house in the night; you think you're doing something you ought to be ashamed of, no matter how good your motives really are. So better let that rest until all other hope has been abandoned."

"Yes," added Bud, "and even at noon tomorrow we could telegraph to Uncle Reuben we were on the road with a letter of apology, and he'd be only too willing to wait for us to arrive before changing his will. I reckon the old gentleman would be only too glad of a chance to meet a compromise halfway, if he thinks as much of Felix as Blake Merton here tells us he does."

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"I want you to come with me over to the camp of the aviation boys," said Captain Barclay. "I have authority to enlist anyone I please in the squad we shall take with us for duty, and that being the case it might be just as well to have that party along who told you about Luther Gregory."

"Johnston was his name, Captain," explained Bud, "and I reckon he's some punkins of an aeroplane pilot, too, because he's been giving daring exhibitions in lots of county fairs down South last winter. From what he said, I reckon Johnston will be glad to be in the bunch, because things are getting kind of stale for him here, with so little material to work with."

The captain left them for a short time. When he came back, three men carrying guns followed at his heels. Blake surveyed their armament with considerable interest, as though convinced by this time that the clouds were gathering around the devoted heads of the two schemers who must soon find themselves in the toils.

"There's the moon just peeping above the horizon, you see, boys," the captain remarked, as he joined the waiting trio of scouts. "It isn't more than ten o'clock, either, and we needn't be in any hurry. Let's head across to where the aviation squad have their quarters, so as to pick up Johnston, the air pilot."

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As they were proceeding along, the clear notes of a bugle ascended from some point close by, and never would Hugh and his chums forget the peculiar effect produced upon them when, for the first time, they heard "taps" sounded in a military camp while the grim shadow of impending war was hovering over the land. It seemed to thrill them through and through with its significance, for they could not help remembering how it is this same sweet sad call that is invariably given over the grave of a soldier when his comrades bury him with full military honors.

When they finally arrived at the border of the camp, where lay the field that was to be devoted to such aviation work as could be carried on with the poor material on hand, Captain Barclay immediately sought the officer in command of the squad, whom he chanced to already know.

He found no trouble in securing permission to have the air pilot Johnston join them, though,

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doubtless, the other wondered much what it all meant, for there was no time to enter into full explanations. Captain Barclay did promise to see him on the next day, and tell him an interesting story connected with the visit of these three scouts from his home town.

Johnston recognized Bud, and readily agreed to lead the little expedition to the house where he had seen his old associate in aeronautics, Luther Gregory. As he had, it may be remembered, heard pretty much the whole story of the adventure from Bud Morgan's lips, at the time the other was coaxing him to tell the location of the house where he claimed to have seen Luther, the aviator did not express any surprise, only satisfaction that his services had been thought worth while securing.

There being nothing else to detain them now, the captain gave the order for marching, and the little company started forth. A sentry on the border of the great camp challenged, and demanded the password, which Captain Barclay whispered in his ear; and so with the last obstacle to their progress removed they began to follow the road that led to the railway station, possibly four miles away.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE HOUSE BY THE ROADSIDE

When Bud Morgan glanced back over his shoulder just as they struck the road and were well launched on their night tramp, he could not help thinking what a wonderful sight it was that greeted his admiring eyes. Bud had always been a great hand for drinking in scenes that were uncommon, and had been known to temporarily forget that he was engaged in a running match, when from the top of a rise a vista of unusual beauty burst upon his vision.

The battered old moon was above the horizon now, and lay low in the east. A myriad of camp fires flickered through the broad valley where the State guardsmen were encamped, waiting to be sworn into the service of Uncle Sam, and entrain for the distant border. All sorts of murmurous sounds came floating to the ear, and formed a medley never to be forgotten.

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Bud, finding that the others were fast leaving him in the lurch, hastened to catch up with his chums; but he knew he would carry that wonderful picture in memory as long as he lived. The very mention of a mobilization camp would make him think of the soft dab of yellow in the sky marking the rising moon, the glittering patches scattered about that looked like giant fireflies; and the murmuring sound of many voices, braying of mules, and kindred camp notes.

But "taps" had sounded, and all this would presently die away, for strict military regulations governed the uniformed community.

Bud found a place alongside Blake, while Hugh strode on with Captain Barclay and the aviator

guide, Johnston. It was perfectly natural that the two boys should desire to communicate while on the way. Blake in particular wanted to find certain things, and as he could bend his head close to that of his comrade, before they had been three minutes on the road in company, he was whispering:

“Bud, would you mind if I asked you something?”

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“Why, of course not, Blake,” replied the other in a soft tone, “only be careful how you speak. Remember that we’re under the captain’s orders now, and he told us not to say anything louder than a whisper. So fire away.”

No doubt Bud understood how very anxious the other must be, for Blake had far more at stake in the successful outcome of their adventure than either of his companions, hence the willingness of Bud to accommodate him; for Blake was a pretty decent sort of fellow, as boys go, and well liked by the Oakvale Troop.

“Why, I only wanted to ask if you could give any kind of guess what the programme is going to be after we get to that lonely house by the road?” Blake asked, showing that, after all, it was more a desire to receive some comforting assurance than a hope for knowledge that actuated him.

“Oh! shucks! how c’n I tell that, Blake?” protested the other. “Just as like as not we’ll first of all throw a loop around the old shanty, so nobody c’n skip out, and then start in to comb it from attic to cellar. All I’m hoping is that they don’t think to carry Felix further away in that little flivver car, you know.”

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“Huh! say, Bud, d’ye know that’s just what’s been bothering me right along,” admitted Blake. “Everything hinges on our finding that bunch hiding at the house alongside the road. I wish we were there, so we’d know the worst.”

“Brace up, Blake,” said Bud, encouragingly. “I’ve got a hunch that it’s all going to come off gilt-edged. Show your colors, old fellow, and don’t forget that a scout can keep his fears under control.”

After that Blake fell quiet. Perhaps he realized that it was foolish to give way to these doubts, just as Bud meant to imply. Silently the little detachment advanced along the road, the four armed soldiers bringing up the rear. Once they were challenged, for videttes had been posted even outside the limits of the big military camp, since strict army rules prevailed, and in a hostile country this would be the practice. The captain, however, gave the password in the ear of the man who suddenly challenged them, and they were permitted to move along.

After this had kept up for possibly fifteen minutes, the boys knew they must be close upon the object of their search. Johnston had, in the beginning, said it was less than two miles away, and hence, at any moment now, they might expect to hear a low command to halt, after which the captain would give directions governing their future movements.

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Eagerly, Blake was straining his eyes in hopes of discovering some sort of house ahead. More than once he thought he had hit upon it, only to

find, upon drawing near, that a clump of trees formed the dark shadow patch upon which his gaze had settled.

But all things must have an end, and in due time the guide of the expedition signified that they were now within stone's throw of their destination. The captain beckoned them to gather around him, after which in whispers he designated every one's part in the venture.

The four privates were to circle the house, guarding every exit, whether this be a door or window. Their orders were to hail first, and then, if the fleeing party refused to halt, to shoot, though trying to "pepper" the man's legs rather than mortally injure him.

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As for the three scouts, they were to accompany the captain and Johnston, whose intention it was to enter the building and arrest the inmates.

When Blake heard this he fairly quivered with an excess of emotion and zeal. He was only too delighted at such a chance to be "in at the death," as he mentally termed it. How good it was of their friend the captain to allow them this privilege. Most army officers would have considered boys a nuisance, and, doubtless, ordered them to stay back until things had shaped themselves, and the danger was past; but then Captain Barclay lived in Oakvale, and knew just how bravely the scouts had carried themselves on numberless occasions.

All of them could see the house, for they were creeping forward again. It happened to be upon the side of the road where the low-lying moon's rays did not fall, so that the shadows were fairly dense; but sharp eyes could make it out.

Blake was glad to notice that all seemed as still as death around the place. So far as he could see, there was no sign of a light visible. If the inmates were awake and burning a lamp, they must have first carefully drawn the shades, and otherwise darkened the windows, for try as Blake might, he failed to detect even a narrow shaft of illumination.

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A near-panic gripped the boy's rapidly beating heart. He feared that those they sought might not be at the roadhouse—that when the man in the flivver had arrived with Felix in his car they may have continued the flight, and by this time were many miles away.

However, Blake's fright was of short duration. He remembered what Bud had said about mastering himself, and thus managed to get a firm grip on his weak heart.

Great care was taken while advancing to keep well in the shadow. Although everything seemed so still about the place, there was no telling whether the suspected inmates of the house were on guard or not. For all they knew, hostile eyes might be peering out from some crack, and ordinary caution required that they take just as much pains as though they knew this for a certainty.

By motions rather than even the lowest of words the captain stationed his four men. He had evidently planned his every move, and there was to be no hitch that would imperil the success of

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the enterprise.

When the armed guards had been placed, the next thing was to approach the door and knock. Blake again had a chilly feeling attack as he realized that the crisis was now at hand, when success or failure would follow. If repeated knocking went without any response, the chances were the house had been abandoned, and that they would have had all their trouble for their pains. Of course, though, Blake told himself, they would give the place a thorough overhauling, so as to make sure those they sought were not hiding.

Well, there was one comfort that appealed to him. This lay in the letter which Felix had written, and now in the possession of Hugh Hardin. If the worst came they could open that, and always have a chance that it would be what they wanted, an apology meant for Uncle Reuben's eye.

The captain had stepped boldly up to the door. Blake saw him place his ear close to the panels, after trying the knob and finding that a key had been turned in the lock, for the door refused to open. If Captain Barclay detected the least sign of human occupancy, he gave no indication of it; but he did knock loudly with his knuckles.

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Everybody listened intently. The four uniformed guards had been cautioned to keep out of sight, and the shadows engulfed them. Had any one peered from a window he would have been able to see nothing, unless in some manner he managed to glimpse that little group on the stone step before the door.

But some person was certainly moving inside, for even Blake heard sounds indicating such a thing. The officer waited a minute, and then again thumped lustily on the panel. A glimmer of light was seen, telling them that some one approached; then came the sound of a key turned in the lock, after which the door swung partly open, revealing a man standing there, holding a lighted lamp.

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CHAPTER XIV

A SUCCESSFUL ROUND-UP

"Don't drop that lamp if you value your life!" called out Captain Barclay, as he immediately covered the startled man with a weapon.

"That's him, Captain—it's Luther Gregory!" shrilled Blake, forgetting that as the captain lived in Oakvale he must also have known the other in times gone by.

Luther Gregory it was for a fact, and Hugh, upon discovering this, felt a wave of relief rushing over him. He believed they were going to meet with success in their undertaking, and that all would come out well.

"What's all this mean?" exclaimed the man who held the lamp.

Hugh immediately started to relieve him of the

light, for he was afraid that a sudden desperate move toward escape might be inaugurated by the plotter dropping the lamp, and causing either an explosion, or darkness to cover the scene.

"Only that you are under arrest, Gregory, charged with unlawfully taking an enlisted man out of camp against his will."

With that the captain summoned one of the guards and placed him at the side of the prisoner. When Luther Gregory saw this he laughed and shrugged his shoulders after the fashion of a reckless man who, having played for high stakes, sees his castles in the air falling in ruins, and cares little what becomes of him.

"Oh! the game is up, is it?" he called out. "Well, you won't hear a squeal from me. I haven't done anything so terrible that the Government, or the State, either, can hold me for it. Coaxing an enlisted man to desert might seem a crime, but inviting him to visit you, and spend the evening is another. You can't prove a thing against me, try as hard as you please."

"We'll see about that later on," said the officer, grimly. "Meanwhile we'll take a look through this house, and make the acquaintance of your confederate in crime. Come with me, boys; fetch him in also, Private Fielder, and keep a tight hold on his arm. Remember you are at liberty to shoot if he tries to break away."

"I'm not so great a fool as to take such chances, Captain," the other told him.

When from the hall they stepped into the adjoining room Blake gave utterance to a low cry of mingled concern and joy, for the very first thing his eyes discovered was a figure lying on a cot. He flew across the apartment and bent down.

"It's Felix, boys, sure it is my cousin!" he called out. "Don't you know me, Felix? Oh! Hugh, what ails him, do you think? See how he stares at me, just as if he didn't recognize me one bit. Is he sick, Hugh; or have those men done something to make him act so queerly?"

The scout master knew.

"I think they've given him some sort of drug, Blake," he went on to say, laying a hand on Blake's shoulder, for he realized that the boy was terribly wrought up. "He's already recovering, and will be himself soon."

"Is that the truth, Gregory?" demanded the captain, harshly frowning upon the prisoner, who, however, was too clever to commit himself so early in the game.

"Why, the fact is," he remarked, airily, with a light laugh, "Cousin Felix commenced to act strangely soon after coming here to visit me. I thought he was going to have a fit, and coaxed him to lie down there as you see. He is getting better, though, and will be himself before very long. But his mind is apt to be clouded, more or less; and I shouldn't be much surprised if he even got it into his silly head to think I had something to do with his leaving the camp, and coming here to visit."

Captain Barclay understood what the sly schemer was aiming to do. He smiled in a satirical way, and then remarked:

"You'll not be able to hoodwink the eyes of a judge and jury when you're placed on trial for this nasty business, Gregory. You've played a high hand, but this time you're going to get your reward, and see the inside of a State's prison. But let's take a look around, and see what's become of your accomplice; for since I noticed his little car drawn under a shed back of the house, I take it he must still be somewhere around."

At that Hugh and Bud began to take fresh interest in the case, though Blake apparently had eyes only for his cousin, over whom he was bending, trying to hold the attention of Felix by continual talking. The scout instinct was strong in the makeup of the two lads, and no sooner had the captain suggested a hunt to find the missing tool of the arch schemer than they began to use their eyes in searching out every possible place where a small man might conceal himself in an emergency.

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They had good reason to feel anything but kindly disposed toward that man of the flivver. Not only did he curtly decline to assist them when they had engine trouble, but had afterwards done everything in his power to hold them up on the way to camp. The memory of the country constable who believed them to be thieves running away with a car they had taken, as well as what happened at the burning bridge, were things not calculated to make them feel very friendly toward the unscrupulous man who had been responsible for these various happenings.

Hugh noticed almost immediately that while there was no blaze in the big open fireplace, there did seem to be an unusual amount of soot on the hearth. This must have given him his cue, for he stepped forward, bent down, and tried to see up the wide-throated chimney.

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"See anything up there, Hugh?" asked Bud, close at his elbow.

"Look at my face and tell me if you see little patches of black on it?" demanded the scout master, turning his head to his comrade for examination.

"Just what there are, Hugh!" exclaimed the other, joyfully, "which announces the fact that *somebody* is up there in that chimney. How'll you get Mr. Coon to come down?"

"Captain, please lend me your revolver," said Hugh, in a loud voice, purposely intended to pass up the chimney flue. "It's got six cartridges in the chambers hasn't it, Captain? Well, they ought to be enough to fetch him down, dead or alive."

Instantly there came a half-muffled groan, and then following an appeal:

"Hold on please, don't shoot! I'm coming down just as fast as I can. Oh! I'm nearly choked to death with the soot up here. Wait for me, please!"

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More black stuff came down in a shower. Hugh

stepped back, and with a grin on his face, Bud followed suit. They heard considerable scratching and puffing from inside the chimney, after which there came a thud.

"Oh! what is it?" gasped Bud as he stared at a dusky object that huddled there on the open hearth amidst the piles of soot.

"It's me," piped up a half strangled voice. "Jones is my name, Pliny Jones, and, as usual, playing in tough luck. I'll turn State's evidence, gentlemen, if you can promise me immunity. But what I want most of all just now is a plain drink of water, because I'm choking horribly. Please accommodate a poor wretch, one of you boys."

Bud could not resist the appeal, though he was quivering with half suppressed laughter, for it was decidedly comical to see what a sight the small owner of the flivver had made of himself by crowding into the recesses of the chimney—a negro could not have been any blacker, Bud felt sure.

By slow degrees Felix seemed to be coming out of his stupor. He had already managed to recognize Blake Merton, though it was hard for him to realize just where he was, and what had happened to him. In fact, his mind was always in somewhat of a haze concerning the events of the last few hours.

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He later on remembered being spoken to by the small man in the car, who had found a way to enter the camp. The other had whispered to him that he was the bearer of an important message from his Uncle Reuben; and as Felix just then was mourning the recent unfortunate break with his guardian, he gave a ready ear to a request to join the other at a certain spot outside the limits of the camp, knowing he could get permission to go there.

He also remembered being told to lean forward, and take a look at some paper held by the other, and that a sudden vertigo seized him as a handkerchief was clapped over his face. After that it was all vague, although he believed he had been stowed away in the small car, and driven a short distance, and only now to awaken from a dream to find Blake there. Some strange things taking place puzzled him greatly.

It was difficult to believe that such a kidnaping could actually have taken place, and yet the evidence of it lay before them. The captain had the two prisoners taken away, to be confined in the guard house until morning, when he expected to put their case in the hands of the commanding general, who, being a lawyer himself, would know what to do with them, so that they might be made to suffer for their miserable work.

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Felix, having recovered in part, was taken in the small car to camp, the scouts following after with Johnston the aviator, from whom Bud picked up many hints as they strode along.

Later on that same night Hugh, Blake and Bud gathered in a tent with the genial captain, who was, of course, deeply interested in their affairs, and anxious to see the outcome.

Felix was also present, having by that time fully

recovered from his recent adventure, though still pale. Here the story was gone over again, in order that the two listeners might get a full comprehension of the facts.

They seemed to be deeply interested as the recital progressed, now one of the trio taking it upon himself to do the explaining, and then another, until in the end everything had been made clear.

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"And now," said Hugh, in conclusion, when they had come down to the place where the capture of the schemers was effected at the roadside house, "here's the letter they found in your tent, Felix, addressed to Uncle Reuben, and which you evidently meant to mail in the morning. Blake was crazy to open it, and see how you felt toward your guardian, but I held him back,—although we would have had to do it in case we failed to find you by noon tomorrow. You can do as you please about showing us what you wrote."

Felix never hesitated a moment, but, tearing an end from the envelope, handed the enclosure to the scout master.

"Read it out loud, please, Hugh," he said simply, yet with a gleam of pride and satisfaction in his voice and manner.

Hugh hastened to do as he was told. The letter proved to be long, and need not be given here, but it was certainly just what might have been expected from a quick tempered lad like Felix, who often said things hastily, and then bitterly repented of them afterwards. Hugh knew that Uncle Reuben would treasure that manly apology as a most precious document.

"It's all right, Felix; couldn't be better!" cried Blake, seizing the young guardsman's hand and wringing it enthusiastically. "You're going to give me that letter, sealed in another envelope and addressed to Uncle Reuben. Then first thing in the morning I'll get him on the 'phone and tell him all about it, so his mind will be easy in case anything prevents us from getting back home by tomorrow night."

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So it was all arranged. The captain joined in congratulating Felix over the successful outcome of his escapade.

"I hope this will be a lesson to you, my boy, all your life," he told him, seriously, as became a commanding officer, "and that you'll learn to bridle your tongue. Lots of trouble is caused in this world by people saying things they're sure to regret afterwards. But let me tell you, Felix, you owe all your present condition of liberty and happiness to these bright and bustling scout friends of yours. Once more Oakvale has reason to be proud of her boys; and I mean that the story of this trip to the mobilization camp isn't kept like a light hidden under a bushel. Others ought to hear about such praiseworthy work, in order that they may emulate the example set by Hugh and his two chums."

The good captain would not hear of the scouts leaving the camp that night. They could occupy a spare tent that he was only too happy to offer them. The arrangement made with the commanding general would answer for this; and,

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besides, in the morning he wanted them to meet the “head boss” of the camp, who must hear the story of their late adventures, for it happened that he had boys of his own who belonged to a troop, and the general was deeply interested in all that concerned scout activities.

So we may leave Hugh and Bud and Blake there, to get what sleep they could amidst such strange surroundings. In thus saying goodbye to the boys of the Oakvale Troop, however, it is with the assurance that such active fellows cannot rest long without engaging in further ventures which will demand our attention, and necessitate another volume to tell the story of their successes.

THE END.

Footnotes

[\[1\]](#)See “The Boy Scouts’ Rally to the Colors.”

[\[2\]](#)See “The Boy Scouts as Forest Fire Fighters.”

[\[3\]](#)See “The Boy Scouts’ Rally to the Colors.”

Transcriber’s Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Added a Table of Contents based on chapter headings.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings, dialect, and name inconsistencies unchanged.
- Note that the villain “Luke” Gregory suddenly assumes the alias “Luther” for no explicitly stated reason.
- Note that the recruit Mr. “Johnson” becomes Mr. “Johnston” (with a passing fling as “Mr. Lawrence”).
- Note that one of the books mentioned in footnotes, “The Boy Scouts’ Rally to the Colors.”, apparently was never published.
- In the text versions, delimited italics text in underscores (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

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