The Banner Boy Scouts on a Tour; or, The Mystery of Rattlesnake Mountain

George A. Warren

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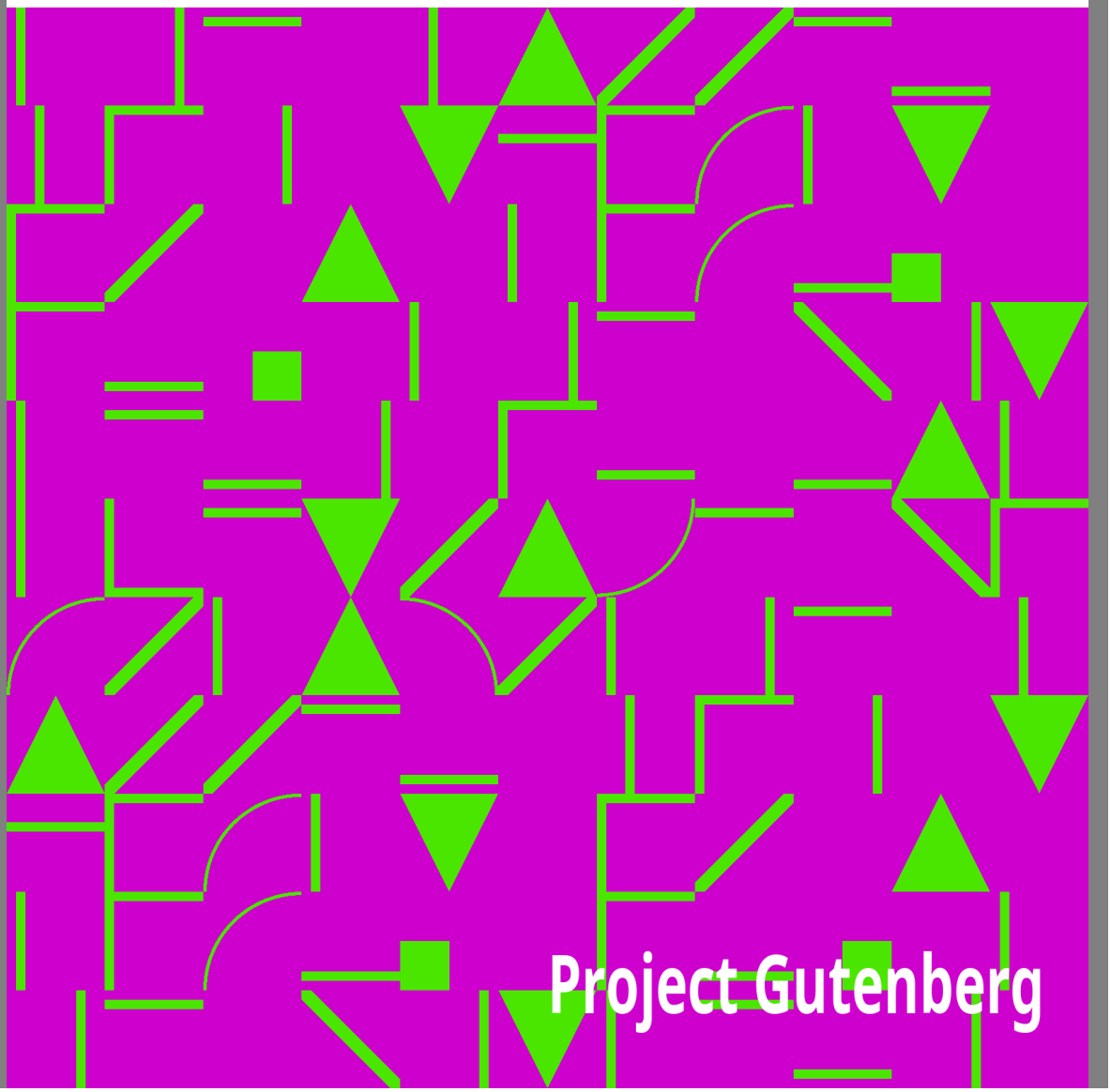

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS ON A TOUR; OR, THE MYSTERY OF RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN ***

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"COME ON, FELLOWS; US TO THE ATTACK!" CALLED BOBOLINK.
Banner Boy Scouts on a Tour, Page 217

The Banner Boy Scouts on a Tour

OR

***The* Mystery *of* Rattlesnake Mountain**

By GEORGE A. WARREN

AUTHOR OF "THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS," "THE MUSKET BOYS OF OLD BOSTON," "THE MUSKET BOYS UNDER WASHINGTON," ETC.

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CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Open Door	1
II	The Mystery of the Tin Box	11
III	Breaking Up the Scouts' Meeting	22
IV	Catching a Tartar	35
V	Getting Ready for the Great "Hike"	46
VI	On Guard	55
VII	"Be Prepared!"	66
VIII	Repulsing the Enemy	76
IX	Returning Good for Evil	87
X	Off on the Long Tour	98

XI	The Coming of the Circus Caravan	107
XII	A Camp by the Roadside	118
XIII	When the Moon Went Down	127
XIV	The Chase	138
XV	Left in the Lurch	147
XVI	At the Foot of Rattlesnake Mountain	155
XVII	Joe Declines to Tell	164
XVIII	A Close Call	173
XIX	Indian Picture Writing	184
XX	Camp Surprise	193
XXI	The Light of the Mountain	202
XXII	The Night Alarm	211
XXIII	What the Eyes of a Scout May See	219
XXIV	The Strangest Fishing Ever Known	230
XXV	Paul Lays Down His Burden	239
XXVI	The Sucker-Hole	247
XXVII	Gathering Clouds	256
XXVIII	The Great Storm	264
XXIX	A Panic-Stricken Crowd	272
XXX	The Underground Refuge	280
XXXI	The Boy Scouts as Explorers	286
XXXII	The Tin Box Again	293
XXXIII	What Paul Found—Conclusion	302

PREFACE

Dear Boys:

While this volume is complete in itself, it forms a second link in the chain of books issued under the general title, "The Banner Boy Scouts Series." You will, no doubt, be glad to find most of the old favorites on parade once more; and perhaps make the acquaintance of several new characters who figure in these pages.

In the preceding volume, "The Banner Boy Scouts; or, The Struggle for Leadership," I endeavored to interest my readers in an account of the numerous trials and adventures that befell Paul and his chums when forming the first Red Fox Patrol. You will remember how the mystery of the disappearing coins continued to puzzle Paul and Jack almost up to the very conclusion of the story. And doubtless you were also ready to admit that, hard pressed by jealous rivals at home, as well as forced to compete with two neighboring troops who longed to possess the prize banner, the Stanhope scouts certainly did have a warm time of it, right up to the close of the tournament.

The wonderful way in which they carried off first honors at that same competition certainly ought to inspire all Boy Scouts to emulate their example, and never be satisfied with half-hearted efforts. I sincerely hope and trust the stirring happenings that fall to the lot of Paul and his chums, as related between the covers of the present volume, may give every reader the same amount of pleasure that I have experienced in writing them.

Cordially yours,

George A. Warren.

THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS ON A TOUR

CHAPTER I

THE OPEN DOOR

"Here we are at your father's feed store, Joe!"

"Yes, but there isn't a glimmer of a light. Didn't you say he was going to stay here till you came from the meeting?"

"Shucks! he just got tired waiting, and went home long ago; you can trot along now by your lonesome, Joe."

"Listen! didn't you hear it, fellows? What was that sound?"

The four boys stood, as Joe asked this question, almost holding their breath with awe, while no doubt their hearts pounded away like so many trip-hammers.

It was after ten o'clock at night, and the town of Stanhope, nestling on the bank of the Bushkill, usually closed its business doors by nine, save on Saturdays.

This being the case, it was naturally very quiet on Anderson street, even though electric lights and people abounded on Broad street, the main thoroughfare, just around the corner.

These lads belonged to a troop of Boy Scouts that had been organized the preceding summer. They wore the regular khaki suits that always distinguish members of the far-reaching organization, and one of them even carried a bugle at his side.

The first speaker was Paul Morrison, the scout leader, to whom much of the labor of getting the troop started had fallen. Paul was the son of the leading doctor in Stanhope.

His comrades were the bugler, known as Bobolink, because he chanced to answer to the name of Robert Oliver Link; Jack Stormways, Paul's

particular chum; and Joe Clausin, the one who had asked his friends to stroll around in his company, to the feed store, where he expected to find his father waiting for him.

The lads had been attending a regular weekly meeting of the troop at one of the churches that offered them the free use of a gymnasium.

"There's no light inside," said Bobolink, in a husky voice, "but the door's half open, boys!"

This announcement sent another thrill through the group.

Anyone unacquainted with the wearers of the Scout uniforms might even imagine that they had been attacked by a spasm of fear; but at least two members of the group had within recent times proven their valor in a fashion that the people of Stanhope would never forget.

In the preceding volume of this series, issued under the name of "The Banner Boy Scouts; or, The Struggle for Leadership," I related how the boys got together and organized their patrol and troop. Of course, there was considerable opposition, from jealous rivals; but in the end the boys of Stanhope won their right to a prize banner by excelling the troops from the neighboring towns in many of the things a true scout should know and practice. Hence, no one who has perused the first book of this series will imagine for an instant that any of these lads were timid, simply because they clustered together, and felt their pulses quiver with excitement.

"Do you hear that sound again, Joe?" demanded Paul, presently, as all listened.

"I thought I did just then," answered Joe Clausin, drawing a long breath; "but perhaps it was only imagination. Dad's been doing more work than he ought, lately. Mebbe he's been taken with one of his old fainting spells."

"Say, that's just what it is, I reckon," observed Bobolink, quickly; "or else he forgot to shut the door when he went home."

"He never could have done that, boys," declared Joe; "you know how careful he always is about everything. I was just thinkin' about the Skarff

robbery, and wonderin' if those fellows had come back to town. The police never caught 'em, you remember."

Joe's voice had once more dropped to a whisper. What he said seemed to make considerable impression on his comrades, for the heads drew even closer together.

"But why would they want to break open a feed store?" ventured Jack Stormways, dubiously; "it isn't like the Skarff place, which was a jewelry shop."

"'Sh!" went on Joe, nervously; "I happen to know that dad keeps quite some money in his safe about the first of the month, when people pay their bills. Mother has often told him he ought to put it in the bank; but he only laughs at her, and says he'd like to see the thief who could open his safe. Paul, what should we do?"

"Go in, I reckon. Wait till I find my matches," returned the scout leader, without the least hesitation.

"Oh! what if we should run up against a man hiding there?" suggested Joe.

"Well, there are four of us, you know, boys. But what are you doing, Jack?" Paul continued, seeing that his warmest chum was bending down, as though he might be tugging at something.

"Look here what I've got, fellows! And there's a lot more to be had for the taking," with which Jack Stormways held up a stout stick of wood, which, coming with some of the hay or feed that reached the store during the day, had been cast aside.

Immediately the three others made haste to possess themselves of similar weapons.

"Ready?" asked Paul, as he prepared to advance boldly into the dense darkness.

"Sure! We're going to back you up, old fellow. Say the word!" shrilled Bobolink, close to the other's shoulder.

"Come on, then!"

The lads had hardly advanced five steps when every one caught the dread sound that Joe claimed to have heard. And Paul, perhaps because he was the son of a doctor, somehow guessed its true import sooner than any one of his chums. He knew it was a groan, and that some human being must be suffering!

There was a slight crackling sound, which was caused by the sudden drawing of a match along Paul's trousers. Instantly a tiny flame sprang into existence; and every eye was strained to discover the cause of the groan.

As the match burned, and the light grew stronger, the boys discovered that some one lay upon the floor inside the glass enclosed office, and close to the desk where Mr. Clausin usually sat. Paul, looking further, had seen that there was a lamp on the stand, and knowing the need of some better means of illumination than a succession of matches, instantly moved forward, and started to remove the chimney of this.

It was still a trifle warm, showing that the light must have been blown out not more than a couple of minutes previously.

Meanwhile, Joe had thrown himself on the floor beside the prostrate form, which he had already recognized as that of his father. He was chafing his hands, and calling out in boyish agony, while Jack and Bobolink looked on with troubled faces.

Paul saw immediately that either Mr. Clausin must have had a fit while alone, possibly just after he had blown out the lamp, or else some one had attacked him. His collar and necktie were disarranged, and there was a nasty bruise on the side of his head; though this might have come when he fell to the floor.

"If we had some water we might bring him to," observed Paul, when the man on the floor groaned again, more dismally than before.

"Back of the safe there is a bucket, with a dipper!" said Joe, eagerly.

Fortunately some water remained in the pail, and Paul was able to fill the dipper. It was just then he noticed the door of the little safe, and saw that it was open. This was strange, if the owner of the store had been about to

leave when he was seized. And supposing he had fallen in a fit, who had put out the lamp?

No sooner had he applied the cold water than it seemed to have a magical effect on the unconscious man. He gasped two or three times, while a tremor ran through his whole frame. Then his eyes suddenly opened.

"Father!" almost shrieked poor Joe, who had begun to believe that he was never again to be blessed by communion with his parent.

"Joe! What has happened? Where am I?" and as he muttered these words Mr. Clausin managed to sit up, staring around him in a way that at another time might have seemed almost comical, so great was his surprise.

"You told me to come here, and that you would wait for me," declared his son; "when we got to the store it was all dark, and the door stood half open. Then we heard you groan, father. Oh! what was it? Did you have another of those awful spells?" Joe still kept on rubbing his hand affectionately down the sleeve of his parent's coat.

"Yes, it must have been that, my boy," the dazed storekeeper answered. "I seem to remember starting to get up to put a little box in the safe, for it was about the time you said you would be along. Then it all grew dark around me. I think I fell, for I seem to remember hearing a crash. And my head feels very sore. Yes, I have bruised it badly. Perhaps it was a mighty good thing you boys came along when you did."

"Oh! that was terrible, father," cried Joe; "but at first we thought some one had been in here to rob you. That door being open worried me. I never knew you to leave it that way when you stayed here at night."

"What's that you say, my boy?" asked Mr. Clausin, hastily; "the door was open when you came? But I distinctly remember that it was not only shut, but latched on the inside! I expected you to knock, and let me know when you came along."

He still seemed half in a daze, as though the blow he had received in falling might have affected him. While speaking, however, Mr. Clausin managed to regain his feet, partly supported by his son's arm.

"Wait until I close my safe, and then I'll go home with you, Joe," he said; "the doctor told me I ought to take a little rest, and that I was working too hard. It looks as if he must have been right. But I'm glad you came along when you did, for——"

He was bending down, and staring into the safe. Paul watched him uneasily, for that open door worried the boy.

"What is it, father?" exclaimed Joe, as he saw the gentleman begin hastily to open several compartments in the metal receptacle, and Paul noticed that his hand shook as though with palsy.

"Look on the floor, boys, please. Tell me if you can see a small tin box anywhere. Of course I must have dropped it when I fell in that faint," Mr. Clausin was saying; but Paul fancied it was more to bolster up his own courage, than because he really believed what he observed.

The boys immediately set to work examining the floor of the office thoroughly. But none of them met with any success.

"How large a tin box was it, father?" continued Joe, presently.

"Some eight inches long, by half as many wide. Could I have misplaced it in any way?" and Mr. Clausin began to feel in his pockets. Once more he looked into the yawning safe.

"We don't seem to see it anywhere, sir," said Paul, who suspected what was coming.

The feed merchant stood up before them, with a very grave face. He was clasping both hands together in a nervous fashion.

"Then there is only one thing that can have happened, boys! I have been robbed while I lay here unconscious!" he said, solemnly, at which Bobolink gasped.

"Do you miss any money from your safe, sir?" questioned Paul, who seemed to be able to keep his head in this crisis.

"Fortunately I took my wife's advice this time," returned the owner of the feed store, "and deposited all I had in the bank this afternoon. Still, possibly

the thief believed I would keep it here. Seeing that tin box, and suspecting that it might hold valuables, he has carried it off."

"Do you remember blowing out the lamp at all, sir?" asked Paul.

"I certainly did not," came the answer; "I can recollect seeing it as I arose. Then all grew dark!"

"That settles it. There must have been a thief here, then!" remarked Jack, with more or less awe, as he looked around the big storeroom beyond the glass enclosed office.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY OF THE TIN BOX

"Give the assembly call, Number Three!"

Presently, in answer to Paul's order, the clear, sweet notes of a bugle sounded through the big gymnasium under the church. More than a score of lads of all sizes began to pass in from the outside, where they had been chattering like so many magpies; for it was now Summer, with vacation at hand.

After telling the bugler to sound the call for the meeting, Paul, who often had charge in place of the regular scoutmaster, Mr. Gordon, watched the coming of the boys through the open basement door.

"Everybody on hand to-night, I guess, Paul," observed his chum Jack, as he laid his hand on the shoulder of the leader of the Red Fox patrol.

Thus far there were three patrols in Stanhope troop. As the first to organize had chosen to be known as the Red Fox, it pleased the others simply to call their patrols by the names of Gray and Black Fox.

In one corner of the room reposed a splendid banner of silk, upon which had been sewn a wonderfully life-like representation of a fox's head done in colors. Strangely enough, to some it seemed red, while others were just as fully of the opinion that it could be called gray or black, so cleverly had the silken threads been arranged.

This banner was the one offered by the old Quaker, Mr. Westervelt, in the preceding Autumn, to be given to the troop that excelled in various scout tactics and knowledge. The contest had been confined to the three troops along the Bushkill River; and while both Aldine and Manchester carried off some honors, the boys of Stanhope had counted as many as both combined.

When the banner was presented to the winners their totem had been ingeniously fashioned upon its shimmering folds. Every member of

Stanhope troop felt a thrill of pardonable pride whenever his eyes fell upon the proof of their efficiency.

"What makes you say that, Jack?" asked the young scout leader, smilingly, when he heard his chum comment on the full attendance.

"Oh! well," laughed the other, "you know the boys understand that we're going to discuss where we expect to spend our vacation this year. Every fellow is just wild to hear what the committee has settled on."

"I sent a communication I received from our absent scoutmaster over to where the committee sat the other night," remarked Paul. "He recommended a certain place for a hike and camp; but I'm just as much in the dark as the rest about what was decided. William does a lot of mysterious winking every time anybody asks him, and only says, 'wait'."

Paul did not seem to be at all concerned. He evidently had full confidence in the wisdom of the committee that had been appointed by himself at the last meeting.

"Why, yes," Jack went on, "and Jud Elderkin, as the scout leader of the Gray Foxes, tried to get Andy Flinn to leak a little; but it was no use. Andy would joke him, and tell all sorts of funny stories about what we *might* do; but it was just joshing. I'm a bit curious myself to know."

"Have you heard anything more about Mr. Clausin?" asked Paul, seriously.

"I guess nobody has found out much about what was in that tin box," replied his chum. "Even Joe says he only knows there were valuable papers of some sort, which his father is broken-hearted over losing. You know Mr. Clausin has been just about sick ever since it happened."

"Yes," Paul went on, "and three times now I've heard that the chief of police has been out there to confer with him. That makes me think Joe's father must have some sort of idea about who robbed him."

"Oh! well, the fellow will never be caught if it depends on Chief Billings," declared Jack, somewhat derisively; "I've known him to kick up a big row more than a few times, after something strange happened; but when did he get his man? Tell me that, will you, Paul?"

"Still, the Chief is a good police head. He can look mighty fierce, and generally scares little boys into being good," laughed the scout leader.

"But some others I know snap their fingers at him," Jack went on; "for instance, you understand as well as I do, that Ted Slavin and his crowd ride rough-shod over the police force of Stanhope. They have been threatened with all sorts of horrible punishments; but did you ever know of one of that bunch to be haled up before the justice?"

"Well, of course you know why," remarked Paul, drily, making a grimace at the same time to indicate his disgust.

"Sure," responded Jack, without the least hesitation; "Ward Kenwood, Ted Slavin's crony, stands pat with the Chief. His dad happens to be the richest man in Stanhope, and something of a politician. Ward threatens to get the Chief bounced from his job if he makes too much row, and you know it, Paul. The result is that there's a whole lot of bluster, and threatening; after which things settle down just as they were, and nobody is pulled in. It makes me tired."

"Oh! well," laughed the scout leader, "some fine day there will be a rebellion in Stanhope. Then perhaps we can put in a police head who will do his duty, no matter if the offender happens to be the son of a rich banker, or of a railroad track-tender."

"Shucks! that day will be a long time coming," said Jack, shaking his head in the negative, as if to emphasize his disbelief. "But do you know, I'm all worked up about that little tin box. There's something connected with it that Mr. Clausin hasn't told everybody. What could those papers have been; and why was he looking at them that night? Did the unknown robber come to the feed-store just on purpose to get hold of them? Was he especially interested in what that tin box held?"

Paul looked at his chum in surprise.

"You certainly have the fever pretty bad, old fellow," he remarked, "and to tell you the truth, I've been thinking along the same line myself. If half a chance offered I'd like to be the one fortunate enough to recover that box for Mr. Clausin. But of course there isn't the least bit of hope that way."

Paul could not lift the curtain of the future just then, and see what strange things were in store for himself and his chum. Had he been given only a glimpse of that future he would have been deeply thrilled.

"The boys are all assembled, Paul," observed Jack, presently.

Accordingly, the scout leader of the first patrol, and acting scoutmaster in the absence of Mr. Gordon, found that he had duties to perform. Paul, in spite of his wishes, had been elected president of the local council, Jud being the vice-president, Bluff treasurer and Nat Smith secretary.

The meeting was especially called for a certain purpose, and every fellow knew that the committee appointed to recommend what the programme for the vacation campaign should be, was about to make its report.

Consequently, other business lagged, and there was a buzz of excitement when, with the decks cleared, the chairman of the meeting called upon the spokesman of that committee to stand up.

William, the humorous member of the Carberry twins, immediately bounced erect; and it happened that he stood just under the framed charter granted by the National Committee to Stanhope Troop. Every eye was glued upon his face, for it had been a matter of considerable speculation among the scouts as to where they might "hike" for the Summer vacation, so as to have the most fun.

William was the exact image of his brother Wallace, though their dispositions could hardly have been more unlike. The former was brimming over with a high sense of humor, and dearly loved to play all manner of practical jokes. His greatest delight it seemed, was to pose as the steady-going Wallace, and puzzle people who looked to the other Carberry twin as an example of what a studious lad should be.

Still, William as a rule never reached the point of cruelty in his jokes; and in this respect he differed from Ted Slavin, who seldom counted the cost when carrying out some horse-play that had taken his fancy.

The spokesman of the committee looked around at the many eager faces, and then bowed gravely. William could assume the airs of a serene judge when the humor seized him. And yet in his natural condition he was the

most rollicking fellow in the troop, being somewhat addicted to present day slang, just as Bobolink and some others were.

"Fellow members of the Banner Boy Scouts," he began, when a roar arose. "Cut that all out, William!"

"Yes, give us the dope straight. Where are we going to hike?"

"Hit it up, old war-horse! We want the facts, and we want 'em bad. Get down to business, and whisper it!"

William smiled as these and many other cries greeted him. It pleased him to keep his comrades on the anxious-seat a little longer; but when threatening gestures were beginning to prove that the patience of the assembled scouts had about reached its limit, he was wise enough to surrender.

So he held up his hand, with the little finger crossed by the thumb—the true scout's salute. Instantly the tumult ceased.

"Gentlemen," the chairman of the selected three went on, "this committee has decided, after much powwowing, and looking into all sorts of propositions, that the country to the north offers the best field for a record hike, and a camp in the wilderness; where the scouts can discover just how much they have learned this past Winter of woods lore. So it's back to the tall timber for us next week!"

"Hear! hear!"

"Wow! that sounds good to me all right!"

"But just what tall timber, Mr. Chairman? Tell us that, won't you?"

Once more William made the signal for silence, and every scout became mute. At least they had learned the value of obedience, and that is one of the cardinal virtues in a Boy Scout's ritual.

"This committee recommends that we hike away up to Rattlesnake Mountain," William went on to say, "and explore the country thereabouts, which has not been visited by a boy of Stanhope, in this present generation, at least. That is all for me; and now I'll skidoo!" with which the chairman dropped down into his chair again with becoming modesty.

Then arose a great uproar. Cheers rang out in hearty boyish manner, as though the committee had struck a popular fancy when it decided upon the neighborhood of Rattlesnake Mountain for the Summer camp.

This elevation could be seen from the town on the Bushkill. It had a grim look even on the clearest days; and there were so many stories told about the dangers to be encountered in that enchanted region that boys usually talked in whispers about a prospective trip of exploration there.

Thus far it was not on record that any of the Stanhope lads had ever wandered that far afield, every expedition having given up before the slopes of the lofty mountain were reached.

There were claims set forth by some fellows of Manchester, to the effect that they had climbed half way up to the crest, and met with many thrilling adventures among strange caves which they found abounding there. But Stanhope boys always smiled, and looked very knowing when they heard about this trip. They believed it originated mainly in the imaginations of those rivals from the nearby town.

It can be seen, therefore, with what elation the announcement of William was received. All felt that there was a glorious future beckoning them on. Boys delight in adventure; and surely the mysterious mountain that had so long been unknown ground to them, offered great possibilities.

Every one seemed to have some particular way of expressing his satisfaction.

"The greatest thing ever!" exclaimed Albert Cypher, who by reason of his name, was known among his comrades as Nuthin.

"Yes, all to the good! Back to the woods for me, and old Rattlesnake Mountain to be the stamping ground for the Banner Boy Scouts!" chirped Bobolink, making his voice seem to come from Wallace Carberry, who was never known to indulge in the least bit of slang. Bobolink was trying hard to be a ventriloquist, and occasionally he succeeded in a way to bring roars of laughter from the crowd.

"W-w-whoop her up!" chanted Bluff Shipley, whose impediment of speech often gave him much trouble, especially when he was at all excited.

One by one the assembled scouts were expressing their individual opinions concerning the proposed pilgrimage, when Paul put it up to the meeting to ratify.

A storm of "ayes" greeted the move that this report of the committee be accepted; and the "hike" to Rattlesnake Mountain be made the basis of their Summer campaign.

Hardly had the roar of voices that followed this acceptance died away than there was a sudden and startling interruption to the proceedings. A sentinel, who, in accordance with military tactics, had been posted outside the church, came hurrying in, and whispered in the ear of the chairman, who immediately arose.

"Comrades," said Paul, in a low but tense voice, "our sentry reports that he has found a window in the back of the church basement open, and looking in discovered moving figures. Our meeting has been spied upon by those who want to learn our secrets."

"It's sure that Slavin bunch, fellows! Come on, and let's get our hooks on the sneaks before they fade away!" shouted Bobolink, jumping to his feet excitedly.

CHAPTER III

BREAKING UP THE SCOUTS' MEETING

Boom! boom!

Upon the silence of the Summer night sounded the startling detonation of the big bell in the square tower of the church.

The assembled scouts, arrested by this unexpected peal just as they were in the act of rushing forth to try and capture those who had been spying on the meeting, stared at each other in mute astonishment and indignation.

Every one seemed to quickly understand just what it meant, nor were they long in finding their voices to denounce the outrage.

"It's a punk trick, fellows!" exclaimed Jack, his face filled with growing anger. "They want to force the church trustees to chase us out of our quarters here!"

"Yes," echoed Bobolink, trembling with eagerness to do something, he hardly knew just what, "it's a plot to throw us out in the cold, that's what! Talk to me about a mean, low-down trick—this takes the cake!"

"Let's surround the feller at the rope! Then we'll have something to show that it wasn't our fault the old bell jangled!" cried another member of the troop.

"On the jump, Foxes!" shouted William.

Immediately there was a grand rush. Some went through the door, aiming to gain the outer air, in the hope of cutting off any escaping enemy. Others rushed towards the stairs, by means of which the vestibule of the old church could be reached, where dangled the rope that moved the bell.

Paul led this latter group. He was boiling with indignation over the trick that had been played, for it promised to put the orderly scouts in bad odor

with the custodian of the building, who had been so kind to them.

The sexton, whose name was Peter Ostertag, usually lighted the gymnasium for them, and then went over to his own cottage near by. It was his usual habit to return at about ten o'clock, when the meeting disbanded, in order to put out the lights, and close the building. Perhaps he might even then be on his way across lots.

What with the shouts of the excited scouts, rushing hither and thither; together with some derisive laughter and cat calls from dark corners in the immediate vicinity, the scene certainly took on a lively turn.

The bell had ceased to toll, though there still came a ringing, metallic hum from up in the tower. Paul had snatched up a lamp as he ran, and with this he was able to see when he reached the top of the stairs.

But the vestibule seemed to be empty. Paul rushed to the door, and to his surprise found it locked. Perhaps the sexton had thought to secure this exit after him, when he left the main body of the church, an hour or two before. Then again, it might be, the plotters had been wise enough to place a barrier in the way of pursuit by turning the key, previously arranged on the outside of the lock.

"Hey! this way, Paul!" cried Bobolink, excitedly. "The door into the church is open! Bring the lamp! He's in here, I tell you! Listen to that, will you?"

There was a sound that drifted to their ears, and it came from inside the body of the church, too. Paul could easily imagine that the escaping bell-ringer must have stumbled while making his way across to some open window, and upset a small table that he remembered stood close to the wall.

He lost no time in carrying out the suggestion of Bobolink, who had already rushed into the dark building, fairly wild to make a capture. Outside they could hear the boys calling to each other as they ran to and fro. The sharp, clear bark of a fox told that even in this period of excitement the scouts did not forget that they possessed a signal which could be used to tell friend from foe.

As soon as he gained a footing inside the big auditorium Paul held the lamp above his head. This was done, partly, better to send its rays around; and at

the same time keep his own eyes from being dazzled by the glow.

"There he is!" shrilled Bobolink, suddenly; "over by the window on the left!"

Impetuous by nature, he made a dive in the direction indicated, only speedily to come to grief; for he tripped over some hair cushions that may have been purposely thrown into the aisle, and measured his length on the floor.

Paul had himself discovered a moving figure over in the quarter mentioned. There could not be the slightest doubt about it being a boy, he believed, and in the hope of at least getting near enough to recognize the interloper, he hastened forward as fast as policy would permit.

With that lamp in his hand he did not want to follow the sad example of Bobolink for such an accident might result in setting fire to the building.

Now the figure began to put on more speed. Evidently the escaping party believed there was considerable danger of his being caught; and could guess what must follow if he fell into the hands of the aroused scouts.

Just in time did Paul discover that a piece of clothes line, probably taken from a yard close by, had been cleverly fastened across the aisle about six inches from the floor. It was undoubtedly intended to trip any who unguardedly came along that way.

"'Ware the rope, fellows!" he called back over his shoulder; for some of his comrades were pushing hotly after him.

The warning came too late, for there was a crash as one scout made a dive; and from the various cries that immediately arose Paul judged that the balance of the detail had swarmed upon the fallen leader, just as though they had the pigskin oval down on the football field.

By now the escaping figure had reached the open window through which he must have entered some time previously, taking time to lay these various traps by means of which he expected to baffle pursuit.

Paul believed that such an ingenious artifice could have originated in no brain save that of Ted Slavin, or possibly his crony, Ward Kenwood. Hence

he was trying his best to discover something familiar about the figure now clambering up over the windowsill.

The balance of the scouts had managed to scramble to their feet after that jarring tumble; and were even then at his heels, grumbling and limping.

"It's Ted himself, that's what!" called Bobolink, at this exciting juncture.

The fellow turned his head while crouching in the window, just ready to drop outside. Paul could hardly keep from laughing at what he saw. Possibly foreseeing some such predicament as this, and not wishing to have his identity known if it could be avoided, what had the daring bell-ringer done but assumed an old mask that might have been a part of a Valentine night's fun, or even a left-over from last Hallowe'en frolic.

At any rate it was a coal-black face that Paul saw, with a broad grin capable of no further expansion.

"Yah! yah! yah!" laughed the pretended darky, as he waved a hand mockingly in their direction, and then vanished from view.

Paul thought he recognized something familiar about the voice, though he could not be absolutely certain. And it was not the bully of Stanhope, Ted Slavin, that he had in mind, either.

There arose a chorus of bitter cries of disappointment, showing how the scouts felt over the escape of the intruder who had played such a successful practical joke on the troop.

"He's skidooed!" exclaimed Bobolink, in disgust. "Wouldn't that just jar you some, fellows?"

"There goes William through the window after him! Bully boy, William! Hope you get a grip on the sneak!" cried Nuthin, who was rubbing his right shin as though it had been barked when he sprawled over the rope.

"Say, perhaps the boys outside may get him!" gasped another scout, who must have had the breath squeezed out of his lungs when the balance of the eager squad fell over him heavily, making a cushion of his body.

"Only hope they do," grumbled Nuthin. "But say, what's that you've picked up, Paul? Looks mighty like a hat!"

"It is a hat, and fellows, I've got a pretty good notion I've seen it before," responded the scout leader, as he held the object aloft.

The others crowded around, every eye fastened on the article picked up by Paul just under the window that had afforded the fugitive a chance to escape.

"It's Ward's lid, as sure as you live!" declared Bobolink, immediately.

"That's what it is," observed another, with conviction in his tone; "ain't I had it in my hands more'n once at school? That was Ward in here, doing these stunts!"

"Well," added Paul, cautiously, "it looks that way; but how do we know? We didn't see his face, you remember. It might be another fellow wearing his hat. This might satisfy the trustees that we didn't have anything to do with the ringing of the bell; but I'd like to have better proof, fellows."

"What's all that talking going on out there?" demanded Nuthin, who had seated himself, the better to get at his bruised shin, and ease the pain by rubbing.

Bobolink drew himself up into the window; and as he did so his hat also fell off.

"There," declared Paul, quickly, "you see just how it happened to the fellow with the black face; and he was in too big a hurry just then to drop down again, so he could get his hat."

"What's all the row about, Bobolink? Have they got the slippery coon?" asked Philip Towne, a member of the second patrol.

"Peter grabbed our chum as he was running after the shadow," replied the boy perched on the windowsill. "He's shaking him as if he believed it was William up to some of his old tricks, and that he rang that bell. Now the other boys are crowding around trying to pull him off."

"But what about Ward? Has he gotten clean away?" asked a disappointed one, of the lookout.

"Looks as if they couldn't flag him," came the answer in dejected tones; "anyhow, I don't see any fellows holdin' a prisoner. Let's get outside, and help explain to Peter, boys."

So they went straggling back to the exit, and passed outside, Paul leaving the burning lamp in the vestibule as proof of his story.

Peter was an excitable German, who had been very good to the boys. Indignant at what he thought to be an exhibition of base ingratitude on their part, he had shaken William until the lad's teeth rattled.

"You vill wake up de goot beoples mit your rackets, hey?" the old sexton was crying, "I knows apout how you does all de times, Villiam Carberries, ain't it? Mebbe you t'ink it fun to ring dot pell like dot, unt pring all de neighbors aroundt mit a rush. Hey! vat you poys say? He didn't pull dot rope? Who did, den, tell me dot? Mebbe I didn't grab mit him as he vas runnin' away! Hello! mister scout leader, how vas dot?"

Paul had come up while William was being shaken like a rat in the clutches of a terrier.

"Say, Paul, tell him, for goodness sake," stammered the innocent victim, as he squirmed in the clutches of the indignant sexton, "ask him to let up on this rough house business. I'm just falling to pieces!"

"Wait a minute, Peter," the scout leader immediately called out, "William was with the rest of us down in the basement at the time the bell began to ring. We all started to try and catch the fellow who pulled the rope; but I'm afraid he got away. He went through the church, and out of an open window. You can see for yourself when you go inside, that he tied a rope to trip any of us when we chased him."

Peter eased up his hold, and the agile William broke away, as if only too glad to be able to catch his breath again.

"Yes, and Peter, we know who it was, too!" declared Nuthin, eagerly.

"That is, we think we do," broke in Paul, holding up his find. "This hat dropped when he climbed up to the window. And a lot of us have seen it before."

"Why, it belongs to Ward Kenwood!" exclaimed Jud Elderkin, as he bent forward to take a better look at the captured headgear.

"How do you know?" asked Paul, for a purpose.

"Well, I've seen it on him lots of times," came the unhesitating reply. "There may be a few hats like it in Stanhope, but they're scarce as hen's teeth. Besides, I've got my private mark on that hat. Look inside, and see if there isn't a circle and two cross bars, made with a pen on the sweat band?"

Paul stepped over to the street light close by, and examined the inside of the hat.

"You're right, Jud; here's the mark, sure enough. However did you come to put it there inside of Ward's hat?" he asked, smiling.

"Oh!" answered Jud, with a broad grin, "that was my idea of a little joke, fellows. I happened to find his hat one fine day at school, and having a pen in my hand, thought I'd give him something to puzzle his head about. So I made that high sign there. Guess he wondered what it all meant, and if he was marked for a Black Hand victim. But you can roll your hoop, fellows, that this is Ward's lid."

"If we had only caught him, Peter, you would know it was so," observed Jack; who had led the crowd that rushed outdoors, and felt rather cheap because their intended game had succeeded in escaping.

"Look here, what's to hinder us going and collarin' him on his way home?" broke in Bobolink, always conjuring up bright ideas.

"That's so, Paul. What d'ye think?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"A good idea," declared the one addressed, without stopping an instant; "and Peter shall go along to be a witness, if we find that Ward is minus his hat. Perhaps we might be lucky enough to find that black mask in his pocket, too. And somehow, I've got a notion he had his hands rubbed with charcoal, to match his face. If we found that to be the case I guess the

trustees would be ready to admit *we* didn't have anything to do with this affair."

"Give the order then, Paul. Every one will want to go along; but that would be sure to queer the job. Pick out several likely chaps, won't you?" asked Jack.

"Sure I will. To begin with, Jack, you stay to see about closing up shop. Bobolink, you and Bluff come with us; yes, and Nuthin can trot along, too. That ought to be enough, with Peter here to help."

The German sexton was not so very dull of comprehension after all. And besides, he believed in Paul Morrison. He agreed to accompany the group of scouts on their strange errand, since Jack promised to close all the windows, and remain in the basement until his return.

Accordingly the five walked away, vanishing in the darkness. Paul suspected that one or more of the enemy might be concealed close by, hoping to learn what they meant to do; and so he had lowered his voice when speaking.

He led the way, passing through several side streets until finally they found themselves close to the fine residence of Mr. Kenwood, the banker.

"Say, I happen to know that Ward always uses the back gate when he goes out nights," ventured Nuthin, in a whisper, close to Paul's ear.

This was important news, and the scout leader was not slow to take advantage of it. So they found a place close to the rear gate, and crouched low, waiting. Slowly the minutes passed. The town clock struck the half hour, though it seemed to some of the watchers that they must have been on duty for ages.

"That's him coming," said Nuthin at length, in the lowest of voices; "I know his whistle all right. He's feelin' right merry over givin' us the ha! ha!"

"'Sh!" warned Paul, just then; and as the whistler drew rapidly closer the five crouching figures prepared to spring out upon him.

CHAPTER IV

CATCHING A TARTAR

"Now!" exclaimed Paul, suddenly.

At the word a number of dark figures sprang erect, coming out of the denser shadows alongside the gate in the high fence back of the Kenwood grounds.

Ward was of course startled. The whistle came to an abrupt termination. Perhaps he may even have recognized the voice that called out this one word in such a tone of authority; for while he did not make any outcry he turned as if to flee.

It was already too late, for Bobolink, as if forseeing some such clever move on the part of the slippery customer, had so placed himself that he was able to cut off all retreat.

Then many hands were clutching the garments of the banker's son, and despite his vigorous struggles he found himself held. While it was far from light back there, he seemed to be able to divine who his captors were, judging from the way he immediately broke out in a tirade of abuse.

"Better keep your hands off me, Paul Morrison," was the way he ranted; "and you too, Bobolink and Jud! What d'ye mean holding me up like this, right at our own gate too? I'll tell Chief Billings about it, and perhaps you'll find yourselves pulled in. Let go of me, I tell you! How dare you grab me this way?"

It need hardly be said that not one of the boys addressed showed the least intention of carrying out the wishes of the speaker. In fact, to tell the truth, each one of the scouts seemed to tighten his grip.

One thing Paul noticed, and this was the fact that Ward did not raise his voice above an ordinary tone. He was angry, possibly alarmed, too; but somehow he did not seem to care about shouting so as to arouse his folks.

From this it was easy for Paul to guess that Ward must have been ordered to remain indoors on this night; and did not wish his father to know he had been roaming the streets with Ted Slavin and his cronies. Of late Ted had been getting into unusually bad odor with the town people, and perhaps Mr. Kenwood was trying to break off the intimacy known to exist between his son and the prime prank player of Stanhope.

"See, his hat's gone, Paul!" exclaimed Nuthin.

"Huh! what of that?" echoed the ever ready Ward, "guess I loaned it to another fellow who lost his, and had the toothache."

It may have seemed an ingenious excuse to him, and one calculated to cast doubts on any accusation that might be made, with the idea of connecting him with the boy who rang the big bell. Paul, however, believed he could afford to laugh at such a clumsy effort to crawl out of the responsibility.

"Peter," he said, briskly, "you look him over, and see if you can find a black mask in any of his pockets. You know I told you the fellow who ran out through the church after dropping the bell rope had his face hidden back of such a disguise."

Ward gave utterance to an exclamation of surprise. Evidently this was the very first that he knew about the presence of the sexton.

"Don't you dare do it, Peter," he said, struggling violently to break the hold of his captors, but without success; "don't you put a hand in my pocket, you old fool, or I'll get you bounced from your job so quick you won't know what struck you! Leave me alone, I tell you!"

That was the customary cowardly threat Ward made when he found himself caught in any of his madcap pranks. His rich father was a man of considerable influence in Stanhope, and many a man dared not treat the banker's son to the whipping he so richly deserved simply because it might be that his bread and butter depended in a measure on the good will or the whim of the magnate.

But the sexton did not seem to be disturbed. Perhaps he had little reason to believe Mr. Kenwood could influence the trustees of the church to dispose of his services. Then again, it might be that he received so small a sum for

taking charge of the property, that he cared little whether he kept his job or not.

At any rate, be that as it might, Peter lost no time in starting to search the pockets of the squirming prisoner. Ward tried in every way he could devise to render this task difficult; but then Peter had half a dozen lads of his own over in the little white cottage near the church, and was doubtless accustomed to handling obstreperous boys.

"Vat is dis, poys?" he asked, as he drew something into view.

There was an immediate craning of necks, and then from several came the significant cry:

"It is the black mask, all right! He's the guilty bell-ringer, Peter!"

"What's all this you're talking about, you sillies? I never saw that thing before. Somebody must have stuck it in my pocket for a joke!" and Ward stopped struggling, as if he knew it would no longer be to his advantage.

When caught in a hole he could whip around like a flash, and change his tactics almost in an instant.

"Oh! is that so?" remarked Paul, with a laugh; "well, I happened to remember just now I saw a mask that looked very much like this, down in the corner of Chromo's news-store a few days ago. Now, I'm going to ask Peter to take it to him, in my company, and find out who bought it. At this time of year there isn't such a sale for these things but what Mr. Chromo will remember."

"Huh! think you're smart, don't you, Morrison? Even supposing I did buy it, you can't prove I ever wore it. I defy you to," Ward gritted his teeth; and somehow his manner reminded Paul of a wolf at bay.

"Snap!"

The match which Paul struck flared up. Ward was staring at his captor, a sneer on his handsome face.

"Hold up his hands, fellows," said the young scout leader, suddenly; and almost before the prisoner realized what this move might mean, the burning

match hovered over his blackened hands.

Peter uttered a snort of delight.

"Dot fix it mit you, mine friendt," he said, nodding his grizzled head as if pleased to find that Paul's prediction had come true. "Dey dells me dot poy vat rings de pell undt runs drough de church, he have his hand placked like he vas a negro. Dot pe you, Misder Ward Kenvood. I schnaps mine fingers at your vader's influenza. I shall dell de drustees of de church who rings dot pell. Den it pe up to dem to say vat shall pe done. Let him go, poys!"

Of course Bobolink, Jud and Nuthin immediately released their hold on Ward. The last flicker of the expiring match showed that the recent prisoner was scowling most hatefully, as if angry at the way he had been trapped.

"This isn't the last of this, you fellows!" he said, trying to keep up his customary threatening tactics, even in defeat. "Perhaps you think it smart to set up a game on me, just because you're afraid I'll organize a hike of my friends that'll walk all around that punk expedition of yours! But just wait; I'll show you that you're barking up the wrong tree. Bah!"

He turned his back on them with this last exclamation, intended to show his utter contempt. Passing through the gate he vanished from their sight. But Paul, who knew the fellow so well, felt quite sure that he would never venture to complain to his father, as he had threatened, for that course would disclose the fact that he was out, and bring trouble down on his own head.

"Back to your meeting place, fellows," said Paul; "and you keep that mask, Peter. To-morrow I'll drop in on you, and we'll see Mr. Chromo. I don't suppose anything will ever be done to Ward about it; but anyhow we can convince the trustees who were so kind as to let us use the gymnasium once a week, that we didn't abuse their confidence. And that's worth while."

Accordingly the scouts trooped back to the place from which they had started, where they found that Jack had carefully carried out the orders given by his superior.

Peter was taken inside to notice the rope fastened across the aisle; together with half a dozen seat cushions distributed around, doubtless intended to

trip any pursuers who might not be wise enough to follow in the footsteps of the fleeing culprit.

After that the boys scattered, heading toward their homes in groups. As they went they divided their chatter between the recent happening, and the important news concerning the Summer "hike" that had been announced that night.

Paul and his closest chum, Jack Stormways, walked together, as they usually did. They had much to confer about, and Jack now and then laughed as he listened to what the other was saying about the hold-up of Ward.

"I tell you that was mighty bright of you, showing old Peter the smudge of black on the bell rope, which proved that Ward was the fellow who jerked it," he said, giving his chum a whack of genuine boyish approval on his back.

"Well," chuckled Paul, himself pleased over his little method of proving the guilt of his rival, "Peter got the charcoal all over his hands when he ran them up and down the rope, so he knows there could be no mistake. I gave him Ward's hat to keep for the present too. But it's too much to hope that anything will be done. Even if Mr. Kenwood doesn't attend this church, some of the trustees are connected with him in business, either in his bank, or the real estate end."

"Oh! the same old story," groaned Jack. "That fellow makes me tired! When Ward gets caught, instead of putting up a bold face, he just crawls, and threatens every one with the power of his governor. I'd just like to see him get his, some day!"

"Hold on. Don't forget you are a scout, and that you've got to look for the good that is in every fellow, they say," laughed his companion.

"All right," admitted Jack, slowly, "but I just guess you'd need a magnifying glass to find the speck of good in that cur. He's a sure enough slick one. All I want him to do is to keep away from me. His room is better than his company, any day."

"I'm ready to back you up in that last remark, Jack," said Paul, "for if any fellow in Stanhope has reason to despise Ward Kenwood and his sneaky

ways, I ought. You know he's been my rival in most things ever since we were knee high to grasshoppers."

"But in nearly every case he's come out of the little end of the horn," declared Jack, warmly; "I'm ready to count on my chum getting there!"

"Oh! well," said Paul, hastily, "that's because he's nearly always in the wrong, you know. If Ward would only turn over a new leaf, and act decently, I'm sure he'd make a rival to be respected, if not feared."

But his chum only scoffed at such a thing, exclaiming:

"Oh! splash! you know the Bushkill will be running uphill before either Ward or Ted act on the square. Hasn't Slavin promised to reform more than a few times; and look at what he's doing still! Get that idea out of your head, Paul."

"Well, they did give us a run for our money to-night, to be sure," laughed his team-mate, as in fancy he once more saw the struggling heap of boys sprawling in the aisle of the church, when they struck the rope that had been slily stretched to trip unwary feet.

"You're right there," returned Jack, warmly, "and I can take a joke as well as the next one; only these fellows have no respect for anything. Think of that big bell booming out at such an hour of the night, will you? Why, it must have startled some sleepers almost out of their seven senses."

"Let's forget it then," continued the scout leader; "for we'll have our hands full in getting ready for that great hike up to Rattlesnake Mountain. Every time I think of it I seem to have a thrill. You see I've had a sneaking notion I'd like to prowl around that lonesome district, and learn for myself what it looks like; and now we've made up our minds to do it, I just can't hardly realize it."

"A bully good plan, and I know we're going to have the time of our lives. Look, who's coming over there, Paul?" and Jack allowed his voice to sink as he spoke, just as though he wished to avoid being heard by the party he indicated.

"Why, that was Mr. Clausin," said Paul, in a shocked voice, as the other walked past them, giving both a keen glance as he did so, while his face took on an expression of disappointment.

"Yes," murmured Jack, in a disturbed tone, "and how changed he looks! There must have been something about those stolen papers more than any of us know. He's been to the feed store again to make another search. Perhaps he can't get it out of his head that he didn't hide them somewhere. Poor man, I wish we could help him get them back. Joe's a good fellow, and a true scout. I'd be mighty glad to see him look happy again."

"So would I," said Paul, earnestly; "but hold on—don't show that you're interested, only step aside into this shadow. There's some one following Mr. Clausin, and when he passes that electric light over there I just must get a peep at his face. Whoever he is, Jack, I believe the fellow is a stranger in Stanhope! 'Sh!"

"Oh!" gurgled Jack, clutching his chum's arm convulsively.

CHAPTER V

GETTING READY FOR THE GREAT HIKE

"Can you see him yet, Paul?" whispered Jack, presently; for he had dropped behind his companion, and his view was slightly hindered.

"Yes, he seems to be following Mr. Clausin," returned the patrol leader, in an awed tone.

"Whatever ought we to do?" demanded Jack. "Perhaps he may be one of the same crowd that robbed the feed store. And now he is following Joe's father home! Oh! Paul, do you think he means to hold him up, or find out where he lives, so he can steal something more?"

"I don't know," returned Paul, dubiously; "but we can't stay here and let this thing go on."

"That's what I say, too," Jack hastened to say, as he once more reached his feet. "Shall we call, and bring some of the fellows around? You know how to bark like a fox better than any other scout in the troop. Give the distress signal, Paul. If there's any fellow within a block of us he's bound to hurry this way."

But Paul hesitated.

"That might do the job all right; but at the first sign of danger don't you expect this fellow would disappear? How could we prove anything, then, Jack; tell me that?"

"But if you won't do what I say, I'm sure it's because you've got something else on tap that is better. Put me wise to it, Paul," begged Jack.

"Come on then; we mustn't lose sight of that fellow. Walk fast, because we ought to pass him by," observed the scout leader, starting out.

"But Paul, you don't mean to tackle him, do you?" asked his chum, thrilled by the prospect of an encounter with the unknown.

"Why, not if I know it! He isn't likely to say or do anything when we hurry past him, you see," came Paul's low reply.

"Oh! I get on now;" whispered Jack, as he clung to the arm of his mate; "you expect to warn Mr. Clausin! That's a good idea. He'd know what to do, of course."

Involuntarily Paul caressed the left sleeve of his khaki coat, where the red silk badge that indicated his right to the exalted office of assistant scoutmaster was fastened, just above the silver one telling that he was also a second class scout patrol leader.

"Why should it," he said in reply; "when our motto is always 'be prepared'? But don't say anything more, Jack, just now."

His companion saw the wisdom of what he said, for they had been rapidly overtaking the figure that was trailing after Mr. Clausin.

The man looked back over his shoulder several times, as though he had caught the sound of their footsteps, and was interested. Paul noticed, however, that he did not show any intention of slinking away, and he wondered at this.

When the boys passed him the man simply lowered his head, so that the brim of his hat would shield his face. He gave no sign that he felt any annoyance, and Paul could hear his chum breathe a sigh of relief. Evidently Jack was keyed up to a point close to an explosion.

Mr. Clausin was now only a short distance ahead, and they hurried faster, so as to overtake him quickly.

"Why, is that you, Paul?" he asked, as, hearing the patter of steps close behind, he turned hastily.

"Yes, sir," replied the scout leader, somewhat out of breath from his exertions, "we wanted to catch you before you left the town limits, sir."

"To catch me," returned the gentleman, showing signs of interest. "And why, may I ask, Paul?"

"Oh! Mr. Clausin," broke in Jack at this juncture, "somebody is following you—a man who seems to be a stranger in town! After what happened last night we thought you ought to know it. There he is, standing in the shadow of that big elm back there."

To the utter astonishment of the two boys the gentleman, instead of showing any alarm, such as they expected, seemed amused. He even chuckled, as though something bordering on the humorous took the place of fear.

"It was very kind of you, boys, to follow after me to give me warning," he said, laying a hand on each of them. "But this time I rather suspect it's going to turn out to be a flash in the pan. Because, you see, my lads, I just said good-night to that same stranger at the door of my place of business, where we have been holding a consultation. Possibly he took a notion to see me safely home, not knowing but what I might be held up a second time."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jack, in a disappointed tone, "then he's a friend of yours, sir? How silly we have been! We thought we might be doing you a service in warning you. Come along, Paul; let's fade away!"

"Not just yet, boys, please," said Mr. Clausin. "Your intentions were all right, and for that I'm a thousand times obliged. Besides, you did me a great favor last night, one I'm not likely to forget. I want you to meet my friend. He's expressed himself as one who believes in the great movement you lads represent in this town."

Then raising his voice he called out:

"Mr. Norris, step this way, please!"

Immediately the shadowy figure started toward them. It was evident that the mysterious gentleman must have partly guessed the mission of the boys, for he was chuckling softly to himself as he came up.

"This is something of a joke on me, Mr. Clausin," he remarked, as if amused. "To think of one in my line of business being outwitted by a couple of lads. But then even lawyers will have to look to their laurels when they

run up against boys who have been trained in the clever tactics of this scout movement. Am I right in believing one of these chaps must be Paul?"

"Yes, this one, Mr. Norris; and the other is his friend, Jack Stormways, of whom I was also speaking to you," replied the merchant.

"Glad to meet you, boys, and shake hands with you both," observed Mr. Norris warmly. "I've got a couple of my own boys down in the city, who are just as wild over this scouting business as you fellows up here seem to be. And my friend Clausin here, has been telling me a few interesting things in connection with a runaway horse, and a burning house. Such evidences make me feel more positive than ever that only good can come out of the organization you belong to."

Of course the boys hardly knew what to say in connection with such a handsome compliment; but they returned the warm pressure of the gentleman's hand.

"I ought to tell you, Paul," remarked Mr. Clausin just then, "that this gentleman is my lawyer. I wired him to come up here and see me, as I wished to consult him about those papers which are so strangely missing. You see, I have a pretty good idea who may have taken them, and their loss complicates matters very much. So I was in need of advice. Besides, I was in hopes Mr. Norris, who is a smart man in his class, might be able to suggest some way in which I could recover the papers."

Paul was more than ever interested now in those missing documents. He could not help wondering what their nature could be to give their late owner so much distress of mind. And besides, he was puzzled to understand just how Mr. Clausin hoped to ever set eyes on them again. Would the thief open up communications with him, and demand a ransom for their return?

These things kept cropping up in his mind long after he had said good-night to the two gentlemen, and even separated from his chum. They came back to him when he woke up in the middle of the night, and lay there in his own snug little room at home, where he was surrounded by shelves of books, trophies of contests on the athletic field, and such other things as the heart of a healthy lad loves.

There was something very singular in the manner of Mr. Clausin when he referred to the contents of the little tin box. Paul disliked very much to give anything up; but it was only groping in the dark to try and solve the puzzle without more of a clue than he possessed.

Besides, the regular scoutmaster being off on one of his periodical business trips, much of the duty of preparing for the long trip into the wilderness devolved on Paul.

School was just over for the Summer, and every member of the troop seemed to be bubbling with enthusiasm in connection with the contemplated outing. Nothing like it had ever been attempted before; and scores of things must be looked after.

By the time the scouts got in camp they expected Mr. Gordon, the scoutmaster, to join them, and take charge. But it would be upon Paul to make all necessary preparations, secure the supplies, look after the tents, packing of knapsacks, blankets, and such food as they would need.

No one could have been found better equipped for such a task. Paul loved all outdoors, and for some years had spent every bit of time he could during his vacations away from town. He was a good swimmer, knew all about the best way to revive a person who had been in the water a perilous length of time, and besides, had studied the habits of both game fishes and the inhabitants of the woods, fur, fin and feather.

It can be readily understood then, how he threw himself heart and soul into the task of getting Stanhope Troop in readiness for the long trip. Some of the boys' parents were worried about letting their boys go so far away; in fact three were sent to visit distant relatives just to keep them from temptation; but this move made discontented boys during the entire Summer; for they had set their hearts on being with their fellow scouts, and felt that they were missing the time of their lives.

When only one more day remained before the time arranged for the departure of the troop, Paul, on "counting noses," found that he might expect just twenty-two besides himself to make the grand march.

"It's going to be a success!" ventured Jack, as he and his chum went over the roster on that preceding night, checking off all those who had solemnly

agreed to be on hand in the morning.

"I hope so," replied Paul, seriously; "but I'd feel better if I knew what we were going to buck against up there at Rattlesnake Mountain, and that's a fact."

That was a boy's way of putting it; but perhaps had he been granted that privilege Paul might have been appalled at the array of adventures in store for them.

CHAPTER VI

ON GUARD

Just after he had finished his supper that evening, Jack Stormways was called to the telephone in his house.

"Hello! Jack, this is Paul," came a voice. "Do you suppose your folks would let you camp out to-night down at the church, along with me?"

"What's that?" exclaimed Jack, more than a little surprised; for it had been decided, as the boys would be needing a good rest before starting off on their long and tiresome journey, there was to be no meeting on this night.

"Bobolink just had me on the wire," went on Paul, quietly; "and what d'ye suppose he told me? He got a hint that our friends, the enemy, mean to be at it again. This time they are thinking of doing something that will upset all our calculations about starting out to-morrow."

"But how—I don't just get hold of that, Paul? Every fellow has pledged himself to be on hand, rain or shine. How can they hold us back?" asked Jack, who had been partly stunned by the sudden shock of hearing such news.

"Oh they won't try to," remarked the scout leader; "but then you see what would be the use of our tramping away up there in the Rattlesnake Mountain country if we had no tents to sleep under, and nothing to eat?"

"But we have tents, and you bought enough bacon and supplies to last the whole outfit for two weeks anyhow! Oh! Paul, do you mean—would they dare try to dump all that fine grub in the creek, and perhaps ruin our new tents?"

Jack's voice trembled with indignation as he said this; for the real meaning of what his comrade was hinting at had suddenly burst upon him.

"Don't forget that Ted Slavin and Ward Kenwood lead that other crowd," remarked Paul, soberly; "and that times without number in the past they've shown how little they cared for other people's rights when they wanted to do anything mean. Bobolink had it on pretty good authority. I rather guess one of the enemy got cold feet, and thought it was going too far; so he threw out a hint."

"Bully for him, then, whoever he was! But what are you going to do about it, Paul?" demanded the boy at the other end of the wire.

"Just what I said—get a few fellows to camp out to-night in the gymnasium under the church where all our things are heaped up. Bobolink says he can come. I'll ask William if either he or Wallace could join us. Four should be enough to hold the fort, don't you think, Jack?"

"Sure! We know they're a punk crowd anyhow, when it comes to trouble; ready to run at the drop of the hat," observed Jack, contempt in his tone.

"Will you be there, then?" continued Paul, eagerly. "After all, it will only be beginning our camping experience one day in advance, for to-morrow night we expect to sleep under canvas, you know. Ask your father, Jack?"

"Oh!" exclaimed his chum, "he'll say yes, right off the reel. He never forgets the time he was a boy, and often says he envies me the good times we have. When will you drop in for me?"

"About half an hour from now. Got some things to do first," came the reply.

"Do you want me to take my gun along?" queried Jack, anxiously.

"Oh! no, it isn't that bad a case," laughed Paul, amused. "We ought to be able to handle things without going to such extremes. Besides, you know, I carried a number of those stout sticks into the gym the other day, and William amused himself fastening a lot of cloth around them, so that they look like the stuffed club we used in the minstrel show last Winter. William is just itching to use one on some poor wretch. Perhaps he might get the chance to-night. So-long, Jack."

"I'll look for you in half an hour then!" called his chum.

"About that," replied Paul. "I'll have these little medicine cases finished by then. Mother has been helping me with them. She used to belong to the Red Cross Society at one time; and besides, a doctor's wife has need of knowing about stuff that's good for stomach-aches, colds, snake bites and such things."

That half hour seemed next door to an eternity to the impatient Jack. Every time he allowed himself to think of the vandals throwing all their carefully gathered stores around, and perhaps cutting great holes in those lovely khaki-colored tents, warranted waterproof by the maker, Jack nearly "threw a fit," as he expressed it, in his boyish way.

Finally there was a ring at the door, and the young scout flew to let his chum in.

"Oh! I hope you haven't overdone it, Paul, and waited too long," he said, as he snatched up his cap, and prepared to hurry out of the door.

"Why," replied Paul coolly, "it was hardly a half hour; and I told the boys to meet us down at the campus of the high school about eight. There, you can hear the clock striking now. You're nervous, that's all, Jack."

"I reckon I am, for it seemed to me you were hours coming. I hope they don't try any of their games before we get on deck," observed the anxious scout.

"Not much danger of that, because, you see it's too early in the night. When fellows are up to any mean dodge they like to wait till all honest people are abed. The thief shuns a light, you know; and even Ted Slavin hunts up a dark place when he tries to play one of his tricks."

Paul spoke as though he had made a study of the town bully, and knew his weak points, which was the actual truth.

"Why can't they let us alone?" grunted Jack, falling into step with his comrade, as they walked down the street. "We never think of bothering them; it's always the other way. They just like to act ugly about things; and it's worse since we won that banner for our troop. But you know they're intending to hike out up in the same quarter we've selected? That was done with a purpose too, Paul, mark me!"

"I'm afraid so," returned his comrade, slowly; "and just as like as not they expect to give us trouble while we're in camp. Well," and his voice took on a vein of determination that told how he was aroused at the thought of what might happen; "there must be a limit to even the forbearance of a scout, you know; and if they push us too far, we will have to teach them a lesson!"

"That's the ticket, Paul. I can stand just so much of this being meek and forgiving; but it ain't in boy nature to keep it up everlastingly. Some fellows think it a big joke. And a sound licking will open their eyes better than soft soap. Ask William if that isn't so!"

"It's all to the good, I'm telling you, and that's no lie," observed the party in question, whom they found sitting on the fence adjoining the green fronting the handsome high school, and whom Jack had discovered at the time he was venting his views.

"Where's Bobolink?" demanded the leader.

"Oh! he was here a bit ago," returned William, who had always been considered ready to fight in the old days before the scout movement struck Stanhope; and who was loth to forsake his former ways, even while endeavoring to remain a member in good standing in the troop.

"But why didn't he stop with you? I told him to wait here," returned Paul.

"You see, we talked it over," explained William, "and got the notion that, as we didn't know how long you might be getting around, one of us had better begin to scratch gravel. So he drew the prize, and hiked around to the church to stand guard."

"Oh!" observed Paul, relieved that it was no worse, "in that case perhaps we'd better be moving along. Now, it may be that the Slavin crowd have a picket out so as to watch the gym, and see if any of us come around. We must be careful how we crawl up to the door. Come on, both of you."

They talked in whispers as they made a long detour, so as to approach the church from the rear.

"Got the key to the gym door, haven't you, Paul?" asked William.

"Sure I have," replied the other, readily enough, "I asked old Peter for it this afternoon. Thought that perhaps I might want to get in to look over the stuff for the last time."

"That's good. D'ye suppose they would break a window if they found the door locked?" continued William, who always wanted to know all particulars.

"Huh!" grunted Jack, at this remark; "such a little thing as breaking a pane of glass wouldn't stand in their way long, if they had a big job to tackle. I wouldn't put it past such reckless fellows to set fire to the church if hard pushed. If they stopped at that it would only be from fear of being found out, and punished by the law, not anything else. Huh! don't I know that Ted, though?"

"'Sh!" came from Paul at this juncture, and all of them lapsed into absolute silence; for they were now drawing near the old stone building that had sheltered the leading congregation of Stanhope since before the Civil War.

Paul had been observing things as he came along. First of all he noted that it was not as dark a night as when the bell of the church had been suddenly tolled. A young moon hung tremblingly in the western sky, promising to increase steadily in size, and give them more than one brilliant night while on their big excursion. Besides, an electric street light was in full force that had been out of business the other night.

He also noted the lay of the land near the church. This was familiar to him, as he had played around this spot, off and on, for years. Paul knew just where every tree reared its leafy branches, and could easily in his mind plan a mode of approaching the rear of the building without once leaving the shelter of the shadows.

So they stalked along, and were soon hugging the stone walls. Thus far all seemed quiet and peaceful. If any of the Slavin crowd were in the near vicinity they must be keeping under cover.

A pinch on his arm told Paul that Jack, with his keen eyes, had discovered something he deemed suspicious.

"Where?" he managed faintly to whisper in the ear of his chum.

"Ahead, by the sun dial," came in reply.

Paul remembered that something had happened to the old fashioned sun-dial that used to stand in the cemetery connected with the church; and that it had been placed up against the wall of the building. He knew, because he had once fallen over it in the darkness.

Looking closely he could just make out some object seemingly perched on the stone that offered a seat to the weary one.

It might be Bobolink, and then again there was always a possibility that the figure would prove to be that of an enemy on the watch.

Paul had instituted a system of signals whereby two scouts of the Stanhope troop could communicate, should they happen to draw near one another in the dark, and wish to unite forces.

Accordingly he now took a little piece of wood out of his pocket, also a steel nail, and with the latter tapped several times upon the bit of veneering. Immediately they saw the sitting boy begin to fumble, as though he might be getting something out of his pocket. Then came an answering series of staccato taps, soft yet clear.

"O. K."

"Number Three," whispered Paul, gently.

"I'm your candy!" came the reply, as the figure stood up at attention.

"Anything doing around here?" asked Jack, cautiously as they joined forces.

"Haven't seen a blessed thing but a young rabbit, that came nosing around. Guess that swift bunch hasn't showed up yet," returned the sentry.

"It's just as well," remarked Paul; "and please talk in whispers. Here's the door, so just wait till I unlock it."

A minute later and they found themselves inside the basement of the church, which was used as a gymnasium for the boys; there being no Y. M. C. A. in the town.

"Do we get a light?" asked Bobolink, as he stared into the darkness.

"Better not," advised Paul, "for that would give the whole thing away. The whole stack of things is piled up in the center, so we needn't tumble over it. And William, you know where to put your hand on those clubs, don't you?"

"That's a cinch," chuckled the other, quickly. "You fellows just hang out here, and let me get busy. Oh! what a chance it looks like to try my little game of tag. Talk to me about baseball! Why, it won't be in the same class with what we'll do to the other fellows, if they give us half a chance! Oh! me, oh! my! yum, yum!"

William came back presently, and handed each of his mates one of the padded clubs he had worked on so industriously, in the expectation that some fine day they might come in useful. Perhaps that hour had arrived; at least William had high hopes.

Paul, meanwhile, had secured some blankets from the pile, and each of them made as comfortable a bed as was possible in the darkness.

"Nothing like getting used to bunking on the hard floor?" grunted Bobolink, after he had fussed around for fully ten minutes, complaining that the boards hurt his bones when he lay on his side.

"Now silence!" came from Paul, in a tone of authority; and after that no one dared to utter a single word in the way of conversation.

CHAPTER VII

"BE PREPARED"

"Paul!"

Jack's groping hand gripped the arm of his chum as he gave vent to this whisper.

"Yes," came the low reply close at hand, showing that Paul was awake, and alert.

"Did you hear it?" asked Jack, eagerly.

Bobolink was breathing heavily on his blankets, and it seemed as though he must have been the first one to get to sleep, after all his complaining about the hardness of his bed.

"Yes. Some one shook the door," answered the patrol leader, still whispering.

"That was what I thought. Shall I wake Bobolink and William?" asked Jack.

"Let me do it. If one of them gave a shout it would tell that we had a guard in here."

Paul, while saying this, started to crawl to where Number Three was enjoying a nap. He shook him gently, and when that failed to arouse Bobolink, the motion was increased.

"Hey! what are you——" but further sound was instantly cut off by Paul's clapping his hand over Bobolink's mouth.

"Keep still! They're at the door right now!" he breathed into the ear of the struggling one.

That seemed to tell Bobolink what it all meant. No doubt his first impression had been that the enemy had stolen a march on them, and meant

to make them prisoners in their own quarters.

He ceased to squirm, and encouraged by this Paul by degrees removed his muffling hand, so that Bobolink could breathe freely again.

The sounds had commenced once more. William was also sitting up by now, and fairly quivering with eagerness, as he fondled the extra large club he had selected for his individual use.

Voices, too, reached their ears, as though the unknown parties without, finding themselves balked by the fact that the door was locked, were conferring as to how they might gain entrance.

"Maybe they've gone and made a duplicate key," suggested William, as he and the other three scouts put their heads close together.

No one thought it at all out of the question. They had run up against these energetic plotters so often in the past, that they were well acquainted with their ways; and nothing surprised them in connection with Ted Slavin's crowd.

"Perhaps we'd better move closer to the door, so as to be ready in case they do push in," Paul said, leading the way.

Creeping across the floor of the gymnasium, they hovered close to the entrance. All of them gripped their novel weapons of offense and defense with a grim determination to give a good account of themselves when the chance arrived.

As for William, he was fairly shivering with impatience. Several times he swished his club through the air, as though eager to test its qualities on an unlucky intruder; so that Paul had finally to warn him against such indiscreet action.

The voices without came more plainly now. Evidently the plotters were disputing as to their best course under the circumstances, some being for one thing, and the balance for another.

"Oh! rats!" came a voice that Paul easily recognized as belonging to Ted Slavin himself; "Who's afraid? Go get the old gravestone, boys, and we'll ram her through the door like soup. It's only a weak door anyhow."

"Yes," came in Ward's cautious tones, "but that would be destroying church property, and we could be punished for it. Better try and open a window, fellows. Bud here knows where there's a weak catch, don't you, Bud?"

"Huh! I unscrewed the catch myself," came in still another voice; "that's how it's weak. But we can get in that way easy, boys. If you say the word, Ted, I'll creep in and open the door in the back, where old Peter chases his ashes out in Winter time."

"You're the candy-boy, Bud. Do it right away. And we'll be awaitin' there at the ash door, ready to push in when you open up. Get a move on you, now."

When Ted spoke in that strain he meant business, and few among his cronies ever dared hesitate. He ruled his camp followers through sheer force of brutal instincts; and many a head had ached in consequence of that bony fist coming in contact with it, when a dispute had to be settled.

Paul gave a tug at the sleeve of Jack, who, recognizing the signal, passed it on to William; and in turn he notified the remaining member of the quartette.

Thus they were presently all in motion, making a careful detour around the pile of camping material that occupied the middle of the floor. Some boys seem to be gifted with the remarkable faculty of seeing in the dark, that a cat enjoys. Jack was of the opinion that his chum must surely be favored in this way, judging from his success in moving about through that darkness without tumbling over obstacles.

The furnace room was off the gymnasium. Gaining the door Paul passed through, and presently came to a number of metal receptacles in which old Peter stored the ashes until such time as he thought fit to get a wagon around to take the refuse away.

Most of them were still full and running over, for Peter had kept putting off his last cleaning up, owing to an attack of rheumatism.

"Every fellow pick out his can and hide behind it," whispered Paul.

When he understood that this had been done he himself slipped back to the connecting door, intending to watch for the coming of Bud.

Presently sounds proceeded from a window near by, one of the small ones that in the daytime gave light to the gymnasium. Looking intently in that quarter, Paul was soon able to make out a moving object; for he had the sky with its stars and young moon as a background.

Then came a series of grunts, announcing that Bud was pushing his way in through the little opening, after having gently forced the catch of the swinging window.

Paul could hear the sound of his heels striking on the boards of the gymnasium floor. And just as he had anticipated, the intruder was supplied with matches, for he immediately struck a light, in order to look around, and get his bearings.

Paul thought it time to beat a silent retreat in the direction of the ashcan he had selected as his cover. When settling down he managed to give the signal that the other three would recognize as denoting caution, and that they must remain on the alert every second of the time.

Now Bud was coming. Paul could hear him stumbling along, grumbling when he banged into the open door, simply because his sense of observation had not been so highly developed as had that of the young scout leader.

But by striking another match Bud managed to locate the cause of his trouble. He was glimpsed by Paul, spying around the edge of his screen, and seemed to be rubbing his forehead vigorously, as though he might have raised a lump there in his contact with the door.

Some one pounded from without.

"Hi! there, Bud, what's keeping you?" demanded Ted, gruffly, unable to control his impatience.

"All right, I'm here. But you'll have to wait a little, fellers," said Bud, who had struck a third match in order to size up the situation around the neighborhood of the exit.

It was rather strange that in looking about him he failed to discover some sign of the presence of those four forms cowering behind as many tall

ashcans; but perhaps this was because they managed to keep well out of sight.

"What's the matter in there? Why don't you open up?" called Ted, again rapping his knuckles on the wooden barrier.

"Hold on! There's a lot of cans heaped up with ashes in the way. I'll have to move a bunch of 'em first, before I kin open the door," declared Bud; and to himself he muttered: "and I just don't like the looks of this hole any too much, tell yuh that, now. Reckon theys a hull heap of rats ahangin' around here. Ugh! what a fool I was to come in here anyhow. Gee! listen, would you?"

A sudden squealing sounded somewhere close to the feet of Bud. It was exactly like the angry cry of a fighting rat. But Paul understood instantly that Bobolink must be the cause of all this racket; for he had known his friend on numerous occasions to make good use of his gift as an amateur ventriloquist.

Bud was in a terrible state of mind. Being very much afraid of rats he would have fled from the spot could he have known which way to go. Twice he tried to strike a match, but each attempt proved a failure, on account of his extreme nervousness. And now he had no more matches with him, so that it was impossible to see the connecting door, through which his retreat must be conducted.

Ted was growing more and more angry outside. He used his knuckles on the door again, to emphasize his demand.

"Open up here, you lazybones! What ails you?" he roared, discretion giving way to rage at the delay, when his fingers were fairly itching to lay hold of those tents, and the balance of the camp stuff belonging to the boys he detested so much.

"Oh! I'm trying to do it, Ted;" answered his tool within, "but you see the place is alive with great big rats. They're all around me in here, and wanting to take a nip out of my legs. Oh! get out of that, hang you! One got me then! I bet he took a piece out of me as big as a baseball. They'll eat me alive! Help! Help!"

But Bud was mistaken. It was Bobolink who had pinched him on the sly. Still, since the other did not know this, his terror was just as much in evidence.

"Hurry up there, unless you want us to break the old door in!" called Ted.

"Ah! go roll your hoop!" called out a voice just like the sharp twanging tones belonging to Bud.

"What's that you say?" shouted the astonished and enraged Ted, who believed his slave was rising up in rebellion.

"Go chase yourself! I'm openin' as fast as I kin, an' if you talk till you're blind I aint agoin' to hurry any faster!" Bobolink made Bud appear to say.

"Aint, hey? Just wait till I get hold of you, Bud Jones; if I don't make you eat them words, my name is mud!" exclaimed the furious leader, outside.

"Oh! I never said a word, Ted, sure I didn't!" cried Bud, still wrestling with the ashcans in the darkness, and kicking right and left at imaginary rats which he believed were advancing in a drove to snap at his shins.

"Oh! yes, tell that to the ducks, will you? Every feller here heard what you said, too. I'm goin' to make you eat it just as soon as I get hold of you!" declared the furious leader, still bruising his knuckles in useless attacks on the boards of the door.

Bud Jones was in the most terrible predicament of his whole life. Beset by innumerable fierce foes as he believed within, there was that big bully outside, only waiting for a chance to give him a thrashing he would never forget. And the mysterious voice that sounded exactly like his own, startled him; for, not being a friend of Bobolink's he probably never heard him give those strange imitations when making his voice appear to come from some other person.

"I've got hold of the last can, Ted!" he wailed, presently, after much tugging and another series of wild kicks into space; though he sometimes bruised his toe by striking it against one of the ash receptacles near by; "and I'm going to open up now; but please don't touch me. I never said a word against you, Ted; it must have been the rats, I guess!"

Bobolink could hardly keep from bursting into a shout at this, for he knew that poor Bud must be very near a complete breakdown through fright.

"Here it goes, fellers. Now I'm startin' to tackle the door, if the varmints will give me half a chance," the intruder called out once more.

He could be heard working away with all his energy at the heavy bar that secured the door, now and then giving a dismal little squeal, as in imagination he felt the sharp teeth of a rodent nipping him again cruelly.

"Oh! there it goes, Ted!" he cried suddenly, as the bar fell on his feet.

The door swung open, knocking poor Bud over; for there was an immediate rush of many eager figures. So Ted Slavin led his backers into the furnace room of the church, where Paul lay secreted behind an ashcan, flanked by three of his trusty and loyal scouts.

CHAPTER VIII

REPULSING THE ENEMY

"Wow! go slow, fellers!" called the first boy who pushed into the basement, urged on by the pressure of his comrades in the rear.

"It's as black as a bag of cats, that's what!" exclaimed another, as he floundered among the ashcans.

"Oh! I'm nearly smothered! Help me out, somebody!" wailed poor Bud, who managed to receive a full peck of ashes over his head as he scrambled on the floor.

"A light! Hold up till we get the glim goin'!" called Ted Slavin, who had after all managed to twist around at the end, so that when the door finally opened he could push others ahead of him into the unknown depths of the gloom.

That was often Ted's way. He liked to bluster and rage, but frequently came out of a scrimmage in far better physical condition than those who had said less. Some boys can always keep an eye out for the main chance; and Ted seemed to belong to the number.

Now, the church was usually lighted by electricity. Of late there had occurred some serious trouble with the insulation, and the main part of the structure had to go back to ancient lamp illumination, when any occasion arose. As this was Summer, the night services had been discontinued until repairs could be made.

Paul, however, chanced to know that the little circuit in this rear basement had escaped the general slaughter. He had even tried turning on the light at one time when poking about curiously.

And when he had taken up his location just now, it was close to the button which governed the two electric lights in the furnace room.

Paul thought that the time was about ripe to give these intruders the surprise of their lives. Up to this moment they had been having things their own way; but why should he wait until some one managed to draw a match out of his pocket, and faintly illuminate the apartment?

While the followers of Ted were groping about among the scattered cans, and Bud was sneezing violently as he tried to gain his feet there was suddenly a flash of dazzling light that almost blinded every one.

At exactly the same instant there sounded the eager barking of what, to the alarmed intruders, seemed to be a small dog. But it was the signal of the Fox Patrol, and possessed a positive significance for every member of Stanhope Troop.

"Oh! look!" almost shrieked Bud, as, having managed to recover his balance, he saw the figures of four active boys shoot up into view from behind as many tall ash receivers.

The Boy Scouts never halted to count their foes. It was an occasion calling for speedy action. Indeed, if they wished to take full advantage of the surprise, and complete the demoralization of the intruders, they must follow up their appearance on the scene with prompt measures.

"At 'em, fellows!" cried Paul, suiting the action to the word by smiting the nearest of the Slavin crowd with the padded club he wielded.

Scissors Dempsey promptly bowled over among the ashes, surprised, if not seriously hurt.

"Sweep 'em out!" exclaimed Jack, whirling his instrument of torture around his head, and sending at least two of the intruders reeling.

Immediately a regular pandemonium ensued. Ted saw that he had run into a hornet's nest, and like the wise general that he was, concluded that it was no place for a fellow who had any self respect. Their little game was spoiled, that seemed evident, and it would be the height of folly to think of conducting a fight in the church basement, especially since punishment of a worse nature must follow when their parents learned about the disgraceful proceedings.

Accordingly Ted gave the order to retreat.

"Skip out, every duck of you, Tigers!" he called, hoarsely; "Hey! get a move on you, Scissors, Bud,—everybody run!"

The spirit was willing with his followers; but the flesh proved weak. The trouble was, they found themselves kept so busy dodging the descending padded clubs of Paul and his friends, that they had little time for maneuvring toward the lone exit.

William was in his glory. Long had he been deprived of his favorite amusement; and he meant to take full advantage of this glorious opportunity to let the red blood in his veins have free swing. The way he whacked at the ducking followers of Ted was certainly marvellous, and every time he made a hit he let out a series of gratified barks such as must have astonished any real red fox of the timber.

One by one, however, the badly-used intruders sped out of the rear door, pursued by a parting volley of vigorous strokes, and breathing threats as they ran off.

From the interior of the gymnasium came a series of noises that could mean only one thing—despairing of escaping in the same manner as his companions, who were lucky enough to be nearer the exit, Scissors had darted through the connecting door, and that was him banging headlong into posts, or tripping over the various stacks of camping material on the floor.

The furnace room was hazy with dust, occasioned by the tilting over of several ashcans; but Paul could see that the enemy had been almost wholly expelled.

Among scouts a peculiar custom often prevails. Each boy makes up his mind to do some sort of good turn to somebody during the day. In order to remind himself of this he frequently turns his badge upside-down until he has found an occasion to even the score. No matter how small the service, it must be something that brings a little pleasure or profit to another.

Well, Paul grimly thought, as he drew out his handkerchief to wipe the perspiration from his face, if any of his chums had failed to find a chance during the day just past, to perform a service entitling them to a sense of

self satisfaction, after this little excitement they could go to bed with clear consciences. For had they not shown several boys the truth of the old proverb, that the "way of the transgressor is hard," and would not this lesson be valuable in after life?

"Oh! shucks!" lamented William, as he leaned on his war-club, and looked as forlorn as one of his merry disposition ever could, "whatever did they run away for? I wasn't half through, yet. Why, I don't believe I got in more than three decent licks at all! It's a shame, that's what!"

Paul was shutting and fastening the door again. He did not wish to have a volley of stones hurled through the opening by the vindictive boys they had put to flight. Past experiences served to warn him as to what measures of retribution Ted Slavin and his kind usually undertook.

"Whew! what a mess! We'll have to get brooms, and a sprinkler busy here, so Peter won't complain," he said, laughing as he looked around.

"Hello! look there! Get next to the ghost, will you?" cried William, pointing to a wretched and forlorn figure that was emerging from the midst of the assembled ashes.

It was the fore-runner of the Slavin clan, the miserable Bud Jones. He had been tumbled over so many times during the excitement, by both friends and foes, that he must have lost all count.

"Oh! what a guy!" shrieked Bobolink, holding his sides with laughter, as the disconsolate Bud trailed out from his place of concealment.

Covered from head to feet with ashes, and minus his hat, he certainly presented a most comical appearance. But it was serious enough to Bud. He judged others by what he knew of Ted Slavin's ways; and consequently fully expected that Paul and his crowd would surely proceed to vent their ill humor on his poor head.

"Oh! please let me go, Paul!" he whined, addressing himself to the one he recognized as the leader of the opposition; "I've got all I deserve, you see, and the worst is yet to come; for when my dad looks at this new suit I'm in for the most dreadful lickin' you ever heard about. Don't kick a feller when he's down, will you, Paul? Please open that door again, an' let me scoot!"

He knew what he was doing in addressing himself to Paul Morrison. Perhaps another, like William or Bobolink for instance, might think he deserved even more severe handling, to pay him for his share in the mean prank that had been nipped in the bud. But Paul had a reputation for being fair, and was also known not to allow such a thing as a desire for revenge to take root in his heart.

When Paul surveyed the forlorn figure before him, with a thought as to what might await Bud at home, for he had a stern father, he agreed with the other that apparently he had been already well punished.

So he stepped over to unfasten the door again.

"I hope this will be a lesson to you, Bud," he remarked, while so doing.

"Oh! it sure will," Bud responded, eagerly, "I'll know better than to crawl in a window, and let other fellers have the snap of waitin' till the door's swung open. I'll be mighty careful about that, after this, give you my word, Paul."

And that was all Bud had learned from his experience. After this he would let Ted snatch his own chestnuts out of the fire. Small use trying to show such a chap the real significance of his wrong-doing. Paul did not try, but opened the basement door.

William and Bobolink hastened to line up on either side. From the threatening manner in which they swung those terrible looking instruments of torture over their right shoulders, it seemed as though they wished to get in one last whack at the enemy before the incident was called closed.

Bud saw these dread preparations with renewed terror. He had already experienced several painful connections with those padded clubs, and was not sighing to renew his acquaintance.

"Please, Paul, call 'em off! Don't let 'em get a chance at me again! I'm all black an' blue now from tumbling around on the floor, with the fellers stampin' on me. Boys, have a little mercy, won't you, now?"

William looked at Bobolink. Then they exchanged winks, for it had really never been their intention to turn loose upon Bud again.

"Well," said Bobolink, "seeing that you've made up your mind to reform after this, p'raps we might let you off easy, Bud. But the next time you get caught, oh! but you're going to get it. Better quit that crowd, and try another tack. Ted and Ward have all the fun, and you fellows take the drubbings. Think it over, Bud!"

It was not often Bobolink talked like this. It happened, however, that once upon a time he and Bud had been good friends. That was, of course, before they reached the parting of the ways, the latter choosing to throw in his fortunes with the Slavin crowd, because he thought they had the most fun.

"I'm going to, Bobolink," responded the wretched fellow, a grain of thankfulness in his voice, "I'm beginning to get my eyes open. P'raps my dad'll make me promise never to go with Ted again."

But Paul did not believe that Bud had reached the point of seeing the full evil of his ways. Had he done so he would never have made that remark about simply being tired of proving the scapegoat; and that the lesson he had learned would only make him wiser about acting as Ted's scout.

So Bud hastened to leave the scene of his recent humiliation; and no sooner was he gone than Paul again secured the door against intrusion.

"Are we going to get busy now?" asked William, as he fondly caressed the novel weapon with which he had recently harassed the would-be destroyers of the camp equipment, as though loth to lay it down for a broom.

"Wait a bit," remarked Paul; "for unless I'm mistaken there's another Tiger loose in the den of the Fox!"

As if to emphasize the truth of his words there came, just at that moment, a tremendous crash from the dark gymnasium near by. Groans, and angry words testified to the fact that Scissors Dempsey was having his troubles of his own in trying to navigate that abyss of gloom, seeking to find the door, and escape by that means.

"Wow!" exclaimed William, once more tightening his grip on that war-club, while the light of battle glowed in his eyes; "I clean forgot that pilgrim in there. Oh! for one last good belt at a Slavin Tiger. Paul, get a lamp, won't you, and turn us loose in there. Oh my! oh me, what luck!"

"I suppose he's just got to be chased out of the place; and the sooner we do it the better," Paul responded, advancing toward the connecting door.

He knew just where to find the nearest lamp. It was close beside the door, and Paul had stamped its location in his mind.

Accordingly, he struck a match and passed the portal. Jack was at his heels, trying to hold the impetuous William and the equally belligerent Bobolink in check; but unable to wholly do so.

When the match was applied to the wall lamp it gave a dim light. The presence of electricity in the furnace room only made the contrast more positive. Still, those eager boys possessed sharp vision, and almost instantly both William and his fellow scout discovered a moving figure at the other side of the gymnasium crawling out from under a wilderness of blankets and tents that had fallen upon him.

CHAPTER IX

RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL

If Paul could have had his own way just then he would have been in favor of allowing Scissors a chance to make his escape. But he had a pair of impetuous comrades along; and aroused by the excitement of the occasion neither William nor Bobolink thought of consulting his wishes.

No sooner was the lamp lighted than they sprang forward toward the heaving heap of blankets and folded tents, where the alarmed intruder was trying to emerge from the avalanche he had brought down upon himself.

Some of the good brethren of the congregation might have felt inclined to hold up their hands in dismay could they have looked in there just at that moment, and seen all the weird goings-on that were taking place. Still, an investigation would have proven that the scouts were not responsible for the scrimmage; since they had a perfect right to protect their possessions against attack.

No sooner had Scissors managed to emerge from the great heap of camp things than he was set upon by a couple of energetic scouts. He dodged most of the blows, aimed with such good will, though a few landed, and forced groans from the unhappy recipient.

To tell the truth, the expression of terror was so strong on the face of the caged Tiger that neither of his assailants could get much force in their strokes, so full of laughter had they become.

Paul himself walked over to unlock the door, wishing to end the ridiculous and unequal performance as soon as possible. And in so doing he happened to leave that single lighted lamp unguarded for just a minute.

It proved doubly unfortunate, though no one could have possibly foreseen the catastrophe which came upon them so suddenly.

Scissors, in trying to avoid further punishment, had taken to running back and forth. He ducked whenever he believed one of those threatening clubs was about to descend upon his head, whirling to the right, and then to the left, almost wild at the prospect of being at the mercy of such seemingly savage enemies.

He was too excited to understand that if he had only thrown up his hands, and called out that he surrendered not another blow would have fallen. Nor could he guess that the ferocious aspect of these assailants was but a mask assumed to hide the huge grins that struggled for mastery on their faces.

In making a last desperate plunge to escape William the fugitive happened to collide with a pair of oars that stood up against the wall in what was believed to be a secure place.

One thing followed another, just as a line of bricks standing on end will bow to the fall of the leading one. Scissors struck the oars and they in turn crashed against that single lighted lamp, knocking it from its cup!

"Oh!" exclaimed William, pausing in sudden horror, as he saw the lamp go down.

There was a crash, and a shriek from Scissors, who had tripped, and plunged headlong. Paul saw a blaze of light; and he knew that the lamp had broken, depositing its dangerous fluid all around. Kerosene in these days is not the same deadly explosive it used to be in other times; still, it will catch fire under certain conditions; and he saw that unless prompt measures were taken the church was doomed!

"Be prepared!"

That scout motto never had a better chance of being lived up to than just at that critical moment, when the oil from the broken lamp began to take fire in various places.

Paul jumped like a flash toward the pile of blankets, and snatched up several in his hands. Nor was Jack an instant behind him, only he happened to seize upon a tent in the excitement of the moment, when there was certainly no time to change.

Regardless of any injury to the articles they were wielding, both lads swung at the flames, and beat them furiously. Such prompt action was sure to meet with its reward, for it would have to be a pretty hot little conflagration that could stand against such energetic work.

But Scissors was calling out, and beating frantically at his garments, which seemed to be afire in half a dozen places. It was then that William, who had just a brief time before been pursuing the imperiled lad with seeming vindictiveness, proved that there was little of venom in his heart.

He had dropped his club at the very instant of the accident, and seeing what Paul and Jack were doing, had hurried over also to possess himself of a blanket. Instead of whipping this at the creeping flames which the others promised to take good care of, William turned his attention to the excited Scissors, who was losing in his fight against the hungry fire that had seized upon his oil-soaked garments.

And right then and there did the lessons taught to these scouts come home to William. Not for nothing had he learned what to do in case of a sudden emergency, whether by water or fire.

Over the head of Scissors he threw that blanket, and then seized the other in a bear-like hug.

"Keep still!" William was calling, as he hung on grimly; "quit your kicking, you silly! It's all right, and no great damage done!"

But as Scissors, being blinded by the blanket, could not see that Paul and his chum had beaten the fire out, and in imagination he felt it still eating into his tender skin, he continued to struggle and try to shout, although his voice sounded very faint in the compress.

Paul found another lamp as soon as darkness had fallen on the gymnasium, and with trembling hands managed to light it. Then the four friends looked at each other, and tried to smile; but it was a poor job. Their faces were as white as parchment, and yet each one at that moment was probably uttering sincere thanks deep down in his heart that the accident had been no worse.

William had removed the blanket from around Scissors by this time, and the prisoner was sitting down on the floor, examining several sore spots on his

hands and legs, where the fire had touched the cuticle.

"Say, did you ever see such a hot time?" gasped Bobolink, presently, as he recovered his lost breath in part; for he had been kicking at the fire just as vigorously as the others slapped at it with the blanket or tent.

Paul shook his head. He could hardly realize what a fearfully narrow escape the fine old church had had. A very little delay in attacking the flames would have allowed them to get such headway that no effort on their part could have won out. And perhaps that would have dealt a crushing blow to the Boy Scouts in Stanhope.

"Is it going to look bad?" asked William, possibly with something of this idea surging through his head just then.

"That's what I'm anxious about. Who'd ever dream that that lamp could be knocked down and broken. Good it wasn't gasoline, or nothing could have saved the building," and Paul got down on his hands and knees, the better to see.

"Well, what d'ye make of it?" asked Jack, as the scout leader once more arose.

"When we clean up around here there won't be much to show for it, except a singed blanket or two, and some marks on that tent. Boys, we ought to be mighty thankful it came out so well," replied Paul, soberly.

In imagination he saw the old church, which was beloved by so many good people of Stanhope, a heap of ashes; and the mere thought sent a shiver through him.

William pointed to Scissors, who was groaning as he sat there on the floor. All feeling of animosity was now driven from even the hearts of William and Bobolink. Indeed, it must have been sympathy that caused the former to bend down over the grunting lad.

"Guess you're not burnt badly, Scissors," William said softly; "smarts some, of course, but rub the black off, an' it looks only a little red. Here, Paul, ain't we got something in our medicine chest good for burns? Seems to me you

carried that, and used it more'n once when a fellow got too near the camp-fire."

"Why, to be sure we have, and I'll get it right away," declared Paul, as he started a search for the article in question.

Such was the confusion following the upsetting of the heap of material that it proved a serious task finding the medicine chest, which, up to now had contained all their simple remedies. Paul had arranged additions, with which he expected to complete the stock in preparation for their big tour.

Seeing what was in progress both Jack and Bobolink lent their assistance; and the dismal groans of Scissors kept urging them on to greater exertions.

"Here it is!" called Jack, presently, as he overturned some of the blankets once more, and fished out the little case.

"Hurrah! you're all to the good, Jack!" declared Bobolink, with his customary vigor of speech.

Paul quickly opened the case, and produced a little box containing a cooling salve his father had given him. It acted in a magical manner with ordinary burns, and the boys had particularly requested that he be sure and bring another supply for use on the tour; since burns were apt to be the portion of those who had much to do with preparing the food cooked over a camp-fire.

Paul set to work rubbing some of the salve upon every spot Scissors indicated as needing attention. He found a wonderfully large collection, for just then it probably seemed good policy for Scissors to act as though seriously injured, lest the others take it into their heads to kick him out of the place.

"I guess that ought to do, Scissors," said Paul, when he had almost used up the entire contents of the box on the other's arms and legs.

"Feels some better, don't it?" asked Jack, anxiously, for once upon a time he and the caged Tiger had been next-door neighbors, and were accustomed to going together.

"Y—es, some; but I reckon I'll be pretty sore to-morrow, boys. Aint you going to turn me loose now?" asked Scissors, looking up out of the corner

of his eye at Paul.

Then as though he feared he saw something hostile in the manner of the other, he commenced grunting dismally again, and writhing as if in pain.

"Why, of course you can go, Scissors," observed Paul, "I'm sure you've got your medicine more than Bud did his. If you can walk, come right along to the door. I was opening it when you banged into those oars, and upset the lamp. Here you are; good-night, Scissors!"

The boy limped grievously as he headed for the door. He kept one eye on William, and Paul really believed that if the Carberry Twin had made a movement as though about to pick up that padded instrument of torture again the apparently lame Tiger would have developed a surprising burst of speed, and fairly shot out of that exit.

So they saw him go stumbling up the few steps that led to the level. Then Paul once more shut and secured the door.

The four chums looked at each other, but no one laughed. Though there had been plenty of humor about the affair, on their side, still that closing scene in the little drama had sent a thrill of horror through them. They realized that, after all, they had been close to a catastrophe.

"First of all let's get this room straightened up, boys," said Paul, as he started folding some of the disarranged blankets.

Four pairs of hands make light work, and after a little there was a new heap of the camp material, on another section of the floor. After that they endeavored to remove all traces of the brief fire, and in this they were fortunate, for having completed their labors it would be difficult to detect any signs of that sudden though terrifying flash in the pan.

"Now for the ashpit, fellows," sang out William, finally. "Me to swing the broom, after some water has been sprinkled. We're going to get there yet, all right; but oh! my, what a time it's been! Will I ever forget it?"

"This is what I'd call heaping coals of fire on the heads of your enemies!" ventured Bobolink; as he, too, hunted for a broom in the furnace room, and prepared to assist in the work of cleaning up the mess.

Paul sprinkled first, while Jack started to place those cans which had not been upset, in a row. For a short time there was an industrious quartette engaged in the labor of reconstruction. When Paul finally gave the signal to knock off work the furnace room really looked much better than old Peter was in the habit of keeping it.

After that the boys sought the faucet where running water could be had; soap and towels were forthcoming from the stores, and they cleaned themselves up.

Then preparations were made, looking to an all-night vigil, during which by turns one of their number was expected to stand guard at two hour stretches; though none of them had the least fear that the enemy, routed so thoroughly, would return.

CHAPTER X

OFF ON THE LONG TOUR

"Get up, you lazybones!"

It seemed to Paul that he had just managed to drop into his first real sleep of the night when he heard William say this. The unusual experience of hearing the loud strokes of the big clock up in the steeple above, had done much to keep him wakeful, even when it was not his time to be on guard.

He immediately sat up, to find the other fellows yawning, and stretching, as if they, too, had been dragged back from dreamland by William's turning-out call.

"Oh! rats, it sure can't be five o'clock yet!" grumbled Bobolink, showing signs of rolling over again, and taking another spell of sleep.

"Ain't it?" remarked the sentry, indignantly; "Well, you just take a look up at that window, and you'll see the sun, all right. Besides, the clock tried to get in the reveille, though I tell you it was mighty hard work, with the lot of you snoring to beat the band. Tell 'em to crawl out, Paul. We've got heaps to do this morning, all right."

"Say, is this the day we start on that long hike?" demanded Bobolink, with a dismal groan; "oh! my, but I feel punk. Who's been kicking me when I was asleep? I'm sore all over, and I guess you'll have to leave me behind, Paul, or else fix up that stock wagon into a sort of ambulance."

"Oh! slush!" exclaimed William, indignantly, "wouldn't that be a nice cinch for you, now, to be reclining at your ease among the tents and blankets, while the rest of us tramped and sweated along the trail? I see you doing it, in my mind's eye."

"Jump up and stretch, Bobolink. You've only got a few kinks in your muscles," remarked Jack, who was already working his arms like flails.

"I suppose I'll just have to, even if it kills me. Oh! what a shooting pain in that left leg. What ails me, anyhow?" grumbled the afflicted one.

"I know," quoth William, readily enough. "You put too much steam into those kicks last night. Didn't I hear Ted give a yelp every time you got near him; and there were others. Everything in moderation, my boy. You're just paying the price now on your speed. Tone down like I do, and you won't have such aches the next day."

By degrees Bobolink managed to get rid of his sore feeling, which may have come, after all, from an unaccustomed bed on the floor. Despite the blankets which he had tucked under him, at some time during the night he possibly rolled out of his snug nest, and the hard boards left an impression.

In a short time the gymnasium was made to look orderly. Paul did not wish those kind friends who had been so good to the scouts to find any reason for regretting their courtesy and benevolence.

Then, after all were out, he locked the door, before making for his own home, in order to finish his preparations, and secure a good breakfast.

Already Stanhope was all astir. Boys who usually slept until the call for breakfast disturbed their happy dreams, were up and doing. Indeed, many of them had, if the truth were known, stolen out of bed at various times before dawn, anxious not to oversleep. For this was to be one of the greatest days the younger generation of Stanhope had ever known.

The long roll of Bluff Shipley's drum could be heard at intervals, and how their pulses thrilled at the sound, knowing that it was meant for them alone! Not since away back in '61, when little Stanhope, then a village, mustered a company to send to the front to serve their country, had such intense excitement abounded.

Who could sleep when in some score of homes the hope of the household was rushing up and down stairs, gathering his possessions, buckling on his knapsack half a dozen times, and showing all the symptoms of a soldier going to the wars?

Every girl in town was on the street, many of them to wave farewell to brother or friend. And besides, there were the envious ones connected with

the "Outcast Troop," as Ted and Ward called their fragment, because they had been unable to obtain a charter from the National Council, being backward in many of the requirements insisted on.

These fellows had been delayed in making their start, and were planning to slip out of town some time later in the day. They possibly wanted to make sure that the scouts were actually headed in the direction of Rattlesnake Mountain; for not a few among them secretly doubted whether Paul and his comrades would have the nerve to venture into that wild country.

And now, by ones and twos, the young khaki-garbed warriors began to gather in the vicinity of the church. Each carried a full knapsack, and all were supplied with a stout, mountain staff, which would assist their movements later in the day, after the muscles of their legs began to grow weary.

Paul was amused at the stuffy appearance of those same knapsacks. Evidently some of the boys' fond mothers or older sisters entertained a healthy fear that their darling might fare badly at meal time; and they had been cooking doughnuts, as well as various other delicacies beloved of youth, to be crammed into the confined space of the shoulder haversack.

But that was to be looked for, since this was their first real hike. After one experience every fellow might be expected to know better, and scoff at the idea of a true scout going hungry as long as camp stores abounded, and a fire could be kindled.

With each passing minute the tumult grew apace. Fathers and mothers gathered to witness the triumphal passing of the troop, in which their own boy must of course appear to be the one particular star.

By eight o'clock several hundred people had congregated near the old church. For one morning, business in Stanhope was forgotten or stood still, for neither clerks nor proprietors seemed to evince any desire to show up.

Those boys who did not belong to the troop pretended to scoff at the idea of undertaking such a wearisome march; but this was pretty much make-believe. Deep down in their hearts they were bitterly envious of the good fortune that had befallen their comrades; for few boys there are but who

yearn to get out *somewhere*, once in a while, and meet with some sort of adventure.

Bluff was kept busy displaying his skill as a drummer. He always had a group of admirers of both sexes around him. And Bluff showed his wisdom by saying never a word. Silence with him was golden, because, as he himself was wont to say, he "never opened his mouth, but what he put his foot in it."

And there was Bobolink gripping that shiny bugle nervously, and keeping one eye on the scout leader the while. When Paul gave the signal he would be primed for his part in the proceedings.

Finally, as far as a careful count went, it seemed as though all who meant to start out on the long tour had arrived.

Paul made a gesture to the official bugler, and immediately Bobolink raised his instrument to his lips. The roll of the drum had become familiar music to those listening hundreds; but when the clear notes of the bugle floated through the morning air there was an instantaneous raising of hats, and hardly had the assembly call died away than a stupendous cheer seemed to make the very church tremble.

"Fall in! fall in, fellows!"

Every boy knew his place.

At the head of the double line stood the flag bearer, Wallace Carberry carrying the glorious Stars and Stripes, while further back, Tom Betts waved the beautiful prize banner which Stanhope Troop had fairly won in the preceding Autumn, when competing with the other troops of the county.

Then came Bluff with his busy drum, and Bobolink holding his bugle ready to give the signal for the start.

After that the scouts came, two and two, each in his appointed place, and the leaders of the second and third patrols heading their commands.

Paul was of course compelled to act in the place of Mr. Gordon, so that temporarily Jack served in Paul's stead with the Red Fox Patrol.

Amid great cheering and waving of hats and handkerchiefs, the troop finally put their best foot forward as one man, and headed away up the road that would, after many miles of weary marching, take them to their distant goal.

At the rear came the wagon, upon which were piled the tents, blankets, and provisions for the two weeks' stay in camp. When the worried parents of the boys saw the large amount of eatables they began to lose their fears about hunger attacking the little troop. But then, a score of healthy lads can make way with an astonishing amount of food in that time; yet Paul had also counted on securing a supply from some neighboring farmers to help out the regular rations.

To the inspiring music of drum and bugle they marched away from Stanhope. A bend in the road hid their homes from view, and only the steeple of the church could be seen.

Perhaps more than one boy felt a queer sensation in his throat as he realized now what it meant to leave home, tramp out into the wilderness. But if this were so they made no sign. The wistful look several cast behind changed into one of manly determination, as they kept pace with their comrades, and faced the future with new hopes.

Paul soon moderated the pace. He was wise enough to know that at this rate some of the boys would early complain of being tired or footsore, since they were hardly yet in condition to "do stunts" in the way of travel.

Two miles out of town they came to a cold spring up among the rocks at which many wishful eyes were turned, so the acting scoutmaster gave the order to halt, and break ranks.

"We'll stop here for half an hour, and get refreshed," he said, as they clustered around him; "because, now that we've left our base of supplies and cut loose from all our homes we must go carefully. The chain is only as strong as the weakest link, you know, fellows. And several of our number are not used to long tramps."

After drinking their fill of the cool and refreshing water the scouts lounged around, each taking a favorite attitude while indulging in animated discussions concerning what might await them far to the north.

It was while the troop was taking things in this easy manner that Jud Elderkin suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Look what's coming, fellows!" he exclaimed, and everybody of course sprang up.

CHAPTER XI

THE COMING OF THE CIRCUS CARAVAN

"Hey!" cried Bobolink, as he rubbed his eyes, "wake me up, somebody, won't you? I've got the nightmare, sure; I'm seein' things I hadn't ought to."

"Gee whiz! it's sure an elephant, fellows!" ejaculated Joe Clausin.

"And what's that coming along behind the same? Get on to his curves, would you, boys? We're the gay defenders of Lucknow, for as sure as you live the camels are coming, heigho, heigho!" sang William, striking an attitude.

"It's the circus that was billed to show in Stanhope this very day," declared Jack, with sudden conviction.

"That's what it is!" echoed Jud, with a grin; "heard they gave a turn over at Warren last night. Say, I bet they've been on the tramp the rest of the night, and the way that old elephant moves along proves it."

"They do look tired for a fact," admitted Paul; "I wonder if our horse will get gay when the animals pass so close. Most horses are just crazy with fear when they smell a tiger or a lion near by."

"Huh! I'd just like to see some spirit in old Dobbin," laughed Philip Towns. "He's a plugger at best, and I expect we'll have to help him up many a hill with that big load. There come the people of the show, and three cages of beasts. My! but don't they all look like they'd been drawn through a knot-hole, though?"

The night march had indeed fagged both beasts and human performers. Horses walked with downcast heads, and some of the men limped painfully. Altogether it was not a sight to arouse much enthusiasm in the heart of a boy, accustomed to seeing the outside glitter of a circus, with prancing steeds, gay colors, music, and the humorous antics of the clown.

Paul pushed to the front just then.

"I've got something to propose, fellows," he said; and the announcement was as usual sufficient to rivet the attention of all his comrades; for when Paul made a suggestion they knew that as a rule it was worth listening to.

"Hear! hear!" said several, nudging each other secretly, as they crowded around.

"I can see that there are a large number among us that so far to-day have not found a chance to do something to help another. Yes, I'm in the same boat myself, for you see my badge is turned upside-down. How many are there who would like to wipe out that debt, and clean the slate for the day?"

Paul held up his hand as he spoke. Immediately every fellow followed suit, even those who had been fortunate enough to ease their conscience so early in the day feeling perfectly willing to repeat the obligation.

As I have said before, it is a rule with most scouts to do some little thing of a helpful nature every day. Sometimes this takes the form of assisting a poor widow with her firewood, running an errand for a mother, helping a child across the street where horses act as a source of danger—there are a thousand ways in which a boy can prove his right to the name of a true scout, if he only keeps his eyes about him, and the desire to be useful urges him on. But of course some lads are always blind, and they never make good scouts.

"Now you see how high up this fine spring is, fellows," Paul went on; "and then perhaps they don't even know about it, because they are strangers here. The horses can't get up here any more than old Dobbin could. You carried two buckets of water down to him, and he thanked you when he drank it. See the point, fellows?"

"It's great, and we'll do it!" declared several at once.

"Once we put out a fire; and now we can quench a big thirst!" shrilled William.

"Huh! if you expect to fill up that camel and elephant I see our finish. Why, my stars! they never could get enough!" lamented Bobolink.

"But do you like the idea, fellows? Every one agreeable say yes!" persisted Paul.

A thunderous response followed, during which Bluff managed to get in a few bangs at his drum, and Bobolink tooted his bugle shrilly.

Immediately there were signs of animation about the caravan. Heads of women performers began to protrude from a couple of dingy-covered wagons, and every eye was turned up to the rocky hillside where the flags fluttered in the morning air.

"Come on then, let's get down to the road, boys," remarked Paul, starting to lead the way.

"Bring on your buckets," said William, gayly, "we're the boys when it comes to running a line of pails. Hey! you, mister with the big elephant, don't you want a drink of the coldest spring water on earth? We've got it up yonder, and it won't cost any of you a cent either."

The man seated on the neck of the lumbering elephant brought the animal to a halt. Then he gave some sort of a signal that the animal understood, for immediately he sank on his knees, and allowed the keeper to slide down from his perch, making stepping places of tusks and uplifted trunk.

"Fine!" cried the interested William; "a private performance for the benefit of Stanhope Troop of the Boy Scouts of America. Where can I get a bucket handy, mister? I'm just dying to see that big beast scoop up the water in his trunk."

By this time the camel had arrived, and presently some vehicles came to a stop close by, while men began to gather around.

Apparently every member of the circus company must be exceedingly thirsty, for as soon as it was known that a spring lay among the rough rocks where the flags floated, a number started climbing up, bearing all sorts of drinking cups.

"How about your animals, sir?" asked Paul. "You see we're looking for a chance to do a good turn to somebody or other, and if you supplied us with buckets we'd be glad to water your stock for you."

The big bearded man who seemed to be the proprietor of the traveling show looked at the speaker as though he could hardly believe his ears. No doubt his experience with boys had been along quite a different line. He evidently fancied that they were only made to prove a thorn in the flesh of every circus owner, stealing under the canvas of the big round-top, annoying the animals, and throwing decayed vegetables at the clown when he was trying his best to amuse the audience.

"Buckets?" he exclaimed, presently, "oh! yes, we've got lots handy; and the animals are certain peeved with thirst. Boys, I'm going to snap that offer up, because you see, my canvasmen are pretty nigh done up, having so little sleep. Here you are; just take your pick, and thank you!"

Every boy made haste to comply, so long as the supply of buckets held out; and those who failed to secure one hung on the tracks of another more lucky, waiting to claim it for the second filling.

The scene became an animated one indeed, with those khaki-clad lads climbing up the hill, empty buckets in hand; and carefully lowering themselves again when the wooden receptacles had been filled with the clear and cold liquid.

Of course the official photographer had to snap off several views of the busy scene, and every scout who had carried his camera along followed suit. It was a "dandy" picture, as William declared, and would hardly be equalled during the entire course of their tour.

"Say, just fancy that old elephant and that camel taken in connection with us scouts!" gurgled Bobolink, as he turned his camera loose, and once more looked for a chance to seize some fellow's bucket.

"Not to mention the cages of *ferocious* wild beasts yonder, and the ladies of the circus taking cups of water right from our hands as though they were really tamed. It's going to be the biggest card we ever met up with," and William thumped himself proudly on the chest as he spoke.

But Paul was thinking of other things. That picture would be mute evidence of the new spirit that had taken lodgment in the breasts of those Stanhope lads, connected with the scout movement. There they would appear, as busy as beavers, doing a real good turn in quenching the thirst of all those poor

animals that had been traveling over the dusty road since the show closed in the other town.

It would need no explanation, for Paul believed any one could read between the lines, and understand.

Their half hour was lengthened to a full one, owing to this unexpected delay. When the caravan finally meandered along the road, and the members of the circus gave a cheer for the boys on the hillside, Paul believed that the additional time had been well spent.

And not one single badge now remained upside-down, since every fellow felt that he had won the right to wear it in its proper position.

"Give them three cheers!" he called, as the caravan drew near the bend in the road that would shut it from view.

There was a lusty response from more than a score of healthy lungs, while both drum and bugle added to the racket. Presently, the dust hanging like a cloud at the turn was the only sign left of the passing of the circus. But the memory of the humane deed they had done would remain with the boys a long time.

Once again they were on the move. Dobbin had managed to survive the near presence of those unfamiliar animals, and seemed to put more vigor than formerly into his work. Perhaps he was anxious to place as much distance as possible between his own person and the terrifying beasts of the jungle.

When noon arrived the young scouts found themselves about five miles away from town. This was really further than a number of the lads had ever been in this direction. Still, there had been no rush, and Paul knew that his command must be in pretty good shape thus far.

Most of them appeared to be merry enough, and joked as they walked. William especially seemed light hearted; and since nothing like order was maintained during the steady tramp, he enlivened the way with his songs and squibs.

It was different with Paul. Pretty much all the responsibility weighed upon his young shoulders, since Mr. Gordon trusted to him to carry the troop to the place selected for the camp, wherever that might be.

He had scores of things to think of, and must always be on the alert to keep his finger on the pulse of the entire score of lads.

When they made their noon halt they had reached another spring known to Paul, though some little distance away from the road.

Breaking ranks, they followed the directions of their leader and made for the water, each boy eager to get at the contents of his knapsack, wherein loving hands had so carefully stowed such dainties as the son of the house was known to favor.

"Don't we have a fire, and some cooked grub, Paul?" demanded William, eagerly, as he hovered about the wagon, ready to pounce upon the kettles and pans that had been brought along to serve as cooking receptacles.

"Not here," replied the leader, smiling at the look of disappointment visible on William's face, which he could twist about in the most comical way ever seen outside of a clown's work in the circus. "To-night we'll make our first regular camp, you know, and that will be time enough to break in."

"Oh! I'm wise now to the idea. You want the boys to get rid of a lot of the sweet stuff they've loaded in their grips. And I reckon you're just about right. The sooner they get down to plain grub, the better. Cakes and such are good enough at home, but give me the bacon, the flapjacks, the hominy, the fried fish and camp fare when I'm in the woods."

William talked big, but Paul happened to know that pretty much all his information with regard to what should be done during an outing of this sort had been gleaned from books, though he could cook quite well. His brother Wallace was just the opposite, and knew from actual experience what a camper should, and should not, do.

A rest of an hour was taken, during which time the scouts lightened their bulging knapsacks considerably. Indeed, Paul had high hopes that by the time another day had passed the supply of crullers and similar dainties would have vanished completely.

During the afternoon they did not try to hurry. There were several reasons for this. Already a number of the boys began to complain of sore feet, and were noticed limping, although Paul had tried to make sure that each fellow started out with the right kind of shoes for tramping.

It kept him busy giving advice, and showing the wounded fellows just how to alleviate their suffering. Andy Flinn finally took his shoes off, and trudged along in his bare feet. But then, Andy had known many a time in his past when he did not own a pair of shoes, and his soles were calloused to the point where small stones made no impression.

It was about four o'clock, and there had begun to arise a complaint of weariness along the whole line, when Paul edged up to William.

He had been over this part of the road on his wheel lately, just to get an idea as to the lay of the land. Hence he knew that the ideal place for the first camp was close by, and presently the cheery sound of the bugle electrified the entire detachment.

CHAPTER XII

A CAMP BY THE ROADSIDE

"Let me have a tent, will you, somebody?" cried Jud Elderkin.

"Me for the cooking outfit!" sang out Bobolink, though his knowledge of affairs connected with the preparing of food was extremely limited, owing to lack of experience. But then Bobolink, as well as all the rest of the troop, would be considerably wiser before they slept again under a roof.

Many hands made light work, and the contents of the supply wagon were soon distributed to the several patrols. There were two tents for each, four fellows sleeping under each canvas shelter.

Paul was busy from the minute the procession turned into the woods bordering the road. He had to see that the right situations were selected for putting up the tents, in case a sudden downpour of rain came upon them. A mistake in this particular might result in having a pond around the sleepers, and add a soaking to their blankets and clothes.

But Paul had figured on this during the previous visit made here. He had even marked off the position he wished every tent to occupy, and this made it easier.

Many of the scouts were really proficient in erecting the canvas shelters, and in a very brief time the scene began to present quite a martial appearance, such as half a dozen tents in a bunch must always make.

Each had a waterproof fly over the whole, which was calculated to shed rain *if let alone*. Besides there were a couple of other open covers put up, which would be useful in case of rain, one for storing things, the other as a mess tent, where meals could be partaken of in comfort, despite the weather.

After that three fires were started, one for each patrol. These were not of the big, roaring kind that usually serve campers as their means of cooking.

Later on they expected to have one such, around which to gather, and tell yarns, and sing their school songs; but the cooking fires must be built along entirely different lines.

A hole was dug in the ground, with a frontage toward the wind. When this was pronounced deep enough a fire was carefully kindled in it, and fed with small stuff until it could take stronger food. So by degrees the depression became filled with red cinders, sending off a tremendous heat, yet not showing more than fifty feet away. An enemy might pass it by twice that distance, without discovering it was there.

Besides, one could cook over such a fire with comfort, and not scorching both face and hands in the effort.

Paul had learned the trick from an Indian with whom he once camped; and ever since that time he had never made a big, roaring blaze when he wanted to cook.

That was only one of dozens of useful things those Stanhope boys would pick up while on this wonderful hike into the wilderness. Wallace Carberry had a lot of information packed away in that big head of his, and there would be plenty of occasions when he could help Paul out in accomplishing things in the proper way.

So eager were the boys to taste their first meal under canvas that they could hardly be held in check.

"Why," said Paul, laughing when some of them pleaded with him, and declared they were bordering on a state of actual starvation; "if we ate now, a lot of you would be hungry again before we turned in. I figure on three square meals a day; but four would upset all my calculations. Half an hour more, boys. Suppose you get a few pictures of this first camp? They'll be worth while."

In this fashion did he manage to keep them from dissatisfaction. At last he gave the word that allowed the various cooks to set to work. There was no lack of helpers, for every fellow hung around, watching the peeling of the potatoes with hungry eyes; but when a delicious aroma began to arise from the first frying pan set over the hot fire, some of them backed away, unable to stand it longer.

William, as the champion flapjack tosser of the entire troop, was of course in big demand at the fire of his patrol. He had brought along a white cook's cap which he insisted on donning as he hovered over his outdoor range, and gave his orders to willing subordinates.

That meal was one never to be forgotten by any of the boys. To a number it proved the very first they had ever eaten under similar conditions; and with ravenous appetites, whetted by the long tramp, and the cool air that came with evening, it seemed as though they could devour the entire mess alone.

But their eyes proved larger than their capacities, for there was plenty for all, and no one complained of not being satisfied when the meal ended.

Each patrol had a regularly-organized system whereby the work might be divided up, and every fellow get his share. Hence there could be no favors shown, and no chance for disputes.

One of the leading rules was that duty came before play. Consequently the tin platters, cups, knives, forks and spoons, as well as what utensils had been used in preparing the dinner, were cleaned and laid away before Paul allowed the big fire to be started.

Each patrol cook was allowed to have what he thought would best please those for whom he labored. Paul exercised only a general supervision over the whole matter, in order to make sure that there was no unnecessary waste. Consequently there would always be more or less rivalry between the three patrols, and much good natured "joshing" with regard to what they had to eat.

Once that bonfire was started, the scene assumed a different aspect. The glow lighted up the encampment, and filled the Banner Boy Scouts with a feeling of pardonable pride, because each one felt that he had a personal ownership in the camp under the wide spreading oak.

After a time they grew merry. William joked, another told a story that sent them into fits of laughter, and then songs were sung.

"How different they sound out here in the woods!" declared Wallace, as the last notes of a favorite air died away.

He was possibly the most satisfied member of the troop, for his love of the open air life had always been profound.

"Say, fellows, how about settling down to the prosy life after this gay old jaunt; tell me about that?" demanded William.

There was a storm of disapproval.

"Don't make us feel bad, old fellow!" pleaded one.

"Me for the gay life of a gypsy!" declared another.

"Why, I'll have to run away, and join that circus, I just guess!" laughed a third.

But Paul only smiled. He knew a change would come over the spirit of their dreams presently. They were now tasting the joys of outdoor life. Everything was delightful around them. The air was fine, the sky filled with stars, plenty of good food near at hand, and the first night on the road yet to be endured.

Wait until the rain came down in buckets, drenching them to the skin; see what sort of enthusiasm would show up when perhaps their supply of food gave out, and they were hard put to get enough to appease their savage appetites; given a week away from the loved ones at home, and how many of these bold spirits would still be able to declare with all their hearts that the life in the open was the real thing?

"Of course we put a guard out to-night, Paul?" asked Jack, as he crept close up to where his chum sat on a blanket, watching the fun going on around the fire.

"That is a sure thing. We must never forget that, while a peace organization, we wear uniforms, and are acting under military rules. Besides, perhaps it wouldn't be just right for me to say this to the rest, but I can whisper it to you, Jack—somehow I seem to have a dim suspicion that we may entertain visitors before morning."

Jack started and looked at his chum anxiously.

"Now you sure can't think any of those circus canvasmen would take the trouble to follow us?" he muttered, shaking his head in bewilderment; "because they know mighty well we haven't got a thing they'd want, outside of our grub. Oh! that makes me think of something. I begin to smell a rat now, Paul. You mean Ted and his crowd."

Paul nodded in response, and smiled mysteriously.

"Any reason for thinking that?" Jack went on, "or are you just saying it on general principles, like?"

"I'll tell you," replied Paul, readily enough; "but please say nothing to the boys. It may be I'm too suspicious, you see, and I wouldn't like to be called a false alarm. But just think how particular that bunch was to stay back until we had left town. They claimed they weren't ready; but I chance to know that was all a fake."

"You mean so they might follow, and give us all the trouble they could?" asked Jack, indignantly.

"Just so," Paul went on, in a low voice. "Another thing; they expected to make use of their wheels in coming up here. Ted laughed at the idea of having a tent. True woodsmen, he claimed, never had any need of such a thing, being able to make a good shelter that would shed rain out of leaves and branches."

"But they said they didn't expect to leave until afternoon. That would give us a long lead, Paul," Jack ventured.

"Shucks! what would nine miles be to fellows on wheels? They could just eat up that distance, and not half try," answered his chum.

"But somebody said they meant to take the other road that winds around so, and joins this one ten miles further on. Do you believe that, Paul?"

"I just think that was said to pull the wool over our eyes. Those chaps have started out with the one idea of bothering us all they can," answered the scout leader.

"Now look here; what's the use of beating about the bush like that, Paul? You've got some reason for being so dead sure. You've seen something,

haven't you?" and Jack pressed still closer to the other as he waited for a reply.

"Well, yes, I have," came the low response.

"Please tell me what you saw then!" asked Jack, almost holding his breath in suspense.

"Just before dark a boy on a wheel came around the bend, and then, seeing our tents, dropped off to hide in the brush along the side of the road," replied Paul.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN THE MOON WENT DOWN

"Did you know who it was, Paul?" asked Jack, after making sure none of the others were noticing that he and the leader of the troop had engaged in such a serious conversation.

"It was getting dusk, and I couldn't see very well on account of the trees, you know; but something about the way he ducked made me think it was Ward Kenwood."

"Well," chuckled Jack, "you've seen him duck often enough to know the signs. Suppose it was Ward, then the rest of the bunch must have been only a little way behind. He's got a motorcycle, you know, and would be apt to pace them. But what became of him then?"

"I don't know," replied the patrol leader, rising. "Perhaps he left his machine in the bushes, and crept away to warn the rest before they exposed themselves. I'm going to find out if my eyes deceive me. Want to go with me, Jack?"

"Count me in. Shall I get a lantern; and do you want any more along?" asked his chum, preparing to get up from the ground.

"Two ought to be enough. Yes, bring a glim along; we may need it, for that moon isn't very bright to-night, and the trees make considerable shadow."

Speaking in this fashion Paul left his position, and sauntered away. Possibly a few of the jolly company noticed his action, but took it for granted that he was only intending to make the rounds, and see that the sentries were on post; for they had already stationed a couple of scouts to serve as guardians of the camp.

Paul walked over to where Dobbin was munching the tender grass, being secured against straying by a long rope.

A minute later Jack joined him, carrying a lantern. Together they walked to the road not far away, and turned back over the ground they had covered late in the afternoon.

"There's the bend," whispered Jack presently.

"I see it," replied his comrade; "and it must have been somewhere close to this spot I saw that wheel appear, and then vanish so suddenly."

"Which side of the road did he dive into?" queried Jack.

"On our left. We'll look there first, anyhow, though if we find no signs I'll turn the other way, for I might have been mistaken. Watch sharp, now, Jack."

The light of the lantern soon showed them what Paul had expected to find. The plain print of a pneumatic rubber tire was seen, turning abruptly off the road, and running into the scrub alongside.

"Here, what do you make of that?" he asked, a tinge of triumph in his voice.

"The mark of tires as sure as anything," replied Jack, bending down the better to examine the imprint. "From the way they show up you can see it was no ordinary bicycle that made the trail, but something heavier. Yes, it was Ward on his motorcycle. But you didn't hear the popping of the machine, did you?"

"For a good reason," returned Paul, immediately. "You see the road descends for some distance, and he had just got over a long coast when he turned this bend. The engine was shut off."

"But the machine isn't here now?" continued Jack.

"Of course not," Paul admitted. "But any one with half an eye can see where he rolled it along here back of the brush, returning to where he came from. If we followed it a little way, we'd be sure to find that he hurried back up the road, pushing his machine, and in time stopped the rest of the bunch as they came along."

"Well, that proves one thing then; they know where we are in camp," observed Jack, with a serious expression on his face; for he understood Ted

Slavin's tactics of old, and could easily guess what might follow.

"It proves more than one thing to me," declared Paul. "If they didn't mean to badger us in some way why should Ward hurry back to tell the rest, and keep them from showing up here?"

"Then we'll have to get ready for an attack. Do you think they would dare stone the camp, and try to smash our tents?" and Jack gritted his teeth at the bare idea.

"Would you put it past them?" Paul asked; "haven't they proved themselves ready to do any sort of mean trick in the past? All we can do is to keep constantly ready, and live up to our motto."

"But suppose they do jump in on us; must we turn the other cheek, and get it on both sides?" demanded Jack, with whom this was always a disputed point.

"Not by any means," declared his chum, positively. "Boys may go a certain distance in forgiving an enemy who is sorry, and asks to be let off; but they never will stand for milk and water stuff like that, and you know it, Jack. We seek no quarrel, and will go as far as the next one to avoid it; but," and Paul's face took on a look of grim determination while he was speaking, "if they push us too far, why we must just sail in and lick the whole bunch. Sometimes peace can only be had after fighting for it."

"Glad to hear you say so. Shall we go back to the camp now, Paul?" asked his chum.

"Might as well, I reckon," came the answer; "because we have no idea of following this trail back to where that crowd has camped. But I'm glad I happened to glimpse that fellow as he came around the bend. It gives us fair warning, and if we're caught napping, why we deserve to get the worst of the argument, that's all."

"Huh! I'm glad we brought our staves along then," observed Jack.

They turned to retrace their steps. Paul half fancied he had seen a flitting figure among the trees not far away; but the light was so uncertain, he could

not say positively that it had not been a passing shadow, cast by one of the boys near by, crossing in front of the big fire.

If Ted and his followers were in truth hovering around, it would not be advisable for himself and Jack to wander any further away, lest they be set upon, overpowered by superior numbers, and kidnapped.

That would be a sad beginning to the great tour, which was almost certain to cause it to prove a failure from the start. Perhaps those shrewd plotters meant that it should be so; and were laying all their plans to that effect.

Unconsciously, then, Paul quickened his footsteps, and cast more than one glance over his shoulder, not fancying being taken by surprise. Even his companion noticed his uneasiness, and commented on it.

"Oh!" laughed Paul, "I imagine the idea must have come to me that they'd like nothing better than to nab both of us, and carry us off. With no head, the boys would soon get sick of staying up here, and scatter for home."

"Well, then," declared Jack, positively, "they mustn't have a chance to get you, if we can help it. But here we are close to the camp. Do you mean to tell them now?"

"It might be just as well," answered the leader, seriously; "every fellow would be put on his mettle then, knowing what was hanging over his head. And the sentries will hardly dare go to sleep on post. I know they realize the nature of such an offense; but many of these fellows are only tenderfeet when it comes to actual service; and what would you expect of boys anyway?"

Jud was the first to see that something was wrong. As he jumped up and hurried over to confer, others took the alarm. Joking ceased, and a look of real concern might be noticed upon many a face that, but a brief time before, was wreathed in broad smiles.

Then Paul explained. The moment he mentioned the name of Ted Slavin angry looks were exchanged between numbers of the scouts. They knew only too well, whenever that bully was around, there was apt to be trouble.

"They're after our good grub, that's what!" suggested one, immediately.

"But they don't get it, if we know it," declared another, positively.

"We're for peace first, last and all the time, even if we have to fight for it," observed William, showing his white teeth with one of his famous grins.

"That's the ticket. We seek no quarrel with anybody; but we're like Paul Jones' flag of the Revolution, with a rattlesnake coiled, and the motto, 'don't tread on me!' Isn't that it, fellows?" exclaimed Wallace Carberry.

"Leave it to Paul here; he knows what to do," ventured Jack.

"Sure," called out Bobolink, lustily; "whatever Paul says goes with us. Think up a good one, please, Paul, and teach those pirates a lesson they'll remember. They've been wanting a good licking this long time back."

"After what we did to them only last night?" demanded Jack. "If your left leg was sore this morning, what d'ye think the other fellow's felt like?"

"Thirty cents, I reckon," replied William, promptly.

Paul soon had his plan of campaign practically arranged. As it was plainly the intention of the marauders to steal a portion or all of their supplies, these were taken from the wagon and stored in the duplicate mess tent. As this happened to be in the middle of the camp the chances of any hostile force being able to reach it without attracting attention from those on guard seemed too remote to cause anxiety.

Other arrangements were made. Fires were laid ready for instant kindling, so that in case of a midnight alarm the woods might be quickly illuminated, and the enemy readily discovered.

Paul went about certain preparations on his own account, nor did he take any one into his confidence, not even his chum.

"When does the moon set to-night, Wallace?" he asked, knowing that the sober Carberry Twin always kept informed concerning such matters.

"Eleven twenty-seven," came the immediate reply, just as if Wallace might be reading it from an almanac; and so he was, only it was figured out in his wise old brain, and not printed upon book paper.

"Then if there's going to be any sort of row, believe me it will hold off until after that time," remarked the patrol leader, positively.

"Yes, Ted is always copying after the Indians in those cheap library stories he buys for his nickels," Wallace made reply. "Those five-cent redmen never used to attack a camp until the moon had gone down. Generally it was just before peep of day, because men, and boys too, seem to sleep sounder then."

"All right. You and I will be on deck to receive them. I've fixed it so our turn comes after eleven, for I knew the new moon would be gone by then. That gives us a chance to snatch some sleep beforehand," remarked Paul.

Once more, just before taps was sounded, he made the rounds of the encampment in order to reassure himself that all was well.

At that time nothing suspicious caught his eye. If any of their foes were hovering near by they knew well how to conceal themselves so as not to be discovered.

Dobbin was still munching the sweet grass as far around him as his rope would permit. Like most old raw-boned horses he seemed never able to get enough to eat. Still, Paul thought that the expedition would be reduced to more or less straits if deprived of old Dobbins' services; and so he ordered that the animal be led up closer to the camp, being secured to a tree where he could be watched.

With the warning call from the bugler there was an immediate dispersal of the merry group around the campfire. These boys had been drilled in the duties that devolve upon organized forces in the field. They understood that without discipline nothing could ever be accomplished; and all were ready to obey orders to the letter.

There was a little good-natured scrambling when the rude beds were made up; but as soon as "taps" really sounded all activity ceased. No fellow was anxious to be the first to get bad marks registered against him in the record of the big hike.

Those selected for doing duty during the first part of the night paced their posts, and exchanged low calls whenever they drew near one another. They

were expected to keep a vigilant watch over the entire camp, and if the least suspicious thing caught their attention, a signal had been arranged whereby Paul would be notified, even though he were asleep at the time.

Two hours passed without the slightest alarm. Then came the time to change sentries. Paul and Wallace were among the quartette that now came on duty; for the acting scoutmaster insisted on sharing the duties of his men. He refused to benefit by the circumstances that had conspired to thrust him into the exalted position usually filled by Mr. Gordon.

Just as Wallace had predicted, the moon faded out of sight before half-past eleven came around. After that it was certainly dark, and perhaps it seemed more so on account of the contrast.

Believing that if any peril hung over them, now was the time for it to make itself known, Paul redoubled his vigilance as he kept back in the shadows among the trees and eagerly watched in the direction of the camp.

For half an hour nothing happened. He heard the customary sounds in the woods, with which he was so familiar, and which he so dearly loved.

Then, while he was gazing at the dying camp fire he suddenly made a discovery that gave him quite a start.

Some moving object caught his eye, not upon the ground as might have been expected, but up in the branches of a wide-spreading oak tree.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHASE

Paul looked again, and more closely.

The light from the fire was becoming fickle. Once in a while the flame would start up, and give quite some little illumination. Then dying down lower than ever, it allowed a condition of half darkness to prevail.

Of course it had been during one of these former periods that Paul made his startling discovery; and he waited in considerable suspense until the flame took a notion to feed upon another little stock of tinder.

Could it really be a bear up there in that big oak, the branches of which reached out, and shook hands with those of other trees? Paul chuckled at the idea; it was so absurd. Save for an occasional traveling Italian with a trained bear, no such animal had been known to exist in all this section for many years.

A bobcat then? That was very nearly as impossible. Still, the hasty glimpse he had secured told him that it was at least larger than a raccoon or a 'possum, animals frequently seen in the vicinity of Stanhope.

Well, what was to hinder a *boy* from coming into competition with other things, when an explanation of the mystery was sought? Some boys can climb like monkeys; and he knew of several who would think little or nothing of making their way from one tree to another, when the great limbs interlocked.

There, the flame again began to show up, and dispell the gloom. Eagerly did Paul make use of his eyes; nor was he disappointed this time.

There *was* a swinging object dangling from the limb on which he had fastened his gaze. Even though the light proved so deceptive Paul knew that he was looking at a hanging boy, caught in the act of changing his location

by the sudden return of the light, and meaning to remain still in the hope of escaping discovery.

Were there others also in the oak? Could it be that the entire Slavin crowd had managed to elude their vigilance, and was now hovering over the camp, ready to carry out some dark plot?

Paul did not believe this possible. Only an expert climber might succeed in accomplishing such a clever feat. He considered a minute, and then felt certain that he could give a guess concerning the identity of the one aloft.

Among the partisans of Ted was a fellow named Eggleston, who was usually known among his fellows as "Monkey." This because of his fondness for doing all manner of wonderful tricks on a trapese or the parallel bars. He could hang by his toes from the limb of a tree, and never seemed alarmed in the slightest degree because twenty or more feet lay between his dangling figure and the earth below.

Of course, then, this was Monkey Eggleston. He had received his orders from Ted, and was carrying them out with more or less delight. Paul calculated that he intended to drop down into the centre of the camp, unseen, his presence unsuspected by the sentries, who would be looking the other way for signs of trouble.

Then what?

A vicious boy let loose in a camp for half an hour, with a good sharp knife in his possession, can do a tremendous amount of destruction. Why, he might begin by cutting the bags that held their sugar, so that every bit of it mixed with the soil and was lost. Half a dozen other things seemed to flash through Paul's mind as he crouched there and watched the dimly seen figure descending slowly from limb to limb.

Two courses were open to the scout leader. He could shout out, and bring every sleeper dashing from the tents; after which the tree might be surrounded, and the spy compelled to surrender. Then again he could wait and watch.

His curiosity was aroused to some extent. He really wondered what the game of Monkey Eggleston could be. And so he determined to simply creep

up closer, without giving the alarm. At the proper time he would start things moving.

Of course, if one of the sentries happened to think that the fire should be looked after, and came forward to throw on more fuel, it might interfere with the plans of the boy in the tree. But Wallace would not do this unless Paul gave the signal agreed on; and the patrol leader was rather of the opinion the other two fellows might be sound asleep, being unaccustomed to such a vigil.

He just caught a fleeting glimpse of something dropping lightly to the ground close beside the mess tent. This he knew must be Monkey. He had accomplished the first part of his errand, and now came the question of what he meant to do next.

Paul pushed in closer, anxious to see what was going on, for the spy was in the midst of the supplies gathered under the canvas cover. Just as though his coming might have been discovered, a dark figure made a sudden spring away from the spot. As the intruder bounded past the smouldering fire he seemed to bend over and throw something into it.

Instantly a bright illumination took place, dazzling in its effect.

With the crash of the spy's retreating footsteps echoed the loud cries that arose from the spot where Wallace was keeping guard:

"Fire! fire! turn out here and save your bacon, fellows!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

Figures came tumbling out of the tents. Every scout had been aroused by that dreadful summons, which might mean the wind-up of their jolly expedition before it had been started.

Of all the disasters that in a camp must be viewed with anxiety, a fire ranks next to a sudden hurricane. Paul had spoken about these things so much that every fellow realized the seriousness of the case, even though he might be a tenderfoot, who had up to now never slept under canvas.

Of course, as is usually the case, many lost their heads in the excitement. It could hardly have been otherwise, since they were new hands at the

business. They ran back and forth, trembling with eagerness to do something heroic and grand, yet unable to collect their wits enough to see what ought to be accomplished first.

Luckily all of them were not built that way. Had it been so there must have followed a dire disaster that would have put a damper on their budding hopes.

Paul saw Wallace jumping directly for the sputtering fire that was running so strangely from point to point, and eating its way toward the shelter under which all their precious stores had been heaped up.

"Whatever it is, he'll get it!" was the thought that flashed through Paul's brain at that instant.

Relieved of this fear, he could turn his full attention toward the escaping spy. Monkey Eggleston must not get clear, if it could possibly be avoided. He had engaged in some sort of miserable trick, calculated to harm those who were paying attention to their own private business. He must be caught and made to confess.

So, with that determination urging him on, Paul sprang in swift pursuit of the rapidly-disappearing form.

Since the moon had gone down, and darkness prevailed, it was not easy to see the figure of the runner; but if Paul's eyes failed him his ears did not. The fugitive was making a tremendous amount of noise as he slammed through the woods. He collided with trees, stumbled over trailing vines, and sprawled across more than one half rotten log that chanced to lie in his path.

Paul did much better. Perhaps he happened to possess eyes that were able to see in such semi-darkness; then again it might be his absence from the fire had much to do with his ability to discern obstacles in time to avoid contact with them.

At any rate he knew one thing, which was, that slowly but surely he was overtaking the spy sent by the Slavin crowd to create havoc in the camp of the scouts.

Paul also knew that it was perhaps a very unwise move on his part, this chasing so madly after Monkey Eggleston. Of course the fellow had friends not so far away, and the chances were he was even now heading toward the place where Monkey knew they would be waiting to hear his report.

Still Paul would not give up. The fact that he was surely overtaking the other fellow acted as a sort of spur, urging him to continued efforts. Had the chase seemed hopeless he might have abandoned it after the first spurt; but now he felt that at any moment he was apt to pounce upon the object of his pursuit, who was floundering along just ahead.

Suddenly the noise stopped. Either Monkey had been given a jolt in his last tumble that knocked the breath completely out of his body; or else he was "playing 'possum" in order to deceive his pursuer.

Paul groped his way forward. The trees became more scattered, and what seemed to be a small glade dawned upon his sight.

He had carefully noted the spot where the last sound was heard, and as he strained his eyes now he was able to make out a crouching figure within ten feet of him.

"Ted?" said a quavering voice, "is that you?"

Evidently Monkey was entertaining a little hope that after all it may have been his comrade who had chased after him so persistently. Paul did not reply, but moved swiftly forward. He saw the other make a move as though about to try and resume his flight; but the young scout leader of the Red Fox Patrol did not mean to let so fine a chance slip through his fingers.

He made a quick spring that landed him on the fugitive. With all his strength Paul threw him back to the ground.

"Got you, Monkey!" he exclaimed, triumphantly; "now you'll come back with me to our camp, and explain what sort of meanness you were up to, trying to burn us out!"

The boy underneath seemed to be so badly frightened that he could hardly find his tongue to say a word. He had shown spirit enough when climbing through those trees to enter the hostile camp; yet now that he was held a

prisoner his natural cowardice returned. But before Paul could drag him to his feet there was an unexpected interruption to the little affair.

"Hey, boys!" called a voice he recognized as belonging to Ted Slavin, "get a move on you, and surround the wise guy. We've got him in a hole, and it's twenty-three for yours, Paul Morrison! He aint goin' to crawl out of this pickle, if we know it. Jump him, fellers!"

CHAPTER XV

LEFT IN THE LURCH

"You don't say so, Ted?" sang out Paul.

He knew that he was facing trouble, and that in an instant as it were, the conditions had entirely changed. From being the pursuer he now found himself with the shoe on the other foot. All the same, Paul was not at all daunted. He had encountered these fellows too many times in the past to fear them now.

It was a question whether Monkey had intentionally led him into a set trap, or his coming upon the balance of the crowd might be looked on as an accident. Paul, remembering how the other had called out, under the impression that the one chasing after him might be his chief, had his own opinion.

But this was no time for thinking it over. He could hear sounds as though several fellows were pushing forward, spreading out as if to try and surround him. Plainly then, he had better be moving, unless he cared to let the Slavin crowd get hold of him.

Paul sprang away. He knew about how the ground lay. Catch as bright a chap as this young scout rushing wildly through the open woods without getting some idea as to the direction in which he was heading. He turned back over the course he had so lately covered.

"He's gone, Ted!" whooped a voice; but it was not that of Monkey Eggleston; for that worthy was hardly in possession of enough breath to more than whisper.

"After him then, every feller! We oughter get him after such a bully chance. Go it for all you're worth, d'ye hear, Scissors, Bud, and Pete!"

But as for himself, Ted did not do much running. What was the use, when he had followers able and willing to obey the crook of his little finger?

Besides, Ted knew what it meant to bang up against a tree in the dark, and knock the skin off one's nose. As long as the sound of pursuit could be plainly heard he continued to bellow out his orders, as though hoping to spur his followers on to success.

Paul had little fear. Once again his keen sight was apt to play him a good turn; for he could avoid contact with obstacles that caught the others napping. He even laughed more than once when he heard a crash, and accompanying groans, from some point in his rear.

"Good boy!" Paul said to himself, when the voice of Scissors was heard, lamenting the fact that a young chestnut seemed to have a harder surface than his forehead boasted; "just keep on some more, and you'll be the worst banged-up bunch Stanhope ever knew," and he could not keep from chuckling again as in his imagination he saw the sorry picture of the three pursuers when they returned to hand in their report, with a list of their bruises.

Evidently the hot pursuit must have come to an end with that last collision on the part of Scissors. Paul, listening, could hear voices, as though the boys were condoling with one another; but there was no longer the sound of footsteps.

After that there was no need of haste, and having figured out just where he was, Paul presently found the road. Of course all he had to do now was to walk along this, and in another minute he caught sight of a bright light ahead.

He knew the boys must have started the several fires that had been laid for an emergency. They were doubtless more or less worried about his continued absence; but did not know which way to start the search.

So Paul, to relieve their anxiety, sent out a call that would reach their ears and tell them that he was coming. And presently he walked up to the fire, where he was immediately surrounded by the excited scouts, all clamoring to know what he had discovered.

"First tell me what Monkey Eggleston threw into the fire, that made such a flash," Paul insisted, turning to Wallace.

The other held something up. It seemed to be a tin box, with a string attached.

"What's all this?" asked Paul, and then, as he took it in his hands, he gave a cry of astonishment, adding: "why, I declare, if it doesn't look a little like one of those bombs you read about. And this is supposed to be the fuse, isn't it? Well, those fellows are getting along pretty swiftly when they try to blow up our supplies."

Of course the "bomb" was not such a dreadful affair. True enough, the tin box contained quite a quantity of powder, but it was a question as to whether the explosion would have done very much damage, even had it occurred.

No doubt it might have scattered things somewhat, and possibly a fire would have resulted, unless prompt measures were taken to stamp the sparks underfoot. What astonished the young scout leader, however, was the strange method of introducing the fake bomb among the supplies, and leading the end of the slow match to the smouldering fire.

"What won't they try next?" said Jack, looking serious, as he took the contrivance once more in his hands.

"Goodness knows," remarked Wallace; "but tell us about your adventure, Paul. We heard an awful shouting in the woods over yonder, and some of the boys wanted to start out hunting for you, but the racket stopped just then. Besides, Jack said that he believed you were getting the best of it."

"Do you know why I said that?" interrupted Jack; "well, you see, I knew it was those fellows doing the hollering, and they sounded as if they were mad; so I made up my mind they wouldn't yelp *that* way if they had their hands on Paul."

"Which was clever reasoning, Jack," declared his chum, instantly. "You had your wits about you that time. I'm glad the whole camp didn't take to rushing through the woods, chasing a jack-o'-lantern. What a jolly time we'd have had rounding up the bunch again. Now, sit down, and I'll tell you just what happened."

It was laughable to see how the eyes of some of the scouts seemed to almost stick out of their heads when they listened to how Paul first discovered the moving object up in the big oak. They turned their heads, and looked up eagerly, as though half expecting to see another monkey-like form hanging from a limb.

So the story was soon told. Many were the exclamations of wonder after the end had been reached. A multitude of questions poured in on Paul; but he shook his head, saying:

"Keep those for to-morrow, fellows. What we want now is to repair our fences, and get some sleep. But you can see how important it is that every scout placed on guard keep his eyes and ears open, ready to give warning in case the enemy try their tricks on us."

He did not reproach the two boys who had been on duty at the time he and Wallace held forth, though strongly suspecting that they must have been asleep. But what he said caused more than one cheek to flush; and doubtless a number of lads inwardly resolved that from henceforth they would never, never allow themselves to slacken their vigilance when on post.

Nothing more was heard from the Slavin crowd on that night. Paul could easily guess why; for in imagination he saw the faces of Monkey Eggleston, Scissors, Bud and possibly several others, decorated with strips of court plaster, intended to hide the results of their tree-hugging adventures.

He only hoped that the lesson would be taken to heart, and cause those trouble-makers to avoid the camps of the scouts in the future; but knowing the nature of both Ted and Ward, he did not have much expectation that way.

Bobolink had them all up at dawn with the reveille call upon his beloved bugle. This never left his side, and some of the boys jokingly declared that he cuddled it in his arms while he slept, for fear lest some prank-loving scout hide it away, just to tease him.

The cooks got busy, and presently there was a delicious odor of coffee around that region, together with that of frying bacon.

William was master of ceremonies when it came time to start operations looking to a supply of flapjacks. He had willing imitators in the cooks of the other two patrols; and while they may not have met with the same glorious success that attended his own efforts, the results were so pleasing to the still hungry scouts that every scrap of batter prepared was used up. Even then there were lamentations because of a shortage in the supply of pancakes.

There was no hurry to get off. Paul was too wise a commander to spoil the pleasure of his comrades by unseemly haste, with so much time before them.

About nine o'clock the command started forth, with Bluff's drum beating time, and the inspiring notes of the bugle lending vigor to their eager feet. By noon some of those who had seemed most chipper at the beginning of the day's tramp were limping more or less, though still full of grit, and a determination not to lag behind.

The country was getting very wild now. Occasionally they began to have glimpses of the upper Bushkill, when the forest opened more or less. Later on the road was likely to skirt the river, they understood, when conditions would be prime for possibly a swim, or some fishing, which latter, they imagined must be good so far away from town.

They were still taking it easy after eating a lunch that possibly cleaned up every scrap of the goodies prepared by fond mothers and sisters; when Paul, who was sitting talking to Jack, noticed a vehicle coming swiftly along the road.

Whoever occupied the rig seemed to be in somewhat of a hurry, for he was every now and then whipping the horse, which showed signs of fatigue, as though it had come quite some ways.

As the man drove past he raised his head to look with a frown in the direction of the scout encampment. Paul did not like his appearance at all. Indeed, he was of the opinion that the man might even have stolen the rig somewhere; for he acted as though anxious to get away.

But his bewilderment increased when he saw Joe Clausin suddenly jump to his feet and stare after the departing stranger, his face turning very white.

"Oh! it's him, it's him!" Paul plainly heard him exclaim.

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE FOOT OF RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN

"Who?" demanded William, as he caught the low-spoken words of Joe Clausin.

"Yes, tell us about him, Joe," went on another of the scouts. "I never saw the man before, and I shouldn't like to meet him on a dark night either. Ugh!"

But Joe turned suddenly red, and shook his head, trying to pass the thing off with a laugh.

"Thought I knew the duck, fellers, but I reckon I must have been mistaken, 'cause you see, the man I took him for is away off at the other side of the world right now," he said. But Paul's keen eyes saw that Joe did not believe any such thing.

"Say, boys, Joe's taken to seeing double," jeered William; "the coffee must have gone to his head. We'll have to remember next time, and make him a cup of grandmother tea."

Paul had something to think over. In connection with the strange robbery of the feed-man's place, and the queer actions of Mr. Clausin then and since, it was little wonder that the young scout leader connected this new event with the other.

He tried to figure it out, but all seemed a blank. No doubt, if he could at some time coax Joe to confess who it was he believed this stranger to be, who was in the vehicle, and who looked back so often as he whipped his tired horse, the puzzle might not appear quite so dense.

But Joe was apparently in no mood just then for any confession. He seemed to have set his teeth firmly together, as though determined that not one of his comrades must learn the slightest thing about his troubles.

Paul tried to picture the face of the man as he had caught it in that one rapid glimpse. Had he ever known him? There *did* seem to be some little familiar look about his expression; but try as he would he could not seem to place the other just then.

But Joe knew; Joe was not in a maze of doubt; and the knowledge did not seem to have given the Clausin boy any great pleasure either; which made the enigma all the more like a tangle to Paul.

Again the Banner Boy Scouts set forth. After the rest, and a little attention paid to their aching feet the cripples were able to keep up with the rest for an hour or so. By degrees they would perhaps become hardened to this sort of work. When a boy has never done much steady walking it comes tough for a time. He may be used to playing all day, but that means a change of action. It is the steady grind, hour after hour, that tells on his lower extremities, until they get hardened to the test.

At three they came upon the river, and Paul understood that it would be more or less of a companion to their march from that time on.

Every fellow greeted it with delight. It seemed like an old friend, because they had been accustomed to skating on its frozen surface, and bathing in its pellucid depths, year after year.

"Don't it look good to meet with a familiar friend, though?" cried Bobolink taking off his hat, and making a most respectful bow in the direction of the gurgling water.

"Listen, would you?" scoffed William, always ready to get in a sly dig at his comrade; "to hear him talk you'd think we'd been away from home a solid month; when it was only yesterday we broke the apron strings, and sauntered forth, bent on adventure. What will he do when a whole long week has crawled along. Oh! me, oh! my! I see his finish, poor old Bobolink!"

But despite his words, even William cast many a fond side look at the noisy stream that was foaming among the rocks; for was it not heading toward Stanhope, where the softest of beds lay unused, and all manner of good things to eat were doubtless going to waste during the absence of twenty hungry boys?

Wilder still grew the country. Even Paul had had no idea it could be so rough within twenty miles of home. But as a rule the boys of Stanhope had confined their tramps and wheeling trips to the other three sides of the town; since the roads were much better, and the country level; so that no one knew anything about this region, save through hearsay.

"Oh! look, there it is!" ejaculated A. Cypher, who happened to be in the lead just as they came out of a woody tract, and turned a bend in the rough road.

During the last hour Paul had abandoned all idea of holding the scouts in any sort of regular formation, so that it had become, what William called, a "free-for-all," with khaki-clad lads stretched out along fifty yards of space, usually in small squads, and a rear guard to round up stragglers.

Of course these words from Nuthin caused a great craning of necks. Those who at the time chanced to be in the rear hastened their steps, eager to discover what it was attracted so much attention on the part of their chums.

"Why, it's the mountain!" said Horace Poole, with a trace of wonder in his voice.

"Sure it is, old Rattlesnake, at home," declared William, promptly.

"Wow! don't it look awful big, fellows?" remarked the awed Tom Betts.

"And d-d-dark as a c-c-cellar!" remarked Bluff, solemnly.

Paul looked with considerable interest at the great pile of rock and brush that loomed up so close at hand.

Many a time during the past two years he had planned to make a run up here, with the idea of seeing for himself if all the strange stories he had heard about grim old Rattlesnake Mountain could be true. They had always been broken up, either through his intended companion backing down, or else some family flitting that took one of the boys away from Stanhope during the holidays.

But now the long anticipated day had come at last. He was looking up at the big mountain, only a short distance away; and while the scouts could hardly expect to climb its rocky side that day, possibly camp might be made at the base.

Even the cripples seemed to mend under the promise of reaching the foot of the mountain that afternoon. They walked briskly for half an hour at least, and then fell back into the same old limp, though proving game for the finish.

"No signs of wheels around here, are there, Paul?" asked Jack, as he sought the side of his chum at the head of the straggling procession.

"Now that's queer, but d'ye know I was just thinking about that same thing," the scout leader remarked. "To tell you the truth I was examining the ground as I went along. Perhaps you noticed me, and that's why you spoke?"

"Yes, that gave me an idea," admitted Jack, readily enough. "I wondered whether those fellows could have gone past us last night while we were in camp, and are even now perched somewhere on the mountain, watching us crawl along down here."

"Well, that's just what they've done. See here, you can notice the marks of the bicycle tires in the road. Little travel away up here, and along the side where it's smoothest they've gone single file, following the motorcycle of Ward, I guess."

"Why didn't we see that before, then?" demanded Jack, frowning as he eyed the tell-tale marks.

"I have looked a number of times," Paul went on; "but couldn't see anything. So you can understand it gave me something of a shock just now to discover the tracks."

"Have you reasoned it out?" asked his chum; knowing full well that Paul would never allow such a problem to remain unsolved long.

"There's only one explanation Jack, that I can see. Perhaps you remember noticing a little side road that joined with this one about a quarter of a mile back?"

"Of course, I remember it. Then you think——"

"They must have come out of that road ahead of us," Paul went on. "That's the way they got in their licks. Somebody knew about how it turned around,

and joined on to the main stem again. What do you say, Jack?"

"Why, of course. And now I remember hearing Scissors boast that he had the only map ever made of the Rattlesnake Mountain country—a logger charted it one winter, hoping to get his governor interested in some timber cutting scheme he had in mind, which fell through though."

"That settles it. They're on the ground first; but what do we care about that, if they only leave us alone?" Paul remarked, seriously.

"There's a call for you, Paul, from some of the fellows in the rear," observed Jack, just then. "I think they want to snap off a view of old Rattlesnake, with the troop stretched out along the road here. The sun is dropping lower all the while, and if we're going to get a picture we'll all want to keep, it ought to be right now."

"A good idea, and I'll do everything I can to help out," laughed the leader.

The command was ordered to fall in, so as to present an orderly appearance in the picture that was to be taken from the rear.

"We don't want to look like a bunch of hoboes trailing along," declared Jud.

"And every fellow quit limping, or you'll just spoil the whole business," pleaded the one who was delegated to use the camera, he being the best expert the troop boasted in this line, and winner in the competition of the preceding Autumn.

The picture taken, they once more broke ranks, and pushed forward.

At five o'clock they found themselves at what seemed to be the base of the high and forbidding mountain over which the road wound.

"Oh! please say Alabama, here we rest!" called one of the limping pilgrims.

Paul had been closely observing the ground, and as if in reply he made a gesture that Bobolink readily understood. Immediately the bugle sounded, and a cheer broke forth, since every member of the troop felt more or less jaded with the long day's walk, and ready to call it off.

Immediately a scene of bustle ensued. The wagon was emptied of its load, and tents confiscated by the various patrols. Good-natured disputes and chaffing accompanied each tent raising; but the boys had by this time become more or less accustomed to the various duties connected with making camp, as well as breaking up, and so in what seemed a very short time all the canvas was in place.

After that fireplaces were scooped out, just as on the previous afternoon; only now they called it an old story. Every boy was learning things he had never known by actual experience before. Reading of such woodcraft in books is very good, but it does not compare with the personal trial. Once these things are actually *done* by an observant lad, and he will never in all his life forget the lesson.

Long before dusk began to set in, the supper was under way; and hungry fellows walked to and fro trying to stand the intense agony of waiting for the summons.

CHAPTER XVII

JOE DECLINES TO TELL

"Joe, I'd like to have you step over here a minute!"

Supper had been eaten amid the best of feeling. The assembled scouts forgot for the time being all their troubles. Lame feet failed to ache, and tired knees had all the buoyancy of youth again.

The mysterious mountain towered above them, seeming to invite a further and closer acquaintance. Beside the camp ran the brawling stream, and the noise of its rushing water would either lull the tired lads to sleep, or else keep them from doing so. Trees overhung the numerous tents; and on the whole the camp was a pretty sight, as many a lad declared in his log of the trip.

When Joe heard Paul say the few words that begin this chapter he gave a sudden start, and looked up quickly. But the patrol leader and acting scoutmaster had already turned away, and was walking beyond the confines of the camp.

After hesitating a moment Joe scrambled to his feet, and followed his chief. He acted as though he more than half suspected just what it was Paul wanted to say to him; for several times Joe gritted his teeth, and shook his head in a way he had; for he was known to be very stubborn sometimes.

He found Paul on the bank of the Bushkill. He had seated himself on a convenient rock, and was waiting. The moon drifted in through openings among the trees, and falling on the water made it look like silver; with frosting here and there, where the foam splashed up around the rocks lying in the bed of the stream.

"What d'ye want, Paul?" asked Joe, as he came up.

The noise of the moving water was such that he had to elevate his voice more than a little in order to be heard distinctly.

"Sit down here, Joe, please," remarked Paul, pleasantly. "I wanted to have a little talk with you on the side, where none of the boys could hear, that's all."

"About what?" asked the other, weakly.

"Well, perhaps it's none of my business; but since I chanced to be one of those with you the night we found your father, and heard about his losing that little tin box with those valuable papers, I thought perhaps you might be willing to take me into your confidence, Joe. I want to help you all I can. You believe that, don't you?"

Joe moved uneasily. He had accepted the invitation to sit down, but his manner was not at all confidential.

"Why, of course I do, Paul," Joe presently observed, slowly, "I know you're always ready to help any fellow who gets in trouble. There ain't a better friend in the whole troop than you are to everybody. But what's got you now? Have I been a doin' anything I hadn't ought to?"

"You know it isn't that, Joe. I wanted to speak to you about that tin box your father said was taken from him that night."

"Oh, was that it?" remarked Joe, faintly, and catching his breath.

"You believe that I'd like to help get it back for him, don't you?" demanded the young patrol leader.

"I remember hearing you say you'd be glad to have a hand in recoverin' it; and I guess you meant it every time, Paul," came the reply.

"Well," Paul continued, "perhaps the chance may come to me up here on Rattlesnake Mountain, Joe. It would be queer now, wouldn't it, if, in coming up to this country we just happened to land on the chap who was in your father's store that night, and put out the lamp after he had picked up that little old tin box, eh?"

Joe seemed to have some difficulty in answering. He appeared to be swallowing a lump in his throat as though it threatened to choke him.

"Why, yes," he presently managed to mutter, "that would be funny now, for a fact. My dad'd like mighty well to get that stuff back, Paul, sure he would."

"Perhaps then you wouldn't mind telling me who that man was, Joe," remarked Paul, quietly.

"What man?" queried Joe, though his voice betrayed the fact that he knew only too well what his friend was driving at.

"I chanced to see you when that party drove past our noon camp," said Paul, softly. "You recognized him, Joe, I am sure you did; and you showed every sign of being both startled and alarmed."

"Huh! well," Joe stammered, "you see it did give me a sorter start, because he looked like somebody I knew was at the other side of the world right then. I reckon you'd feel upset like, Paul, if you thought you saw a ghost."

"Perhaps I would," replied the patrol leader, quickly; "but you immediately knew that it wasn't a ghost. Still, it has been bothering you all the afternoon, Joe."

"Say, what makes you think that?"

"I've watched you when you didn't think anybody was looking," Paul went on. "I've seen you shake your head and talk to yourself as if you might be trying to believe something your common sense told you couldn't be so. How about it, Joe?"

"Oh! I'm willing to admit I've been mixed up about that thing, and bad too," confessed Joe, as if brought to bay; "but I ain't goin' to say anything about it, not just yet anyhow. I must see dad first, and get his opinion."

"Well, I don't want to force you, Joe, against your will. If you think it best to keep your little secret, do it; but perhaps later on you may be changing your mind. If we just happened to meet up with that gentleman while we knocked around old Rattlesnake Mountain, perhaps you'd be glad to get back that tin box again."

"Sure I would, Paul. Please don't think I'm not wantin' to trust you, because I hold back. I want to think it all over by myself to-night. Perhaps in the

mornin' I might tell you about it."

"Then I won't say anything more now, Joe. Only believe that I'm ready to do everything I can to help you. That man came all the way up here."

"How d'ye know that?"

"Why, even a tenderfoot could tell that much," observed the patrol leader, calmly; "his horse left marks all the way. If you went out on the road now, and lit a match, you'd see the print of shod hoofs, and the lines made by the wheels. So you see, Joe, it wouldn't be so strange if we *did* happen to run across him some fine day."

"Oh! I wonder what I ought to do? What would dad say if he knew?" and muttering half to himself in this way, Joe wandered back to his seat beside the big fire that was making all outdoors look bright with color and warmth.

Paul was more mystified than ever. Who could that man be, and why should poor Joe feel so badly over having set eyes on him? If he were an ordinary person, and suspicion pointed his way, one would think that the son of the feed-man would welcome his detention, which might result in the finding of the stolen property.

But on the contrary Joe seemed to be dreadfully alarmed over something.

"Oh! well," Paul finally said to himself as he left the rock and turned to go back to the camp; "it may be a family secret of some sort, and I have no business to be poking into it. I'll just keep my hands off, and wait for Joe to speak, if he cares to. Besides, I've got plenty of other things to keep me hustling."

He happened to glance up at the frowning mountain while walking away from the river bank. Suddenly there flashed a little light away up yonder. Once, twice it seemed to flash up, and then was gone.

"Now, I wonder what that could be?" said a voice close beside him.

"Why, hello, Wallace, is that you?" laughed Paul; "and I guess you must have made the same discovery I did?"

"Meaning that queer little light up there, eh, Paul?" remarked the other, who had been walking about uneasily, and just chanced to face upward at the time the double flash came.

"Yes. I wonder what it was," Paul went on, thoughtfully. "I happen to know that Ted and his bunch are ahead of us somewhere, and that might have been a signal to fellows who were left down here to do something to upset our camp."

"Now, do you know, Paul," Wallace went on; "I hadn't thought of that. I'll tell you what it looked like to me—some man lighting his pipe. You saw the light go up and down; that was when he puffed. But it was too far away to see any face."

Paul, remembering the man who had gone up the side of the mountain with that rig, wondered very much whether Wallace could be right, and if the unknown was even then looking down upon them from that height.

This made him turn his thoughts back to the noon camp, and try to remember whether the man in the buggy had shown that he recognized Joe at the time the boy so suddenly sprang to his feet with a cry.

At any rate the unknown had whipped up his horse, and seemed in a great hurry to depart from the spot.

That night the Banner Boy Scouts were just as merry as before. A banjo had been brought along, and to the plunkety-plunk of its tuneful music they sang every popular song known among Stanhope's rising generation.

"I just don't exactly like the looks of the sky," remarked Wallace, as the time for sounding taps drew near.

He had found Paul examining the ropes of the various tents as though curious to see how well they had been secured.

"That's why I'm overhauling these tent pins and ropes," laughed the other, as he rose up. "The clouds have rolled up, and it feels as if we might have a bit of a Summer storm. Perhaps it would be a good thing for the boys to have an experience like that, if only our supplies can be kept dry."

When they finally retired, the sky seemed to have cleared again. Paul set his guards and took his place in his tent, for his turn would not come until later.

He was tired and soon fell into a heavy sleep. Jack was on duty, and could be depended on to keep a good watch.

Paul was aroused from slumber by loud cries. Sitting hurriedly up he found the tent wabbling to and fro in a violent manner, while the air seemed full of the most alarming sounds. He crawled out without wasting a minute, and shouted aloud to make the balance of the boys get busy before everything was swept away by the violence of the gale.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CLOSE CALL

"Hold 'em! hold 'em!" whooped William, as he found himself mixed up in the canvas of the tent which had fallen in a heap; for evidently he was of the opinion that all this racket must be caused by those vindictive workers of evil, Ted Slavin and his crowd.

"Look to your tent pins, fellows!" shouted Paul, lustily, as he hurried around to lend what assistance lay in his power.

He had little fear about his own tent, understanding just how it had been put up. But all of the scouts were not so well versed in the little tricks known to those who spend much time under canvas; and there was a chance that others would share the sad fate that had already befallen poor William.

Then there was a great scurrying to and fro. As the storm broke the boys shuddered and held on to the ropes for dear life, regardless of the fact that they were clad only in pajamas, which were soon rain soaked.

"Never mind that little thing, fellows," sang out the care-free Bobolink; "because you know we can get plenty of dry clothes after she's over; but if you let the tents blow away, where, oh! where do we come in? Hold hard, everybody; here comes another bluff at us. Wow! get a grip on my legs, will you? I'm agoin' to fly, that's what!"

But some of his mates held on doggedly, and Bobolink consented to remain on earth a while longer. As long as it lasted it was one of the greatest short storms most of the scouts could remember ever experiencing. But then, up to now, they had been pretty much in the habit of viewing such convulsions of nature from the shelter of a snug harbor in the shape of a home window; and things looked vastly different when the same Summer gale was met, with tents threatening to carry away, and the trees groaning in the furious wind.

"She's over!" cried Jack, at last, when the storm seemed to come to a halt almost as suddenly as it had broken.

No one was sorry. Repairs were quickly undertaken, after the boys had donned some dry clothes; for the air was chilly after the rain, and being soaked to the skin they found themselves shivering.

William had managed to crawl out from under his tent, with the help of others. He had several bumps to prove what a close call it had been. The others could not lose a chance to poke fun at him; for it was not often the opportunity came when the fun-maker of the troop could be caught napping.

"Next time, get a move on you, old slow poke!" one advised, when William ventured to complain that it was mean in their deserting him to his fate.

"Yes, Mr. Tortoise, you'll have to learn how to crawl better than that, if you expect to stay with this fast crowd," declared Tom Betts.

"But every time I started to get out," William declared, ruefully, "somebody would stick his foot in my face, and climb all over me. Then the blessed thing dropped flat, and left me swimming all alone. Of course I thought it was some more of Ted's fine sport, and I hoped you chaps were flagging 'em. After that the water came in on me. Ugh!"

"What did you think then, old molasses in Winter?" asked Bobolink; shaking the last of the water out of his precious bugle, and carefully wiping its brass mouthpiece with his handkerchief.

"Why," said William, grinning, "at first I thought the river had overflowed its banks, and was going to carry me all the way down to Stanhope. Then I heard the wind and the thunder, when it struck me there was something of a storm. So I just laid still; for I knew you fellows wouldn't want me bothering around while you worked like fun to hold the rest of the tents from going by the board."

"Listen to him, would you, Paul?" exclaimed one of the others. "He knew all along we were hard pushed to hold out, and yet he just snuggled there, and wouldn't give a helping hand. What kind of a scout are you, anyway, William?"

"Well," returned the accused one, in his drawling way, "I didn't want to cut a hole in the canvas, you see; and I couldn't get out any other way. Come to think of it, I don't generally carry my knife around in my pajamas, like some fellows do bugles, and such trash."

"Rats!" flashed back Bobolink, disdainfully, "you're just jealous of my noble calling, that's all."

"He's always calling, ain't he, fellows?" asked William. "I expect to see him sit up in his sleep some night, and scare us half out of our lives by tooting away to beat the band. I'm going to get up a petition that the old horn be muzzled every night before we go to our little beds on the hemlock browse."

A fire was, after some little trouble, started. Paul had been wise enough to keep some fine kindling in his tent for just such an emergency. Even had it been otherwise he would have known just how to get at the heart of a dead tree, which would yield the necessary dry wood to make a beginning. Such hunter's tricks were well known to Paul, likewise to Wallace; and before this tour came to an end most of the others would have picked up scores of such bits of knowledge, likely to be of use to them whenever they chanced to be in the great woods.

The sky was clear again long before the last boy had concluded that it was safe to crawl into his tent once more, and try to sleep.

And whoever happened to be on guard, kept the fire going throughout the remainder of that eventful night.

No further adventure broke upon their heads, and in good time dawn appeared in the eastern sky. There was much merriment as the boys went for a morning dip in the waters of the Bushkill. Many jokes were made about the new order of things in camp that necessitated a shower-bath at midnight.

"Be careful, fellows," Paul admonished, as he saw that most of the scouts were bent on trying the water of the rapid little stream. "There's a bad current here, and if it gets hold of you grab a rock and yell. To be dashed down there wouldn't be the nicest thing going."

Jack agreed to keep an eye on the clump, for Paul had duties in camp just then. He expected to take a dip himself a little later on.

Hardly had ten minutes passed before he heard a loud series of shouts.

"Hold hard, Tom! Make a chain there, you fellows, and get him before he lets go! Hurry up, can't you?"

It was Jack Stormways shouting these words. Paul knew instantly that some one must have been caught by the current, and was in danger of being dragged along down the stream to where it dashed wildly against the rocks.

The young patrol leader lost not an instant. Snatching up a rope that happened to lie handy, he rushed for the bank of the river.

Instinct caused him to head for a point below where Jack was standing, trying to reach some object with a long pole he handled awkwardly. Even in that thrilling moment Paul could think, and was able to understand that the ever flowing current must sweep any helpless swimmer past Jack's position in quick order.

As he ran Paul was trying to fashion a loop in the end of the rope. Had he not been perfectly calm he could never have succeeded in doing this difficult feat; but when he reached the bank he had managed to accomplish it.

What he saw was a tumble of water, which was almost covered with foam. Somewhere in this poor Tom Betts must be floating, churned back and forth by the suction of the current that was striving to escape from the whirl.

Jack had evidently lost sight of the drowning lad completely, for he was even then running toward Paul, his face as white as chalk.

There! Paul had just a fleeting glimpse of the boy in the foamy water. He had thrust one arm up rather feebly, as though almost gone. Perhaps his head had come in contact with a rock while he was swimming, and this had dazed him; for ordinarily Tom Betts was a clever swimmer.

Paul waited for no more. He was down the bank like a flash, and wading into the water, regardless of clothes. What did it matter about his getting wet, when a precious human life was in peril.

Again he caught a glimpse of the boy's arm amid all that spud and foam. But the first attempt to throw the loop of his rope over it resulted in failure.

Paul instantly changed his tactics. Reversing the coil, he cast the loop over a friendly stump that chanced to be at hand; then, gripping the rope in his hand, he boldly cast himself into the midst of that whirl of froth and spinning water.

Fortune was kind, for almost immediately he came in contact with the unconscious lad, and was able to throw an arm about him. The fierce stream tried in vain to drag him down into other basins below; but Paul had his hand twisted in the coils of that rope, and would not let go.

"Hold on, Paul; we'll pull you in!" shouted Jack on the bank, as he clutched the lifeline and began to exert his full strength.

"Hurrah! Paul's got him! It's all right!" whooped others, as they lent a hand.

Of course Paul was quickly dragged into shallow water, where willing hands relieved him of his burden. Tom looked dreadful, being deathly white, and very limp. But Paul could not believe the boy had been under the water long enough to be drowned.

Immediately he had the others bring the senseless boy up to the camp, where he was placed on his chest. Kneeling down, with one leg on either side, Paul placed his palms on Tom's back just where the small ribs could be felt. Then by leaning forward, and pressing downward, he forced the air and water from the lungs of the patient; relaxing the movement allowed air to creep in a little, when the operation was repeated time and time again.

Sometimes it may take an hour to make this artificial respiration successful; so that it is not wise to desist until every hope is gone. Many a person has been saved after it seemed next to a miracle that life might be restored.

With Tom it was not a difficult problem. He had been stunned by the blow received in his contact with the rock, and hence little water had entered his lungs.

In five minutes he was showing signs of coming to; his arms, extended above his head while this process of pumping air into him was being

conducted, twitched and moved; then he groaned, and finally made a move as if he wanted to get up.

Ten minutes after being taken from the water he was sitting up, and asking what all the fuss was about.

Tom afterwards confessed to a dim recollection of feeling something hitting him a dull blow in the head; after that he knew nothing more until he opened his eyes to see his mates clustered around, and hear them give lusty cheers.

But he heard how Paul had acted so wisely, and while Tom was a fellow not much given to words, at the first opportunity he thanked his friend with tears in his eyes; for he was thinking of a fond mother at home, and what a blow she must have received had he been drowned.

The boys cared little about indulging themselves in any more bathing in that treacherous portion of the fast-running Bushkill. Down around Stanhope they understood its various moods; but up in this Rattlesnake Mountain district it was quite a different thing.

Breakfast appealed more to them, and they went at it with a will. Tom was exempt from any menial labor on that morning. Warmly dressed, and placed close to the roaring fire, he watched his chums work, and thought what a splendid thing it was he had not been alone at the time the accident happened.

And Paul was more than glad it turned out so well. Had a tragedy come to pass, their joyous outing must have met with a sudden halt, and the return journey to Stanhope would have been a sad one indeed.

"What's the programme for to-day?" asked Jack, as they all sat around, eating the fine breakfast the patrol cooks had served.

"Another hike, and this time up the mountain," returned Paul. "It will be our last for a while, at least, for when we get settled in another camp I hope to stay there until our scoutmaster arrives."

"And when do you look for Mr. Gordon, Paul?" queried Wallace, who seemed to have lost his appetite after seeing how near a companion had

come to a terrible death.

"Any hour after this. He said he would use my wheel in coming up here, so as to make better time. I'll be glad when he comes," and Paul gave a sigh as he glanced around at the score of boyish faces turned toward him; to let his gaze rest finally on that of genial Tom Betts, whom he had known pretty much all his life.

Nor indeed could Paul be blamed for wishing to pass the responsibility on to broader shoulders, more capable of bearing it. He was only a boy, and it seemed to him that since he had been placed in charge of this expedition, with all its attendant cares and trials, his spirit had been almost crushed.

But the camp was broken, and with much laughter the scouts began to climb the side of mysterious old Rattlesnake Mountain, of course Paul managed to forget most of his troubles, and his merriment rang out as loud as that of any other.

So, boosting and pulling at old Dobbin, they made the ascent by slow degrees, and by noon had reached a point that afforded them a grand view of the country away off toward the south, the east and the west; but it was toward the first named region that many a wishful look was given, for did not Stanhope lie yonder—and home?

CHAPTER XIX

INDIAN PICTURE WRITING

"We'll never get that old horse any higher up than this, Paul," said Jud Elderkin.

The scouts were sitting there with that fine panorama spread out before them, and eating a sort of pick-up lunch. At breakfast time enough food had been prepared to carry them along for another meal. After that Paul had promised that they would very likely be in a permanent camp, and might expect to have decent fare right along.

"Fact of the matter is, Jud," replied the leader of the expedition, "we don't need to, fortunately."

"What's that, Paul; not going to camp right here, I hope?" questioned the scout leader of the second patrol.

Jud shot a swift look across the country down below, and Paul smiled when he saw the direction of the glance.

"I understand what you mean," he remarked, immediately. "You imagine that if we stayed here any length of time some of the tenderfeet would be running away."

"Oh! well," Jud went on to say, "what would be the use of tantalizing the poor chaps? Hear 'em disputing right now whether that shining thing they see far away in the distance is the brass hand on the top of the church steeple in Stanhope, or the wind vane on the court house cupola? Anyhow, it stands for Stanhope; and if they were where they could stare out yonder by the hour some of 'em would skip before another night, I'm afraid."

"And you're just right, old fellow," Paul remarked. "I'm glad you noticed that sign, for we'd hate to have any desertions, now that we've made such a great start. But your other guess was away off. I haven't the slightest idea of holding over here."

"Then the road——" began Jud.

"Makes a bend just beyond," Paul broke in with, "and goes no further up that way. This is the last peep any of us are likely to have of far-away Stanhope till we come out again on the way home."

"That's all right, then. Now that you mention it, I can see how the road does take a turn a little way along. What do you suppose we're apt to strike there, Paul? I'm more than anxious to get wise."

But the acting scoutmaster only shrugged his shoulders.

"You really don't know, then?" continued Jud.

"Only what I've heard. Some say there's a fine lake back here a few miles. And that's what I'm hoping to strike, for a spot to camp," returned Paul.

"Well, I've heard that same thing," said Jud, slowly, "but never more than half believed it. Just as like as not we'll find it only a duck pond. But a camp always seems more like the real thing if it's only near water."

"I always thought so," Paul admitted, "and I've been in a few dandy camps in my time. My people have gone up in Maine every Summer for a long while, you know. But this year they are going to stay home for a change. Father hates to turn over his practice to any one else; and to tell the truth I said I wanted to be right here."

"Bully for you, Paul. We all feel that we owe you a lot for the way you've stuck to us through thick and thin. We'd never have won that banner there if ____"

But Paul would not listen.

"Stow that sort of talk, Jud!" he exclaimed. "I've done my best, but it wasn't any more than lots of the other fellows could do. If we'd gotten hold of Mr. Gordon in time he'd have made a better troop than we were. He knows a heap along many lines."

"Yes," remarked Jud, with a nod, "by theory, but I just bet you if it came down to practice you could beat him out every time. But what was it I saw you doing at our last camp, just before we pulled up stakes?"

"I was leaving a letter for Mr. Gordon when he came along," replied Paul, with a mysterious smile.

"What sort of a letter now, I'd like to know? Seemed to me you were marking on a piece of birch bark, which you stuck on a stick close to where our fire had been. And Paul," with a grin, "I had the curiosity to take a sly look at the same as I passed by."

"Yes. What did you see?" asked the patrol leader, quietly.

"Why, it looked to me like you'd gone back some years, and started drawing funny animals, and such things," replied Jud.

"Just what they were, old fellow," said Paul, confidentially; "but when our scoutmaster takes one of these slips of bark up, he'll read what I've marked on it just as you would a letter. He and I have become deeply interested in the old method of Indian picture writing, you see. Signs stand for words with them. A whole story can be made in a dozen characters or groups."

"Oh! I remember something about that I read once," remarked Jud, with a look of deep interest; "and if you don't mind I wish you'd give me a few pointers about that sign business, some time. I'd like to know, the worst kind."

"Oh! no trouble about that. All you have to do is to use your head a little, and make your signs plain enough so that they can be understood. Now, I'm going to leave a letter for Mr. Gordon right here. Watch how I do it," and Paul picked up a good-sized bit of clear bark he had evidently prepared for the purpose.

"You see," he began, "I use a lead pencil because it's more convenient, that's all. If I didn't have it, I'd just take a black brand from the fire; or even scratch the characters on the smooth bark. And first of all to tell him that twenty-one white soldier boys camped here."

He rapidly drew just that number of rude figures, diminutive enough to be crowded around what was plainly a spread out luncheon. They had hats on their heads, and a flag was to be seen in the picture. A wagon and a horse occupied one corner.

"Now," Paul went on, "you see that I've indicated these fellows spent a brief time here. He will understand that it was noon from the round sun I've drawn *directly above the cluster*. To show that they are eating I have made a coffee pot in the hand of one, though that was hardly the truth, for we've had none this time. But I guess it's always allowable to stretch things *just a little* in these picture stories. They were white because they all wear hats. Do you get it, Jud?"

"Easy as falling off a log. Why, I could read that myself, if I was lost and happened to fall into this place," replied Jud, positively.

"Sure you could," laughed Paul. "That's the object of this picture writing; to make it so clear that anybody would know. We're not trying to puzzle people now. This isn't what you'd call a cryptogram; not much. It's the primer of writing. A kid could tell what it all stood for. And these Indians are just like kids, you see."

"Well, go on," pleaded the leader of the second patrol, "I'm dead stuck on this thing, for I can see what lots of fun we will have with it up in the woods. How are you going to tell Mr. Gordon that we hiked out of here, and headed due west from this point?"

"Oh!" answered Paul, readily enough, "I might use just the letter W; but you see that wouldn't do for an Indian, who doesn't know what it means. To him west means the setting sun, just as east is signified by its rising, and noon by an overhead disc. So suppose I draw a rude hand, with the finger pointing toward a sun that is half down behind a line? Wouldn't that be apt to tell him we went west from here?"

"Why, dead sure. He couldn't mistake that. The level line I take it is meant for the horizon?" Jud continued, deeply impressed by the simplicity of this method of communicating between separated friends.

"Yes. Well, now he knows which way we've gone. We don't know ourselves just how far we expect to hike this afternoon. It may be only a mile, and it may be two. But we want to tell him that we mean to go into camp, and that the setting sun will find us with our tents up, and a fire burning."

Paul, while speaking, started to once more make some marks on the balance of the smooth bark, which he had himself peeled from a nearby birch.

"There," he presently declared, holding the pad up, "you see how I've made the camp. The tents are set, supper cooking, and just twenty-one little marks tell that so many soldiers are around the fire, all but three who stand guard. And in beyond, the sun is going down, almost out of sight in fact. No trouble about such a simple story, eh, Jud?"

"It's as plain as a book, plainer than most I've ever read. No getting mixed up in such a story. But I'm wondering what that big circle close to the camp means?" and Jud pointed as he spoke.

"Oh! I'm glad you spoke. Mr. Gordon himself might well wonder what that was, for I left out the most important part. Now watch, and tell me if you can hit it," with which remark Paul made several tiny dashes with his pencil.

Jud gave an exclamation of delight.

"Boats—real Injun bark canoes, as sure as you live!" he observed.

"And boats don't run on dry land as a rule, do they, Jud?" Paul went on.

"Well, not so you could notice. That circle then, must be our lake, or pond, we ain't so sure which, yet. The story is now complete, Paul from start to finish. But sometimes it must be hard to tell things that happened."

"That's where the fun comes in," Paul continued; "lots of happenings make a fellow sit up and take notice, when he tries to picture them so plainly that the other can read it right off the reel. I had a tough nut to crack this morning."

"About that little adventure of Tom Betts in the river," interrupted Jud. "Tell me how you did it. A crooked little mark would show the river; but I'm blessed if I can see how you made out the drowning act, and the rescue."

"I'll tell you how I did it," Paul went on; "and when Mr. Gordon comes we'll find out if he understood my letter, or thought it meant something else. I'm only a beginner in this business, you know, and expect to improve, for I see where we can have lots of fun out of it."

"But the letter?" said Jud, impatiently.

"In the river I had several of the boy scouts bathing. All had their hands down but one, whose arms were up over his head. That told of his being in danger. Then on the bank I showed a ring around two, one on the ground. Just beyond these, two were moving off, arm in arm. That ought to tell him that the drowned boy recovered. And when the company formed to go on the road I was *very* particular to have the exact twenty-one in line. How's that?"

"Great," cried Jud, excitedly; "you've got me head over ears in this picture writing business, and I'm going to study it up. There's a book home that has a lot about it. Me to swallow the same when we get back. And while we're up here I'm going to get you and our scoutmaster to teach me what you know."

"All right," laughed Paul, getting up. "Now notice that I stick this where he will be sure to see it. And perhaps we'd better be on the hike once more, because we don't know what we've got ahead of us. Number Three, give the call to break camp!"

CHAPTER XX

CAMP SURPRISE

On the march the scouts had more than a few times amused themselves by practicing some of the many maneuvres they had learned. For instance, a detail was left with signal flags on a prominent knoll; and later on, when the main company had arrived at a certain point half a mile further along the road, a series of communications would be exchanged between the two detachments.

As a record of all such wigwagging was kept, it would be easy to learn just how proficient they had become in manipulating the various colored flags, or in making the many different arm gestures that conveyed the meaning of the intended message.

Among their supplies they also carried a complete telegraph equipment. After they were finally located in a definite camp it was intended to have one or more stations, and both send and receive messages from time to time.

Thus, in these and many more genuinely interesting as well as instructive ways, they expected to make their tour a most profitable one.

Some of the boys became quite sober as they saw the grand view of the plateau and valley blotted out after leaving the noon camp. They brightened up after a while, however, since there were dozens of things to draw their attention, and arouse their boyish interest.

Dobbin had all he could do to pull the wagon over the rough road, so full of stones, and so overgrown had it become. Still, Paul noticed as he went along, that those marks of the wheels, and the prints of a horse's hoofs showed, telling that the vehicle occupied by the stranger, whom Joe Clausin seemed to have recognized, must have kept on this way.

They were now surrounded by the very wildest kind of scenery. It looked as though a tremendous convulsion of Nature must have occurred at some remote age; for giant rocks were piled up in great heaps on every hand, many of them covered with creeping vines. Trees grew in crevices, and wherever they could lodge.

"Whew! ain't this the toughest place ever, though?" remarked William, as he gaped around him at the frowning heights, and the little precipices that the road skirted.

"It's just what they told us, though, even if we wouldn't believe what we heard," declared Wallace, who was deeply interested in the big ferns that cropped up, and dozens of other things most boys would never have noticed.

Several were kept busy snapping off photographs.

"Better go slow with that, fellows," warned Paul; "because we expect to be here ten days or so, and you'll find lots of chances to get action in your pictures, with this grand scenery for a background. And the one whose films run out will wish he'd been more careful. I'd advise that you don't take too many duplicates; because, you see, good pictures can be passed around to all, and the greater variety we have the better."

After that the camera brigade, taking warning, got together, and formed a set of rules that would prevent waste. It was a point worth noting.

When they had been moving in and out along this rough and winding road for some time, anxious glances began to be taken ahead.

"Where's that fine old lake, I wonder?" grumbled one.

"Perhaps there ain't anything doing," observed another lame one, as he limped heroically along in the midst of the trailing band, and tried to forget the sore feeling in his feet.

"Well," quoth William, with one of his famous grins, "it wouldn't be the first time we'd been stung; and I guess it won't be the last. But don't holler before you're hurt, fellows; because there's water ahead I reckon, if the signs don't lie."

"How d'ye know, old wiseacre?" demanded Bob Tice, of the second patrol; for at the time they were marching without the least semblance of order.

William struck one of his amusing attitudes, and slapped himself on the chest, as much as to say: "Look at me, and take pattern, because I'm the one who knows this game from Alpha to Omega, the beginning and the end!"

"Hark! and I'll give you a pointer, fellows. A true scout must always keep his eyes wide open. No sleepy fellow can ever make a howling success of this business. I leave it to Paul here, if that ain't the truth?" and William turned to the other, who was smiling as though he suspected what had happened to meet the eyes of the speaker.

"That," said Paul, "is one of our beliefs, sure enough. A scout must always be on the alert, or else he may miss many things that would give him valuable information. William, suppose you go on and spin your yarn in your own way. I saw what you did; but I'm glad I didn't cut in. Strike up, now, and then we'll move on again, for Dobbin is coming yonder."

"Yes," remarked the party addressed, "and if you notice the old duffer you can see that he's showing more animation than he's exhibited this hour back. It ain't that Curley's been using the whip either, for that don't hurt Dobbin any, his hide is so thick. He smells water in the air, fellows, that's what!"

"Was that what you noticed?" demanded Tom Betts, who seemed to have fully recovered from his accident of the morning.

"Not much. It's only what my dad would call corroborative evidence, or proof," remarked William; whose father, although a blacksmith, was considered one of the best read men in Stanhope, and able to argue with Judge Holt on legal matters.

"What did you see, then? Don't bait us so, William. Did you get a squint of the pond through the trees? Funny nobody else saw it then," grumbled Jud.

"Y-y-yes, for g-g-goodness sake t-t-tell us before we d-d-drop dead!" cried Bluff, who always stuttered worse when excited.

"I just happened to be looking up over the tops of that big clump of trees ahead when I saw a bird; and he told me there was water below," remarked

William, calmly.

"I didn't hear a single squawk," remarked Andy Flinn, warmly; "and even if I had, d'ye expect me to belave that ye understand the birrd language. Oh! come off. Be aisy with us, and roll your hoop, William!"

"Oh!" William blazed up, "you doubt my word, but that bird told me just as plain as words could there was water below. He was circling up, so as to get above the trees, and put for his nest. And, fellows, when I tell you it was a fish-hawk, with his dinner in his claws, you can understand what I guessed right then and there."

"Hurrah! for William! He's our keen-eyes! Nothing escapes his eagle vision. He's all to the good!" came the shouts, amid more or less laughter.

And after that there was no holding the eager scouts in. It seemed as though they could themselves scent the water, just as the wise old Dobbin had; for helter-skelter the entire troop started to make a wild dash ahead.

Even the cripples forgot to limp, and stifled their groans; for they surprised themselves by their ability to sprint with the rest.

The first to round the clump of rocks and scrub gave a shout that echoed from the adjacent mountain side; while, he waved his hat above his head to indicate his delight.

As the others skirted the obstruction they too gave way to enthusiasm, and the cheers that rolled forth must have startled the hawks, and wearers of fur in this remote region, since they could never before have heard a genuine boyish whoop.

There was a lake before them, as wild looking a body of clear water as any one could ever expect to find, even in the Adirondacks. Indeed, Paul, and several others, who had been around more or less, declared that they had never before looked on so desolate a picture.

Nowhere was there the slightest sign of human habitation. And upon the lonely sheet of water not a solitary craft of any description could be discovered. So far as they could see the Banner Boy Scouts owned the whole region!

"Alabama! here we rest!" chorused the whole troop, gleefully, as they started on a run for the near shore of the lake.

"Don't go far away, any fellow," warned Paul, knowing the weakness of boys when new and novel scenes beckon them on.

He had good reason to speak in this manner; for judging from the appearance of the country by which the lake was surrounded, any fellow who was unlucky enough to get lost, before he secured his bearings, might have a serious time of it.

Of course the boys had been taught various ways of telling the four points of the compass. Sun, moon and stars could be depended on when visible. On a cloudy day or night the bark of the trees would serve as a guide; since the green, mossy side was almost invariably toward the north. Besides, Paul knew how to make a compass out of his watch, though he generally carried a real magnetic needle in his pocket for emergencies.

He and Wallace, accompanied by Jack, set to work looking the ground over, with the idea of picking out the best place suitable for a camp.

"It must be not far from the lake, because we want this nice view," said Paul. "Then it ought to slope just a little, so as to drain, in case of a heavy rain storm. We don't want to be under any of those big trees either; and you can see why, if you notice what happened to one of them long ago."

"Yes, that's so," declared Jack; "for a bolt of lightning did knock that one down, sure as you're born. How's this place, Paul?"

A selection was presently made that answered the purpose. Paul was of the opinion that it would be open to the sweep of the western wind in case of a violent wind storm; but then they hoped nothing of the sort would visit them while up here in camp.

Once the word was given, and every boy got busy. Tents were pitched with rapidity, and having had one rude experience every fellow made sure that his pins were driven deep into the ground. In some places where this was not possible they made use of obliging rocks to hold the canvas snugly down.

The flag pole was cut, and planted under Paul's directions; and soon Old Glory floated proudly in the breeze, with their prize banner just below it.

"What shall we call the camp?" went up the cry.

"We had Camp Misery and Camp Rescue; what's the objection to calling this Camp Surprise?" asked Wallace, quickly.

"That's a good name! Camp Surprise it is!" shouted several in chorus; and as such the permanent camp went down in the log book of every scout.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LIGHT ON THE MOUNTAIN

"Paul, we're not alone up here after all!"

It was Jack who made this remark. He had been skirmishing around later in the afternoon; and came upon the other as Paul was standing at the edge of the lake, looking out upon its surface, to where some ducks floated.

"Well, I never believed we did own the place," returned the patrol leader, with a smile. "But what's happened to give you that idea, Jack?"

"Just by chance," his chum went on, "I saw something moving away up on the side of the mountain. At first I thought it might be some sort of animal; but as I watched I made sure it was human, either a boy or man. And whoever he was he kept track on what we were doing down here. I could see him crane his neck to look, lots of times."

"But you couldn't recognize him?" asked Paul.

"It was pretty far, and there's a sort of haze around us just now. Sometimes I thought I knew him, and then I made up my mind I didn't," came the reply.

"Is he still there, Jack?"

"Yes, but don't look up," said his chum, quickly. "We are in too plain sight here. I thought perhaps you might step into the tent and get our field glasses. Then we could slip away, and take a good look on the sly. How's that suit you?"

"All right. Meet me at the place where you saw him. Where was that, Jack?"

"See that bunch of hemlocks over yonder? I happened to be partly sheltered back of that when I looked up. I'll wait for you there," and Jack moved off.

Two minutes later Paul joined him. He had the field glasses tucked under his khaki coat, not wishing to attract the attention of the others, lest they might express a wish to trail along, and so spoil things.

"Now, tell me where to look," he observed, as he suited the glasses to his eyes, knowing just how far they should be opened to give the best results.

Jack pointed carefully upward.

"He's there yet, because I saw him move while I waited for you, Paul," he said, in an eager tone.

"I've got him," answered the scout leader, as his hands became rigid.

After a brief look he lowered the glasses.

"Well, who is it?" demanded Jack.

For answer his chum offered him the glasses; and presently Jack had his eyes glued to the smaller end.

When he lowered them a short time later his eyes met those of his chum. Both of them laughed, as though they had exchanged their views in that glance.

"Ted Slavin?" said Paul.

"Just as sure as fate," went on Jack; "and much interested in our doings. That of course means trouble for us at any time. I believe all those fellows have come up here for is to pick quarrels with us. But Mr. Gordon will know how to handle them when he gets here."

"Meanwhile," said Paul, seriously, "we must be on our guard against a sudden attack. We don't want the name of our camp to mean that we were taken unawares. We'll have things fixed so the boot will be on the other foot, if they try to surprise us."

When they looked again, the figure had vanished from that point high up among the rocks. Evidently Ted, having seen all he wished, had gone to tell his cronies the story.

"Where d'ye think they've located; because never a tent did they bring along?" Jack was asking as they returned to camp.

"Oh! up here that wouldn't matter much. Looks like there might be hundreds of caves of all sizes among these piled-up rocks. And a cave is a pretty good hide-out sometimes. I've spent lots of nights in one."

The afternoon sun had vanished behind another elevation that lay to the west; but night was slow in coming, since these were some of the longest days of the year.

Paul could not help noticing that Joe Clausin seemed worried once more. He kept by himself a good bit of the time, and his brow was clouded. Then again, he had taken to looking suspiciously about, here and there, up the steep mountainside, and even along the dimly-defined road that skirted the lake.

It was no mystery to Paul, so far as understanding what Joe might be worrying about went.

"That man with the rig who passed our noon camp on the road—Joe knows he's up here somewhere, and perhaps he wants to meet up with him—I wonder why?" was the way the young scoutmaster ran the thing over in his active mind.

In one way it did not concern him, because Joe had not asked for his assistance; but then again it certainly interested Paul. He believed that there was some odd connection between the loss of those papers contained in the tin box, and the presence of that stranger in the region of Rattlesnake Mountain.

Again, as before, the pressure of many other things caused him to push all concern about the mysterious stranger from his thoughts.

When supper had been cooked and the scouts sat around enjoying its delights, the shadows of coming night told that another period of sentry duty was at hand.

"No Mr. Gordon to-night, I reckon," ventured Jud Elderkin, as he sat with his tin plate upon his knees, and scooped up the luscious Boston baked

beans with his fork; while a steaming tin cup of mild coffee stood beside him.

Most of the boys were not used to this appetizing drink for supper; and a few of them did not take it, being satisfied with cold water; but Paul had considered the matter, and was of the opinion that a little change from the regular programme of home life would not hurt these hardy chaps, especially as they were so tired that nothing could keep them awake, once they lay down.

"I guess you're right, Jud," remarked Paul, "and I'm sorry too."

"Oh! well, we're not worrying," declared Jud, looking around at the ring of bright faces, and nodding, "are we, fellows?"

"Mr. Gordon's all right, and a mighty fine gentleman; but we don't really need him," declared one, promptly.

"Not so you could notice it, while we've got such smart guides as Paul and Wallace along," declared Tom Betts.

"D-d-don't you g-g-go to forgetting W-w-william here; he's t-t-turned out just a w-w-wonder, you know!" burst out Bluff, vigorously waving his knife and fork.

"It's William the Discoverer after this, fellows; for you know he proved that this bully old lake was here, long before any of us had set eyes on it!" argued another scout.

"Joking aside, boys," remarked Paul, earnestly, "I hope a few more of you will take a pattern from the way William learned that fact. If you only keep your eyes about you all the time, there are dozens of things just as interesting that you can read in the plain signs. And the deeper you dig into the Indian way of knowing things the better you'll like it. Please fill up my platter again, William, if there's enough to go around a second time. You're getting better as a cook every day you live."

As always, the utmost good cheer existed around the rude mess table which had been constructed by several amateur carpenters, while the rest were doing other necessary things.

It was meant to go under the big "round-top," as the scouts came to call one of the extra canvas spreads; and could be moved to the open at pleasure, during good weather.

"Oh! I think he's a bum chef, and ought to get bounced!"

Every one stared at Joe Clausin as these words appeared to proceed from his mouth, and no one looked more surprised than Joe himself.

"If I've just got to eat his messes, you'll have to carry me back to good old Stanhope, and mother's cookin', that's what!" Joe persisted in saying, though no one saw his lips move.

"Hey, what d'ye think of that, fellows?" exclaimed William, trying to look indignant. "Here I've been breaking my back trying to get up the right kind of grub for the patrol, and this ungrateful member kicks me when I ain't looking!"

"But I never——" started Joe, when he was cut short again.

"Now don't you go to saying you didn't mean anything, because the boys heard you speak right out in meetin'!" exclaimed William, getting up, and throwing his hands out as though he meant to wash them of the whole business.

"But William," the accused boy went on, eagerly, "didn't I eat more'n any one else? I declare I never said your cooking was off color. It's really decent, and I'm ready to tackle anything you try. Somebody's joshing us—somebody's putting the words in my mouth."

"It's Bobolink changing his voice," called out Paul, laughingly.

"Sure it is!" cried William; "look at his grinning there, for all he makes out to be so innocent. He's up to his old tricks again, fellows; he's practicing that game of ventriloquism on us, that's what."

Whereupon Joe made a dash for the author of his humiliation; but Bobolink had been expecting such a move, and was prepared to sprint out of the danger zone.

It was in this spirit of merriment that they finished their supper. If any of the scouts began to feel a homesick sensation creeping over them, they were manly enough to hide it from the eyes of their comrades.

And later on, when the dishes had been washed systematically, and everything arranged for the night, Paul and Jack sat together watching the stirring scene. The campfire glowed and snapped, boyish laughter and small talk abounded, and beyond the confines of the camp the sentries walked their beats.

"Looks good to me, eh, Jack?" remarked the weary acting scoutmaster.

"Same here," declared his chum, warmly; "though I guess you'll be right glad when Mr. Gordon comes. To-morrow you said we would have some tests of endurance, whether he is on hand or not. I think that is a good idea. But look yonder, Paul. Isn't that a moving light away up on the side of Rattlesnake Mountain?"

And Paul, turning quickly in the direction indicated, was thrilled to discover once more the phantom jack-o-lantern flickering light that had mystified him on that other occasion. This time Wallace could not have said it seemed to be made by a man lighting his pipe, for it was too steady. It moved to and fro, now clear, and again dim. Then even while the two boys stared, it suddenly vanished from sight.

CHAPTER XXII

THE NIGHT ALARM

"It's gone!" exclaimed Jack, drawing a long breath.

"Seems like it," remarked Paul, with a trace of excitement in his usually steady voice; for that strange moving light mystified him.

"What do you suppose it could be?" asked his chum, relying as always upon the ability of Paul to solve the puzzles.

"Oh! well, that isn't hard to guess," returned the scout leader. "Somebody was moving about with a lantern, as sure as you live. The question that bothers me is to say who the fellow can be."

"There's Ted and his squad; we happen to know they're roaming around these regions somewhere," suggested Jack, quickly.

"That's true," said Paul, thoughtfully; "and it may be one of that crowd; but somehow I doubt it. In the first place I don't believe they were smart enough to fetch even a lantern along. You know they brag about how they can go into the woods with only a hatchet and a few cooking things, and enjoy life. But we didn't come up here to endure things."

"Not much," declared Jack; "we want all the comforts of a well managed camp. And in the line of fun we've got a string of things laid out that will keep us doing stunts every hour of the time. But if not Ted's toadies, then who could be wandering about up there? Can you give a guess, Paul?"

Paul could; but then he debated with himself whether he ought to take Jack fully into his confidence. He decided that as they had been chums so long, and shared each other's confidences, he ought to speak. Besides, Joe had shown no intention of confiding anything in him.

So in low tones he told about the queer actions of Joe Clausin when that man in the vehicle had gone by; and the few words he had heard the boy

scout mutter. After that he related the incident of his interview with Joe.

"Say, that is mighty funny," observed Jack, after he had listened to the whole story.

"Don't you think the same as I do, and that Joe recognized that man?"

"It looks that way to me. And he seemed to guess something that was anything but pleasant to him," replied his chum.

"Speak plainly, Jack," said Paul, eagerly, catching the other's eye, "you mean that he must have connected the presence of that man here with the robbery of his father the other night? Is that it?"

"I reckon that was what flashed into Joe's mind," remarked Jack; "he thought this man was at the other side of the world, he said, did he? Well, the very fact that he had turned up here at such a time looks mighty suspicious. Paul, what if we happened to run across him while we were in camp here; wouldn't it be a great thing if we found that old tin box for Mr. Clausin?"

"I was thinking about something. Did you happen to get a good look at the face of that man as he drove past?" asked the scout leader, gravely.

"Well, no, I didn't, to tell the truth. I happened to be doing something just then, and when I looked up I only saw his back. But what of it?" asked Jack, knowing that his comrade would not speak in this way without a motive.

"I did, and it's been bothering me ever since," came the reply.

"How was that? Did you know him?" demanded Jack.

"I seemed to see something familiar about him, and yet I couldn't just get hold of it. And Jack, just while we were talking it over, and I was telling you about what Joe said to me in his confusion, it flashed over me who he made me think of."

"Who was that?" demanded his chum.

"Joe!" answered Paul, quietly.

Of course Jack was stirred deeply when he heard that.

"Oh! I wonder what it can mean?" he exclaimed. "I've known Joe for more than five years now, and so far I've never heard that he had a brother. You know they came to Stanhope from down in Jersey somewhere. Do you really think it might be so? This fellow, who was, as he believed at the other side of the world, in China or the Philippines perhaps, may have come home to rob his father!"

"Hold on," laughed Paul; "you're getting too far ahead, old hoss! Don't jump at things that way. This man looked too old to be any brother of Joe's. He might be an uncle, though. Uncles sometimes go bad, I guess, and do things that make their relatives ashamed of them. Suppose we leave it at that, and wait to see if we happen to learn anything more."

"But Joe knows," persisted Jack, doggedly.

"That's right," replied Paul, seriously; "but don't forget that it's his secret, and as true scouts we've no business to go prying into his affairs unless he asks our help. Forget it all for a while, and let's talk about what we have laid out for to-morrow. I do hope Mr. Gordon shows up. I wonder if he can read the Indian talk I left in each place we stopped."

They were soon deep in the various interesting features of the programme as mapped out for the next day. Having now settled into what they expected would be the permanent camp of the tour, the boys were wild to get down to business, and show their efficiency in the various lines which they favored.

"Listen to 'em gabble like a pack of old women," laughed Jack, as the friendly argument about the crackling fire grew more heated.

"Bob Tice is demanding why they didn't think to bring a portable dark room along, so he could develop his films in the daytime," said Paul, after listening a minute; "and Jud is explaining to the novice that with his new film tank there's no need of any such thing, for he can do all that work right in the tent at noon."

Many other subjects were discussed about that blazing fire, and much information passed around.

Strict discipline was maintained in camp, just as though the scoutmaster himself were present to enforce it.

At the hour appointed, Bobolink tooted his bugle, and immediate preparations for retiring commenced. Twenty minutes later taps sounded, and every light had to go out save the one fire that occupied the centre of the camp.

Three sentries paced to and fro, and they had been given to understand that any failure to keep constant watch would meet with prompt punishment. They knew that Paul meant to enforce his orders; and suspecting that he might creep out under the rear of his tent to make a secret rounds, they were one and all determined that nothing should cause them to fail in their duties.

Paul was asleep in his tent with two of his mates, when something suddenly awoke him. He sat up to listen, and again heard the sound. It was a dull thud, as of a hard object falling to the ground. Then came a distinct splash in the nearby lake.

"What in goodness can it be?" he thought, as he listened for a repetition of the strange sounds. "Hello! what's going on, Paul?" Jack asked at that moment, raising his head as if he too had been awakened by the several thumps, and wondered what his chum was doing sitting up.

"That's what I'm trying to guess," replied Paul, quietly.

"Sounds as if it was hailing to beat the band!" exclaimed Jack, as a series of continuous thumps came.

Just then some one burst in at the open flap of the tent. It proved to be Bluff Shipley, who had been appointed sentry from the Red Fox Patrol.

"Paul, c-c-come out here, q-q-quick!" he cried, in considerable excitement; and as this condition was always bad for the poor fellow's twisted tongue, he began to "fall all over himself," as Jack expressed it, when he attempted to go on and explain what had happened.

In the jumble, however, Paul caught something that gave him the clue he wanted—"Ted Slavin" and "rocks!"

He quickly got inside some clothes, not even waiting in his hurry to remove his pajamas. When he crawled out of the tent he found a number of the scouts had been aroused. Their angry shouts were heard on every hand; for a shower of stones was descending upon the camp from some point further up the abrupt side of the mountain.

"It's that Slavin crowd, as usual!" cried Jud, furiously, rubbing his arm where he had been struck.

"We've just *got* to get after them with a hot stick!" exclaimed Wallace, who was usually the warmest advocate of peace in the troop; but this constant and vicious annoyance on the part of their rivals was proving too much for even his temper.

"Come on, fellows; us to the attack!" called Bobolink, with his accustomed vim; "this is the limit, and we've just got to flag 'em!"

All discipline was forgotten in the excitement of the moment. Nor did Paul try to show his authority. He was very nearly as indignant as any of them; and had they been able to locate the enemy, possibly there might have ensued a scramble that would hardly have been to the credit of the well known peaceful principles of the scouts.

But the stone throwing seemed to cease about the time the scouts began to climb the side of the rocky elevation. Doubtless Ted and his allies knew that it would be dangerous for them to remain longer; and having stirred up a hornets' nest below, they probably crept away over a path they had mapped out, which would lead to their cave camp.

The boys came back in bunches of twos and threes presently, heated with their useless search, and breathing out all sorts of threats against the disturbers of their peace. On the next night Paul meant to have a vidette posted on the mountain side, whose one particular duty would be to look out for prowlers.

There was no further alarm that night. Possibly Ted and his crowd believed that it would not be wise to go in too strongly for these things. And so another day dawned, that was fated to be full of strenuous doings between sunrise and sunset.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT THE EYES OF A SCOUT MAY SEE

"What damage was done last night?" asked Jack, as he and Paul walked around the camp, while the cooks of the several patrols were engaged in getting breakfast over fires built after that clever fashion, partly in holes in the ground.

"Well," replied his chum, "outside of Jud's bruised arm that will handicap him a bit in his work; and one hole through the fly that serves as our mess tent; I haven't been able to find anything. But I picked up several stones that must have come down, and they were big enough to hurt if they had hit any of us."

"What ought we to do?" asked Jack.

"For one I think we've just got to change our way of handling those fellows. The more we try to argue, and hold out the olive branch, the worse they get. I hate to tell the boys we've reached the end of the rope; but what else is left?" and Paul, as he spoke, shook his head, and drew a long breath.

"Oh! nothing but give tit for tat," returned Jack, without a pause, as if his mind had long been made up. "Why, even a Quaker will fight if forced to defend his honor; or some bully attacks his family. They say a worm will turn; which you mustn't take to mean that we are grubs."

"Well," declared Paul, "to-night we'll have a watch set, and if they try that sort of thing again, perhaps they'll find two can play at a bombardment."

The welcome call to breakfast broke in on their dialogue; and being possessed of the ordinary boy's appetite, both Paul and his chum were not at all backward about dropping into their places around the rude table.

Of course pretty much all the talk during the meal was about the unprovoked and cowardly attack of the preceding night. Every time a boy

cast his eyes upward, and saw the sky through the ragged hole in the canvas cover, he was noticed to grit his teeth, and look angry.

But Paul assured them that he had a plan ready whereby they could put a stop to this rough treatment. Knowing him as they did, the scouts felt sure he had been driven to the limit of his forbearance. Having gone as far as their code called for in the effort to keep the peace, they would certainly be justified in taking the law into their own hands from this time forth.

"Forget it all until night comes, fellows," said Paul, finally, when they had talked the subject threadbare. "Meanwhile don't think you're going to get any sort of a nap to-day. There will be something doing every minute of the time from now up to supper call. And to begin with, let the dishwashers get busy right away, so as to clear the decks for action."

As every one had satisfied his appetite, and just then cared little whether there was ever such a thing as eating again, they were not sorry to leave the mess tent.

The camp was quickly a scene of animation. Some fellows were busy with cameras, seeking enticing subjects for views that would do them credit when the results of the great hike were examined by a committee later on. Others set about making preparations for the various duties to which they had been assigned. Paul kept his finger on the pulse of everything that took place.

He sent one squad along the shore of the lake to try the fishing. Another was engaged in forming a rude raft so that they could have something on which to paddle around from time to time. Still another group followed Paul and Wallace to hunt for signs of the raccoons they had heard during the preceding night.

Each boy of the bunch was expected to jot down in his note-book the various interesting things they came across as they tramped. Paul gave a few hints; but he wanted them to think it out for themselves.

The most observing would make mention of dozens of things that might never attract the eye of the novice in woodcraft. He would state the species of trees he noticed on either hand; the formation of the rocks, the result perhaps of a former hurricane that leveled many old trees, and the direction

which it must have passed along over this country; he would find a multitude of things to mention in the sap-sucker that tapped the dead limb of a tree; the wise crow that cawed at them from a distance; the flashing bluejay that kept just ahead of them; the red squirrel and the little chipmunks that scurried over the ground, to watch with bright eyes from the shelter of some tree, or hummock of up-tilted stones.

There was absolutely no limit to the list of interesting subjects that an observing lad could find to fill pages upon pages in his memorandum book. After he had returned home again how pleasant it would be to read anew these notes, and realize that he could not be termed blind when he passed along the trail.

And then the tracks of the little woods animals, how interesting it was to hunt for them close to the border of the water, where they could be plainly seen in the soft mud.

At first one seemed pretty much like another to the greenhorns; but either Paul or Wallace, who had studied these things before, pointed out the difference; and after that lesson the other fellows could easily tell the tracks of a raccoon from those of a mink or a 'possum, for they found them all.

After that Paul took pains to explain just how differently the imprint of a dog's or a cat's foot looked when compared with those of the wild woods folks. These two were so much alike that Bobolink remarked upon the fact.

"How can you tell them apart, Paul?" he asked, looking at the prints made by the scout leader in the mud.

"That's easy," replied Paul, "if you notice that the dog leaves the track of his nails every time; while puss, well, she sheathes her claws while she walks, keeping them sharp for business when she sights a sparrow or a young rabbit."

"But look here, what's this funny track here? Some baby must have put its hand down in the mud; but that's silly, of course. Whatever made these, Paul?" asked Philip Towne, pointing ahead to a spot they had as yet not visited.

Paul took one look, and smiled. He turned to Wallace, who nodded instantly.

"A muskrat made those tracks, boys," observed Paul; "you see he leaves marks entirely unlike any others we've seen. And here is where our friend, Mr. Crow, came down from his perch where he's been scolding us so long. He wanted a drink perhaps; or expected to pick up a breakfast along the edge of the water, from insects that have been washed ashore."

All these things were very attractive to the boys.

"This thing gets better and better the deeper you climb into it," declared Bobolink, as he wrote away for dear life, jotting down all he could remember of what he had heard.

Some of the boys even made rude but effective diagrams of the various tracks, so that they would have the proof to show if ever a dispute arose concerning the difference between the several species.

Many other things did Paul and Wallace bring to their attention. Why, it seemed as though one had only to turn around up on the side of Rattlesnake Mountain to discover new and wonderful facts that these boys never dreamed of before.

"Where do you suppose this old pile of rocks ever got its name, Paul?" asked one of the scouts, as he looked up at the frowning crest far above.

"I really don't know," replied Paul; "I took the trouble to ask a number of people too, who have lived around Stanhope for scores of years, and they couldn't tell me; they said it had always gone by that name, and supposed that once it was a regular rattlesnake den."

"Why, yes," interrupted Jud Elderkin; "one man told me he remembered when there was a queer chap lived up here, a cripple too, who in those days used to put in all his time hunting rattlesnakes for their skins, which were used to make pocketbooks and slippers and belts out of; and he sold the oil, too."

"Oil?" exclaimed Bobolink, "now, what do you mean by that? Do they use it for lamps, or watches, like they do porpoise oil?"

"How about that, Wallace?" asked Paul, seeing that the reader of the Carberry Twins gave evidence of possessing knowledge along those lines.

"Good for rheumatism, they say," observed Wallace; "athletes also use it to limber up their limbs. It has a commercial value. Some men make a business of hunting rattlesnakes pretty much all the year."

"Excuse me from the job then," said Bobolink, making a wry face. "Ugh! I hate the sight of a snake! Say, you don't think there might be a little bunch of the nasty scaly monsters left over from the old cripple's hunt, do you, Paul?"

"I hope we won't run across any," returned the patrol leader, soberly; "for it's no fun getting struck by the fangs of a rattlesnake. I've never had that bad luck, and I give you my word I'm not hankering after an experience, either."

"But then it might happen to one of us," retorted Bobolink; "and as a wise general I hope you've thought of bringing a gallon or two of strong drink along. That seems to be the only thing that can save a poor fellow when he's been jabbed by one of these twisters; anyhow, that's what I've read about it."

"You're away off then, Bobolink," laughed Paul; "for we haven't a drop of liquor in camp. There's a better way to counteract a snake bite; and I intend telling the whole troop when we gather at lunch to-day, as well as distribute some little packets I made up, under my father's directions."

"But go on," demanded Jud, "now that you've said so much. If a rattlesnake jumped out of those bushes there, and gave me a jab on the leg, how ought I go about it to keep from keeling over? I want to know, and I ain't from Missouri, either!"

"Well," Paul started to say, "in the first place you ought to know that no rattlesnake ever jumps out at anybody. At the slightest sign of danger he coils up, and sounds his policeman's rattle, which is just as near like the buzzing of a big locust as you can get it."

"Say, that's why they call a policeman's club his locust, ain't it?" interrupted Bobolink; at which Paul smiled and nodded.

"If you should get excited on hearing this warning, and rush straight at the snake, not seeing him, why he'd get you. The first thing to do is to free your leg from all clothing, if he struck you, and tie a bandage tight above the mark where his fangs hit. Then get down yourself, or if you have a chum along, and you always will up here, according to the orders to hunt in pairs, have him suck the wound as hard as he can, spitting out the poison."

"Good gracious!" cried Bobolink, "but won't he get the dope instead of you, then?"

"It would never hurt him," answered Paul, quickly, "unless he happens to have a cut about his mouth. If that is the case he must never try to suck a snake bite. Hot water will help nearly as well as sucking. Then use some of the strong ammonia that is in a little bottle, to burn the wound. Never mind the pain, for your life is in danger. Another bottle holds some aromatic spirits of ammonia, which can be taken inwardly, as it is useful to keep up the strength and nerve of the wounded fellow."

"Is that all?" asked the interested Jud.

"Pretty much all," Paul went on. "Don't keep on the tight cord or bandage more than an hour, for it stops circulation, and might bring on mortification, father says. Ease up on it for a bit. The arm will sting like fun, but stand it. If the patient shows signs of collapse, tighten the cord again for a time. Do this several times until you can take the cord off for good."

"Oh! I see," said Bobolink; "by that time the poor chap will either be recovered or else have kicked the bucket. But I do hope none of us get mixed up with one of that old cripple hunter's left-overs. I'm going to keep my eyes about all the while."

"That's a good idea," declared Paul, laughing; "and every fellow ought to follow suit. But let's go back to the camp now, boys. We've had about as much as anybody can cram into their head at one time."

"Here, Paul, please take a look at these marks, and tell me what sort of an animal made 'em!" called out Jud, who had been bending over, half on his knees, as if deeply interested in what he had found.

All of them hurried to the spot.

"Perhaps he's found the spoor of a runaway elephant!" suggested Bobolink, wickedly, with that passing circus in mind.

"More'n likely," observed Philip Towne; "it's a wildcat that's been prowling around the camp. Once, when I crawled out to take my watch, I thought I saw a pair of yellow eyes staring at me over the edge of that little cliff back of the tents."

Paul made no remark. He was himself bending over now, and looking at the ground just where Jud pointed. Those who were watching him saw Paul start, and look closer.

"It must be a lynx; or perhaps a regular old panther has come down here from the North Woods," said Bobolink, really beginning to believe such a thing might be so.

"Hardly," remarked Paul; "but all the same it may mean trouble for us. You can see that these tracks were made by a man, for he had a foot much longer than any of the scouts; and boys, I'm afraid he's been hanging around our camp for some purpose!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE STRANGEST FISHING EVER KNOWN

"A man!" echoed Wallace, also looking grave; and even while speaking he turned his head to stare upward toward that grim cap of old Rattlesnake Mountain that hung so high above them.

Perhaps Wallace had seen that will-o'-the-wisp light far up the side of the rocky steep on the preceding night, as well as Paul and Jack. He may have been pondering over it since, though neglecting to speak to the patrol leader.

"Well," said Bobolink, with a relieved look, "I'd rather have a two-legged man wandering around our camp than a four-legged tiger-cat, any day."

"Of course you would," observed Jack, drily, "but think how awful it would be if a four-legged man was spying on us!"

Bobolink only snorted at this thrust. It was not often the other fellows had a chance to give him a sly dig; and that was why Jack could not resist the temptation, even while Paul was looking so worried.

"I think we had better run this trail out a bit, fellows," remarked the patrol leader; "and see what he was after. It seems to have come from along the shore of the lake, and struck up the rise about here. What say, Wallace?"

"I'm with you all right," came the immediate reply from the one addressed; "It will give us some exercise, and experience; because once he strikes the rocks we'll have to be pretty smart not to lose him."

Accordingly they all bent their heads low over the spot where that plain print of the boot was to be seen.

"Say, do you know what this makes me think of?" demanded Bobolink.

"Not elephants, panthers, or two-legged men, of course!" chuckled Jack.

"Oh! rats!" expostulated his fellow scout. "Come off your perch, Jack, and talk sense. You make me think of an old Polly, just able to repeat things over and over. But to see us all down on our knees staring at that trail made me remember the alarm of poor old Robinson Crusoe when he found the footprint of the cannibal on his island."

"Well, the comparison isn't so bad—for you, Bobolink," observed Jack; "because while we haven't got an island that we can call our own, we seemed to be the only campers on this lake; and to discover that there is another fellow on the spot ready to dispute our claim makes us feel that we've been taken in and done for. But there goes Paul."

The scout leader was indeed moving off. Still bending low, and making positive of every step, he kept advancing slowly but steadily. When there was the least doubt he asked Wallace for his opinion; for two heads sometimes prove better than one.

Presently they came to where the rocks began to stand out. Here the difficulties increased at a surprising rate, for the impressions were very faint indeed. Still Paul eagerly continued his labor, because there was a fascination about it for him. He dearly loved to solve any puzzle, no matter how bewildering; and in these dimly defined traces of a man's upward progress he found that he had a problem worthy of his very best efforts.

Sometimes the trail seemed utterly to have vanished. Indeed, Jud and Bobolink again and again declared that it was useless trying to pursue it any further. But Paul would not give up, and he had a good backer in Wallace.

This time they would find a broken twig that had given way under pressure. Then again it would be a stone overturned that caught their eye. And a little later the proof of their reasoning was shown in a clear imprint of the foot in a soft patch of earth.

Then the others would exchange glances of wonder, almost awe, and shake their heads, as though they were of the opinion that such work was bordering on magic. But Paul only used common-sense in his trailing, calling to his aid all that he had ever read, heard or seen of the art.

"Hey, we're right above the camp, fellows!" exclaimed Bobolink presently.

Raising his head Paul saw that what his companion said was true. But he did not look surprised; for all along he had felt convinced that the unknown must be making for some spot where he could obtain a good survey of the little encampment without being observed by the sentries while walking their beats.

Two minutes later the quartet found themselves on the brink of the little shelf where Philip Towne, who had given up the pursuit some time back, had, as he declared, seen a pair of yellow eyes during the night.

All of them peered over. The tents were not more than twenty-five feet below. Indeed, that one which contained their supplies lay almost directly under them.

The patrol leader seemed to be possessed of an idea. Perhaps it originated in certain marks which he had discovered in the thin layer of earth along the edge of the shelf.

"I think I know why this party hung about the camp so long last night," Paul remarked, when he looked up; and the others hardly knew whether the expression on his face stood for amusement or chagrin.

"If it was daytime when he came, I'd think he wanted to get a great picture of the outfit; but in the night, nixy," remarked Bobolink, who always had an opinion, one way or the other.

Wallace himself looked puzzled.

"Don't keep us strung up any longer, Paul," he pleaded. "What's your idea?"

"Put out your hand, then, just back of that bush, and see what you find," and Paul pointed while speaking to a particular little scrubby plant that had evidently been partly broken down by the passage of some heavy object over it.

"A string!" exclaimed Wallace, as he held it up.

"Somebody been flying a kite!" ejaculated the ever resourceful Bobolink.

"Suppose you pull it in," continued Paul.

When Wallace had drawn about eight yards of the stout cord he gave a grunt.

"Well, what did you strike?" asked Paul, smiling with confidence.

"Why, hang it, if it isn't a fish hook!" cried Wallace.

"Oh! the looney has been fishing here; now, what d'ye think of that?" exclaimed Bobolink, in apparent glee.

Wallace, however, understood at once. He again looked over the edge.

"But Paul, how could he ever get his line in under that canvas, and secure any of our grub?" he protested.

"It happened unfortunately that he didn't have to. I can show you marks here on the ground that plainly outline one of our fine hams," said Paul, pointing to where he had been so closely examining the ground.

"A ham! Oh! my, oh! me, don't tell me that!" cried Bobolink, making a gesture of despair; "for we're half through the other one, and it was *so* good. How could the villain ever clap hands on our prize; tell me that, won't you Paul?"

"I know, all right," said Wallace in disgust, "and I guess it was my fault too. I remember suggesting that it would be a good idea to hang the second ham from the pole William drove into the face of this little cliff about seven feet up; and they did it too, the worse luck!"

"Yes," remarked Paul, drily, "and it caught the eye of this fellow, whoever he was. The temptation must have been too strong for him. Perhaps he enjoys a joke. Anyhow, he got it, after some little use of his fishline. We're out a ham, that's plain, fellows."

"Think of snapping a porker's hind leg off a pole," groaned Bobolink, "and playing it, inch by inch, up here; while our gay guards walked back and forth on post, as innocent as the babes in the woods. It gets me, all right!"

None of the Banner Boy Scouts looked very happy. Like many other things, a ham is never so much appreciated as when it has disappeared.

"Say, you don't think, now, it could have been one of that Slavin bunch, do you?" demanded Bobolink, presently; "because I happen to know Scissors Dempsey is mighty fond of pork, every way you can fix it."

"I've thought of that," said Paul, without hesitation; "but you can see the foot is an extra long one. No boy's shoe ever made that. And it's had a home-made patch on it, too. No, some man has been here, and made way with our ham."

"Oh! won't it be bad for him if ever we meet the wretch!" threatened Bobolink. "Just you see what the fellows say, when they know. Only enough ham for one more meal! That's what I call tough."

There was a howl indeed, when the other campers learned what had happened. All sorts of theories were advanced, and Paul laughed at some of these.

"That old humpback rattlesnake oil man must have come to life again, just like Rip Van Winkle," declared Nuthin, who seemed to have heard the story somewhere; "and could you blame him for wanting ham, after sniffing the *delicious* smells that went up from this camp last night, while William was busy?"

William thereupon made his lowest bow, with his hand on his heart.

"Oh! thank you!" he exclaimed, simpering; "this is too, too sudden; and I've really left the speech I prepared, at home."

But while the rest were both growling and making fun over the secret visit of the unknown, Paul noticed that there was one in the party who said never a word.

That was Joe Clausin.

He listened to everything, without comment; but there was a puzzled look on his face, as though he could not quite understand certain facts.

Paul realized that he was thinking about the man who looked like the party he knew; but who was supposed to be at the other side of the world just then. Joe believed it might have been this person who stole the ham; and yet

something seemed to upset such a theory. Possibly the mention of that extra long foot, and the patched shoe, hardly agreed with his ideas.

And while they were standing around, still engaged in disputing and advancing new theories, some one gave a shout.

"I saw a man on a wheel just flash past that open spot back along the trail!" he cried; and immediately every eye was focussed on the spot indicated; for coming at just such a moment the news electrified the scouts.

CHAPTER XXV

PAUL LAYS DOWN HIS BURDEN

"There! I just caught a squint of him, back of the trees!" whooped William.

"And he's coming lickety-split, to beat the band, too. Oh! I hope it isn't a messenger from Stanhope to bring us any bad news!" cried Tom Betts; who had left a sick mother when he came on the trip, and whose conscience, perhaps, caused him to have a sudden fear.

More than one pair of cheeks lost some of their color, in that quick spasm of alarm, following this suggestion on the part of Tom.

"Listen, fellows; he's tooting his auto horn like fun! It gives me a scare for keeps!" ejaculated Philip Towne.

But Paul laughed aloud.

"Don't get frightened, fellows," he exclaimed, "I sure ought to know the sound of that old siren. That's my wheel; and who do you think's on it but our good scoutmaster, Mr. Gordon!"

"Hurrah!" came from a dozen pairs of lips, as the boys swung their hats aloft.

And this was the exciting picture that met the eyes of the scoutmaster when he burst into view around a bend, and sighted the camp on the lake shore.

Mr. Gordon was a very bright young fellow, with considerable experience in training boys. He had a fair grasp of the grand possibilities of this Boy Scouts' movement, and never lost an opportunity to pick up additional information. Nor did he disdain to ask some of his scouts concerning matters they had studied, but along which lines he did not happen to be well informed.

There was a grand "pow-wow," as William called it, after he came. He had to hear all that had happened since his leaving Stanhope on that unfortunate business trip. The adventures at the church on both nights were recounted by those who had taken part; and it was plain that the story lost none of its comical features in the telling.

After that he heard about the grand march, the meeting with the circus, and what the scouts had done to clear up their record for the day. Then came the various things that had occurred; until at last the dismal truth about the missing ham made Mr. Gordon laugh heartily.

"How did you manage with the Indian sign letters I left with you, sir?" Paul asked, when he found a chance.

"Pretty well," replied the scoutmaster; "though once or twice your meaning was not quite clear. I had to use a lot of commonsense to understand whether a boy was pulled from the river, and brought around all right; or if a poor fellow had been taken with the colic, and you used a stomach pump on him. But then, as I said, my good sense told me the former must have been the case. Who was it, and is he all right again?"

"I'm the victim," declared Tom Betts, promptly; "and I guess the whole show would have been broke up if Paul here hadn't yanked me out like he did."

Mr. Gordon turned a look of sincere affection on Paul. He had studied the boy often, and always found something new to admire about him. Still, he knew it was not always wise to praise a lad to his face; and so he only squeezed Paul's hand.

Paul was a happy fellow just then. It seemed to him that the load of responsibility had slipped from his shoulders like magic with the coming of Mr. Gordon. Now they could undertake all manner of interesting stunts; and each day would be taken up with dozens of events in which they wished to shine.

Presently the fishermen made their appearance. A shout went up at sight of the glorious strings of fine trout they carried. Although they had heard the cheers of their mates, and understood that Mr. Gordon must have arrived,

really they did not have the heart to break away, while the fish were feeding so savagely.

"Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest!" cried Bobolink; "good-bye ham, and how d'ye do Mr. Trout. I really don't know which I like best. When I'm eating trout my thoughts go out to ham; and when I'm sitting down to a rasher of bacon I do long so for a mess of trout. But they're all to the good, fellows. Do it some more, will you?"

And when William and the other cooks served the fish at noon the boys were loud in their praises. Some had suggestions to offer about the ways of cooking them; but it was noticed that half the inmates of the camp busied themselves immediately after lunch in hunting fishing tackle; and the prospect for peace among the finny tribes in that lake was small.

There was no little rivalry between the trio of cooks. Usually this took the form of good-natured chaffing, and trying new dishes, in order to arouse the envy of other patrols.

Bobolink always hung around to hear these discussions; but William made a great mistake when, thinking to bolster up his cause at one time, he demanded to know what the member of the Red Fox Patrol thought about it.

"Huh!" grunted the wise Bobolink, "I'll tell you, if you promise not to hold it against me, and give me the poorest grub in the bunch for spite."

"All right, go on," said William slowly, as though he already began to doubt the wisdom of asking his comrade's opinion; "I don't know as you c'n settle this important question at all; but I promise not to hold anything against you. Give us a straight yarn, now, Bobolink, hear!"

"Well," said Bobolink, with a grin, "when I hear you learned cooks disputing about how to do this, and that, I just have to think about the blind men and the elephant, you see."

"What about 'em?" demanded Nat Smith, who belonged to the third patrol, and had carried his mother's big cook book along into camp, thinking to surprise his rivals by the vast extent of his knowledge concerning cookery terms.

"Oh! shucks, d'ye mean to say you never heard that story?" said Bobolink. "Well, a lot of blind men in the Far East disputed about what an elephant looked like, though nary one had ever seen the critter. So they went, one at a time, to find out. Now what d'ye think happened?"

"How under the sun do we know? Get along with the yarn!" exclaimed William.

"Each feller came back with a different story," went on Bobolink gravely; "the one that grabbed the tail of the elephant vowed the wonderful animal was mighty like a rope. Another says a snake, because, you see, he got hold of the swinging trunk. A third vows the elephant was like a wall, just because he slammed up against his side. And a fourth hugged his leg, and was ready to take his affidavy the famous beast was made just like a tree! Get the idea, boys?"

Apparently they did, for a minute later Bobolink was seen flying for his life through the woods, with three mad cooks in full pursuit, shaking their fists after him, and threatening all sorts of vengeance.

Paul and Mr. Gordon concluded to push out from shore on the big raft, and try the fishing in that style. Fortunately there was little air stirring, so that the clumsy contrivance could be readily managed.

Mr. Gordon was not an expert fisherman; while Paul had had considerable experience in the art during his several Summers in Maine. He cast his flies with such skill that the scoutmaster expressed admiration, and took lessons in sending out the oiled silk line, so that the imitation flies dropped on the water softly.

They cast in toward the shore, of course, and near the spot where a creek sent its waters into the lake, each of them had a strike.

Paul succeeded in landing his fish, which proved to be a fair-sized specimen. Then Mr. Gordon tried again. In a short time he had a strike, and with a quick motion of the wrist succeeded in fastening the barb of the hook in the jaw of the fish.

"It's a dandy too, sir!" exclaimed Paul, as he saw a flash of rainbow colors, when the big trout jumped wildly into the air, trying to break loose by

falling on the line; "keep a tight pull on him, sir, and if he drags too hard let him have just a little more line. Oh! but he's a beauty."

So coaching Mr. Gordon by degrees, he finally got the landing net ready; and after the prize had been played until almost exhausted it was lifted upon the raft with one swift and accurate movement.

After that the fishing seemed to slacken. Though the lake was undoubtedly just teeming with fish, still they had their times for feeding, and between these nothing could induce them to take hold.

Later in the day there were swimming tests started, and Mr. Gordon, who was at home in this sport, showed the boys many tricks whereby their prowess in the water might be doubled.

Paul had dressed, having cut his foot a trifle while walking on the rocks. He and the scoutmaster, were standing there talking, Mr. Gordon still had on his swimming trunks.

"I was just thinking, Paul," he remarked, "what a queer lake this is. Have you noticed that it seems to have no visible outlet? Possibly some of its waters manage to get to the Bushkill because there are several streams running in; but where does it flow out?"

"Why, yes," returned Paul, "I did notice that. I suppose there must be an outlet in the bottom of the lake somewhere."

"Just what I had concluded; and it would stand to reason that such a hole might be somewhere near here. I'm a little anxious, because I've had an experience myself with such a sucker-hole, and came near losing my life in one. I managed to get hold of rocks on the bottom, and clawed my way outside the terrible suction that was drawing me steadily in toward the centre."

"Why, I noticed a peculiar swirl down just below where the boys are swimming now. There, Andy Flinn has dived right into the spot! Oh! I hope nothing will happen to Andy, sir. Perhaps you'd better call them out, right away!"

Mr. Gordon uttered an exclamation of alarm. He turned his head and seemed to be looking for something. Then Paul saw him snatch up a rope that was coiled, and hanging from the stump of a tree close to the camp. Mr. Gordon had placed it there himself, and for a purpose.

"Come with me, Paul!" he called over his shoulder; but there was little need of his saying this, for the young patrol leader was already hurrying after him, his face white with sudden fear.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SUCKER-HOLE

The swimmers were astonished to see Mr. Gordon coming on the run toward them, with Paul at his heels.

But by that time the two who had been actively playing conquer with Andy Flinn began to notice something queer.

"He don't come up at all, sir; Andy's got us all beat to a frazzle staying under!" one of them declared, as if surprised that the Irish lad could hold his breath so long.

The words thrilled Paul, for he realized that his worst fears were likely to be realized. And how glad he felt that there was some one else there now, capable of assuming the responsibility. Had the duty devolved on him, not knowing the terrible peril of a sucker-hole, he might have plunged straight in, to try and find Andy; when there would have been two victims, perhaps many more!

Mr. Gordon was quickly flinging one end of the rope toward Paul. He had slipped the noose over his own body, securing it under his arms.

"If you feel any quick jerks pull hard!" he shouted.

The next instant, he had leaped from the bank. They saw him take a graceful header into the agitated water, where the boys were gathering. Then he vanished from their sight.

Paul clutched the rope and gathered in the slack. His heart was pounding like mad with the anxiety, while he waited for results. If no signal came after a certain lapse of time he meant to pull in anyway; determined that Mr. Gordon must not be sacrificed too.

"Get a grip here, some of you fellows!" he called, fearing lest he might not be able to manage alone.

Willing hands seized hold, and half a dozen hung to the rope. Every eye was fastened on the surface of the water; but since the boys had trooped ashore it was no longer agitated. Paul could see that wide circle forming a distinct swirl. He shuddered as he looked at it. Never again would he ever watch a sweeping ring in the water without feeling a coldness in the region of his heart.

The terrible seconds passed. Some of the boys were as white as ghosts; and they shivered while standing there scantily clad.

"Oh! let's drag him back!" exclaimed William, who had hold next to Paul.

"Not yet. It isn't hardly half a minute, and Mr. Gordon can hold out longer than that," Paul replied, firmly; though himself anxiously counting the seconds, because he knew he could never trust to a haphazard guess.

"There! wasn't that a jerk?" asked Jud Elderkin; but the wish was father to the thought; and again Paul refused to be swerved from his plan of action.

Sighs were heard, and more than one groan. It required considerable firmness on the part of the patrol leader to refrain, when every nerve in his body seemed crying out in protest. But the time he had set as a limit had not yet expired.

Just as he was about to give in, he felt a sudden quick pull, followed by another.

"Now!" he called, in his excitement, and it was like the letting off steam from an overcharged boiler.

How those fellows did pull upon that line! Paul had to caution them to be careful, such was their eagerness to get the scoutmaster safely above water.

And when presently his figure arose, and they saw that he was carrying poor Andy in his arms, such a shout as went up! Two fellows who had been in camp all this while, resting in ignorance as to the thrilling event that was transpiring, came galloping along the shore to see what was up.

Mr. Gordon knew just how to get to work in order to revive Andy, providing he had not been under the water too long. His system was the

same as that used by Paul; indeed, it had been the scoutmaster who had taught Paul much of what he knew in the science of life saving.

After half an hour of hard work, during which the boys were greatly depressed, success greeted their efforts. Andy was revived; but he had had even a closer call than Tom Betts. It was a very useful lesson to every boy in camp, and one that they could profit by in future years.

"What did it feel like, Andy?" asked Mr. Gordon, after the rescued boy had recovered enough to talk.

"Sure and I thought a great big giant had holt of me," Andy remarked, slowly and thoughtfully. "I tried me best to break away; but the harder I swum the tighter he grabbed me. I remimber trying to shout out for help, and swallowin' a quart of wather. Thin I didn't know anything at all till I opened me peepers right here, and saw yees all dancin' around me. But I don't go swimmin' in that old lake agin. It's enchanted, that's what it is."

When the secret of the unseen outlet of the lake was explained to Andy, he just smiled and shook his head. He had been down there, and ought to know if there was a giant waiting to make a meal of plump boys. Nor could they ever convince Andy to the contrary; and it was noticed that he did not go in bathing again during their stay.

After that, while swimming tests as well as those of diving, were expected to be indulged in every day during their stay in Camp Surprise, the boys would keep well away from the place where that steady swirl in the water told of the treacherous sucker-hole.

Mr. Gordon's chief forte lay in water athletics. He was like a duck himself, and never tired of teaching those boys who showed an inclination to learn. It was of vast importance to know just what ought to be done should a swimmer be suddenly seized with a cramp while in deep water, and with no one near to help him.

Then he took pains to show them just how it was possible to break the frenzied grip of a drowning person, that has so many times drawn a would-be rescuer down to a watery grave. Whether the grasp was upon the wrists, the neck, or around the body from the back, there was a simple method of shaking off the terrified one in order to clutch him unawares.

Talk or entreaty being impossible under such circumstances, immediate action is the only way of accomplishing results. In the wrist hold the swimmer must suddenly raise his arms and sink, eluding the other's clutch as he goes down. When clasped about the neck it is necessary to raise the knees and give a sudden and powerful thrust forward that forces the other away.

"That grip on the back has always been the most difficult to manage, for me at least," the instructor continued, while explaining the various methods by actual demonstration, in the water; "sometimes you can take hold of the wrists that are clasped around you, and by pushing with all your force backward, find a chance to slip out from the threatening embrace."

"But suppose that fails?" observed Jack, who, as a good swimmer, was eagerly listening to all that was said, and endeavoring to profit by the advice.

The scoutmaster shrugged his shoulders at this question.

"Well," he said gravely, "under such conditions there remains but one method. It sounds cruel, but remember that two lives are at stake. Heroic measures alone can save one, and give the other a chance. Throw back your head suddenly with considerable force. You will come in contact with his nose, and give him a shock that is likely to so unsettle him that you can break away, and turn around."

He even showed the boys how this could be done, without, of course, bringing into play the roughest part of the rescue act.

If every Boy Scout only learned these simple rules for rescuing a comrade without running much risk himself, dozens and scores of precious lives might be saved every Summer.

As evening came on, and preparations were being made to have a rousing supper, in order to celebrate the arrival of the scoutmaster, Mr. Gordon and Paul separated themselves from the rest of the campers to talk matters over.

"One thing is sure, Paul," remarked Mr. Gordon, with a look of grim determination; "we must make certain that there is no repetition of last night's bombardment."

"You mean the Slavin crowd, sir, I take it?" observed the patrol leader.

"Yes," went on Mr. Gordon; "and I commend your plan for nipping such a thing in the bud. Of course it's a shame that we are not allowed to camp up here in peace. But those fellows need a good lesson before they'll call quits, and go back home. I've made up my mind just what ought to be done in the matter."

"You know," said Paul, "I suggested having several of our scouts located up on the side of the mountain, with plenty of ammunition handy; and when the first stone is thrown, they could send a volley right at the spot where they discover the others at work."

"A good idea, too," commented the scoutmaster, readily, "and one we will put into operation; but even that does not strike at the root of the matter. If we are disturbed to-night, or at any other time by those unruly boys, I shall organize an expedition on the very next morning, to search the side of the mountain back of us, in the hope of finding where they have their headquarters."

"We have made up our minds that it must be in a cave. I understand the mountain is fairly honeycombed with them in parts, Mr. Gordon."

"I have no doubt that will prove to be the case," continued the leader of the troop; "since you say they brought no tents along, and not very much to eat. And should we find out where they are located I am going to manage in some way to make them lose what few provisions they have. That is the quickest way in the world to subdue a hostile army; capture their base of supplies."

"You mean they will have to go back home, or stay hungry?" laughed Paul; "well, I never thought of that, and must say it is fine. I don't think you'll have any trouble about getting recruits for that expedition. The fact is, every fellow will want to be in the party."

"Then we'll choose those we want," said Mr. Gordon, "and make the rest guard the camp, which might be raided by the angry Slavin crowd, when they learned what was on the carpet. But Paul, that odor in the air smells very appetizing. I imagine our cooks must be doing themselves proud to-night. It will be hard to wait for the assembly call. Look at our William

putting on airs with that chef's white cap cocked over his ears. Oh! this is certainly worth while coming for. What's that, Bobolink picking up his bugle? I really believe supper is ready. How glad I am to be here to-night. Come, Paul, and let us see what sort of fare the Stanhope troop can offer us."

CHAPTER XXVII

GATHERING CLOUDS

Pop! pop! pop!

"Listen to that, will you?" shouted William, as he jumped to his feet, and waved his arms above his head to attract attention.

It was the following day. The night had passed without any alarm, and the squad of scouts posted on the side of the mountain with instructions to shower stones on Ted and his allies should any attack be made on the camp, had their labor for their pains, since nothing happened out of the ordinary.

During the middle of the morning, while many of the scouts were at work developing plates, and printing pictures that had already been taken, suddenly there came on the breeze that quick pulsating sound, so unlike anything one might expect to hear up in this vast solitude.

"It's Ward's motorcycle!" cried Jud Elderkin, almost upsetting the daylight film-tank in his eagerness to gain his feet.

"Yes, and he's coming down the old road like fun," remarked another of the boys with a laugh; "reckon a wildcat or something is after him!"

"There he is!" called Philip Towne, pointing to an opening among the trees; and immediately adding, "no he's gone past. Look what's that chasing him?"

"Oh! that's the rest of the lot, whooping it up on their wheels," remarked William, himself interested, and ready to snap his camera at the procession as soon as it got within open range; "and they look like they've had a bad scare, as sure as you live. Oh! there goes Scissors head over heels in the bushes. What a cropper he took, and how his head will sing to-morrow."

"But he's up again, and mounted," broke in Jack. "As sure as you live, boys, they do look like they wanted to get back home in a hurry. What d'ye suppose has scared them?"

By this time Ward on his motorcycle was abreast of the camp. He was not putting up any great speed, for the road would not allow of it. On this account the fellows on ordinary bicycles were able to hang closely to his rear.

It was not in human nature to hold back that cheer which went up from the camp of the Boy Scouts. Possibly there was considerable of irony in it too, the kind that smarts with all lads. Those who were in full flight seemed to consider that they were being held up to derision, for they sent back answering cries of scorn, accompanied by not a few gestures.

"Hurrah, I've got the whole kit!" shouted William, as he lowered his camera, "Ward, Scissors, Bud Jones, Monkey Eggleston and Nat Green. We've got all the evidence we want, to show they were up here. But I missed that dandy header Scissors took! What wouldn't I give to get that?"

"I might spare you a copy, if my exposure turns out all right, William," remarked Jack, smiling; "for I just happened to be pressing the button when he showed us what an acrobat he had become."

"They're gone now," said Tom Betts, as the last of the group, being poor Scissors himself, with one hand trying to staunch the blood that flowed from his nose, wobbled among the stones that so plentifully strewed the unused road.

Paul and Jack exchanged glances as they approached each other.

"What do you suppose has happened to give them that bad scare?" asked the latter.

"I might give a guess, but perhaps we'll never know," replied Paul.

"I suppose," ventured his chum, "you're thinking of that man, the fellow who stole our ham, and who came up here in that light rig?"

"Yes," said the patrol leader, seriously, "but when I was out on the mountain this morning after breakfast I thought I'd take a chance to follow that trail further. What do you think I found only a few hundred feet away from our camp?"

"I really don't know, Paul."

"The tracks of two other men!" came the reply, in Paul's most impressive manner.

"Oh! then the thief wasn't alone; he has friends up here!" ejaculated Jack.

"That's a point I'm not decided on," Paul went on. "These tracks were not made at the same time as his. They always cut across the long footprint, marked by the patch on the shoe. That told me they were *following* the thief. Then I figured out that, as it was impossible to do this in the night, they must have come across his trail early this morning, and taken it up."

"H'm! That sounds as if they might want to meet the thief. Then they can't be very dear friends of his, Paul!" exclaimed Jack.

"My idea is that they want to find the man who made those footprints. Just as soon as they discovered his tracks they started following him. And that was so close to our camp they must have smelled the bacon frying, and the coffee."

Paul had evidently been thinking seriously over the matter, and had arrived at some conclusion.

"I guess they didn't want to see us very bad. Look here, Paul, do you think the man who drove along in that rig is one of these two men?" demanded Jack, suddenly.

"Now you're getting close to what I mapped out myself," smiled Paul.

"Perhaps Ted and his crowd had an ugly experience with those men?" suggested Jack, following up his train of thought.

"I can't imagine what else could have given them such a scare," returned the patrol leader. "When they came in sight they looked rattled for keeps. I noticed too, that Ted seemed to hold his left arm half dangling at his side, as if it had been hurt."

"Well, anyhow, if they've scared the Slavin crowd out of this region we'll have to take off our lids to the unknown gentlemen," laughed his chum.

The balance of that day passed off pleasantly. Many things occupied the attention of the campers; and all the while they were learning more about

the secrets which a bountiful Nature hides in her solitudes away from the haunts of men.

"Thank goodness," declared Nuthin, as he rubbed his side with considerable feeling, "no more of that guard duty up on the side of the mountain after this. Since Ted and his bad lot have skipped out, there's no need of expecting a shower of rocks at any time during the night. I'll sleep like a brick to-night, boys, you bet!"

"But all the same we'll keep guard, and don't you forget it, Nuthin," declared William, who chanced to overhear the remark; "because you see, the same thief who grabbed our fine ham might take a notion to get his fingers on more grub, and first thing you know we'd have to cut and run for town just like those fellows on wheels did, starved out."

"Yes," interposed Bobolink, as he joined the group, and lowered his voice mysteriously; "I just heard Paul and Mr. Gordon talking about two more men that seem to be wandering at large up here. That makes three, you see, and none of 'em care to step into our dandy camp in the daytime. Boys, don't you see what an ugly look that has?"

The three scouts exchanged glances, and nodded their heads. Like all boys they loved a touch of excitement, and the fact that there was a mystery hanging about Rattlesnake Mountain just pleased them.

"Now, what d'ye think these prowlers might be?" asked Nuthin, in awed tones.

"Huh! Why d'ye suppose men'd hang out in such a place as this, and shun their fellows, if they ain't been doin' something against the law?" demanded William, with lofty scorn.

"My! then you mean they're escaped convicts, or something like that?" gasped the deeply absorbed Nuthin, his eyes round with wonder, and perhaps a touch of fear.

"I wouldn't be surprised," replied William, indifferently, as became a valiant scout; "and it's my opinion that the feller who passed us in that rig when we were resting on the road that day, looked like *he* was a bad egg. If ever I saw what my dad calls a hang-dog look on a man's face, he was all to the

good. I hope I don't meet the same when I'm doing my lone stunt through the woods, that's all."

Joe Clausin had been hovering near while they talked in this way. At first he had shown just the natural curiosity a boy might under the circumstances; but as William began to declare his belief in the rascality of the lone traveler, his face turned rosy red, and then pale. He walked quickly away, perhaps afraid that one of his companions might notice his confusion.

A guard was set that night as usual, and their supply of food was placed in such a position that none of it might be stolen by any clever method of using a fishhook and line.

Again morning came without any alarm. The scouts by this time had begun to hope that their troubles were over. During the day they penetrated further into the wilderness of rocks and trees that surrounded them, and Mr. Gordon was kept busy explaining the innumerable matters that caught the attention of the eager lads in every quarter.

The weather had grown much warmer. Indeed, several of the boys complained of the heat; and as clouds covered the heavens at nightfall, the scoutmaster warned them to be prepared for a storm before morning.

Once more tent pins were examined, and everything made as secure as possible. At the same time Paul surveyed the black sky with secret misgivings, wondering what they would have to do should a tornado sweep down upon them there on the side of the mountains, and demolish their tents.

The scouts turned in earlier than usual that night, for Mr. Gordon thought it well to get what sleep they could. He went the rounds last of all, to make sure the provisions could not be wholly ruined by water, no matter what befell.

By nine o'clock the camp was wrapped in silence, even the fire dying out. The moan of the wind through the pines further up the mountain helped to sing most of the scouts to sleep. Two hours later the guard was changed; and again silence fell upon the scene.

It must have been midnight and past when Paul was awakened by what he thought was the rush and roar of a railroad train. Alarmed he sat up to listen.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GREAT STORM

"Oh! Listen to that, will you!" came a loud voice from a nearby tent, as one of the other sleepers, aroused by the racket, started up in wild alarm.

Shrill cries arose in every quarter. Not a single scout now but who was wide-awake, and endeavoring to pull on his clothes in haste. That former experience had at least taught them a lesson; and much confusion was avoided at the start.

Already were the tents wabbling furiously. Some of the more timid boys kept calling the name of Mr. Gordon, just as if the scoutmaster, however willing, could be of any avail against the aroused forces of Nature.

"Wow! look at that, will you!" shouted Nuthin, as the tent under which he and his three companions cowered, threatened to sail away before the increasing gale.

The storm was no ordinary one. Paul knew something of the signs, and even his stout heart quailed a bit as he heard the terrible sound of trees crashing to the earth somewhere near by. Perhaps this was to be a duplicate of the hurricane that had toppled over so many of the big forest monarchs years before!

Already were the boys outside, hanging on to the tents for dear life, regardless of the fact that they were being slowly but surely drenched.

"We can't seem to beat it out!" gasped William, almost out of breath with his tremendous exertions.

"She's going to carry off, fellows!" shrieked another scout.

"Don't anybody let go yet!" commanded Paul; equal to the occasion.

He darted into the wildly agitated tent, and with all his strength tore the central pole from its hold. The tent instantly collapsed, amid the howls of the upset boys, who really thought it was tearing away from their grasp.

"Now pile some rocks on top!" ordered Paul, as he crept out from under.

They seemed to grasp his idea, and immediately set about carrying it out. In this way the wind could not get at the tent; and the consequence was, that later on it would be found safely held under the press.

Paul darted to the next tent, where another lot of scared boys were holding on for dear life; while the thundering of the storm beat in their ears, and almost demoralized the entire troop.

It was his intention to assist them in the same way he had his immediate chums; but just as he reached the spot there arose a combined shout.

"Look out! there she goes!"

With a ripping sound the tent was torn from the grasp of the four scouts, and went sailing off into the pitchy darkness. Paul could only hope that it might become fast in some friendly tree, and be found again when daylight arrived.

Not satisfied with stopping there he darted to the next bunch who were apparently still able to hold to their canvas. They did not know what he meant to do, and when the tent suddenly collapsed loud were their cries of distress. But Paul was quickly among them, shouting orders in their ears similar to those he had given in the other case.

So he kept on. A third and a fourth tent he treated in the same way, and by now many of the scouts began themselves to grapple with the solution of the problem, so that he was able to call upon these for assistance.

When he made for the big round top that covered the provisions Paul was agreeably surprised to find that it was already down, and snugly gripped by half a dozen heavy stones, at the corners and elsewhere.

From this he knew that Mr. Gordon, who had spoken to him about this relief measure in case of sore necessity, must have been there.

All these things took place in really less time than it requires to tell them. Perhaps it seemed hours to some of the alarmed boys; but only a few minutes had actually passed between the arousing of the camp, and the final scene where the last tent was thrown down and secured.

So far as Paul knew only two had blown away. Considering the fearful violence of the wind that howled along the plateau, crossing the lake, and throwing the water high in the air, this was doing very well indeed.

And what a sight the camp presented when that moment arrived! Paul could hardly keep from laughing at the picture that he saw when the lightning flashed; even though his heart was still beating like a trip-hammer with excitement.

It certainly looked as though a cyclone had struck Camp Surprise. Ruin and desolation surrounded them on all sides. Trees had been blown down in many instances, and everywhere were signs of a tempest such as none of these lads had even known in all their lives.

Paul managed to find the scoutmaster after a bit.

"Looks like a bad job, sir!" he shouted in Mr. Gordon's ear.

"It certainly does, Paul," came the reply, also in a loud tone; "but bad as this seems I'm afraid from the signs that we'll get even worse before morning!"

"What ought we do then?" asked Paul, his anxiety aroused once more by these words.

"We ought to get out of this as soon as we can. Those trees up there look as if they might fall down on us any time," replied Mr. Gordon quickly.

"But where can we go, sir," cried Paul. "I've heard lots of trees go over, down the side of the mountain. Besides, there's no shelter there for us."

"We will have to make our way along the side of the mountain up here," answered Mr. Gordon, "and trust to luck to run across one of those caves you were speaking about. Shelter we must find as soon as possible. It would be hard on some of the boys to remain exposed to this wind and pouring rain all the night."

"Shall I try to get them together, sir?" asked the patrol leader.

"Yes, round them up near the mess tent, Paul."

They separated, and began to grope around, for it was fearfully dark, save when a flash of lightning came to show the terrors surrounding them. Paul, as soon as he came upon a cowering figure, shouted the directions of the scoutmaster in his ear, and then went on.

He was himself more awed than he would care to admit by the nature of this awful storm. Nothing in all his limited experience had ever approached it in violence.

"Oh! that lucky Slavin crowd, to get home before this came along!" shouted envious William, when Paul came upon him trying to crawl under a rock that offered a little shelter from the fury of the blast.

When he could find no more boys to summon, Paul himself made his way toward the fallen mess tent. Here he found about a score of excited boys clustered, trying to bolster up each others' spirits by making out that they were not a bit afraid.

"Are all here?" Mr. Gordon first of all demanded, in such a way that every fellow was able to hear what he said.

Paul started to count, pulling each scout behind him. A flash from above was of considerable assistance to him in carrying out his plan.

"Not one missing but Nuthin, sir!" he announced, presently.

"Who saw him last?" demanded Mr. Gordon.

"I did, sir," replied one of the scouts, promptly; "he was hangin' on to our tent when it blew away into the air!"

"Oh! then he must have been carried up into the tree, for the tent stuck there," announced another voice, with a thrill of horror in it.

"Come and show me which tree; Paul, I may want your help. The rest of you stay right here, and don't move under any circumstances," and so

saying Mr. Gordon caught the boy who "knew" by the shoulder, and dragged him along.

Paul staggered after them. The wind was very strong, and it was impossible to walk in places without bending down almost to the earth. Besides, there seemed to be many branches torn from the trees flying through the air, so that it was perilous to life and limb to be abroad.

But the scoutmaster was one who could command, and he forced the tentmate of the missing Nuthin to find the spot where the canvas had stood at the time it was torn out of their hands.

"That's the tree, sir!" cried the boy, trying to point in the darkness.

"I can see something white up in the branches, sir; it must be the tent!" Paul himself shouted just then.

They made their way forward, and the lightning, happening just then to dart in zigzag lines across the inky heavens as if to assist them, they saw that sure enough the missing tent was caught in the tree, about fifteen feet from the ground.

"Can you see anything of him, Paul?" called Mr. Gordon, as the three of them cowered under the tree, that was bending and groaning before the blast.

"I didn't that time, sir; but wait for another flash; perhaps we'll have better luck," replied the patrol leader, eagerly.

It was a long time coming. Paul could feel the other scout shivering furiously as his hand touched him, probably more through fright than excessive cold; though the experience of being soaked to the skin was far from comforting.

Then came a dazzling flood of electric light that almost blinded them.

"There he is, sir, hanging onto the tent! I think he must be twisted up in one of the ropes. Shall I go up and find out?" called Paul.

"I think you'll have to, my boy," answered the scoutmaster; and if ever he felt pride in one of his troop it must have been then, when Paul, forgetting

what chances there were of that tree falling, offered to climb into the branches, in order to rescue a comrade in peril.

Without losing a second the patrol leader sought the lowest limb, and drew himself up. He could feel the trunk of the bending tree straining as it was twisted by the violence of each terrible blast; but undaunted by this impending calamity Paul's only desire was to reach the side of poor Nuthin before worse things happened to him than being carried away with the balloon-like tent.

CHAPTER XXIX

A PANIC-STRICKEN CROWD

"Oh! Help! help!"

The cry reached Paul's ears between blasts of the howling wind; but he never could have caught it had he not been so close to the wretched boy who gave utterance to the appeal.

With every nerve strained to the utmost, the young patrol leader continued to climb upward. He could see the tent flattened out like a great pancake against the branches of the tree. It had opened as it swept along, and the force of the gale had for the time being turned it into a sort of balloon. This accounted for the carrying away of Nuthin, who was a slender lad at best.

Paul found more or less difficulty in reaching a point where he could come in contact with his comrade. Branches were in the way, and swayed back and forth in a furious fashion as fresh gusts of wind caught them.

"I'm coming, Albert; hold out a little!" Paul shouted as he strained; and it was perhaps strange that in such a period of excitement he unconsciously used the real name of Cypher, something few people save his parents and teachers did, when A. Cypher stood so handsomely for Nuthin.

One more desperate effort, and Paul, by stretching out his hand, found he could touch the other. Doubtless the contact sent a thrill of hope through the hanging scout.

"How are you caught?" Paul called, as he managed to force himself still nearer by hanging on to the branches with his other hand, and twisting both legs around the same.

"I think a piece of rope is wrapped around my body. Anyway it hurts like fun, and my arms seem all numb," he heard Nuthin reply.

This sort of an explanation just fitted in with what Paul had conjectured. He had found it hard to believe that Nuthin would be so frightened as to cling desperately to the flying tent, when he knew that it was being carried off by the gale. He must have been an involuntary passenger of the airship that quickly ended its short flight in a neighboring tree.

Fortunately Paul had his stout pocket knife with him. He never went without it; and furthermore, it was his habit to keep all of the blades very sharp. If a knife is going to be worth a grain of salt it should be sharp. Many a fellow has realized this with dismay when some situation has confronted him calling for a keen blade, and has found his knife almost worthless to solve the difficulty.

Perhaps had he been asked later just how he managed to get that knife out of his pocket, and the largest blade opened, Paul might have some trouble in telling.

The first thing he knew, he was again pushing himself inch by inch closer to the boy who was hung up in the tree, and feeling for the rope that held Nuthin fast.

When, after a little, he had found it, Paul prepared to press the edge of his knife against the same.

"Oh! please hurry, Paul; I'm awfully afraid the tree will go down!" he heard Nuthin cry.

But Paul had another problem to face. If he cut suddenly there would be nothing to support the other, and Nuthin might have an ugly fall through small branches that would scratch his face still more than it had been already cut.

"Can you feel anything under your feet?" he asked, almost in the other's ear.

"Yes, I've been standing on a small limb; but sometimes I slip off when that wind swings the tree so. I'm deathly sick, Paul, and dizzy. But one of my hands is loose now. Tell me what to do, please," came back instantly, as loud as Nuthin could speak.

"That's good," declared Paul. "Feel around just above you. Can't you get hold of a branch or two, and hang on when I cut the rope? I want to keep you from falling when the support goes."

"Why, yes, I've got hold of one, Paul," answered Nuthin, who seemed to catch a trifle of the other's coolness; "and my feet are on the one below, now."

Paul dared not wait another second. He pressed the blade against the rope, and with a determined movement severed the strands.

Then, dropping his handy knife, he immediately threw his arm around the body of Nuthin. Possibly the other might have managed to keep from falling; but still he was in a state of panic, and his muscles were weakened by their recent confinement.

"It's all right!" Paul shouted, when Nuthin gave utterance to a shriek: "I've got you safe! Now, try to work your way over here. Take it easy, and you'll make it, never fear."

And Nuthin did. By degrees he seemed to gather courage, and was able to help himself. In times of stress there is nothing like confidence. It carries nearly everything before it, and brings victory where otherwise defeat must have won the day.

Presently Nuthin had reached the body of the tree, and was descending. There was really no need to urge him to haste, for he could not get down to the ground a second too soon to satisfy his anxiety.

They found the others awaiting them below, and Mr. Gordon caught Nuthin in his arms as if to express delight at his almost marvelous escape. What if no one had noticed the absence of Albert, and they had hurried away from the ruined camp, leaving him fast in the tree? He would have been in for a terrible experience, and in the end it might have resulted seriously for the boy.

"Are you badly injured, Albert?" asked the instructor, as he drew the other on toward the point where the balance of the disrupted troop crouched, trying to get out of the way of those furious bursts of wind.

"Pretty sore, sir, but nothing serious, I reckon," came the reassuring answer, which proved that Nuthin did, after all, possess a fair amount of pluck.

When they arrived in the vicinity of the spot where the mess tent had stood, the rest of the troop greeted their coming with a faint cheer. It takes a good deal to utterly discourage a bunch of healthy boys; and while things looked pretty bleak, still they made out to consider the adventure in the light of a joke. No one wished his companions to know just how badly frightened he really was.

"Now we must get out of this," said Mr. Gordon, "and as we make our way along, try and keep together as much as you can. Pair off, and hold on, each to his mate. Ready?"

In this manner, leaving Dobbin, the horse to his fate, they deserted the late joyous camp, now lying a seeming wreck. Yet things were not as bad as they might have been, thanks to their wisdom in cutting down the tents before more of them blew away.

The crash of falling trees could still be heard with every renewed furious blast. But just as Mr. Gordon had said, these sounds proceeded almost wholly from the lower region. That was the reason he declined to seek safety in that quarter, preferring to push in the teeth of the blow, because the rocky shelters were to be found there.

They made but slow progress, but as time passed on they managed to gain some distance from the open space of the late camp, where the little hurricane had so free a sweep.

As yet they had not been successful in discovering any sort of a refuge worthy of the name. The rocks were piled up all around them, and they had to do a great deal of clambering over obstacles in order to get along; but so far as a cave went none had been found.

Mr. Gordon knew that some of his charges must be perilously near the point of exhaustion. All the boys were not as robust and hardy as Paul and several others. He was becoming genuinely alarmed concerning them, knowing that unless shelter were quickly found they would be apt to fall.

"We must change our tactics," he called out, finally; "and instead of going on in a trailing line, spread out and cover more ground. If any one finds a cave let him give the scout's shout of discovery!"

After that they advanced more slowly, since it was really every one for himself. Paul saw that the scoutmaster must have been right when he declared that they had not yet experienced the worst of the terrible Summer storm. It seemed to be getting slowly but surely more violent, and he wondered what amount of damage it would carry along the farms of the Bushkill, and the various towns and villages bordering its banks.

Stumbling blindly at times, it was no wonder the boys had many a tumble. Hands were bruised and scratched, yet in the excitement little attention was paid to such trifling things.

Several times Paul fancied that one of his mates had called out, and hope began to surge afresh through his heart. In every case, however, it proved to be a mistake, since no succeeding calls announced the glad fact that shelter had been discovered. He was forced to believe that the sounds he heard were only new exultant shrieks of the wind, as it swept along the side of old Rattlesnake Mountain.

Jack was close at the side of his chum, and when the darkness prevented them from actually seeing each other, they frequently caught hands, so that they might not be separated.

Whenever a little lull came in the storm the cheery voice of the scoutmaster was heard, encouraging his followers to hold out "just a little longer." In this time of gloom Mr. Gordon endeared himself to the hearts of those soaked boys as he had never before done while the sun was shining, and all seemed well.

Paul realized that they were now plodding along over ground that was totally unfamiliar to him. It gave him new hope that shortly one of the extended line might discover what they sought.

And it was just when he was bolstering up his courage in this fashion that he heard a sudden sharp cry from his chum. The lightning flashed out at that second and Paul looked eagerly toward the spot where he knew Jack had been but a brief interval before. To his astonishment his chum had utterly

disappeared from view, as though the rocks had opened and swallowed him!

CHAPTER XXX

THE UNDERGROUND REFUGE

"Jack! oh! Jack!" called the patrol leader, filled with dismay over the mysterious disappearance of his best friend.

"Hello! Paul!"

That was surely Jack answering him, but where could he be? The sound seemed to come from underground, which fact gave Paul a suspicion regarding the truth.

"Where are you?" he shouted, as he flattened himself out close to the ground.

"Down in a hole! Look out, or you'll come in too. Tell Mr. Gordon I've found a cave!" came back to his ears.

So, after all, it was Paul who sent forth the signal agreed on, announcing the welcome fact that a refuge had been discovered. The rest of the boys came crawling to the spot by twos, eager and curious.

"Take care!" Paul cried out, as he heard them arriving on either side, "Jack fell down a hole right about here. We must find where it is, or else some more of us may follow suit!"

Paul believed that his chum could not have been seriously injured by his sudden and unexpected descent. Had this been the case he would not have called quite so cheerily as he did.

Searching in the quarter where he last remembered seeing Jack, he presently discovered that the trailing vines hid the mouth of a cave. It was not more than four feet across, but would answer their purpose, no doubt.

And even as he looked he saw a match flame out below, and caught sight of Jack on his knees, peering eagerly upward. Luckily he, as well as every

other scout, had learned to always carry matches in a waterproof case while in camp, since there could be no telling when they might need such valuable little articles.

Paul quickly found a way to clamber down the side of the opening, and join his chum.

"Well, this is something like," he observed, relieved to find that he could now speak without shouting, as the sound of the gale was deadened underground. "Were you hurt by that tumble, Jack?"

"Oh! not worth mentioning," replied the one addressed, as he rubbed his knee, and then struck another match, so that the others might see how to get down.

Some were fortunate enough to make the descent safely. A few came sprawling, and sat there rubbing their bruises and grunting. Presently Mr. Gordon, counting noses, announced that the entire troop had been safely housed.

Wallace being one of the first to arrive, had busied himself looking around while the balance of his comrades were making the descent.

Finding some bits of dry wood handy he started a little blaze. This served two purposes, for while it dissipated the dense darkness that surrounded them, at the same time it seemed to give the drenched and shivering lads a trifle of new courage.

"See if you can find more wood, fellows," Wallace observed, knowing that if thus employed the scouts were less apt to grow despondent over their discouraging condition.

As the boy scouts began to feel more comfortable, their spirits commenced to go upward again, just as the mercury in a thermometer rises with the coming of heat.

"We're a lucky lot, I tell you, fellows, to stumble on such a fine snug hole in the nick of time!" declared Tom Betts, as he rubbed his hands together, before giving his place in the front rank to another scout less favored, and still shivering.

Some of the scouts were so utterly exhausted that presently, when they began to feel more comfortable, as their clothes dried in a measure, they gave evidence of drowsiness.

Mr. Gordon made these fellows lie down in a heap, and try to sleep. They would secure a certain degree of warmth by contact with their mates.

But there were others of just a contrary mind, who had never been more wideawake in their lives than just then. Sleep was the last thing they thought about.

"I wonder where this cave leads to?" remarked Bobolink, after more than an hour had elapsed.

Paul was interested, of course. Anything that bordered on mystery at all, always had a peculiar fascination for him. And Jack was pretty much of the same mind.

"If we could only get a few torches together," the former observed in answer to Bobolink's remark, "I'd just like to take a little trip around, and see what lies back there. Some of us have gone fifty feet and more, looking for more wood; and there was no back wall to the place. Perhaps it might have another entrance; and I'd just like to know whether any other fellows ever did camp in here. If we found the ashes of a fire we'd know for certain."

"Let's go!" suggested Bobolink, ready for any lark.

"But how about the torches?" continued the cautious Jack; "I wouldn't like to get lost in such a twisting hole in the ground. That might turn out to be worse than lying out there in the storm."

"Oh! we can get enough wood to keep us going," replied Bobolink; "and besides, it seems to be lying all along the passage, as if some feller had dropped pieces every time he went in with a load. Come on, say yes, Paul."

"All right, then," said the patrol leader, ready to give way to argument; "but we must be careful. I've got a scheme boys, to keep from getting lost in this place."

"Tell us how, then!" demanded both the others; and Joe Clausin, who had been hovering near by, came closer to catch what was being said.

"I've got a piece of red chalk in my pocket; and we can mark the way as we go," Paul continued; "and when we get tired of prowling around so that we want to come back here, all we have to do is to follow the red marks of the arrows."

"That's what I call a bully scheme, Paul. Now come along," cried Bobolink.

"Count me in too, fellows," said a voice just then.

"Why, hello! Joe, is that you?" exclaimed Paul, turning to look into the eager face of the Clausin boy. "Why sure, if you want to go along, and feel able to keep on your feet. Start up one of your torches, Bobolink; and every one keep his eyes on the lookout for more tinder as we go along."

Paul could not help noticing that Joe had an unusually eager look on his face at the time he asked to accompany them. He could read between the lines, and guessed what was in the other's mind. Perhaps Joe allowed himself to imagine, or even hope, that luck might enable them to run across the man who had passed up into this region, and who looked so like some one he believed must be at the other side of the world.

Paul took the lead as the four boys moved away. Mr. Gordon looked after them; but having the utmost confidence in the young patrol leader, he did not ask them what their intentions were. And none of them imagined they would be gone any great length of time.

Presently they had passed the line that marked the boundary of any former search for fuel. And Paul noticed as he walked on, holding the rude torch above his head, that the winding passage seemed to be constantly getting larger. This gave him the idea that they must have fallen into one of its extreme branches; and that perhaps, after all, their exploration might reveal wonders of which none of them had so much as dreamed.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BOY SCOUTS AS EXPLORERS

"Oh! Shucks! there she goes again!" exclaimed Bobolink, when the torch suddenly whiffed out, to leave them in the dark.

Bobolink sometimes carried the light when the splinter of wood Paul had held burned to its finish. He was not as careful as he might be, and consequently twice already had they been compelled to stop and use a precious match in order to renew the illumination.

"You want to be more careful, Bobolink," remarked Paul, as he applied a match to the still smouldering torch his companion carried.

"I was trying to keep from trouble," grumbled the one who had been at fault; "but something just seemed to snuff it out. Did anybody hear a sound like a dog growling right then?"

"Oh! my, what do you mean, Bobolink?" asked Joe; "you're just trying to scare us, and you know it. 'Taint fair either. I felt a draught of air, and that was what puffed your light out. There ain't any wild animals in here, are there, Paul?"

"I don't think so," replied Paul, smiling at Joe's alarm; "because you can nearly always smell the den of a fox or a wildcat. Now, what are you staring at, Bobolink?"

"Look there, what d'ye call that, fellows?" demanded the torchbearer, pointing ahead to where the little light just managed to win out against the gloom.

"Been a fire in here, that's sure," observed Jack, eagerly advancing.

In another minute all of them were bending over a flattened heap of ashes, undoubtedly the remains of some fire made by unknown people who had occupied the cave.

"Wonder whether they were tramps, or thieves?" Bobolink was saying.

"Perhaps neither," remarked Paul, who was looking closely about him, with the intention of allowing nothing of moment to escape his gaze.

"Huh! then you think perhaps that Ted Slavin and his crowd might have made this fire; is that it, Paul?" asked Bobolink, quite satisfied to have another do his thinking for him.

"Well, hardly, because these ashes have been here a long time, perhaps several years, for all we know," remarked Paul.

"Go back a little further, Paul, and say the mound builders left 'em," chuckled the doubting Bobolink, who always had to be shown.

"Look for yourselves. You know what fresh ashes are like. These have settled down a long time. If it was outdoors now, the rains would have washed them away; but sheltered in this cave they've just blown about by the current of air. And see here why I know no boy sat beside this fire," and while speaking Paul walked over to pick up several things his quick eye had discovered.

"An old shoe, and a big one at that!" said Jack, nodding his head, as if agreeing with his chum's version.

"And a tomato can with the top cut away," broke in Bobolink, as he looked, "and a stick in the hole of the cover. Say, Paul, I guess you're right, because I've seen tramps heating coffee in that style. It wasn't Ted and his crowd after all; and I guess the old mound builders didn't have tomato cans to use."

"Or coffee to put in them," laughed Paul, turning the can upside down, and allowing some dark grains to fall on his palm; at which Bobolink sniffed, and then threw up both hands as though giving in.

"Shall we go on further?" asked Paul. "I'm ready to leave it to the rest."

"Sure," declared Jack, without hesitation.

"Count me in on that, Paul," came from Joe, stoutly.

"I'm all to the good," remarked Bobolink; "because, you see, we want to know what sort of a joint we've got here; and if there's any front door to the same. We just sort of fell in at the back entrance; which I take it was hardly the proper thing for decent fellers to do. Skidoo, Paul; we're on your track!"

For some little time after that they found nothing of interest. The passage kept winding in and out, in a way that was "some confusing," as Bobolink said. And since there were other passages branching off the main stem Paul thought it wise to bring his red chalk into play.

Accordingly, he marked an arrow that always pointed along the right channel, and was calculated to lead them back to where the balance of the troop was quartered.

"That's a cinch!" was the way Bobolink greeted this action; and indeed it seemed that no one could possibly miss the route with such a guide at hand.

But they had forgotten that light was absolutely necessary in order to tell the way these arrows pointed. Pretty soon Jack awoke to the fact that they no longer seemed able to pick up small pieces of wood which could be used as torches.

"And our supply has nearly run out, too," he added, holding up only one more piece.

"That looks serious," said Paul; "and perhaps after all our smartness we're going to get lost in the dark. How many matches in the crowd?"

A hasty search revealed the act that all told they could only muster nine; for they had been using quite a number.

"That isn't much to count on, if we have to depend on them till we get back to where we can find wood again," remarked Paul, thoughtfully. "What shall we do, boys?"

"I'm willing to leave it to you," replied Jack; who suspected that his chum had an idea of some sort, which he was ready to spring on them.

Both the others agreed with Jack; for they knew that Paul was better able to grapple with such an emergency than either of them claimed to be. And besides, it is so nice to have another fellow do all the thinking at such times.

"Then listen," said the patrol leader; "the fact that we can feel a draught of air plainly here tells me there must be another opening to the cave not very far off. If that is the case perhaps we could reach it easier than go back over all the ground we've covered. What say, fellows?"

Every boy declared himself in favor of pushing on into the unknown region that lay before, rather than to take chances trying to retrace their steps. Perhaps the spirit of adventure lured them on more or less, for it appeals to almost every lad with red blood in his veins.

"That settles it, then; and we'd better get off at once," remarked Paul, satisfied that it was all for the best.

The last torch was speedily used. Then they crept along in the dark for a time, after which one of the matches was struck very carefully, in order that they might see their surroundings.

"Wow!" exclaimed Bobolink as he found himself looking into what seemed to be a very deep and black hole; "wasn't it lucky we got the glim going when we did? I guess I'd dropped into that pit if we'd held off any longer. My good little angel must have warned me to light up."

After that they were even more careful. None of them felt like taking a header into such a gulf, since a fall might break limbs, or do even worse.

"That was my last match!" announced Bobolink, after a while.

"I've got just one more," said Jack, dolefully.

Paul had another, and Joe was completely out. Still there did not seem to be any end to the passage; and Paul, for the first time, began to suspect that they had made a serious mistake in deciding to go ahead, instead of retreating.

"I'm just getting played out, and that's no yarn," announced Bobolink, who had been limping for some little time, and grunting, as he would himself have said, "to beat the band."

"Suppose then, you three wait here for me," proposed Paul; "I'll make my way along further, and try to find out if there is any hope of finding an

opening. I promise to keep one hand on the wall here, so I can get back again."

They were loth to have him go; but Joe was almost "all in" too, and Jack thought he ought to stay with the cripples. So Paul crawled away, with but one match in his possession, and feeling in anything but a cheerful mood, although he would not discourage his chums by saying a word that would add to the gloom.

He moved cautiously as he advanced, remembering how ugly that pit had looked when Bobolink struck his match; and not wishing to find himself tumbling into such a sink. Just how long he was creeping along in this way after leaving his chums Paul hardly knew, but he must have covered quite some distance. And thus far the current of air did not seem to warrant a belief that an opening was very close by.

He was feeling discouraged, and on the point of giving it up as a bad job when he tripped over some object that, of course, he had not seen in the pitch dark. In trying to save himself from falling he upset something that made quite a clatter as it struck the rocks; when to Paul's amazement he heard a voice call out:

"Who's that?" and accompanying the words came the scratching of a match.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TIN BOX AGAIN

Paul stared, and well he might; as the match flamed up he found himself confronting a man who had evidently been sleeping on the floor of the cavern, for he had just thrown a blanket aside.

And Paul recognized him instantly as the party who had passed them on that noon, in the rig which he imagined must have been stolen—the man he had reason to believe Joe suspected to be connected with the robbery of his father.

Feeling that he would be apt to receive a hostile reception here, Paul turned to run. He hoped that, as the match went out, the other would not know just where to look for him, and thus he might escape.

But to his surprise, as he turned he found that another man faced him, who must have been located at a point he had passed while creeping along close to the wall.

Before Paul could dodge, this fellow had clasped his arms about him. The other was hastily lighting some sort of lantern, with which he seemed to be provided.

Although Paul struggled sturdily he was hardly a match for a full grown man.

"Keep still, you!" the fellow growled in his ear; "or I'll give yer somethin' you won't like. Bring the light here, Hank. Let's see what sort o' a critter we've bagged, anyhow."

Of course they knew the instant they saw Paul's suit of khaki, discolored even though it was from the rain and dirt.

"Huh! another o' them boy scouts you was tellin' me about, eh, Hank?" grumbled the man who held Paul in his embrace. "What under the sun d'ye

suppose he's doin' in here? Come to look us up, d'ye s'pose, pardner?"

Paul had already seen that the second fellow was even worse looking than the man named Hank, which he took to be a corruption of Henry. In fact, if ever there was a tramp who might be sentenced on his looks alone, this fellow could fill the bill.

"I don't know," remarked Hank, slowly, and scowling at Paul; "it doesn't hardly seem possible, though if I thought so, I'd be tempted to choke the young cub. Look here, what brought you up here, and who are you?"

"Yes," roared the second man, shaking Paul vigorously, "pipe up and tell us that, 'less you want us to do somethin' you wouldn't like. What d'ye want with us? How'd you ever git in here; and who's along with you? Say, Hank, didn't I tell you I seen that chief of police down on the road that comes up here from Tatum? I bet he sneaked around, thinkin' we'd try to cut out that way, 'stead of in the direction of Stanhope. Reckon you don't ever wanter go there agin, eh?"

"Shut up, Pim!" snapped the taller man, cutting the other short, much to Paul's regret; for somehow he just felt that the conversation was reaching an interesting point, and that if the tramp kept on he might have mentioned something worth while.

Thinking that he had better be frank with his captors Paul started in to tell of the terrible storm, and the destruction of the camp, followed by the flight of the Banner Boy Scouts along the mountainside in search of a safe refuge in the shape of a cave. When he told of how they had found such a place through mere accident the two men exchanged looks as though they believed Paul were inventing his yarn as he went along.

"What you say may be true, and again perhaps it ain't," declared the tall man called Hank; "and I reckon we'll just have to tie you neck and crop, so's to keep you from going back, and bringing a bunch of your tribe down on us. We're in possession here, and we don't want any more unwelcome guests. Pim, get a cord, and do him up!"

"Oh! please don't. What I told you was the truth, every word. I only wanted to find out if there was another opening to this cave. Don't make me a prisoner, mister! Please let me go!"

Paul shouted these words, and for a purpose. He wished to let his friends know of his predicament, believing that Jack would lead a rescue party instantly; and when three boys start to shouting in such a confined space as a cavern they can make enough racket to cause one to believe a whole army is coming.

The two men were still struggling with their prisoner, and using more or less violence in forcing their wishes upon him, when there broke out a sudden series of whoops that rang through the place.

Half a dozen wildcats engaged in a mix-up could hardly have created more of a racket than did those three lads as they hurried toward the spot where the lighted lantern showed them their chum in the hands of two hard looking customers.

Hank took the alarm immediately. He seemed to be more timid than his companion, who showed signs of being willing to turn and face the advancing enemy until he noted that he had been left in the lurch. Then, growling, and showing signs of temper, he waddled after Hank, who bore the lantern.

"Paul!" called Jack, as they drew near.

"Here!" came the answer; and then the last match that Jack possessed was sacrificed in order that he might find his chum.

The first thing that Paul noticed was another lantern on the floor of the cavern.

"Here, light this, Jack, with that precious match!" he cried, after shaking the lantern to find out whether it contained any oil.

"What under the sun does it all mean?" gasped the breathless Bobolink.

Joe seemed to be just as anxious as either of the others to know, although he did not say a single word.

"I happened on two men who were sleeping here," said Paul. "Notice the blankets and the things for cooking, will you? They must have had a hold-out here. Perhaps they chased Ted and his crowd out of the cave, because, if you look, you can see that aluminum frying pan Ward Kenwood used to

carry around with him, and which he must have forgotten in his hurry to leave."

"Did you know them, Paul?" asked Jack.

Paul turned so that he could watch Joe while he replied.

"I never saw the fellow called Pim before. He was a tough customer, too; either a regular tramp or a yeggman; and I guess from his looks he must have been ready for any game, from robbing a bank to stealing a farmer's chickens."

"How about the other?" Jack kept on.

"Well," said Paul, slowly, "you remember the man who drove past when we were at the side of the road that day, and whose wheel marks we saw all the way up here? That was the fellow. I had a good look at him. His companion called him Hank!"

"Oh! my, then it is really true!" ejaculated Joe Clausin, apparently taken quite off his guard by this declaration on the part of the patrol leader.

Paul turned upon him then and there, and looked serious.

"Joe," he said, firmly yet kindly, "once you refused to tell me what you knew or suspected about this man. I hope you won't try to bluff us off again, now that you know he's here, and everything looks as if he might be the one who took your father's valuable papers."

As he spoke Paul stooped and picked something up that had attracted his eye. It had been lying among quite a quantity of clothing and other things. Probably these had been secured in various raids on clotheslines, where the good people of the farming community were airing Winter garments before putting them away in camphor in the chest.

"Look here, Joe, what do you call this?" Paul went on.

Joe could hardly speak, he was so excited.

"It's the tin box that my dad used to keep those papers in! Oh! Paul look inside and see if they're there!" he exclaimed, trembling with eagerness as

he laid a hand on the arm of the patrol leader.

But Paul believed that his friend was doomed to disappointment, even before he opened the strange little tin box, which had been stolen from the store of the feed keeper in Stanhope.

"It's empty, you see, Joe," he said, turning it upside-down. "Look at it again, so as to make sure it's really the box."

"Oh! I'd know it anywhere, Paul," declared Joe, warmly; "and see, here's where father scratched his initials on it. I remember seeing him do that one day, while he was talking to me. Yes, this is the box. But where can the papers be?"

"In the pocket of that fellow, beyond a doubt. Who is he, Joe?"

When Paul put the question straight to him, Joe could hold out no longer. Besides, a wild hope had probably sprung up in his heart to the effect that this comrade, whom nothing seemed to daunt, might perhaps be able in some wonderful way to help him get the papers back again.

"I just guess I'll have to speak up, fellows," he said; "but please don't say anything to the others 'less my dad tells you to. You see, we've always held our heads up in Stanhope, and some people might look down on us if they knew one of the Clausin family was a convict!"

"Oh! that is the man who was at the other side of the world. What relation is he to you, Joe, and where was he in prison?" asked Jack.

"He's my Uncle Henry," answered Joe, reluctantly, "a younger brother of my dad's. Last we heard from him he was nabbed away out in Australia, for doing some bank sneaking, I think. Anyhow, he was sent to prison. Father told us not to mention his name again; and we never have all the time we've lived in Stanhope."

"Oh! well," advised Paul, "I wouldn't feel so bad about it, Joe. I suppose he's changed his name now. So that if he gets into a scrape in this country nobody need know he belongs to the Clausin family. But Joe, how did he know about the value of the papers your father kept in that tin box?"

"Well, I can tell you that, Paul. I've often thought it over; and the only thing that strikes me is this. Uncle Henry, being in this country after escaping from prison, was coming to see his brother, perhaps to ask him for help. He may have happened in just when dad fainted, with one of his attacks; and found the tin box on the floor. Perhaps he did strike dad on the head. No matter, he examined what was in that box, and must have counted it valuable, for he grabbed the whole thing, and lit out for the mountain till the chase blew over. Now you know as much as I do. But don't I hope we c'n get them papers back again."

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHAT PAUL FOUND—CONCLUSION

"What if those men should come back again, and take us prisoners?" suggested Bobolink, anxiously.

"Oh! I don't think they'll do that," replied Paul. "But it might pay us to look around, and see what they have here."

With the lantern to give them light, the boy scouts began an examination of the piles of material which the tramp called Pim, and his companion had accumulated in their snug retreat. Food was found, also some bottles of liquor, which latter Paul took great pleasure in immediately smashing.

"Say, look what I've found!" called Bobolink.

It was a dangerous looking revolver, of the short-nosed, bulldog pattern. Perhaps it belonged to Pim, for it lay close to where he had been sleeping. And while he did not exactly like the looks of it, Paul felt that they would be safer from attack while they had possession of this weapon.

"Here's a bottle of kerosene for the lanterns!" announced Joe, presently; he had been searching feverishly around, possibly in hopes of finding the papers; though Paul felt sure they were snugly reposing in the pocket of Hank at that moment, wherever he might be.

It was finally decided to stay there for the balance of the night. They could of course have gone back, now that they possessed means for lighting their way; but somehow Paul did not feel anxious to leave the spot.

Paul remembered what Pim had said about having seen Chief Billings on the road between Rattlesnake Mountain and the village of Tatum. Could it be possible that Mr. Morris, the lawyer friend of Joe's father, had influenced that official to start out in search of the papers? Had Mr. Clausin found something on the floor of his feed store that told him his wicked brother must have been there?

These were things which gave Paul much concern as he lay there resting, and making good use of one of the blankets that had been found. He did not mean to sleep at all, for the responsibility of the entire little expedition rested on his shoulders, and he could not take chances.

Lying thus, Paul tried to go over all that had happened since the camp lights went out at the sound of taps. Step by steps he advanced until the thrilling moment came when he made that stumble, and immediately heard the voice of Hank calling out to ask who it was.

He could see just as plainly as though he were living the whole thing over again, how the man sat up, having thrown his blanket from him. Why, it was the very blanket that Paul had over and under him now, and which felt so comfortable.

Then, with the match showing Hank a strange boy so close at hand, he had jumped to his feet. Paul could see him, as he lay there in the darkness; even to the soiled white shirt he wore.

"Oh!"

If Hank had been minus his coat at the time he jumped to his feet, he certainly had found no time to snatch it up when he ran away in such haste at the coming of the others. Why, possibly this was the very coat which Paul had doubled up, to serve him as a rude pillow.

Investigation revealed the fact that it *was* a coat. And when he pawed it over to find the inside pocket, he was thrilled to hear the unmistakable rustle of papers somewhere! Yes, wonderful as it might seem, there was a good-sized bunch of folded documents in the pocket. Could these be the lost papers that had been the cause of so much distress to Mr. Clausin?

Even while Paul was thinking whether or not he should wait until morning to mention his discovery to the anxious Joe, because he did not wish to arouse any false hopes, he thought he heard a slight sound near by.

What if Hank were returning to search for his coat, remembering how he had left it so carelessly when he fled, and what things of value it held? Paul was glad now that he had that revolver. He might not like to make use of it; but believed it would prove very valuable as a gentle persuader.

They had found a box of matches among other stores the two men had collected in this retreat; so that there was now no scarcity of such things.

Something touched him on the arm and sent a quiver through his frame, for he was worked up to a point where he felt as though he could just shout. Then he heard the lowest kind of a whisper close to his ear.

"Paul!"

It was of course his chum, who must also have been awake, and heard the same suspicious sound that came to his ears.

Paul drew Jack's head close to his lips as he whispered:

"I think it is Hank, coming back for his coat. I've been sleeping on it, and just discovered that there are papers in the pocket!"

"Oh, what can we do?" asked Jack, also in that low tone, inaudible five feet away.

"Get a match ready, Jack," said Paul, once more in his chum's ear; "and when I nudge you, light the lantern as fast as you can."

"All ready!" came back, a short time later.

Paul waited until he fancied that the unseen prowler must be groping in the dark very close to them. Then he thrust his elbow into Jack's side, causing him to grunt. But at the same instant a match flamed up, for Jack had been ready.

"Don't you dare move a foot!" called out Paul, instantly covering a crouching figure with the weapon he had in his hand.

Snap! Down went the lantern globe, and the cavern was brightly illuminated. It was Hank Clausin, just as Paul had suspected, and in his shirt sleeves too. He had come back for his coat, and walked into a trap.

The other three boys were now on their feet, and acting under Paul's directions they tied the man's hands. Poor Joe did not take any part in this ceremony. His heart was too sore, though he also rejoiced because Paul told him he had the precious papers on his person.

Hank pretended to be indignant at first, and claimed that he had done nothing wrong. Then he changed his tactics, and threatened the boys. Finding that this had no effect he turned to Joe, and pleaded with him. But Joe only shook his head, after looking beseechingly at Paul, and turned away.

None of the party obtained any more sleep that night, for they feared that the other man might return to see what had happened to Hank. And so all of them sat around, talking in low tones, with the lantern burning, Paul keeping the pistol in evidence.

Of course they could only tell when morning came by Paul's watch.

Both Bobolink and Joe declared they were fully rested by then, and so the return march was taken up. Perhaps Paul was a little reckless, or it may have been he did not care very much. But it was suddenly discovered that the prisoner was gone! Paul did not say anything, but he could guess that Joe, for the honor of the family, had taken advantage of their being a little ahead, to set him free.

"And boys," Joe said later, when confessing what he had done, "please don't tell anybody that he was my uncle. Just say he was a bad man, and that he got away. You see, we've got dad's papers, and that is all he wanted. I hope I never meet Uncle Henry again."

And he never has to this day, for Hank and his evil companion, Pim, made haste to leave that vicinity, which was growing a bit too warm for their operations.

Mr. Gordon was loud in his praises when he heard the story, though even he was not taken into Joe's secret. He declared that the storm had passed over, leaving a track of ruin in its wake, and that they could now leave the cave to return to Camp Surprise.

This the Banner Boy Scouts did that morning. After all, the damage to their belongings did not turn out to be very serious, thanks to their ready wit in cutting down the tents; and before nightfall they were almost as comfortably fixed as before the blow.

Joe wanted to go home because of the papers; but who should turn up while they were eating supper but his father, accompanied by Mr. Norris and Chief Billings, proving that the hobo had not made a mistake when he said he felt sure he had seen the latter on the way to the mountain by another route.

Of course there was great rejoicing when Mr. Clausin found his papers returned. Joe took him aside and doubtless told him the full particulars; for the gentleman looked very grave, and when he returned, he went around, silently squeezing the hands of Paul, Jack and Bobolink. They knew he was thanking them for their promise not to say a word about his brother even to their home folks.

With the neighborhood clear of all troublesome characters, it can easily be understood that the Stanhope Troop of Boy Scouts began really to enjoy their outing.

Each day saw new pleasures and competitions. Boys who were backward in any of the various branches of work connected with the useful things a true scout should know, were tutored by Mr. Gordon, or in many cases by Paul and Wallace. Bad cooks were taught how to succeed by simple processes; and the secrets of the wilderness became as an open book to those who wanted to learn.

Old Dobbin had managed to survive the storm, and when the troop started on the homeward route he pulled the wagon that carried their tents and other things. Needless to say, that as it was pretty much all down-hill, and the tremendous amount of food had vanished, the ancient horse found the going much easier than on his previous trip.

So successful had their first tour proven that the Stanhope Boy Scouts began to talk of other outings which might be arranged later on; and which will be treated of in the next volume of this series, to be called "The Banner Boy Scouts Afloat; or, the Secret of Cedar Island."

After all their adventures none of them came back feeling any the worse for the experience, and most of the boys declared they had had the time of their lives.

To this day they have never really learned just what it was frightened Ted and his cronies out of the neighborhood. Still, the fact that Pim and Hank had possession of Ward's fine aluminum frying pan caused Paul to believe the boys must have run across the two men, and been chased away.

Before the camp was finally broken up Paul discovered an old hunchback trying to steal more of the food. He was caught in the act, and it only needed a look at the patch on the sole of his boot to tell that he was the guilty one who had carried off their ham. He proved to be the fellow the boys had heard about, who made a living catching rattlesnakes; but as these were now scarce he was in poor circumstances. Paul forgave him, and when camp life came to an end they left him all the food that remained, proving their right to the name of Boy Scouts.

THE END

Transcriber's note:

Several typographical errors in the original edition have been corrected. The following paragraphs are as they originally appeared, with corrections noted in brackets.

Chapter IV

["]'Hold on. Don't forget you are a scout, and that you've got to look for the good that is in every fellow, they say," laughed his companion.

Chapter VI

"Oh! no, it isn't that bad a case," laughed Paul, amused. "We ought to be able to handle things without going to such extremes. Besides, you know, I carried a number of those stout sticks into the gym the other day, and William amused himself fastening a lot of cloth around them, so that they look like the stuffed club we used in the ministrel **[minstrel]** show last Winter. William is just itching to use one on some poor wretch. Perhaps he might get the chance to-night. So-long, Jack."

"I'm afraid so," returned his comrade, slowly; "and just as like as not they expect to give us trouble while we're in camp. Well," and his voice took on a vein of determination that told how he was aroused at the thought of what might happen; **["]**there must be a limit to even the forbearance of a scout, you know; and if they push us too far, we will have to teach them a lesson!"

"Where's Bobolink?" demanded the leader,**[.]**

According **[Accordingly]** he now took a little piece of wood out of his pocket, also a steel nail, and with the latter tapped several times upon the bit of veneering. Immediately they saw the sitting boy begin to fumble, as thought **[though]** he might be getting something out of his pocket. Then came an answering series of staccato taps, soft yet clear.

"I'm your candy!'**["]** came the reply, as the figure stood up at attention.

Chapter VII

"What's the matter in there? Why don't you open up?**["]** called Ted, again rapping his knuckles on the wooden barrier.

Bud Jones was in the most terrible predicament of his whole life. Beset by innumerable fierce foes as he believed within, there was that big bully outside, only waiting for a chance to give him a thrashing he would never forget. And the mysterious voice that sounded exactly like his own, startled him; for, not being a friend of Bobolink's he probably never heard him give those strange imitations when making his voice appear to come from some other preson **[person]**.

Chapter XI

Paul pushed to the front just them **[then]**.

Chapter XIII

"Two ought to be enough. Yes, bring a glim along; we may need it, for that moon isn't very bright to-night, and the trees make considearble **[considerable]** shadow."

Chapter XV

"He's gone, Ted!" whooped a voice; but it was not that of Monkey Egleston **[Eggleston]**; for that worthy was hardly in possession of enough breath to more than whisper.

Chapter XVII

"Sure I would, Paul. Please dont **[don't]** think I'm not wantin' to trust you, because I hold back. I want to think it all over by myself to-night. Perhaps in the mornin' I might tell you about it."

Chapter XX

"That," said Paul, "is one of our beliefs, sure enough. A scout must always be on the alert, or else he may miss many things that would give him valuable information. William, suppose you go on and spin your yarn in your own way. I saw what you did; but I'm glad I didn't cut in. Strike up, now, and then we'll move on again, for Dobbin is coming yonder.**["]**

Chapter XXII

"Say, that is mighty funny, "observed **[funny," observed]** Jack, after he had listened to the whole story.

Chapter XXIV

"Oh! rats!" exposulated **[expostulated]** his fellow scout. "Come off your perch, Jack, and talk sense. You make me think of an old Polly, just able to repeat things over and over. But to see us all down on our knees staring at that trail made me remember the alarm of poor old Robinson Crusoe when he found the footprint of the cannibal on his island."

Chapter XXVII

"Yes," interposed Bobolink, as he joined the group, and lowered his voice mysteriously; **["]**I just heard Paul and Mr. Gordon talking about two more men that seem to be wandering at large up here. That makes three, you see, and none of 'em care to step into our dandy camp in the daytime. Boys, don't you see what an ugly look that has?"

Chapter XXVIII

Paul staggered after them. The wind was very strong, and it was impossible to walk in places without bending down almost to the earth. Besides, there seemed to be many braches **[branches]** torn from the trees flying through the air, so that it was perilous to life and limb to be abroad.

Chapter XXIX

This sort of an explanation just fitted in with what Paul had conjectured. He had found it hard to believe that Nuthin would be so frightened as to cling deperately **[desperately]** to the flying tent, when he knew that it was being carried off by the gale. He must have been an involuntary passenger of the airship that quickly ended its short flight in a neighboring tree.

"That's good," declared Paul." **[Paul.]** "Feel around just above you. Can't you get hold of a branch or two, and hang on when I cut the rope? I want to keep you from falling when the support goes."

The crash of falling trese **[trees]** could still be heard with every renewed furious blast. But just as Mr. Gordon had said, these sounds proceeded almost wholly from the lower region. That was the reason he declined to seek safety in that quarter, prefering **[preferring]** to push in the teeth of the blow, because the rocky shelters were to be found there.

Chapter XXXI

"Who's that?**["]** and accompanying the words came the scratching of a match.

Chapter XXXII

"Yes," roared the second man, shaking Paul vigorously, "pipe up and tell us that, 'less you want us to do somethin' you wouldn't like. What d'ye want with us? How'd you ever git in here; and who's along with you? Say, Hank, didn't I tell you I seen that chief of police down on the road that comes up here from Tatum? I bet he sneaked around, thinkin'

we'd try to cut out that way, 'stead of in the direction of Stanhope. Reckon you don't ever wanter go there agin, eh?'**["]**

"Here, light this, Jack, with that precious match!'**["]** he cried, after shaking the lantern to find out whether it contained any oil.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS ON A TOUR; OR, THE MYSTERY OF RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN ***

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