

eBook

The Banner Boy Scouts

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The Banner Boy Scouts

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PREFACE

My Dear Boys:

Knowing that ninety-nine lads out of every hundred love outdoor life above all else, I have taken it upon myself to give you a series of what I hope will prove to be clean, wide-awake, up-to-date stories, founded upon a subject that is interesting our whole nation---the Boy Scouts of America. You know what a hold this movement has taken upon the rising generation of our broad land. There never was anything like it before---there never may be again.

At first many people made the mistake of believing that it was simply a new military order, and that boys who joined were to be taught the duties of soldiers, and learned how to fight. They know better now. It is really the greatest movement for Peace ever started. Not only that, but the lads who belong to this vast organization are taught how to be manly, self reliant, brave, courteous, kindly and steadfast.

When you examine the roster of the officers who have loaned their names to help along the good cause you will find such honored signatures as those of President William Howard Taft, ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, and many others dear to the hearts of our boys.

This glorious field opens up a very tempting opportunity for a series of stirring stories concerning the fortunes of *real* Boy Scouts, who have gone into the movement heart and soul, with a desire to excel in all they undertake; and at the same time enjoy themselves hugely. I only hope and trust that you may be pleased with what you read in this book, about the doings of the Red Fox Patrol, of Stanhope Troop, and that the story will do you much good.

Yours faithfully,

George A. Warren.

THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS

CHAPTER I

A MEETING IN THE BARN

"All here now, Paul!"

"Call the roll, somebody, won't you?"

"Keep quiet, fellows, please!"

"Shall I strike a match, Paul?"

"Not on your life, Bobolink. That crowd of Ted Slavin's is out, looking for us. Somebody must have leaked, or else Ted was tipped off. We've got to be mighty cautious, I tell you, if we want to give them the slip."

"S-s-say, d-d-don't you k-k-know we've got a fi-fine b-b-barn on our p-p-place, fellows?"

"For goodness sake; won't somebody please pound Bluff Shipley on the back, and make him bite his twisted tongue, so he can talk straight?" cried a pleading voice.

"Listen!"

There must have been a streak of authority in the tone used by Paul Morrison when he spoke this last word; every one of the other six boys crouched there, craning his neck, and listening to catch the unusual sound that had apparently reached the trained ears of their leader.

The woods surrounded the boys on all sides, gloomy, and full of mystifying noises.

Yet Paul knew full well just what every one of the sounds meant. An owl called mournfully to its mate from a hollow tree. Katydid and merry crickets added their shrill music to the chorus of that late summer night. Even a colony of tree frogs solemnly chanted their appeal for "more rain."

During the day just ended six fellows in the thriving town of Stanhope had received urgent telephone calls from Paul, who was an only son of the leading doctor in the place.

And each boy had promised to meet him at the Three Oaks by the time the clock in the church steeple had struck eight.

It was even now booming out the hour.

When the last stroke died away, the most impatient among the gathered boys moved restlessly.

"Follow me, fellows," said Paul, in a low, thrilling tone.

"Where are we heading for?" queried one, who had as yet failed to express his feelings in the matter.

This was Wallace Carberry, the sober member of the pair known far and wide as the Carberry Twins; his mate, William, being his exact counterpart in every particular, when he chose to repress the good-natured grin that usually marked his fate.

"To the Shipley barn; single file; and silence is the watchword!"

Paul Morrison had long enjoyed the confidence of his comrades in most matters pertaining to outdoor sports. A healthy lad, both in mind and body, he was never so happy as when studying the secrets of Nature in wood and meadow; or in playing any of the various strenuous games to which all boys with red blood in their veins are addicted.

And when he sent out his mysterious request that some of his most intimate friends meet him on this night, as he had a communication of importance to put up to them, the greatest curiosity made itself manifest.

Paul never suggested ordinary things. More than once he had engineered some game that brought honor and glory to the boys of Stanhope; and remembering these satisfactory "stunts" of old, it was no wonder these fellows had come to the place of meeting without a single exception.

With Bluff Shipley close upon the heels of the leader, and Robert Oliver Link, whose name had long since been corrupted into Bobolink, bringing up the rear, the seven lads trailed through the woods, following some path with which they were evidently more or less familiar.

Several times Paul gave a recognized signal that caused every one of the bunch to stop short, and turn his head on one side in the endeavor to discover whether hostile footsteps could be heard in their rear.

But although there were doubtless many rustling sounds, the boys laid these to the bright-eyed little denizens of that strip of woodland. Too often had they watched the chipmunks and red squirrels hunting for nuts under the already falling leaves, not to know that the forest was peopled with these harmless animals.

After five minutes more there loomed up before them the dark outlines of a huge barn that seemed rather out of place here on the border of the woods.

This belonged to the father of Bluff, who, being a prosperous tobacco grower in this valley, used the place to cure the product of his broad fields, after it had been harvested in the fall.

Paul had been carrying some sort of package in his hand, and the boys for some time amused themselves in guessing its nature. When he took off the paper it stood revealed as a lantern, ready for lighting.

"Show us the way inside, Bluff. Then we'll have a little light on the subject," remarked the leader, with a last anxious searching look around; as though he still entertained suspicions that their march to the old barn might have been observed by some of the hostile Slavin crowd.

Ted Slavin had long been known as the bully of Stanhope; for it seems that there never yet existed a village or town without some big chap exercising that privilege. He was a fighter, too, and able to hold his own against the best. Besides, Ted had shown some of the qualities that indicate a natural leader; though he held the allegiance of those who trailed after him mostly through fear, rather than any respect for his manly qualities.

His leading crony for the past year had been Ward Kenwood, son of the wealthy banker who was also a leading real estate owner in the place. Once upon a time Ward would have scorned the thought of associating with Slavin and his crowd; but an occasion had arisen whereby he had need of a strong arm to even up a score, and once he found himself indebted to Ted he kept on in the bully's company.

His rivalry in many fields with Paul had much to do with his throwing his fortunes in with the other fellows. And nothing pleased him more than to be able to upset any calculations the latter entertained. That explained why Paul was anxious to avoid a meeting with the Slavin crowd on this particular night, when he was brimming over with a great idea.

Once the boys had entered the barn, Bluff secured the door, after which a match was quickly lighted.

"Now, here we are, safe and sound, and not an enemy around. Suppose you open up, Paul, and get this load off our minds," said Albert Cypher, who seldom heard his own name among his friends, but was known far and wide as Nuthin'.

But what else could a lad expect who was so unfortunate as to find himself afflicted with such a name as A. Cypher?

"Yes, what's it all mean, Paul? You haven't even taken me in, you know, and I'm as much in the dark as the next fellow," remarked Jack Stormways, reproachfully; for being Paul's closest chum he might have expected to share his confidence.

"Wait a bit. We might as well make ourselves comfortable while we're about it. I'll sit down on this box, and the rest of you gather around on the floor. I've got a big proposition to make, and you want to listen carefully."

"T-t-take c-c-care of the lantern, f-f-fellows; my d-d-dad's w-w-wanting this old barn f-f-for his t-t-tobacco crop, and he'd b-b-be some put out if it b-b-burned just now!" came from Bluff.

Finding perches on various low piles of waste left over after the shipment of the last crop, the six lads gathered around Paul, eagerness stamped on every beaming face.

"Now, what's the idea that struck you this time, Paul?" demanded Bobolink.

"I'll tell you without any beating around the bush, fellows. The thought came to me that Stanhope was away behind the times. Other towns not nearly so big, have one or more troops of Boy Scouts. Why shouldn't we get up one here?" and Paul waited to hear what the response would be.

The six who sat in a ring looked at each other as though stunned by the proposal. It was strange, indeed, that no one had up to this time taken a lead in advancing such a thing.

"Bully idea, Paul!" ejaculated Jack, slapping a hand on his knee enthusiastically, as though it appealed to him most decidedly.

"Well, I declare, to think that nobody ever mentioned such a grand movement before. Count me in right from the start!" said Wallace Carberry---sober Wallace, who usually measured his words as though they were golden.

"And me too," observed Bobolink.

"Ditto for William!" called out the other Carberry Twin, grinning with delight.

"G-g-guess I'd make a bully good t-t-tenderfoot!"

"That's the best thing you ever thought up, old chap," came from Nuthin'.

"Hurrah! every county heard from, and not one contrary word. It looks as if there might be something doing right soon around this region," declared Paul, naturally pleased because his proposition had met with such unanimous satisfaction.

"Tell us more about it, please. I've read about the Boy Scouts; but my mother would take a fit if she thought I was practicing to become a soldier. You see, I had an older brother, who enlisted to go out with some of the boys when we had our little fuss about Cuba and the Philippines; and poor Frank died in camp of typhoid fever. I'll have a hard time

winning her over, and the dad, too," remarked Bobolink, sadly.

"Well, that's where you make a big mistake, Bobolink. Over in England, where the Boy Scout movement started, it has some connection with the army, because there, you see, every fellow expects at some time to serve his country as a soldier, or on board a naval vessel. But here in America, the movement is one for peace."

"Then what's all the doings about?" asked Nuthin', as if puzzled.

"I know, and Paul is right about it," came from Wallace Carberry, always quite a reader of newspapers and magazines.

"Let him tell then. I'm for the game, no matter what it means," cried Bobolink.

"And I think Bluff knows something about it, for he said he would do for the lowest grade of scout, which is the tenderfoot. But I don't think any of you are qualified to take even that degree; for a tenderfoot must first be familiar with scout law, sign, salute, and know what his badge means; he must know about our national flag, and the usual forms of salute due to it; and be able to tie some seven or eight common knots. How about that, Bluff?"

"N-n-not guilty!" promptly answered the one addressed.

"Say, that sounds interesting any way. Tell us some more about this, Paul!" exclaimed William, always eager to hear of anything that smacked of novelty.

"Well, there are two more degrees a fellow can climb up to, a second-class scout, and a first-class scout, full fledged. After that, if he wants to keep right on there are merit badges to be won for excelling in angling, athletics, camping, cooking at the campfire, taxidermy, first aid to the injured, handicraft, life saving, path-finding, and a lot more."

"Now you've got me stuck on this new game," cried Bobolink, excitedly. "The more you explain the better I like the idea. Me for the Boy Scouts, fellows!"

"Hear! Hear! Paul, the idea is yours, and we vote unanimously that you occupy the exalted position of scout master---I know that every troop has to have such a head, and you're better fitted for the job than any fellow in town!"

"Yes," laughed Paul, "but unfortunately, I believe a scout master has to be over twenty-one years of age."

"Who knows the ways of the open like our Paul? He's the right man in the right place. Say, are there any books on the subject, that we can get, and learn more about this thing?" asked Wallace, who seemed to be particularly well pleased.

"I've already sent for a manual, and expect it by to-morrow; when we can find out all about it. But wishing to be posted when I put the question I went over the river to Aldine to-day, and saw some of the boys there who belong to the Scouts. They made me more anxious than ever to start a patrol in our home town."

"But I've seen something about a troop?" remarked Jack Stormways, who, Paul thought, seemed unusually sober for a boy ordinarily light-hearted.

"Yes, a troop takes in say, three local posts called patrols, each of which has eight members. It is known by a number, as Troop One of Boston; and each minor organization takes a name of some animal, such as wildcat or fox. If it is called Fox, every boy belonging to it is supposed to be able to bark like a fox, so as to be able to signal a comrade while scouting in the woods."

"Ginger! but that does sound interesting," declared William.

"It's j-j-just immense, that's w-w-what!" was Bluff's opinion.

"Listen! I heard a laugh as sure as anything!" exclaimed Paul, lifting a hand to indicate silence; and every one of the group assumed an attitude of expectancy.

As they waited there suddenly came a tremendous crash, as some object landed forcibly against the wooden side of the old barn. It was instantly followed by a second bang, and others came quick and fast, until the noise might be likened to a bombardment from a hostile battery.

"It's the Slavin crowd!" called Bobolink, excitedly jumping to his feet. "They followed us here after all, and have been listening to every word!"

"All hands to repel boarders!" shouted Paul; and with a cheer the seven boys rushed over to the door, out of which they sprang, bent on retaliating on their tormentors.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A BOY SCOUT

"Where are the stone throwers?" shouted the merry member of the Carberry Twins, as he danced up and down, eagerly trying to discover some moving object in the surrounding darkness.

"Gone like smoke, I guess," laughed Paul, who had really expected something of this sort, judging from past experiences with these same tormentors.

"Look there, I can see something moving yonder. Get ready to give a volley!" cried Nuthin', pointing as he spoke.

"H-h-hold on, f-f-fellows, d-d-don't fire yet! It's only our old d-d-dun cow!" gasped Bluff, excitedly; as he waved his arms up and down after the manner of a cheer captain at a college football game.

"They've lit out, that's what," grumbled William, who felt as though cheated.

"All right, then. It's just as well, for a fight would be a mighty poor way of preparing to join the scout movement. You'll learn what I mean later on when you hear the twelve points of the law that every fellow must subscribe to," observed Paul, seriously.

"What d'ye mean, Paul?" demanded Bobolink, quickly.

"Yes, tell us right now what the twelve rules are," said William.

"I know, for I read all about them a few days ago," remarked Wallace, readily.

"All right, then, suppose you call them off. What does a scout promise to be if allowed to wear the uniform, Wallace?" asked the leader.

"To be trustworthy, loyal, helpful to others, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient to his superiors, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

"Why, it doesn't say a single word about fighting!" ejaculated William.

"Because a scout must never fight save as a last resort, and then only to save some weak one from punishment. He must be brave to face danger, to stop a runaway horse; or jump in and keep another from drowning. Do you get on to the meaning of this movement, fellows?" asked Paul, eagerly. The more he read about it the greater became his desire to have a hand in organizing a Stanhope troop that might compete with those of Aldine and Manchester, two rival towns, both on the opposite side of the Bushkill River, the former a few miles up-stream, and the latter the same distance down.

"We do, and I tell you I like it better and better the more I hear of it," said Jack, earnestly. "Why, I just had an idea it meant being junior soldiers, and drilling so as to be ready to invade Canada, or repel the yellow peril when the little Japs swarmed across the Pacific. Count me in, Paul."

"If I can pass the examination I'm going with you, sure," observed William.

"All right, but if they take you in just remember that you've got to quit your playing tricks on everybody, William," declared the other Carberry Twin.

"Listen to him, will you? He's feeling hard on me just because dad gave him a touch of the cane last night, thinking it was me. As if I was to blame for looking like my brother," the other said, plaintively, though chuckling at the same time.

"You know you fixed it so he'd pounce on me. I'm always in hot water because you must have your fun. 'Taint fair, and I'd have to be an angel not to kick. Oh! I hope you get to be a scout, because then I'll have some peace," declared Wallace; but all the others knew very well what a deep and abiding affection there really lay between the Carberry Twins.

"Let's go home now. No use staying any longer out here, with Ted Slavin and his cronies hanging around, ready to bombard us again. Besides, I guess Paul wants to wait till he gets his book before telling us any more about the game."

"Right you are, Nuthin'. I only wanted to see how the land lay, and if you took to the idea. I'm satisfied already that it's going to make a hit, if we can get a few more fellows to join in with us," said Paul.

"I know one good recruit I can drum up---Tom Bates," spoke up Albert.

"And a good addition to the seven now here. That would make our first patrol," echoed the leader, quickly.

"How about inviting some of the Slavin crowd to join us?" asked Bobolink.

"Well, perhaps we might pick a couple there; but I think you'll have to be getting up early in the morning to manage it," replied Paul, meaningly.

"What's that?" asked William.

"Just this. Ted Slavin has heard our plans. You know that he never likes to see anybody else pull down the plums. What will he do right away, fellows?"

"Go and see his shadow, Ward Kenwood, and get him to put up the money to start the ball rolling. My word for it that inside of a week there'll be two rival Boy Scout troops in little old Stanhope," remarked Jack Stormways.

"Say, that would be great, if the other crowd only acted on the square," ventured William. "We could have all sorts of contests between us. But I know Ted Slavin too well to believe he'll ever subscribe to the twelve rules Wallace mentioned. Why, he'd have to be made all over again to do that."

"Look here, Paul, if a fellow has to live up to the rules, however could the members of Ted's company be taken into a troop of Boy Scouts?" asked Bobolink, who always sought information.

"I don't believe they ever could. Still, there's no law in the land to prevent any lot of boys from forming a patrol, and calling themselves scouts. That's my way of looking at it," was the answer the leader gave.

The lads were now on their way home, the lantern having been secured, and extinguished, lest it invite another bombardment on the part of their tormentors, doubtless still hovering somewhere nearby.

No further attack came, however, for which some of them were possibly sorry, particularly William and Bluff, who delighted in strenuous action at all times.

On the border of the town the seven separated into three groups, the twins going off arm in arm, Bluff, Bobolink and A. Cypher forming another; while Paul and his particular chum made up the third.

"Well," said Paul, as they headed for the house of his comrade, which chanced to come before his own, "what do you think of my scheme, Jack?"

"Immense, that's what. I'm only astonished that nobody else took up with the idea before. Poor old Stanhope seems to be away behind the times, Paul."

"Well, I don't know. We've had lots going on this summer to take up our time; and then most of us were away during part of the vacation. There are other towns just as slow to catch on," returned the other, loyal to the place of his birth.

"But now that the ball has been started rolling, just watch how fast it gathers force. I know how you go at these things. And of all the fellows I ever met, you are the one best fitted to lead in this thing, if I understand the game right. Why, it's just going to fit in with the things you've preached and practiced for years."

"That's why it appealed so strongly to me, after I really understood what the many duties of a scout were supposed to be. But what's the matter with you, Jack?"

"Eh? With me? Oh, nothing much, Paul."

But the other knew better, for he had noticed a frown come over Jack's usually smiling countenance more than once that evening, when the other thought he was not observed; and from this Paul felt positive his chum was worrying about something.

"Of course, if you think it best not to take me in on it, I'm the last one to bother you, old chap," he went on, when Jack interrupted him.

"It wasn't that, Paul, not in the least. To tell the truth I've been thinking it over, and just about made up my mind that I must tell some one, or I'd never sleep easy. And of all my friends you're the one closest to me. Yes, I'm going to confess that there is something that puzzles me, and fills me with alarm."

"Say, is it as bad as that, Jack? But how is it you don't want to go to your own folks? You've got one of the best dads I ever knew, and your mother, well, few are in the same class with her."

"That's just it, Paul. I'd hate to have either of them know anything about this trouble."

Paul swung his friend around so that he could see into his face; for they were just passing a street lamp at the time.

"Oh! I can look you in the eyes, old fellow. It isn't anything disgraceful I've been doing, not at all. But you see," and again that frown darkened Jack's brow as unpleasant things presented themselves before his mind's eye, "it's a family affair, I'm afraid, and must be kept quiet."

"Now you *have* got me to guessing good and hard. Suppose you tell me what it's all about. I hope your brother, Karl---" and there Paul stopped, for by instinct he seemed to feel that he had guessed the truth the first shot.

Jack had given a huge sigh that seemed to well up from his heart.

"Yes, it's about Karl, only I do hope that it will prove a false alarm, because I just can't believe he'd do such a rotten thing," the other went on, slowly.

"But he's only a little fellow after all, Jack?"

"That's so, but old enough to know better. You shall hear it all, and then perhaps you'll advise me what to do," went on Paul's chum, with a vein of relief in his voice, as though he felt better already, after deciding to share his trouble with another.

"That's right, and you know that it goes no further, Jack."

"Karl got into some mischief a week ago, and to punish him father cut off his allowance of spending money for a whole month. Now, Karl belongs to a boys' club, and I heard that at their last meeting the other day he paid up his dues, and seemed to have plenty of money. The question that is bothering me is, where did he get it?"

"Oh! is that all? Why, you forget that your brother is a bright chap; and I imagine you'll find he's been earning it some way or other; or perhaps his mother gave it to him. But see here, there's more back of this than you've told me?" declared Paul, suddenly.

"There is," replied his chum. "Listen now, and for goodness sake I hope you can cheer me up some, by explaining a mystery that's bothering me. It's about those old coins Uncle Reuben sent to me two years ago. There are some twenty-one in the lot. They're copper coins, you know and I don't suppose worth much. I've always kept them in a little open cedar box on my table up in the den; you've spoken about them more than once."

"Sure, I remember all about them; but you don't mean to say---" and there Paul stopped, almost afraid to voice the thought that flashed before his mind.

"Yes, a bunch of them have gone in a mighty queer way. Why this morning there were just fourteen left; but to tell the truth I was afraid to go up there at supper time when I came in after our last game of ball on the lot, to see if any more had disappeared."

"Say it plainly, Jack. Some one is taking your old coins, sent by your uncle, and you're just afraid it's Karl, tempted to get some money in that way. But where could he sell them, do you think?"

"There's old Doc. Thomes, who keeps stamps and curios for sale. I've seen some coins in his window often. He would know the value of these, and perhaps be willing to pay something for them. Oh! it's just awful even to suspect my brother of being guilty of such a mean thing. I hate myself for allowing it, and have made up my mind just to hide the rest away, and never say a word."

"No, I wouldn't do that, Paul. In the first place it isn't fair to Karl."

"Fair? What can you mean? I wouldn't ever say a word to him, never!"

"That's just it, but you would *think* it always; and if he is innocent, why you see what a shame that would be. No, you ought to learn the truth, even though determined to keep your mouth shut afterward. In justice to Karl, you *must* know!"

"I believe you are right, old fellow. And I'm going to be guided by what you say. Come in with me, won't you?" pleaded Jack.

"Yes," answered Paul, promptly. "On condition that you take me up to your den, where we can talk without being disturbed."

"You have an object in saying that. I believe you want to see for yourself if any more of my coins have disappeared?" declared the other.

"I acknowledge the corn, for that is just what I wanted to learn, Jack."

"I suppose the sooner I take the bull by the horns, the quicker we can learn the truth; so come on in," and taking his chum by the arm Jack led the way boldly up to the door of the Stormways' house.

They managed to pass upstairs to the third floor without attracting any attention, the family being gathered around a table in the living room, reading.

No sooner had the lamp been lighted, after the door was closed, than Paul stepped over to the table desk which he knew so well.

Just as Jack had said, there was a little cedar box standing in plain view, and the coins it held attracted his eye.

Slowly and deliberately he proceeded to count them, while his chum awaited the result with abated breath, and his eyes turned in another direction.

"Well?" said Jack, hoarsely, when he saw that the other had dropped all of the coins back, one by one.

"You said there were fourteen left this morning, didn't you, Jack?"

"Yes, and now?"

"I find just eight here, that's all!" came the answer that caused the wretched brother of young Karl Stormways to shiver and sigh dismally.

CHAPTER III

THE DISAPPEARING COINS

"Just thirteen gone now," said Jack, as he bent over to look for himself.

"Of course you know what they were, those that are missing?" suggested Paul.

"I have a list of the bunch somewhere; made it out one day just for fun. Yes, I think I could tell them again; but I never would have the heart to accuse old Doc. Thomes of buying stolen coins; and the thief---never!"

"I didn't mean that, Jack; you mistook me. Suppose I had that list, and rooting over all the little boxes he keeps his coins in for sale, found every one of the missing ones there?"

"Yes, and then what?" asked the other, greatly affected, though watching his chum's face eagerly, as though something seemed to tell him Paul would find a way out of the difficulty, such was his faith in the other.

"Why, perhaps you might buy the whole lot back, for almost a song, and never say a word."

A hand crept out and squeezed Paul's warmly; and there were tears in the eyes of Jack Stormways as he made answer.

"Just like you, old fellow, to cheer me up like that. Here, let me hunt up the list for you. But promise that you won't whisper one little hint to a living soul. Oh! Karl, how could you?"

"Hold on, don't judge him before you know. Believe him innocent until you find proof otherwise. I guess you'll learn that one of the first things a scout has to do is to believe in his brothers and friends through thick and thin, until the proof has become positive, or the guilty one confesses. And another thing, Jack, in case the worst comes true, it's up to us to make sure that such a miserable thing never happens again. We must save the one in error, save him through kindness and sympathy. How old is Karl?"

"A little over ten."

"Too young to join the troop then, for all boys have to be twelve or over, according to the rules, I was told. But they have younger fellows in the bunch over at Aldine, I'm sure. One I saw strutting around in a uniform looked like a kid of eight or nine. Never mind; I believe it'll all come out right yet. Perhaps some servant may have taken them?" said Paul, wishing to buoy up his chum's spirits.

"We only have one, and she's been with us ever since I was born. No use thinking Maggie would touch a single thing," declared Jack, quickly, with a shake of his head.

Paul sauntered about the room for a few minutes. Apparently he was glancing at the numerous college pennants and other things that were upon the walls; but in reality he found himself wrestling with the strange puzzle that was giving his chum so much concern.

Presently he stood by the window, which was partly open.

"Who owns the Dempsey house now, Jack?" he asked, indicating the building next door.

"Oh! it is still for sale," replied the other. "They don't want to rent it again, you know, and ever since that last party moved out of town and left things looking so bad, Mr. Dempsey has kept it closed up."

"When he lived here, you and Scissors used to be something of chums, didn't you?" Paul went on.

"Well, yes," the other admitted, "when we were smaller. But ever since Scissors started going with the Slavin crowd I've cut him dead."

"I wish I lived as close to you as this," Paul observed. "Why, we could nearly shake hands across the gap. I don't suppose Scissors ever drops in to see you nowadays?"

"I should say not," laughed Jack; "why, we've been at swords points now for a year and more, and never even speak as we pass each other."

"Oh! well, of course then it would be silly to think of suspecting him," remarked Paul as he sat down again.

But nevertheless, many times his eyes seemed to turn toward that partly opened window, and then in the direction of the low desk where the box of coins stood.

"Scissors" Dempsey had come by his nickname because of a peculiar trick he had of keeping his knees stiff when walking. Long ago one boy had likened his long legs to a pair of scissors, and quick to take up a humorous name like this, his mates had called him nothing else in years.

"Well, it's a mighty funny thing where that bunch of old copper coins has gone to!" remarked Jack, presently, unable, it seemed, to think of anything else just then.

"I believe this den of yours is hardly ever locked," remarked Paul, presently, "and all persons can come up here whenever they choose. I've even often found your dog Carlo sleeping here. Why, if any friend calls to see you, and wants to wait till you come home, he just meanders up here as he pleases, and amuses himself looking over your books and magazines. Isn't that so, Jack?"

"Sure. My mother says this is Liberty Hall, judging from the way all my chums go and come. But what's got you now? Do you think some other chap may have fallen into the nasty habit of helping himself to my coins, either to swell out his own collection, or to sell them to Doc. Thomes?"

"Oh! hardly that, although it seems possible. But don't worry too much about it, Jack. I'm sure we'll discover the truth sooner or later."

"Anyhow I'll have eight to hide away; part of a loaf is better than no bread," remarked the other, dejectedly.

"Oh! I wouldn't put them away, not just yet, anyhow, Jack."

"But, my goodness, perhaps I'll lose all of my coins if I leave them around like this any longer on my desk!"

"That's so, but don't you see if you hide them, it shuts us off from ever learning who is taking them."

"Oh! I see. You mean to catch him at it some time; is that the idea, Paul?"

"Nothing less. I'll drop in at the old dealer in curios to-morrow, and find out if he has any that are on this list. Listen, there's somebody at the door!"

"It's only Carlo, scratching to get in. Open the door, please, Paul."

As the other did so a large Newfoundland dog stalked solemnly in, paid little heed to either of the occupants of the den, but snuggled down in a corner, where there was an old cushion, evidently placed there for his especial use.

"My! he's getting fatter than ever," remarked Paul, surveying the bulging sides of the shaggy canine, as he curled himself up as if to sleep.

"I believe he is, the scamp. I see it when I put him through his paces with all the tricks I taught him. He's getting too logy, and has to be told three times before he'll do a blessed thing. But about this wretched matter, Paul---you won't say anything to your folks, will you?"

"Not for the world. It's your secret, and I'd never leak a word without your permission. But I must be off now. Leave things just as you always have done; and don't shut or lock the door here any more than before. I've got to do some studying over this Boy Scout affair when I get back. Whitson loaned me some pamphlets, but I didn't have time to read them through."

Jack accompanied his friend down to the front door. Here Karl, having heard them descending the stairs, joined them; and so far as Paul could see there was no change in the boy's manner. If he had done wrong he must be clever enough to hide the guilt that lay in his heart, and put on a bold face.

"Remember!" was all Paul said as he squeezed Jack's quivering hand, before jumping down the steps, boy fashion.

It was enough to encourage the sorely distressed lad, for he had the greatest faith in Paul Morrison, the doctor's son, that any boy could ever place in a comrade; nor had the other ever failed to equal his expectations.

"I really believe Paul will do it," he was muttering to himself as he slowly went upstairs again to the den, with its decorations of college flags, and pictures of camping, canoeing, outdoor sports such as baseball and football struggles, and kindred things so dear to the heart of almost every growing lad; "yes, I believe he will if anybody can. But I wish he had let me hide the rest of them away. It seems like putting temptation in the way of a weak brother. But he told me I wasn't even to believe Karl took the coins, and *I won't!*"

Nevertheless, Jack Stormways must have passed a miserable night; for the anxious eyes of his mother noticed his distressed looks when he came down to breakfast on the following morning.

"You don't look well, son," she observed, as she passed her cool hand across his fevered brow; "I think you ought to step in and see Doctor Morrison some time this morning, and let him give you something."

"All right, mother; but it's only a little headache," he protested, for like all boys he disliked the thought of being considered sick.

Her eyes turned solicitously toward him many times during the meal, for she saw that Jack was unusually dull, and took little part in the conversation.

But it seemed that Karl made up for his brother's lack of energy, for he was more than ordinarily inclined to be merry, and told numerous jokes he had heard from his fellows in the boys' club he had joined.

Jack mentioned that they were about to organize a Boy Scout patrol; and very naturally his mother looked a bit serious at this news, until he explained some of the really excellent points connected with such an association; when her face cleared at once.

"If that is what the movement means then the sooner a patrol is organized in Stanhope the better. There are a lot of boys who would be vastly benefitted by such uplifting resolutions," she declared, with some show of enthusiasm.

"Yes, mother, you are right," said Mr. Stormways, just then. "Things have been going from bad to worse in our town of late, and the fathers are beginning to wonder where it will end. Only yesterday I met old Peleg Growdy. You remember the old fellow, for we stopped at his place when we were out riding, and had a drink at his well."

"Yes, and a most singular old man he was. I really couldn't say that I was much impressed with his looks or conversation," replied the lady, as she poured another cup of coffee for her husband.

"All very true; but he minds his own business if let alone; and after all I find that he is a well educated man, up in most questions of the day. But the boys, or some of them at least, have for a long time considered old Peleg a fit subject for practical jokes. They change the lines on his team, given half a chance, and annoy him in every way possible. Really, I don't wonder he is bitter about it."

"But you had something in mind, father, when you said that you met him?"

Mr. Stormways looked at Jack.

"That is true, my son; and do you know, the first thought that came to me was one of pleasure to feel absolutely sure no boy of mine would disgrace himself in plaguing an old man who had never harmed him."

Jack felt a glow in the region of his heart at this show of confidence; and resolved that more than ever would he merit it; but somehow he could not help looking out of the tail of his eye toward Karl, to find that the color had mounted to his forehead, and that he seemed embarrassed.

Was he thinking just then of the coins; or did he have some knowledge of the practical joke that had been played on old Peleg Growdy?

"Now, tell us what it was, Alan," said Mrs. Stormways, encouragingly.

"Well, perhaps in one way it may have been looked upon as something humorous, but it annoyed the old man very much. Last Sunday he went out to let his pigs run loose in the lot, as is his habit. When he pulled the rope that opened the little door in the back of the pen, he was astonished to see the queerest lot of porkers dash away that human eyes had ever beheld."

Karl was snickering by now, showing that he must have some knowledge of what was to come.

"No two pigs looked alike. The boys had crept into the pen in the night, with a lantern, and some pots of paint taken from Mr. Rabow's shop, and painted the whole drove in every color imaginable. One, he said, looked like the American flag. Another had four legs of different hues; a third was striped yellow and green, and so it went. Imagine the old man's amazement as he saw them kicking up their legs, and tearing around like mad; for the sun had reached the turpentine in the paint, and made it burn tremendously."

Karl gave a shout, and even Mrs. Stormways could not repress a smile, though she felt that it was wrong.

"I heard about it from one of the boys, father; I don't want to tell his name, you see, because it might get him into a scrape," said Karl, as he managed to get his breath again.

Jack breathed easier, since he knew now that his brother had not been concerned in the adventure; still, there was that other thing---but he had promised Paul not to believe, or even suspect, anything so early in the game.

"I admit that it does seem ludicrous; and no doubt if I had been there I must have been strongly tempted to laugh at the comical spectacle those six pigs must have presented. But it is the spirit of the thing that looks so bad. Growdy never harmed a boy in his life, he says, and only wants to be let alone; but they went out of their way to play a malicious trick on the old man. It took him the whole of Sunday to scrape that paint off the hides of his pigs; which I consider a pretty hard proposition. And I repeat what I said before, that I'm pleased to know a son of mine would not be guilty of so mean a trick."

Karl left the table just then, and his brother fancied that he looked a bit confused, as though his conscience were troubling him, but then Jack hoped he might be mistaken.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST SCOUT LEADER

Paul had said that he would be away the greater part of the day, his father having asked him to go to the city on an important errand.

Consequently there was no opportunity for the two chums to confer upon any of the matters that were interesting then.

But all the boys had agreed to meet at the house of Nuthin' that evening, to plunge deeper into the subject of organizing at least one scout patrol in Stanhope.

As usual Paul called for Jack, and as the latter's parents knew what was on tap, there was no opposition shown to his going out.

"Has anything happened to-day?" whispered the visitor, as he was joined by Jack in the hall.

"Yes, I was out a lot with the fellows, and doing some chores around; but I mustered up enough courage just before supper to go upstairs," replied the other, his voice giving plain warning as to what was to follow, for it showed the strain.

"And counted the coins again, perhaps to find them short, eh, Jack?"

"Well, you said there were eight, and now I can count only six. Why, it's getting to be a regular clock-like piece of business. And after what father said this morning, too."

"What did he say?" asked Paul.

"Come along. I'll tell you while we're on our way," and Jack gave a nervous look over his shoulder, as though afraid lest his brother pop out on them unawares.

As they walked slowly along the road he spoke in the affectionate manner in which Mr. Stormways had declared his utmost faith in the honesty and integrity of his two boys.

"But you're not sure that Karl has anything to do with the disappearing coins. Other boys may have been up there to-day?" suggested his friend, quickly.

"I asked mother, and she said she didn't remember that any one had come to see me. No, the more I think about it the worse I feel. But I guess you didn't have any time to see old Doc. Thomes before you went to the city, did you?"

"That's just what I did, dropped into his shop, told him I was going down to New York on business for dad, and asked if I could do anything for him."

"Oh! how bright of you, Paul. And what did he say to that?"

"It seemed to quite tickle the old chap. He said he had a little package he wanted to send in to a dealer on Fourteenth Street, and would be glad if I took it to him, instead of his sending it by express."

"A package, Paul; did he say what it contained?" demanded the other, almost holding his breath with sudden alarm.

"Yes, a lot of old coins he had been buying lately. Now, hold your horses, Jack, my boy. He hadn't made it up yet, and I helped him do it. There wasn't one of the same kind yours are. He bought the collection of Chinese and Japanese coins old Captain Crocker owned. His widow had no use for them, and needed the money."

"Oh, you gave me a scare, Paul; but I'm glad you saw them, for I'd always imagine mine must have been in the lot; not that I care a bit for the old things now; but it was the thought, you know, the terrible suspicion."

"Yes, and while about it I managed to see every old coin Doc. has in his shop, for he was pleased to let me root around. And Jack, not a single one of your missing pieces has he got, depend on it."

"Oh! well," remarked Jack, arousing himself, "let's try and forget my troubles for a while. Unless I get it off my mind I'll lie awake again, and then your father, the doctor, will give me some medicine that tastes even worse than what he did to-day. Did you get that manual you sent for, Paul?" and the speaker resolutely shut his teeth hard together as if determined to keep his mind off the harassing subject.

"Yes, it's in my pocket, and seems to be full of meat, too. I haven't had much chance to soak it in, but what I did read interested me a whole lot," returned the doctor's son.

"Well, I thought of a friend I had over in Manchester, and this afternoon I took my wheel and jumped down there, crossing by the bridge. Just as I hoped, Landy is a member of the troop there, and he gladly told me all he knew about the business. I'm more than ever tickled at the idea of our having a branch up here, to compete with the neighboring towns. He told me something more that we might consider, too."

"What was that, Jack?"

"You remember Mr. Silas Westervelt, the Quaker of Manchester?"

"Sure. I've often talked with him, and my father is their family doctor," replied Paul, readily enough.

"It seems that he's become interested in this scout movement, which he endorses through and through. The result is that he has offered a beautiful banner to the organization that can show the highest degree of efficiency, and the greatest number of merit marks by Thanksgiving day. It's being made now, down in the city."

"That counts us in, then, for we'll have plenty of time to get busy before the day of turkey rolls around, eh, Jack?"

"Oh! we'll be in the contest all right, even if we are counted in the 'also ran' class. These other fellows have been camping this summer, and must be up in many of the things that count. But then, they haven't got Paul Morrison at the head as scout leader, and that means everything in our favor," declared Jack, warmly.

"Please cut that out after this. It's true that I've always been deeply interested in many things connected with life in the woods; but you see that's only one part of a good scout's credit marks. In fact, there's hardly one thing in all the trades and professions that is omitted from the list. Only he must *excel* in all he undertakes. And soon we will have to find a young man over twenty-one who will act as our scout master."

"Hold up, there's Bobolink hurrying to catch us; and he acts as if he might be the bearer of important news," remarked Jack, who had heard a hail from the rear, and turned his head to see a flitting form.

The other came up, panting heavily.

"Say, you fellows must have the seven league boots, the way you get over ground. And just after I've gone and made away with a monstrous supper, too," he managed to say, between gasps. "Let me get my breath, and I've got something to tell you."

"Is it about Ted Slavin and his cronies?" asked Paul, suspiciously.

"Hit it the first shot," returned Bobolink; "who told you?"

"Why, I haven't heard a word; only I thought that if there was anything going on, Ted would be apt to have a finger in the pie," returned the other, grimly.

"Well, he has, all right, as usual. Anyhow his mouthpiece, Ward Kenwood, has, and it's the same thing. I was taking something in to the dominie at our church (my mother is at the head of a committee, you know) when he asked me if I was going to join the new Boy Scout patrol that was being organized in Stanhope."

"Whew, but those fellows don't believe in letting the grass grow under their feet, do they? Never thought a thing about it till they heard us talking matters over; and here they're getting all the credit for being first in the field," and Jack shrugged his shoulders ruefully as he spoke.

"Didn't I say we'd have to get up early in the morning if we hoped to keep from taking their dust? No matter what else you can say about them, Ted and his crowd are alive, and wide-awake fellows all the time," returned Paul.

"Well, the minister was some surprised when I told him all about it. He said he was delighted, and I guess he meant it too. The more patrols the better for the community, he said. And he seemed to know all about the meaning of the thing,

for he showed me several books along the subject, that he promised to lend us."

"Bully for him!" cried Jack, with perhaps more energy than reverence; but had the genial old man heard the words he would have felt highly complimented, knowing that whoever succeeds in getting the approval of live, wide-awake boys must consider himself fortunate indeed.

"There's Nuthin's house," remarked Bobolink, just then.

"And Tom Bates going in, with the Carberry Twins. I hope we can enroll a dozen good fellows for a start. The rest will flock over after a bit, when they get to know what fine times we expect to have," remarked Paul.

They found that there were just a dozen present, counting A. Cypher, who as host was much in evidence. Besides Tom Bates, the new boys were Philip Towns, Jud Elderkin, Joe Clausin and Andy Flinn; the latter of Irish parentage, but well liked, even though his widowed mother had to take in washing to provide food for the numerous mouths dependent on her.

Andy was a particularly bright boy, and many declared that he had a future before him, if only he kept away from the one curse of his father's life, rum. But as he hated the very word drink, there seemed to be little danger that he would be apt to follow in the footsteps of the brilliant man who had fallen so early in life, and left a family nearly destitute.

"Meeting please come to order," called Paul, after he had been pushed into a chair to serve as temporary chairman.

Soon the boys began to go into the details of the projected troop, its meaning, what good it might be expected to accomplish, and everything connected with the Boy Scout organization.

Paul read page after page from the book he had brought, while the others, including the parents of A. Cypher, listened, and applauded at times, as some particularly fine point happened to strike them.

"That ought to do for the present," said Paul, finally, as he closed the book and beamed upon his mates; "and now, what do you think, fellows?"

"I'm just wild to get started, and more so than ever after hearing all about the hundreds of fine things scouts can do. I'm a crank on making fires, and I guess I'd qualify right easy for the championship in that tournament!" exclaimed William Carberry, his face aglow.

"Yes, and I remember the time he nearly burned our house down, trying to start a blaze without a match. He got the fire all right; but there was a lively time around there, until the bucket brigade arrived, and slushed things down. Oh! you can believe William; he's some on the fire racket," remarked the other Twin, at which there was a roar from those present.

"I move that we write out just what we intend to do, and that all the fellows in the room sign it as charter members. Then we'll try to double our dozen by a week, and rush things along. We already have enough for the first patrol and half a second. If we expect to compete with those other troops in the struggle for supremacy we've got to be awake and doing."

"You never said truer words, Paul. What sort of a binding agreement had we ought to get up?" asked Bobolink, pretending that it was Tom Bates who spoke; for really the boy had a wonderful gift of ventriloquism, and often amused himself, and his friends as well, by sending his voice into strange places, to the wonder of those who were not aware of his tricks.

"I thought that over, and wrote out what I believed would cover the ground. If you listen now, I'll read it to you," returned the chairman.

"Hear! hear ye! All keep silent while our honored chairman reads the document to which we expect to subscribe our names and seals!" called William, pompously.

What Paul had written was simply that those whose names were found below had united themselves together with the idea of forming a troop that could be connected with the regular Boys Scout organization as incorporated.

Then every boy present wrote his name beneath the agreement, after which they went into executive session, the parents of A. Cypher being kindly but firmly requested to retire from the room, while the election of officers proceeded, and other necessary steps were taken to perfect the first patrol.

So the first patrol of Stanhope Troop was organized, and consisted of the eight originators of the scheme. It was decided to call this the Red Fox patrol. As fast as others were arranged for they could take on such names as Gray Fox, White Fox and even Black Fox.

Later on they hoped to secure a scout master, but just now with Paul and Wallace brimming over with woods' lore, the lack of such an officer would not bother them.

The meeting ended in Paul being placed in the honored position of scout leader, with the second position being thrust on Jack Stormways, though he declared that Wallace Carberry was far better qualified to fill it than he ever could be.

But Paul was satisfied to have it so. Jack was his favorite chum; and he would be thrown much in his company. Besides, the desire to study up the rules, and perfect himself in all that an assistant scout master should know, might for a time at least take Jack's thoughts away from the subject of his trouble at home.

Before the boys left they were summoned to the dining room, where refreshments were placed before them; and when the meeting did finally break up every fellow felt deep down in his heart that an important step had been taken toward raising the standard of living among the rising generation of Stanhope.

Finally, as the hour had grown fairly late it was suggested that they leave in a body, since all military organizations did this.

"And," continued the one who had put this idea forward, "while we have nothing to do with the army itself, we expect to be governed by certain military rules. What say, fellows?"

"Fall in! fall in!"

Out of the door they marched, and down the steps, two by two; Bluff Shipley, who was paired with Nuthin', being the lone straggler in the rear, since his mate remained at home.

If he experienced the slightest sense of dejection at being compelled to walk without a side partner, it was of very brief duration.

Outside it was very dark, and this condition seemed more or less heightened by the fact that the eyes of the young scouts had become accustomed to the glow of the rooms they had just left.

Consequently there was more or less chance of some one tripping on the steps, and pulling others down with him.

"Ware the fourth step; it's shaky and may throw you, boys!" sang out Nuthin'.

Hardly had he spoken than the first pair executed a beautiful forward bow, and went down in a heap from the lower step.

"Look out there! A rope!"

Paul had just barely time to give utterance to this warning when the next pair found the obstruction for themselves, and came plunging down on top of those already landed.

Two more were close behind, so nearly upon the heels of the second pair that it was really impossible for them to avoid following in their wake. Thus there were by this time six struggling figures at the foot of the steps, while the balance of the patrol huddled just above, looking with amazement at the dimly seen spectacle.

From somewhere near by, possibly the shelter of some bushes, came gurgles of boyish laughter, and jeering words in assumed voices.

No need to tell Paul and his friends to whose kind attention they owed this unexpected downfall. Ted Slavin and his backers had not been idle while the new patrol was being organized in the home of Nuthin'. They had fastened a stout rope across the lower step, and succeeded in tripping half of their rivals.

Paul managed to scramble to his feet, hardly knowing whether to laugh, or get angry at this practical joke on the part of the opposition.

CHAPTER V

CHECKING A COWARD

"It's that Slavin crowd!" exclaimed Jack, as he gained his feet.

"Let's capture some of them, then!" shouted William, always ready for battle, as was also Bluff Shipley, whose hands were never bothered with impediments as was his speech.

A rush was made for the bushes, and retreating footsteps announced the hasty departure of the enemy.

None of the new scouts seemed to care about following very far. They knew Ted of old, and feared lest they be drawn into a trap, so that their last condition would be really worse than the first.

"No damage done, after all," remarked Paul, as he brushed off his clothes; while the others gathered around, and Nuthin' came down to secure the treacherous rope.

"Barked my shins some, now; and sooner or later I've just got to take it out of that crowd!" muttered William, limping around, and shaking his head.

"Better do it soon, then," observed Bobolink, "for after you've taken the oath of allegiance to the scouts you dassent tackle a feller without losing marks."

"H'm! is that so?" grunted the injured member, regretfully; for to be deprived of the boon of fighting would be taking some of the joys of life away from the pugnacious Carberry twin.

"Fall in again, boys!" said Paul, cheerily.

"Not the same way, I hope, captain!" ventured Bobolink; at which there was a laugh, and the incident seemed closed.

The boys had no doubt but that their rivals must have been observing much that went on in the lighted rooms, possibly also trying to catch what was being said.

"What of it?" demanded Paul, when some one suggested this; "if they heard what I read out of that manual so much the better. Let them subscribe to those rules, and life will be worth living alongside Ted and his cronies."

"But you see they just can't!" declared Bobolink, quickly.

"Which is to say they won't. All right. Once we get out troop formed, public sentiment will be on our side. If they try to worry us the good people of Stanhope, backed by the Women's Club, will see to it that the nuisance is stopped. Isn't that so, Paul?" remarked Jack, with conviction in his voice.

"Them's my sentiments, as some character in fiction used to remark. We can afford to laugh at all these little plans to annoy us. Of course, if they go too far, why we may have to turn and do something ourselves," said Paul, seriously.

"Bully! Hasten the time!" cried William, ceasing to limp for the moment in his new delight.

"Oh! but Paul doesn't mean a regular give and take fight. If we pitch in at all, I'm afraid it'll have to be doling out punishment in the way the good dad does when he plies the stick and says it hurts him worse than it does the bad kid," declared Bobolink; at which there was a roar.

On the following day there was more or less skirmishing about town by various eager lads, seeking recruits for the rival troops.

Paul was as busy as a beaver, and at several points conferred with some of his followers. He had sent for more manuals, besides a price list of uniforms, and other equipments necessary to the complete organization of the Fox Patrol and Stanhope Troop No. 1.

Leading citizens began to take an interest in the movement, as they grew to understand its true significance. Stanhope seemed to be fairly sizzling with a new and novel energy. Even the meeting of the Women's Club that afternoon was given up partly to a discussion of the merits of the Boy Scout wave then sweeping over the land; and ladies who had been decidedly averse to such a thing found their eyes opened to its beneficial accompaniments.

As was to be expected, the recruiting was not confined to Paul and his chums. Ted Slavin and Ward Kenwood were just as vigorously employed; and several times in the course of the day the rivals ran across each other while engaged in thus drumming up new subjects for initiation.

On such occasions there was apt to be something in the way of verbal fireworks passing between the opposing scouts. Ted Slavin seldom knew how to bridle that tongue of his; and Ward Kenwood seemed to be in a nasty humor himself.

To tell the truth there had long been a sort of rivalry between Paul and Ward over the smiles of pretty Arline Blair; and latterly the high school girl seemed to be giving young Morrison more than his share of her company.

That afternoon about four o'clock, as Paul and two of his chums were passing along one of the side streets of the town they came upon a scene that caused a sudden halt.

The blustering voice of Ted Slavin was what first drew their attention; and it seemed to come from around the next corner. Then followed a quavering voice, pleading in its tone.

Paul looked at his friends, and his brow darkened.

"It's old Mother Martha, the market woman who sells things in her little stall around here. And some of those mean skunks are plaguing her, like they often do, she tells me, stealing her apples, and laughing at her, because she's lame with the rheumatism, and can't chase after 'em!" said William, who happened to be one of the trio brought to a halt so suddenly.

"Come on, then; we can't stand that!" exclaimed Paul.

The boys hurriedly turned the corner, to find that what William had suggested seemed to be the actual truth.

Ted and a follower were hovering near the poor old woman. The fact that Ted was contentedly munching a red apple told that he had already made his hawk-like descent on the stand of the market woman, and was now seeking to distract her attention so that his companion might also swoop down to seize a prize, when they would go off, laughing uproarously, as though they considered it a huge joke.

Paul was on the bully in a flash, and almost before Ted knew of his presence he had torn the apple from his grasp and hurled it far away.

"Get out of this, you coward!" exclaimed the scout leader of the new patrol, as he gave Ted Slavin a push; "I'm going to speak to the chief of police about the way you rob this good woman, and see if he won't stop it. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, both of you!"

William and Bluff were for jumping at the two offenders, and giving them a lesson then and there; but with both arms Paul held his fire-eaters back.

"Let 'em come on, if they want to mix up with us. We can take care of two, and think it a picnic. P'raps even three wouldn't be too much, if so be you want to try it on, Paul Morrison. Huh! there comes another bunch of your sissies. Seven against two might make it too interestin', so we'd better skip out, Scissors. But you just wait, that's all. I don't forget you laid a hand on me; and some time I'm going to take it out."

"Oh! suit yourself, Ted," answered the other, promptly. "I'm ready to have a go at you when you're ready, if you force me to the wall. I'm not a fighter, but when I see a couple of rowdies treating a poor old woman like you did, it makes me see red."

With derisive jeers the pair faded away as several boys came running to the spot, having seen the group, and guessing from the presence of the two rival leaders that there must be something doing.

Their indignation was boundless when they learned what new meanness the coming of Paul and his two chums had interrupted.

It required considerable persuasion on the part of the scout leader to prevent an immediate chase of the culprits.

"Let them go this time," said Paul, impressively; "but I'm going to see what can be done to put a stop to this rowdyism. It gives the boys of Stanhope a bad name all around. I told Ted I'd speak to Chief Billings about it."

"You won't get any too much satisfaction there," remarked wise Nuthin'; "because, you see the Chief owes his position to the political influence of Mr. Kenwood; and as Ward runs with Ted he won't dare do anything for fear of offending the head of the party. We've just *got* to find a way ourselves to change things."

"Well, I'll ask my father about it. Perhaps he can suggest a plan. He used to be a boy himself once, and never forgets it either," was Paul's conclusion, as they each bought an apple from the old woman to make her forget her recent trouble, and then walked away, followed by her earnest thanks.

"Say, but time just crawls along," observed William, dolefully; "because, you see, I'm dying to get to work and win some of them merits you told us about. Just set me the stunt of making water boil over a fire I have to kindle, and I'll do it in three shakes of a lamb's tail. The rest of you will be left hull down. And then there's lots of other jobs that look good to me. Let's get a move on, and start the ball rolling. When's the next meeting, Paul?"

"To-night, and once more at the barn where we were first. This time I figure on having nearly twenty present, and that will make things interesting."

"Same hour as before---eight o'clock?" asked Bobolink.

"Yes. And if any of you feel that you are qualified to take the examination for the first degree, so as to become real tenderfeet in the Scouts, why, I'll be in trim to put you through your sprouts," announced the leader.

"That hits me," declared William; "for I've been studying to beat the band, and believe I'll pass muster with flying colors. Me for the tenderfoot class!"

"And I've just used up a whole ball of twine tying all those measly knots," declared Nuthin'; after which his face brightened when he added: "but I can do every one just like an old jack tar. My dad was once a sailor you know, and that's where I've got the bulge on the rest of you. So-long, boys; I'm going home to try again."

CHAPTER VI

A STRANGE SUGGESTION

"Who goes there?"

"A scout of the Red Fox Patrol!"

"Advance scout, and give the countersign!"

A figure came shuffling forward, bent over, and whispered a word in the ear of the sentinel at the door of the old tobacco barn.

"Correct! Pass in, scout!" said the one on guard, solemnly.

But William chose to loiter by the door, and watch the gathering of the clans, for the boys arrived rapidly after that, usually in pairs.

"Where's the other twin?" asked Paul, seeing William alone.

"Unavoidably detained, Captain. May be on deck later. Here comes another bunch," and William stepped aside to allow the sentry to halt Andy Flinn, who had arrived in company with Jud Elderkin, the latter as tall and thin as the former was fat and pudgy.

"Pass along, gentlemen," sang out William, after the pair had successfully stood the test; "the animals went in two by two; the elephant and the kangaroo!" and as usual there was a laugh at this sally, which applied so aptly to the couple just entering.

"All here now, Paul," announced Jack Stormways, counting noses in the light of half a dozen lanterns provided by Mr. Shipley, the owner of the barn.

For an hour routine business was transacted.

There were just twenty-one names on the roll now, and all present saving two, Wallace Carberry and another. It was decided to organize two patrols at once, the first to be under the charge of Paul as scout leader, while Jud Elderkin took the Gray Fox crowd.

The more the assembled lads learned concerning the duties and sports of the Boy Scouts, the greater became their enthusiasm. As the evening progressed they were fairly bubbling over with excitement, and it began to look as though the success of the new movement were already assured.

But Paul knew that it must be a constant fight between the natural rough-and-ready, give-and-take spirit which almost every boy inherits from his ancestors, and the new idea that would have him a hero without being a bully or a brawler.

And he was not surprised when, later on, just before they thought of breaking up the meeting, William got the floor on the question of a personal privilege, and threw a bombshell into the camp.

"I'm going to ask a favor of you fellows," he said; "and you can help me break even with that old rooster as well as have some fun. D'ye think you can stand the racket?"

The others crowded around, for they knew very well that when William had anything to propose it usually meant some frolic. But Paul noticed to his surprise that the joker seemed worked up far more than he could ever remember seeing him before, and he scented trouble ahead.

"Who is it this time, William? Tell us about it, old fellow! Of course we're bound to stand by you through thick and thin. That's one of the first duties of a scout, you know. Speak up, and give us a tip!"

It was Jud Elderkin who said this; but that he voiced the sentiments of pretty much the entire group could be judged from the chorus of exclamations that greeted his aggressive speech.

"It's that old grumpy miser, Peleg Growdy," said the orator, waving his hands to emphasize his words. "He never had any use for boys, you know, and often says he wonders why the pests were ever born. I don't remember doing him any mean thing in my life, but he's got it in for the whole creation of boys, I expect."

"What did he do to you?"

"Yes, tell us, William. We'll stand by you, never fear."

"He needs a good lesson, the old skinflint. Tell us what happened!"

William grinned, for he saw that he had already captured the hearts of his comrades, and had small need to fear they would let him seek satisfaction alone.

Jack Stormways was as deeply interested in the outcome as his chum Paul.

He remembered all his father had said at the breakfast table on the preceding day, in connection with this same man Growdy.

William was proceeding to thrill his hearers some more. To hear him talk one might imagine his father was a celebrated lawyer instead of the town blacksmith, for William had a smooth tongue.

"I guess all of you know by this time what some fellers did to Growdy's pigs last Saturday night, painting 'em to beat the band? It's the talk of the town, and lots of folks says that it serves the old crusty just right. But I was tucked away in my little bed alongside t'other twin that night, as snug as two bugs in a rug; and consequently had my little *alibi* ready to prove I wasn't in the bunch that paid him that sly visit."

"Oh! we all know who did it, never fear!" cried Joe Clausin.

"He spells his name T-e-d!" echoed Bobolink.

"All right. Because some bad boys played that joke on old Growdy he seems to have it in for every mother's son in Stanhope. I met him on the road this afternoon when I was out with a light wagon after some feed. He was on the way to town to deliver a big load of truck. Everybody's entitled to half the road; ain't that the law, fellers?"

"Sure it is, William; but that mean man wouldn't budge for you, hey?" said Jud.

"Not for an inch. Just hauled up there taking two-thirds of the road, and started to light his pipe. I was in a hurry to get along, and thought I could just squeeze by; but I made a mistake, and my wagon got upset in the ditch. He went on, grinning at my trouble, and never offering to raise a hand to help me out."

Exclamations of indignation arose on all sides.

"He needs another lesson, boys!"

"Say the word, William, and we're with you. Guess I might think up a few ways for you to get even with the old skinflint!"

Paul saw that they were rapidly being swayed by their feelings of natural resentment. He had no particular reason for liking Peleg Growdy any more than the balance of the group; but the lesson of returning good for evil had taken full possession of his soul.

Once he would have been only too ready to join in with his chums in redressing what seemed to be a positive wrong; but somehow it was different now.

Before he could speak, however, Jack had elbowed his way into the midst of the excited lads, his face full of determination.

"Wait a bit, you fellows, before you decide what you're going to do. I want to tell you something that ought to interest you."

"All right, Jack; speak up. Any objection to joining in with us and having a little fun while we help a brother even up his score?" demanded a voice.

Then Jack repeated as well as he was able the conversation that had taken place at the breakfast table in his house. He went even further than this, for it happened that he knew something about the old man's past.

"Peleg Growdy is a crabbed old chap, I admit; but perhaps you wouldn't blame him so much if you knew the trouble he has had."

"What was that?" asked one boy.

"His wife and two children were burned to death when his house caught fire many years ago. Another child grew up to be a man, and committed some crime that made him run away. His last one, a daughter, was killed in a railroad wreck. Ever since then the old man shuns people, and just works as if he never wanted to know a living soul."

"That's tough, for a fact!" admitted one boy, slowly.

"But it don't excuse him for hating all boys. What business did he have sitting there and taking two-thirds of the road, to let William upset in the ditch trying to pass him?" demanded Jud, still rebelling.

"Oh! well, that's a rule of the road that isn't always carried out. For instance, the loaded vehicle is generally given *more* than its half; and William admits he was going light, while the old man carried a heavy load," said Jack.

"Yes, that's so," grunted William, unable to hold out against such logic.

"And perhaps, if he told the actual truth, William would admit that there was room enough for him to pass, if he had been a little more careful!"

"Sure; but I was in a hurry, you understand; and didn't see that the edge of the ditch was crumbly. But he laughed, I tell you, and that riled me!"

"And now you want to bring a dozen and more of your friends down on his place to commit some prank that will make him dislike boys more than ever. It's all wrong, I tell you, fellows, and for one I refuse to lend a hand," and Jack folded his arms as though his mind were made up once and for all.

Paul saw that they were very near a division that might be fatal to the future good of the cause. He wondered whether he could swing the crowd to the other side, like the pendulum of a clock. It would take considerable eloquence, as well as all his powers of leadership to accomplish it; but the crisis was upon them, and he would be false to himself if he did not meet the issue squarely.

"Will you listen to me, fellows?" he said, quietly, stepping forward to occupy the place just vacated by Jack, and managing to whisper to the other in passing: "back me up for all you're worth, and we may win the day!"

"Of course we will! You're the scout leader, Paul, and when you hatch up any game it's sure to be worth the powder. Let her go!" came from Jud, who seemed to be a sort of ringleader in this little rebellion in the camp.

"All right, boys. I'm going to make a proposition that will take your breath away; but I have strong hopes that after what you've listened to from that manual to-night, you'll be ready to back me up," continued Paul.

"We believe in you, Paul. You never fooled us yet; and you never will. What's your queer game?" asked Bobolink, ready to swing over already, such was his faith in the one they had elected their leader.

The boys crowded around Paul, more than eager to hear what his proposal might turn out to be; for novelty always appeals to the average lad.

"All of you know that old Peleg keeps his dooryard in a horrible condition. Why, my mother says she doesn't believe it has been cleaned up in years; and he hardly ever takes the trouble to even put his wagons and that old buggy in the shed. It's a disgrace to the town to have him so near. I've heard that the women talked about asking him to do something to make it look cleaner."

"He's a stubborn old man, and can't be driven, my dad says," remarked Jud.

"Now here's what I'm going to propose. You know he's pretty deaf, and can't hear much that goes on. He used to have a savage dog, but it died a couple of weeks ago, and since then he's been trying to get another, but so far without success. Get that?"

"Yes, but go on, Paul," demanded Bobolink.

"Let's go over to Peleg's in a body," continued the scout leader; "and while he sleeps clean up that dooryard of his so that in the morning he'll just rub his eyes and begin to think the fairies have paid him a visit in the night. And when he learns who did it perhaps he may feel something like you did, William. Don't you see, *it'll be rubbing it in good and hard!*"

Paul waited to see how his suggestion took.

The boys stared at each other in amazement. It is doubtful whether a parcel of wide-awake lads ever before had such a novel proposition made to them. And perhaps it was the sensational character of the appeal that stirred them more than any desire to return good for evil.

"Count me in that job, Paul," said Jack positively.

He had timed his interruption with exceeding cleverness. Boys are like sheep, and given a bell wether they will follow blindly where the leader goes.

"Me too!" cried Bobolink, quickly.

"Ditto! I'm for the game just as Paul says!" exclaimed Nuthin'.

And every one in the crowd followed suit, laughing at the idea of their turning the tables on the old farmer in such an unheard-of fashion; though several doubtless secretly scoffed at the project, and only agreed because it seemed to be a necessary evil if they wanted to become Boy Scouts.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRAP THAT PELEG SET

"There's Growdy's shack and barns!"

"Don't seem to be anything stirring, fellows!"

"Look out for a trap. Once bitten, twice shy. Perhaps he's just laying for some fellers to come along, and play some more paintin' job trick. I heard that he said he would find some way to stop the nuisance!"

This from "Red" Betts, who was known as a cautious chap, and able to vanish at the first sign of danger better than any fellow in town.

"Suppose we hold up here, and send out scouts to see how the land lies? That's the military way of doing it," ventured Bobolink.

"A good idea, and I appoint you, Bobolink, with Jud Elderkin, to carry out the little business," remarked Paul, in a low tone.

"Trot along, you chaps; the rest of us will bunk right here alongside the road and wait till you report," and suiting the action to his words William dropped in his tracks.

A brief time elapsed, and then the pair of spies returned.

"Not a single light in the house, and the coast clear, fellows; so come on!" and Jud waved his long arms as though enjoying his brief assumption of authority to the limit.

It would have doubtless astonished the old farmer had he chanced upon the scene just then. A young moon hung in the western sky, and while giving little light, still the figures of some score of stooping boys might have been discovered, advancing in broken formation along the road.

The leader silently opened the gate leading to the dooryard of Growdy's place. His barns stood near the house, so that the confusion which reigned was all the more noticeable. Its equal had never been known around Stanhope; and could only be expected in the case of a place where a woman's influence for cleanliness had been totally absent during the past ten years.

Over to the stable went some of the boys.

Paul had talked it all over with them as they walked, and each knew what part he was to take in the general clean-up.

To some of them it was simply another form of a lark. Boys are queer creatures even to those who imagine they know them well. They must be doing something all the time. Once get them started in the right direction, and they will labor just as sturdily to bring about a good object, as under other conditions, they would work to play a joke. It all depends on how they begin. And thanks to the sagacity of Paul, he had succeeded in interesting them in the novelty of his proposal.

Some secured rakes and hoes, and began to systematically gather up the scattered loose material that covered the place, ankle deep. Others pushed the wagons, and the old dilapidated buggy, back into the shed in systematic order.

They worked like busy bees, chuckling, whispering and evidently getting considerable fun out of the strange frolic.

Paul himself went over the job to make sure that it had been thoroughly done, and that nothing remained uncared for.

Up to this time fortune had favored the busy workers, since no sound had come about to betray their presence.

"How is it, Paul?" asked Jack Stormways, as he ran across the other in making his rounds.

"About at the end. The boys are putting the old tools back where they found them; and then we can go home. It's the best half hour's work any of us have done for a good while, I tell you, Jack."

"Some of the boys don't seem to think it quite so funny now as when they started in. They say they can't see where the pay is going to come in, and have begun to grumble," whispered the other.

"Perhaps it never will, and again, who knows what might come out of this? Anyhow, the ladies will be glad to see this dirty place clean for once. Some others I know may take a notion that if Old Growdy can clean up they ought to. Listen! what in the world is that?"

A rattling of tin pans came to their ears, as if one of the boys in prowling around had accidentally upset a bench on which a milk bucket and some flat tinware had been airing.

"That settles it! He'll hear all that row and be out on us in a jiffy!" said Paul, annoyed because the affair had not gone off according to schedule.

"Look! there's a light sprung up inside the house. He's getting his trousers on, all right, and the sooner we skip out the better!" declared Jack.

The boys now came running from every direction, while sounds from within the nearby farmhouse told that Old Peleg must be switching on his heavy boots.

So Paul, knowing that the only thing left now was a hasty flight, gave the signal arranged for. It meant every fellow for himself until they had put a reasonable distance between themselves and the seat of danger. Then they could meet at a given place, and go home, laughing over the whole affair, and wondering what Peleg would think when he saw what a miraculous transformation had taken place while he slept.

Paul happened to be the very last to run away. Instead of passing out by way of the gate as most of the others did, Paul started to pass over the fence at an inviting point, where two of the bars seemed to be down, and he could gain the adjoining woodlot, from which he might reach the road at his pleasure.

But alas! the best of plans often go amiss. And that gap that yawned in the fence proved a delusion and a snare.

Hardly had Paul made the jump over the two lower bars than he found himself suddenly jerked down, and his head came with a crash on the ground, causing him to see a myriad of stars.

Nor was this all. An unknown power at the same time seemed to lift his lower extremities up in the air at least two feet, so that he appeared to be trying to swim on dry land.

For a moment he was puzzled to account for this remarkable happening; but as his head cleared a bit, and the stars ceased to shoot before his mental vision, he began to get an idea as to what had happened.

Apparently the fellows who had painted the farmer's pigs on the other night must have entered his place from the woods, and through this gap in the fence.

Old Peleg had remembered, and anticipating another invasion sooner or later, he had succeeded in arranging some sort of ingenious trap on the spot.

In jumping Paul had set off the trigger, with the consequence that a noose had instantly tightened around his ankles, and a hogshead partly filled with stones, starting to roll down the slope, had drawn his legs upward.

Well, at any rate there he was, clinging to the grass, and with an unseen force pulling at his elevated feet, so that he was helpless to assist himself.

It was very funny, no doubt, but Paul hardly felt like laughing, just then. He tried to wriggle around so as to get at the loop, in the hope that he might loosen the same; but all his efforts were wasted.

Old Peleg had builded better than he expected when he set that trap in which to catch his tormentors.

He was coming now to see the result of his cunning. No doubt he had heard the tremendous rattle as the bulging barrel of stones started to roll down the slope after being liberated; for even a deaf man could hardly have missed that racket. Lantern in hand he was even now hobbling along, chuckling in anticipation of what he would find in his trap.

Closer came the limping farmer. Paul saw now that he held a vicious black whip in his right hand, while gripping a lighted lantern in the other.

Laughter in the distance told that the boys had all taken themselves off. They could not suspect what a dire calamity had befallen their leader, or a rescue party must have certainly been formed.

Another minute and Peleg had arrived at the fence, and bending over held the lantern so that its light fell upon the figure of his captive.

"Gut ye, have I? Mebbe ye'll try to paint some critters of mine agin, an' mebbe ye won't!" said the farmer, as he raised the ugly black whip which he held, with the evident intention of bringing it down good and hard on the helpless boy.

CHAPTER VIII

TURNING THE TABLES

"Wait, Mr. Growdy!" Paul hastened to exclaim.

The old man laughed harshly as he flourished the whip. Perhaps he had never struck a boy before in all his life, and hardly knew how to begin; but his temper was plainly disturbed, and he meant to make a start.

"What should I wait for, when I cut ye in the very act? Paint my critters red, white an' blue, will ye? P'raps ye wanted to pull all the feathers out o' my flock o' chickens this time, an' think it funny. Sarve ye right if I gi'e ye a dozen stripes!"

"Mr. Growdy, I did you a favor once!" said the prisoner of the trap, wishing to keep the old man as long as possible from starting operations.

"Say ye so? Wall, this wipes it out then. Who air ye, anyway?"

The farmer bent lower, and thrust his lantern so that its light would fall upon the face of the boy. Immediately he uttered a grunt, for it was plain that he had recognized his captive.

"So, it's ye, is it, Paul Morrison? This is some surprise, seein' as ye're the last boy I'd expect to be up ter sech meanness. What d'ye think yer father'll say w'en he hears 'bout this?"

"I guess he'll laugh, and say it was about the cutest trick ever played on you, Mr. Growdy," came the immediate answer; "but please get me down from this. Perhaps the blood will all run to my head. Tie my hands if you want, and fix it so I can't run away; but I couldn't stand this long."

"So ye think yer father'd larf, do ye? I never wud 'a' b'lieved Doctor Morrison was the kind o' man to encourage practical jokes on anybody," grumbled the old man, plainly at a loss to understand what was meant.

"Well, he isn't, and I'd be sorry to have him know I was guilty of such a thing. But you're barking up the wrong tree, Mr. Growdy, I give you my word we none of us had any trick in mind when we came here to-night."

"Then what took you in my dooryard here; for I heard a pack runnin' away when I kim out of the house? Tell me that, Paul," insisted the farmer; but the hand that held that cruel looking whip had fallen to his side, which was a good sign.

"I'll be only too glad to do so if you let me up. Tie my hands, my legs too if you want, sir; but I'm getting dizzy from having my head below my heels."

Peleg stooped still closer. He again held the lantern down so that he could look into the face of his prisoner; after which he did something that Paul had hardly expected---bent over, seized the rope connected with the laden hogshead, and pulling hard succeeded in casting the loop that had just encircled Paul's ankles, over a post of the fence.

"Get up, Paul!" he said, grimly, yet with a flicker of curiosity in his wrinkled face; as though a dim suspicion that there might be something out of the ordinary back of this, had begun to take possession of his mind.

Paul regained his feet, a little wobbly to be sure, for he had experienced a bad fall, and his head felt rather tender where it had come in contact with the hard ground.

"Thank you, Mr. Growdy. And now I'm going to tell you something. Perhaps you will find it hard to believe me, and again you may not just appreciate our way of taking matters in our own hands, when the request of the women of Stanhope didn't have any effect. Look around your dooryard, Mr. Growdy. Do you see anything changed here?"

The farmer held up the lantern, and what he saw caused him to utter an exclamation.

"Ev'ry one o' 'em gone, by hokey! If so be ye've smashed all my rigs, Paul Morison, I'll have the law on ye, as sure as my name's Peleg Growdy!" he roared, aghast at what he deemed a serious discovery.

"Come with me, Mr. Growdy. Notice as you go that this place doesn't look much like a pigpen now. In fact, I calculate it's as clean as any dooryard around Stanhope. Even the ladies can drive past now without being shocked. And Mr. Growdy, if you will take the trouble, sir, to look under that wagon shed, you'll see every one of your vehicles just where they should be when not in use!"

The old man stared, as well he might.

"By gum!" Paul heard him mutter; and the words seemed to express the situation so well that the boy could hardly keep from laughing outright.

Finally the puzzled farmer turned and looked at the lad who stood there beside him. Easily might Paul have made his escape at any time now; but that was really the last thing he thought of doing. He would much rather remain and see the bewilderment of Peleg Growdy reach its conclusion.

"Look here, Paul, what's this hull thing mean?" finally demanded the farmer.

And Paul, remembering the fact that the old man was hard of hearing, raised his voice as he thought fit when making reply.

"Do you want me to tell you the whole thing, sir?"

"I sartin do, every word. Blest if I kin make head or tail out o' it. Reckons as how them leetle fairy twins ye read about must 'a' ben workin' wile I slept; er else I'm dreamin' things that caint be true."

"Listen, Mr. Growdy," Paul went on. "Perhaps you may not know that we have started a troop of the Boy Scouts here in Stanhope. Some twenty of us have joined, and later on we hope to get uniforms, and other things needed, when we have earned the money to buy them. Those boys you heard running away were my friends and comrades, every one going to be a true scout."

"Soldier bummers then, out on a raid, and ready to kerry off everything they kin lay hands on," grumbled the old man, still unable to grasp the true condition of affairs.

"At a meeting to-night in Mr. Shipley's barn we made further progress looking to perfecting our organization. But boys will be boys, you know; and one of our number asked the rest to help him get even with you, because you forced him into the ditch this afternoon, upsetting his wagon."

Old Growdy moved uneasily.

"I was real sorry to see William do that. If he'd only waited till I lighted my pipe I 'spected to pull out a leetle more, so's to let him git by; but he was that impatient he must push on," he said.

"Just as I thought. Well, Mr. Growdy, one of the rules of the scouts is that a member must never return an evil deed by another of the same kind. I proposed that we try to make you change your mind about detesting all boys. So we came here, not to paint your pigs as some other fellows did, I'm told; not to let your stock loose, or run off with your wagons; but to clean up your dooryard, and give you the greatest surprise of your life when you came out in the morning!"

"Sho! now. That takes the cake!"

"When one of my chums upset that bench by accident, and the pans fell with a racket, of course it gave the whole thing away, and we started to run; but unfortunately I happened to drop into your nice little trap, and you found me upside down. That is all, Mr. Growdy. Do you want to whip me now, or take me in to the lockup, which?"

Peleg Growdy found himself strangely thrilled as he looked into that frank, smiling face of Paul Morrison.

For almost a full minute they stood thus.

Then Peleg spoke.

"Reckon as how them comrades o' yers must 'a' gut a long start by now, Paul. S'pose ye see if ye kin ketch up with 'em, son."

That was all, but as Paul hurried off he was conscious of a strange feeling deep down in his breast; and he felt sure that after all it had paid. Peleg Growdy at least had met with the surprise of his life. After this possibly his ideas of juvenile depravity might undergo a violent change; for such positive natures as his usually swing from one extreme to the other, just like the pendulum of a grandfather clock.

Paul did not catch up with his fleeing comrades, for they had secured too good a start. When he reached the rendezvous, however, he found them there, one and all, and wondering what could have happened to detain him.

Loud were the expressions of astonishment as he calmly announced that having been caught in a trap, he had held a face to face talk with Peleg Growdy himself; when he managed to relate the whole surprising adventure the boys were stunned at the possible consequences of their little prank.

Those who had considered it only in the light of a joke began to see that Paul had something deeper in mind when he proposed such a thing.

All the way home Paul was kept busy repeating some of the things he had said to the irate farmer. It gave those lads something to ponder over when by themselves. Possibly they had never before realized what a powerful lever for good such a method of returning a grudge may become.

Paul himself was delighted. Even if nothing more came of it he could look back to the little adventure with satisfaction such as Ted Slavin and his cronies might never feel with regard to their prank.

And the next morning Paul was not at all ashamed to relate the entire circumstance at the breakfast table. He felt amply repaid when he saw the look of pride upon his mother's face, as she turned her eyes, filled with unshed tears, upon him and said gently:

"I am glad you did it, Paul. I know the history of poor Peleg Growdy; and surely he has had enough of trouble during his life to make him different from the rest of his kind. The milk of human kindness has perhaps been dried up in his breast; yet who knows, my boy, but that you may have set him to thinking by that one little act of yours. I shall never fear for you, Paul, whatever betides."

His father, the doctor, was a man of few words; but that morning when he was going off on his round of visits he did an unusual thing--took Paul's hand, and gave it an affectionate squeeze, while the look that accompanied the action needed

no further explanation.

And Paul was many times satisfied.

That day and others saw a growing buzz of excitement in the town of Stanhope. It seemed as though nearly every boy over the age of twelve, yes and even under, might be filled with a burning zeal to join the new troops that were being started under two different scout leaders.

Ward Kenwood had entered heart and soul into the work, which seemed to appeal to him; but there were those who secretly believed he was more concerned about opposing his rival, Paul Morrison, than in building up a second troop of scouts that would be a credit to the place.

Ted Slavin, of course, worked hand in glove with his friend, Ward. If money counted for anything they had no reason to complain; for inside of a week there blossomed out numerous boys clad in the new khaki uniforms that distinguish the Boy Scouts everywhere.

Some of Paul's friends felt grieved because they had failed to get their equipments as soon as the others; but nothing could disturb the scout leader.

"You'll see that they are bound to meet up with a snag when they apply for admission to the real organization. They can't subscribe to many of the rules. Then again you know that the real scout scorns to receive his uniform as a gift. Everything he owns must be earned. But most of us are nearly ready to send for suits. Wait a little longer. The race is not always to the swift."

In this fashion then did wise Paul bring peace to the troubled hearts of those anxious ones. Never a member of the new Fox Patrols that sought an interview with the scout leader but who came away feeling that there was not a cloud in the sky of their future.

In this manner a week, and then ten days, drifted along, with the opening of school looming up in the near future.

Paul had almost forgotten the troubles of his chum when one day he had the fact suddenly brought to his attention again, as Jack came upon him with a face upon which rested the same old cloud of anxiety and grief.

CHAPTER IX

"*Well done, my boy!*"

"There, some more gone, Paul!"

"But it's nearly ten days since we talked it over last, and then there were, let me see, I believe six coins left," returned the other, quickly.

"That's true enough. And I can see now that you're wondering why none have been taken all this time, up to to-day," remarked Jack, as he came alongside his chum, who was looking in at a window where sporting goods made a brave display.

"Will Carlo hang around and wait for you a bit?" asked Paul, looking with a smile toward the big Newfoundland dog that had been trotting at the heels of his young master, carrying a basket, in which were several packages from the store.

"Sure. He's well trained, and that is one of the smallest of his stunts, as you know. See, he has laid the basket down, and stands guard over it. I dare any dog in Stanhope to try and take it away. Now, you want to know about my poor old batch of coins!"

"I'm waiting to hear, old fellow," said Paul, tenderly; for he could see that his chum was once again highly charged with emotion.

"I thought I'd try a scheme unbeknown to you," began the other, slowly.

"Perhaps I can guess what you did---was it that you locked the door of your little den, Jack?"

"Well, now, you are a champion guesser, for that was just what I did, every day up to this one---shut down the window, locked the door, and never went up there once," replied his comrade, with surprise written on his face.

"And nothing was missing?"

"Not a coin. I counted six myself this morning when I went upstairs just to get something out of the snugery."

"Did you forget to lock it after you, Jack?"

"No; but an idea came to me. At the time I thought it a bright one; but now I'm more than half sorry I ever tried it."

"Oh! then you left the door unlocked again on purpose?"

"Yes, and with the window open, at that. The invitation was plain enough," murmured Jack, with dejection in his voice and manner.

Paul seemed to ponder over the matter; and indeed it was quite enough to try any boy's wits.

"Do you happen to know if any fellow called to see you to-day while you were out?" he asked, presently.

"Now, I thought of that, and asked both my brother and Maggie to pay particular attention to it, if any boy stopped over, hoping I would come in."

"Nothing doing?"

"It's kind of queer, but do you know, for a wonder not a single fellow has been at our house this blessed day. Generally half a dozen call to see me, you know, to borrow books from my library, or talk over matters connected with our school society. It just looks as if everything wanted to mix me up worse than ever, and make me think---"

"Never mind what it makes you think," interrupted Paul, quickly, squeezing the arm of his chum affectionately; "let's get down to facts. You know I promised that I'd find out the truth about this matter; and while up to now I've given it mighty little attention, don't think that I've forgotten, Jack."

"I don't; only it bothers me to understand how you can ever expect to find out who's taking my old coins, if I've made a mess of it; and living in the house at that!" rejoined the other, with bewilderment plainly visible on his face.

"Leave that to me. I repeat my promise, and if everything else fails why, what's going to hinder my hiding up there behind some of your stuff, where I can see for myself what happens?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Jack, "that would be a clever idea; but much as I want to know the truth, I'm afraid to!"

"Well, you've got to get over that feeling. No matter what happens it's far better to know the worst; for then it may be remedied. I've heard my father tell of many a desperate case where only heroic treatment, as he called it, brought his patient through. We've just got to try it here, Jack, old fellow. Hello! what d'ye suppose all that row's about?"

"Sounds to me like a runaway horse, from the shouts," declared Jack, quickly forgetting his own personal troubles in the new excitement.

"Look! There's the runaway, and coming this way around the corner. Oh! it was nearly over that time! My heart was in my mouth!" cried Paul.

"There's some one in the wagon, Paul, a little child!" almost shrieked Jack; for the clamor was deafening by now, and ordinary sounds could never have been heard.

No need to tell Paul that. He had just made the astounding discovery himself, and was thrilled with sudden horror.

It was a little boy who was tugging at the lines with a heroism worthy of one twice his size; but such a young person could make no impression on the hard mouth of that terrorized animal.

In the sudden whirl around the corner the lad had come very near being thrown but, and was even now unsteadily trying to regain his balance.

Paul knew that it was an occasion for quick thinking, and even faster doing!

He bounded away from the side of his chum as though on springs, leaving Jack standing there on the curb, filled with eager anticipation, and fears.

It was not *toward* the rapidly advancing horse that the boy ran, but in exactly the opposite direction, as though he were being chased. With the wagon flinging about from side to side, and hindering the progress of the runaway to some extent, Paul believed that he could almost hold his own in the race.

Little by little he meant to let the horse overtake him. Then, at just the right second his chance would come to jump at the animal's head, seize upon the lines close to the bit, and throw his entire weight upon them.

He knew that it called for good judgment, since the slightest mistake would be apt to cost him dear. To be thrown under the iron-shod hoofs of the galloping animal might mean making him a cripple for the rest of his life.

Even that possibility did not daunt Paul. He only saw the frightened face of the little chap who so valorously clung to the lines, and shouted shrilly at the top of his childish voice, as though expecting the usually tractable horse to mind.

A human life in peril---that was one of the cardinal points that must call for action on the part of a true Boy Scout. He might refuse to engage in a sanguinary battle with some rival who had dared him to a fight; but under no conditions must he hold back when the chance offered to do a good deed.

Now the horse was just behind him, and still galloping furiously. If anything, the animal was making more desperate headway than ever, for the outcries on every side seemed to add to his fright.

Every eye was focussed on the runner. One man in a vehicle had drawn in his horse, and with white cheeks watched the remarkable scene.

If any among that throng had reason to send up a silent prayer for the safety of that daring lad just then, surely he might. For the man in the buggy was Doctor Alan Morrison, Paul's own father!

Five seconds passed, but it seemed an hour, a day, a life-time to that man, as his heart ceased to beat, and he gripped the reins convulsively in his clenched hands.

Then the heavens seemed to almost split with the sudden outburst of wild shouts that raced up and down that street.

"He's done it! Hurrah! The boy's stopped him! Bully for Paul Morrison!"

Men shouted, boys shrieked, while women embraced in their tears. The tense strain was over, for willing hands had clutched the lines after Paul's weight had brought the wild runaway to a staggering halt; and the danger was past.

Then ensued a wild scene, everybody trying to get hold of the boy who had known what to do in an emergency, and not only that, but had done it.

Confused, overwhelmed, Paul in the great confusion tried to flee; but while he did manage to duck under many of the hands outstretched to clutch him, it was only to dart into the arms of some one who pressed him to his heart.

And looking up the boy saw above him the face of one whom he loved---his father, who had been a witness to his adventure.

"That was well done, my boy; and I'm glad I saw it!" was all the good doctor said; but Paul never forgot the proud look that accompanied the words.

It would return to him many times in the distant future, when he might be tempted by the fascinations of the world to turn aside from the narrow path which he had chosen to tread; and must ever be a guide and beacon for his footsteps.

Then came Jack, with William, Tom Betts and Bluff Shipley, all nearly wild over the fact that it was their chum who had acquitted himself so well.

Before Paul could make his escape he found his hand gripped by the father of the child in the wagon, who happened to be a prosperous farmer, with whom Doctor Morrison was well acquainted.

"I never could tell you what I think about this, my boy," he said, with deep feeling. "The child's mother'll never forget you, be sure of that. And it ain't right for me to offer you any reward for doing such a fine thing; but I want you to buy something with this ten dollars, that every time you look at it you'll remember little Tod Perkins, what owed his life to you."

"Oh! I couldn't think of it, Mr. Perkins. Why, it was just pie to me, you know. Please don't make me take it!" said the boy, still more confused; but the farmer had already turned away to embrace his child, and there seemed nothing for it but to accept the gift.

"Don't offend him by refusing, Paul; he means well, and perhaps you can buy something with it that will serve as a reminder," said the doctor, always trying to avoid hurting other people's feelings.

"Why, sure, what's to hinder you buying your scout's uniform with it?" declared William at this juncture.

"You certain earned it, if anybody ever did work for what they got!" avowed Bobolink, positively.

"Oh! w-w-why wasn't it m-m-me?" wailed Bluff, in pretended grief.

"Say, do you think you could have nailed that runaway horse, with such an impediment twisting you up?" demanded Bobolink, grinning.

"Well, boys, since you say so, I suppose then I'll just have to accept it, and call my outfit earned by the sweat of my brow," laughed Paul, taking out his handkerchief to wipe his face from its collection of perspiration and dust.

CHAPTER X

AN UNEXPECTED OFFER

Paul and his chum managed to break away finally, and walk toward the home of the latter. Jack had his arm through that of the other, and it seemed as though he felt happier over the recent exploit than the one who had occupied the centre of the stage.

"My heart seemed to be up in my mouth just when you made that grab for the bit. I believe I would have fallen in a fit if you had gone under, Paul," said Jack, with a big sigh, as he pressed the arm he held.

"Well, I was a little worried myself that something might upset me just then. But luck favored me, you know. I'm more than glad, because it would have given my mother a bad shock if I'd been trampled on. But please drop that subject, old fellow," said Paul, making a wry face.

"I will, since you ask it; but they won't forget it in the town for a long time. Such things happen only once a year or more around dull old Stanhope. To-night we meet to see how many have the money earned for the suits; and I'm glad to say I can cover my needs. You're doubly supplied now, with this windfall."

"Yes, and I wish I could help some other fellow out; but I'm afraid that would be against the rules of the game. Here we are at your house, and bless me if Carlo hasn't carried that basket of provisions straight back to the kitchen door. Say, he *is* a trump, sure enough, Jack."

"Oh! that's dead easy for Carlo. Why, we often put a nickel in the basket, and send him down to the bakery for a loaf of bread," laughed the other.

"And does he always get it?" asked Paul, looking suddenly interested.

"I don't believe he's failed for six months. Of course Mr. Crusty knows what we want, and wraps the loaf up so as to keep the dust off. Why, that ain't the best of his tricks, by a long shot. I taught him when he was hungry to go--"

"Excuse me, won't you, Jack; there comes father, and I do believe he's heading home long before his usual time. Perhaps he's afraid mother may hear that something has happened to me, and would be anxious. I'd better jump in with him, don't

you think? Another time I'll hear all about the wonderful stunts of Carlo."

And so speaking Paul ran out to join his father in the buggy.

Jack looked after him, and sighed heavily. It was not that he felt a particle jealous of the recent exploit which his chum had engineered so successfully; for envy was not one of his failings. But he did wish that his mind was as free from anxiety and suspicion as that of Paul Morrison.

For the mystery of those disappearing coins hung about his neck like a millstone, nor could he ever know peace again until in some way it were explained.

What happened at the Morrison home when the doctor told the story of his boy's heroism no one ever knew; for Paul was not the one to betray family secrets.

But Jack, who understood what an affectionate mother his chum had, could easily imagine how she wrapped her arms about the boy, and pressed him again and again to her bosom, thanking Heaven that the child she had watched grow from babyhood until he was now almost as tall as his father, should show signs of proving himself a worthy successor to the "good Doctor," as every one knew him.

That night the boys had the darkness to contend with when they started for the place of meeting, though the late moon might show her smiling face before the time came for them to return home.

There were just twenty-two who reported at roll call that evening at eight, and one need only glance around at the faces of the boys, both large and small, to be positive that the enthusiasm, instead of dying out, was increasing by leaps and bounds.

When the meeting had been called to order, the one subject that interested those gathered was the question of obtaining their uniforms and other outfit.

A warm discussion arose shortly when Jack asked for information concerning the right of any scout to assist a fellow member who might be behind in earning the necessary amount.

Some believed one way, while others seemed to look at it in another light, and not a few were, as Jack said, "on the fence."

"Listen, fellows, and I'll tell you what I gathered from studying the books on the Boy Scout movement loaned me by the minister. Here are twenty or more of us, and we need just so much money for an outfit. Some can show much more than they need, others fall short, although they may have worked even harder. Is that plain?" and Jack looked around at the eager faces as he put the question.

"It certainly is," remarked Paul, smiling; "some are born rich, others earn riches, and once in a while some lucky chap has the money stuck right in his hand. I'm one of the last class. But go on, Jack; for I know you've got a bright idea that may help us out of this hole."

"The answer is easy, fellows. We must make a common fund. Then every member can put in all he wants, so long as it has been honestly earned. See my plan?"

"Sure, and it goes. That's the answer to the problem. Let's try it out and see how near we can come to the amount needed," said Jud Elderkin, briskly; starting to pass around slips of paper and a pencil.

"Put down what you can hand over to the general fund, each fellow; and remember it means cash, to be delivered to-morrow, and not credit," he announced.

There was the utmost eagerness to carry out the idea, and before five minutes had passed every boy had written his name on a slip of paper, together with the full amount which he could contribute to the general fund.

"I appoint Jud and Bobolink a committee to canvass the vote, and count up the amount subscribed," said Paul, as chairman of the meeting.

It did not take very long, though the two boys were seen to go over their figures several times in order to make sure there could be no error.

"Look at the grins on their faces! Don't that tell the story, fellows! Hurrah!" shouted Nuthin'.

And when the amount was declared it was found that it far exceeded the actual sum needed to purchase uniforms for the entire twenty-two scouts, including hats and leggings.

"Don't forget that I've just got to have a bugle, fellows. What use is it to be elected bugler if you can't bugle?" exclaimed Bobolink.

"And m-m-me for a d-d-d-d-drum!" echoed Bluff, excitedly; when he was immediately pounced upon as usual, and pounded several times on the back.

"Yes, do get Bluff something he can beat. I've heard him drum, and he's just a corker at it. It keeps him from talking, you know," laughed Tom Betts.

"Hello!" exclaimed Nuthin' suddenly; "look who's here, fellows!"

All eyes were immediately turned toward the door, and focussed upon the figure that stood just within the barn, having entered while they were boisterously exchanging these compliments.

"Why, it's Mr. Growdy!" said Paul.

"Old Peleg!" echoed Bobolink, in a hushed tone.

One and all stared at the crusty old farmer, who for years had avoided all boys as though he thought them a dangerous breed of animals which it were safer to let severely alone.

When Paul saw the amused smile creeping over the rugged and seamed face of the old farmer he understood that Peleg had really experienced a wonderful change of heart, dating from that night when the new Boy Scouts cleaned up his dooryard as an object lesson.

And now Peleg was coming slowly forward, looking a bit awkward; since he had never been accustomed to facing an audience, and especially one composed of boys.

They made way for him, so that presently he found himself completely surrounded by an eager throng.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Growdy," said Paul, holding out his hand impulsively; and to the surprise of the others it was eagerly seized upon by the calloused fingers of the toiler in the fields; "these are the friends I spoke to you about. And this is the Fox Patrol of the newly organized Boy Scouts."

Peleg grinned, and acknowledged the introduction by ducking his touseled head.

"Glad to meet ye, boys. I've be'n hearin' quite considerable 'bout what ye was adoin' over here, an' I thort as how I'd jest drap in to see ye all; sorter like returnin' yer call, so to speak!" he said, again allowing a humorous look to appear upon his face.

And somehow the boys instantly concluded that when Peleg allowed the lines of his severe face to relax, he was rather a jolly old chap after all.

"Hurrah! Three cheers for Mr. Peleg Growdy!" exclaimed one of those who felt relieved to think that his coming meant no trouble after all.

But the farmer raised his hand.

"Jest wait till I has my little say, boys. Now, at fust I was kinder riled that a passel o' boys shud 'a' took me to task on account o' my way o' lettin' things run loose like at my place. But I gotter thinkin' her over, and by hokey if it didn't jest come home to me. Times was when my dooryard was the puttiest around all Stanhope, with the flowers abloomin', an' every scrap tidied up; but in them happy days Mandy an' the kids was there, ye see; an' sense they was took it 'peared like I never cared what things looked like; an' that's a fact, boys."

The old man seemed to swallow something that threatened to choke him; and then, while the boys hung on his every word, and wondered how they had ever come to misunderstand him as they had, he went on:

"But I kim to the conclusion, arter thet kind visit ye paid me, thet I owed a duty to the community, and it warn't right for any citizen to let his place look disgraceful. So arter this nobody ain't agoin' to be ashamed to pass by the yard where Mandy 'tended the rose bushes, and her tots played from morn to night. I jest drapped in here to thank ye right hearty boys, for showin' me wot was wantin'. Arter this there ain't never agoin' to be any trouble between me an' the boys o' Stanhope. They kin count on old Peleg Growdy to contribute to every sport that goes to cultivate the mind and body in the right direction!"

He seemed a vastly different man as he stood there and said this, for his head was thrown back, his eyes flashed, and his face was almost friendly in its expression, the old haggard look having for the time being disappeared.

"Again I say, three cheers for Mr. Growdy!" called Joe Clausin.

"Wait a bit, fellers. I got somethin' more to say," pleaded the old man, once again lifting his hand to still the rising tumult.

Paul smiled, for he could give a pretty shrewd guess as to what was coming; and it certainly did him good to realize how their odd little scheme was turning out to be such a glorious success.

Every voice was hushed, and once more the throng waited for the farmer to explain.

"I've been ahearin' a good lot about wot ye're all adoin' with this Boy Scout business. Kinder got me interested, an' I borried some books o' the dominie jest so I could understand wot 'twas all about. An' I want to say I like the ijee fust rate. If I hed any boys o' my own," and his voice faltered right there, "I'd sure encourage 'em to jine in with ye. Seein' as I ain't, an' on account o' the good turn ye done me t'other night, boys, I'm goin' to ask a favor o' ye. I ain't got nary a kid to leave my money to when I go; and so I hope ye'll let me pay for fittin' this here Fox Patrol out with uniforms! That's my ijee, boys, an' it'll give me great joy if so be ye take me up!"

They looked at each other for a minute, speechless with astonishment.

Then being real boys they found their voices with a rush. No need now for Tom Butts or Joe Clausin to suggest three cheers. That old barn fairly rocked with the volume of sound that burst forth, as every fellow swung his hat in the air, and tried his best to give his feelings free rein.

CHAPTER XI

CAUGHT NAPPING

"Silence!"

The tumult died away as quickly as it had sprung into being, when Paul held up his right hand and made this request.

All being still again, he turned to the grinning old farmer, who was doubtless getting more solid satisfaction out of this new experience than he had obtained from any clever dicker or trade engineered in the last ten years.

"Mr. Growdy," said Paul, with considerable of feeling in his voice, "as the present scout leader of Stanhope Troop No. 1 of the Boy Scouts, I want to thank you sincerely for your generous offer. We all appreciate the kindly spirit that causes you to make it to us. But unfortunately it happens that the rules of our organization will not allow us to accept."

Peleg's face fell several degrees at this.

"Say, couldn't ye jest make an exception this time, boys?" he pleaded. "I'll feel right hurt if I ain't 'lowed to help on this business some. Wot's a hundred dollars beside the new speerit ye've managed somehow to start up in me? If ye need more, by gum! ye kin hev it! I ain't no hog, if I hev let the people think so this long time."

"Sorry to say so, Mr. Growdy, but we can't accept. Besides, we have all earned enough money now to pay for what we need, and expect to send away to-morrow to get our suits," Paul went on; and even while he was talking a bright idea came flashing into his brain.

"Wall, now that's jest too bad, boys. I'd calkerlated to spend that hundred on doin' a good deed, an' ye make me go back home with the same hugged tight in my pocket. I'm sorry it cain't be did, I am, sure," muttered the farmer, shaking his head, and acting like a child that has been cheated out of some anticipated pleasure.

"That doesn't follow, Mr. Growdy," said Paul, in a low but thrilling voice; "if you have set your mind on using that hundred dollars to do a good work, perhaps I might give you a hint where it would fit in mighty well, and make your heart feel warm."

"Hey! wot's that, Paul? I don't understand," exclaimed the man.

"Down just beyond the outskirts of Stanhope there lives a poor widow woman who, I'm told, is in danger of being put out of her home any day now because she has been sick and unable to work so as to pay her rent. If you went to her right now, Mr. Growdy, and put that wad of money in her hand, I'm sure you'd never regret it, sir; and every boy here would thank you just as much as if you paid for his uniform. Isn't that so, fellows?"

A chorus of shouts testified to the fact that Paul had hit upon a popular idea for turning the sudden generosity of the hitherto miserly old farmer to account.

"Who is the woman?" asked Peleg Growdy uneasily.

"Mrs. Jenks, who has three little children to support. Her husband was killed in that blast some years ago, and she never recovered a cent from the mining company, for they burst like a bubble," returned Paul.

"By gum! wot d'ye know about that, now? I reckons as how she lives in one o' my own cottages, which the real estate man, Stebbins, takes keer of fur me. He was tellin' me about some tenant he'd have to put out; but I never noticed more'n that the name was Jenks."

"But now?" ventured Paul.

"It won't be did! No, sir, not by a jugful. I got my team outside, an' I'm goin' straight over to see the widder. I knowed her husband onct too, an' I'm some 'shamed that I didn't look her up afore," and Peleg started for the door.

"Hold on, Mr. Growdy!" called Paul.

"Hey! wot's doin' now, boys?" demanded the old man, turning to grin again at his new host of young friends.

"You oughtn't to leave here, sir, without giving every boy scout the privilege of shaking hands with you. I'm sure I speak for each fellow when I ask that favor," returned Paul, stepping forward.

Peleg was agreeable, though he blushed like a schoolboy as the scouts, forming in line, walked past him, each seizing his horny hand eagerly, and doing his best to make the old farmer wince with the warmth of his squeeze.

They gave him a parting cheer as he passed out, and the old fellow tried to return the military salute to the best of his ability.

"Well, what do you think of that?" asked Nuthin', when they were once more gathered around their leader for the purpose of further discussion.

"The finest thing that could possibly have happened. We had our frolic; and see what it hatched. After this Peleg Growdy will never be the same grumpy man he was in the past. No boy need longer hesitate to call out to him on the street; for Peleg, I take it, has seen a great light, eh, Jack?" and Paul slapped his chum heartily on the shoulder as he spoke.

"My idea exactly," replied his chum, quickly. "And do you know it made me feel bad the way he spoke of Mandy and the kids. Some of you fellows may not know that he lost his wife and children in a fire that burned his house down while he was away. I'm glad we did that job, and you deserve the praise, Paul, because it was your own scheme."

"Humbug! every one of you chimed in as soon as it was mentioned, and so you're entitled to as much praise as I am. But about those uniforms, boys---hadn't the scout tailor better get to work, going over his measurements again? We want the suits to fit all right, you know."

And in this way did Paul direct the attention of his comrades in another quarter, because it was really unpleasant for him to be placed on a pedestal, as though he were different from the rest of them.

Amid much laughter and joking the measuring went on. Wallace Carberry wielded the tape-line, and Bobolink put down the figures, being closely patched so that no errors could possibly creep in.

So engrossed were they in this interesting business, that no one paid the least attention to their surroundings.

And when a heavy shutter was slowly closed over the one large window of the tobacco barn, the fact went unnoticed.

In fact the meeting was about ready to disband, and one of the boys started for the door to be in advance of his friends, when he made a discovery.

"Who locked this door, fellows?" he called, as he tried in vain to budge the barrier.

Of course this drew the attention of all the rest, and a rush was made for the place of exit. One by one the boys tried to push the door open, but even the stoutest of them failed to accomplish it.

"Who was the last one in?" demanded Bobolink, furiously, as he retired, worsted from the encounter, to allow another a chance at the door.

"Old Peleg Growdy, to be sure; and the door wasn't fastened then. D'ye suppose he did anything to it when he went out?" asked William, as he tried to assist Jud, now straining and pushing in a useless endeavor to move the heavy door.

"That's nonsense," said Paul, as he pointed to the fact that the door could not be locked, since it gave an inch or so each time the boys pushed.

"Ginger! it's got something braced against it outside, that's what!" announced another fellow.

"As sure as you're born it has!" echoed Bobolink.

All doubt was dissipated just then, for a series of loud and derisive shouts in boyish treble welled up from outside.

"Shucks!" grunted Bobolink, in sheer disgust; "we've gone and let the Slavin fellers have another crack at us. A nice lot of scouts we look like, not to keep sentries on duty when we have a secret meeting. And now they've got us cooped up here like a lot of old hens! Shucks! I say again!"

"Well, that's no reason we have to stay cooped up, is it?" demanded Jack, as he turned to hunt around for some object which could be used for a battering ram so as to force the barricaded door of the barn.

"T-t-try the b-b-big wagon doors, fellows!" whooped Bluff.

They did, but with no more success than had attended their puny efforts against the smaller exit. Those who had been at work while they talked must have done a good job, for the big doors were utterly immovable.

"Do we have to stay in here until morning?" wailed Andy Flinn, in mock despair.

"Not much, if I have to climb up to the roof, and knock a plank off. Say, those fellows must have been spying out here when I met them this morning," said Bobolink.

"Listen now, what d'ye suppose they're doing?" demanded Nuthin'.

All remained in an attitude of expectancy, and could hear strange sounds that seemed to come from under the boards forming the floor of the barn; which building had not always been used for drying tobacco alone.

"Now what d'ye suppose the sillies are poking poles under there, for?" ejaculated William; "and just when I was going to propose that we pull up a board, and crawl through the hole."

"Whew! what's this mean? Say, fellows, if that don't make me think of a blessed old skunk I don't know the odor when I meet it!" and Wallace drew back as he was about to get down on his hands and knees to investigate the meaning of the odd sounds under the barn flooring.

Others got it quickly, and various cries arose, as the boys began to hold their noses, and look around at each other.

"It'll smother us, fellows, that's what!" gasped William, quite pale by now; for the odor which a skunk leaves in its wake affects some persons powerfully, though others hardly mind it at all.

"I know!" Bluff managed to gasp, with a great effort; "there's a f-f-family of s-s-skunks have their h-h-home under here. I've seen 'em, b-b-but I never b-b-bothered the b-b-beauties. Oh! ain't it j-j-just awful, f-f-fellows?"

It certainly was.

Stirred up by the poles wielded by Ted Slavin and his cronies, who must have discovered the presence of the polecats when visiting the barn that morning, and laid their plans accordingly, the little animals were using the only means of defence against an enemy granted them by Nature.

William actually keeled over, and his brother had to drag him to the further end of the barn so that he might not get the full benefit of the overpowering scent.

"Something's just *got* to be done!" cried Jack, himself not feeling any too well under the infliction.

"Here, help me lift this old beam, boys. We can make a battering ram out of it, and burst a board off somehow. Never mind the damages; they can be repaired easy enough. Two more get hold. Now, swing around this way. I think the weakest place is in the rear. Keep back, the rest of you. Here goes!"

Five others had been only too willing to lend a hand when Paul called for volunteers. The beam that had been lying against the further wall was good and heavy; but that made it all the better as an engine for ramming a hole through the boarded side of the barn.

Amid the cheers of the scouts the novel battering ram was carried forward with a will, and on the run. Some of the boys held up lanterns so that those who were in the line of attack could see just where to strike. Even poor overcome William managed to raise his head, and feebly wave a hand of encouragement.

The beam struck with tremendous force, and nothing in the way of a plain ordinary boarding could withstand the impetus with which it was driven forward.

"Whoop!" yelled the scouts, as a big aperture appeared in the side of the barn, and the route to liberty lay before them.

They were not slow to avail themselves of the privilege either, but hastened to scramble through the gap, carrying the lanterns with them. William managed to get up enough steam to crawl outside, where he could breath air that was not fetid, and filled with overpowering odors.

Only Bluff looked back half regretfully at the haven of refuge they had just quitted. For he was wondering how his father could ever manage to efface that scent so that the tobacco, soon to be harvested, might be hung up in that barn without detracting from its marketable value.

And once out of the trap the Boy Scouts began to chase around, with vengeance in their eyes; but as on previous occasions the wary enemy, after accomplishing their mischief, had been wise enough to slink away.

CHAPTER XII

THE RIVAL TROOPS

"How far do we have to go in this new plan of forgiving the enemy, Paul?" asked William, who had by now fully recovered from his recent weakness, and was burning with zeal to avenge himself upon their persecutors.

"Yes, this thing has got to have a limit!" declared Jud Elderkin, as he glared around at the moonlit scene, and no doubt imagined their rivals hiding near by, where they could laugh at the disturbed group.

Paul knew boy nature too well to stretch their patience beyond the breaking point. He was astonished that such fire-eaters as Bluff, William, and several more, could restrain themselves even as well as they had.

To keep them in hand the reins must be loosened a little; but only to enable him to get a better hold later on.

"Well, there's no positive rule, fellows; and so far as I can see I believe the limit has already been passed, with us," he said, pleasantly.

"Hurrah! that's the kind of talk!" cried the inflammable Twin.

"Then you give us permission to pitch in, and whale the whole bunch the next time they play one of their measly old tricks on us? Is that so, Paul?" demanded Jud.

"Oh! I only h-h-hope so!" came from Bluff.

"Wait till the time comes, and perhaps I'll help you give them a much-needed lesson. We don't want to play the worm part, always," remarked Paul; "and now, boys, let's head for home."

"Ta-ta, sweet little meeting-house on the edge of the woods; I'll carry fond memories of you as long as this suit of clothes lasts, I guess," said William, waving his hand mockingly backward toward the deserted barn.

"Watch out for some of those Slavin fellows on the road. They may bombard us from the woods with rocks!" warned Joe Clausin.

"Just let 'em try, that's all. We'll chase the stone thrower to a standstill, and then he'll be sorry he wandered away from his happy home this night!" Bobolink declared, ferociously.

So they walked along in detached groups, many eyes were on the alert, and listening ears bent to catch some sign of a lurking foe.

Once or twice they heard signals being exchanged deep in the woods, evidently by the scattered cohorts of Ted; but while valiant, the members of the Fox Patrols were wise and prudent as well, copying the cautious attributes of the wary animal after which their new organization had been named.

They declined to explore the dense forest, seeking a foe that might only be bent on luring them along, until ready to pounce on them in a body, to make them prisoners of war.

And so finally the march came to an end, with all hands satisfied that the last meeting of the little host of new scouts had been attended by several of the most exciting circumstances that ever befell the boys of Stanhope.

Paul and his chum walked on together, until reaching the first home they said good night. But neither again brought up that subject which had been worrying Jack Stormways for so long a time.

If Paul had conceived any sort of an idea in connection with the strange disappearance of the old coins, he kept it to himself.

Once, however, on the way home after leaving Jack, he stopped to clap his hand down vigorously on his knee, and whispered to himself:

"Now, I wonder if that could possibly be so?"

But no matter what idea had struck him, further words didn't come to tell whether his thoughts were connected with Jack's personal trouble; or on the other hand if the annoying enmity of Ted Slavin, Ward Kenwood, and their would-be scout troop, was still on his mind.

Nevertheless, as Paul passed up to the front door of his home, and stopped a minute to look up at the bright moon sailing across the eastern heavens, he considered that he had good reason to feel more than satisfied with the magnificent results already attending the new methods of the Boy Scouts.

On the following day he sent off the letter containing a check which his father gave him in place of the money, so that it might not be lost.

Then followed a period of anxious waiting, during which many of the members of the Stanhope Troop No. 1 felt touches of envy at sight of their rivals parading the streets, decked out in the full regalia of Scouts, and carrying themselves with the proudest of airs.

They knew that Ted and Ward were busily engaged in drilling their followers in many of the devices prominently mentioned in the manual book. For that matter, though, it did not require regulation suits of khaki to excel in those same things; and so the Foxes also studied and experimented, and burned candles at night in the endeavor to learn all that was

possible of those various accomplishments.

There was a great difference in the boys of the town.

Few who were of the proper age but who belonged to one or the other of the troops; and people were beginning to notice how much more manly they carried themselves, and how anxious they seemed now to get credit marks at home.

Parents upon meeting never failed to talk about this wonderful change, and express hopes that it would last.

"The best thing that ever happened, barring none, I think," was what the old minister declared, at a meeting of the Women's Club; "and it deserves to be encouraged. Why, you ladies should take advantage of this wave of reform, to get these lads interested in keeping the streets of the town clean. Give me fifty willing workers among the boys, and I warrant you there will never be a stray piece of paper blowing around. They'll provide receptacles for trash, and see that everybody uses them."

And so it went around, and everybody seemed delighted at the innovation. Only a few skeptical old fogies shook their heads, and declared that it was too good to last, and that they about expected to see the boys of Stanhope transplanted to the heavens in a body presently, since their wings must be sprouting.

About this time it came to the ears of Paul that the banner which the peace-loving Quaker, Mr. Westervelt, had offered for the most proficient troop of scouts along the Bushkill, had been placed on exhibition in the window of a jewelry store over in the manufacturing town of Manchester.

He and Jack wheeled over that very day to inspect the coveted trophy. When they saw what a beauty it was, their hearts thrilled with new aspirations.

"Worth fighting hard for, eh, Paul?" observed Jack.

"I should say, yes," replied the other, delight written in big letters on his face, pressed so close to the glass; "and I reckon it would do our fellows lots of good just to run down here to look at that dandy banner. I must tell them all about it, and have them see it for themselves."

"A bully good idea. You know how to get a fellow to put his best licks into any job he undertakes," declared his chum, admiringly.

"Humbug!" scornfully replied Paul; "why, it's as easy as falling off a log. Don't you feel more like straining every nerve in the effort to win that prize, after seeing how handsome it is? Well, I just try to believe every fellow is more or less like I am. That's the whole secret. Yes, Stanhope must work hard to catch up with the other fellows."

There were several boys standing around, also gaping at the fine snowy banner, upon which as the card under it, went on to state, was to be embroidered with colored silk the totem of the leading patrol of the successful troop.

These fellows could not help knowing who the strangers in town were; and it was also easy for them to guess what had brought Paul and Jack down there. More than a few times had they seen these Stanhope boys competing on the athletic field, either in baseball, or football. And of course it was always good form for Manchester lads to "josh" any would-be rivals.

"Yes," said one of the natives, with a grin, "up in that corner is where the eagle is going to be painted. And every time we go on a hike we'll carry that banner at the head of the procession."

"They say," remarked another, with pretended innocence, "that poor old Stanhope is getting up a troop, and even hopes to have a try for this beauty. Now, what do you think about the nerve of that, fellows?"

"Oh! well, the more the merrier," came from a third, whom Paul knew to be the scout leader of the "Eagles" in person, "and after all, we don't mind showing these tenderfeet scouts how to do stunts. None of us want to be hogs, boys. There's room enough for all, even if some do have to eat the husks."

Paul had to laugh out loud at this.

"Say, you're on to us, all right, Manchester," he said, turning around. "Yes, we've come down here just to take a peep at this great prize. Of course we'd like mighty well to say we meant to win it; but we're too modest for that. The most we admit is that we mean to make a try for it. Of course we haven't got much show against two such veteran troops as Manchester and Aldine; but we want to get all the fun out of the game we can. And you won't begrudge us that, Claypool?"

"Sure we won't, Morrison," returned the other, frankly, thrusting out his hand; "as I said before, the more in it the better. It will make our victory look bigger."

"Glad to see you're so dead sure of winning out," laughed Paul; "whenever the Stanhope boys go into anything they always work harder if they have big odds against them. But all the same that's a bully good banner, and no matter whether it has an eagle, the head of a beaver, or that of a fox worked on it in colored silk, it's going to be something we'll all be proud of as Boy Scouts."

"That's well put, Morrison; though you might just as well get it out of your head now as later that the Manchester fellows will ever let any crowd come in here and take that dandy flag away. Why, our fellows know ten times as much about scout tactics as your greenhorns do now."

Claypole did not mean to be overbearing; when he said this he really believed it to be an actual fact.

"That's very true," said Paul, quietly, as he and his chum prepared to mount their wheels for the return journey; "but Thanksgiving is still more than two months off; and Claypole, I give you my word, we've got some of the smartest tenderfeet in the Stanhope troop you ever heard of. Ta-ta, boys!"

Of course, when Paul and Jack told what they had seen, every fellow wanted to make the run over to Manchester to look for himself. And, just as Paul had expected, they came back home more than ever enthused with the hope and prospect of winning that royal banner for the Stanhope troop.

At the next meeting the talk was all about the prize, and a vote was even taken to ascertain to whom the honor of being the banner bearer might fall, in case the victory was awarded to Stanhope. Wallace Carberry turned out to be the lucky standard bearer.

All of which was just what clever Paul wanted. He had infused a new stimulant into the veins of his comrades. And at their next outdoor rally, when various contests were undertaken to discover who showed the most skill, he found that the very atmosphere seemed to be surcharged with electricity; for the boys labored to excel as they had never done before; but it was because each one believed that upon his shoulders alone devolved the duty of bringing that beautiful prize to

Stanhope.

Four days later the expected suits arrived, much sooner than even the most sanguine had anticipated.

Then there *was* a time.

The usually quiet and peaceful streets of the town were fairly filled with khaki-clad warriors, strutting up and down, exchanging military salutes, and arousing the admiration of all the girls, who came forth to gaze and applaud.

It was a great day for Stanhope. A stranger visiting there for the first time might think some military academy must have taken up fall quarters near by, and granted full liberty to its uniformed hosts.

If there were those who had been hesitating about joining either of the troops, a decision must certainly follow the first glimpse of those gallant uniforms.

That night many a lad ate supper as an honored guest at his father's table; for surely the wearer of a uniform must be entitled to unusual privileges.

Of course the word had gone around for a meeting of the Stanhope No. 1. But it was not to be held at the Shipley barn--oh! no, those boys had had "quite a sufficiency," as Bobolink said, of their former quarters; and Bluff admitted that his father would not dare use the building again that year for his tobacco crop.

Jason Carberry, father of the twins, had asked as a favor that they make use of his big smithy; and since the night air was cool, Paul had accepted this generous proposition of the blacksmith on the spot.

So that was where they came together, a uniformed organization, at last.

CHAPTER XIII

"FIRE!"

"Man the bellows, somebody."

"Yes, stir up the fire in that forge, William. It's the coldest September night on record, and that's a fact!" exclaimed Bobolink, as he pushed the lively member of the Carberry team toward the smouldering fire left by the blacksmith when he gave over his capacious smithy to the Boy Scouts for their meeting.

"M-m-my dad s-s-says he once lost his t-t-tobacco c-crop in S-s-september!" observed Bluff, shaking his head as he pushed toward the fire.

The boys had had a fine meeting.

Besides the twenty-two in their new uniforms, four new recruits had been present, to drink in with eager ears all that passed, and sigh for the day to come when they too might shine forth in such resplendant suits.

Already was there much rivalry shown in the many competitions which the young scout leaders had instituted. There was a class on aviation, another that had taken up the mysteries of camping with all its fascinating details; a third chose photography as the most entrancing subject, and exhibited many pictures that were to be entered in the great contest of

the county for the banner.

Then several boys had doubled, for surely the knowledge of cookery went hand in hand with that of camping; while a good stalker could at the same time enter for a merit badge in the path-finding line.

Besides, though the season was late for swimming, several fellows who knew just what their best accomplishment might be, had qualified to enter this class.

On the whole the meeting had been a most interesting one. Every scout was burning with enthusiasm, and many were the resolutions that Stanhope must have what Bobolink called a "show-in," with regard to that coveted banner, which was to fall to the leading patrol of the county.

They were now almost ready to "break camp" for the evening, and before doing so indulged in a little general talk. Many had ideas which they wished to advance, in order to discover what the attitude of their comrades might be.

"Mr. Chairman," said Wallace Carberry, when he found a little lull in the buzz of conversation, "I have a proposition I'd like to put before the meeting before we disband."

"Hear! hear!" shouted several of the boys, notably those who had been seen in close confab with Wallace, and hence probably in touch with his scheme.

"All right, Number Seven; let's hear what it is," replied Paul, readily.

Every member of each patrol had a number. These began with the scout leader, who of course had to take the "initial sack," as Bobolink, still baseball wild, put it. Jack, as his assistant in control, came as Number Two; Bobolink next; Bluff captured Four as his distinguishing feature; Nuthin' being Five, and the twins the next pair, for it would never do to separate William and Wallace, while Tom Betts was Eighth and last.

"If the gentlemen present will give me the floor, with the privilege of three minutes in which to explain what I have in mind, I will be glad to comply."

Wallace was very precise in his way of putting things. This did not happen only when in school, or as he stood up to address a meeting of his chums. He could not unbend his dignity even under the most trivial conditions.

William was just the reverse; and so full of frolic and fun that the boys always declared the pair to be unequally matched, since in disposition they were exact opposites.

And yet under it all there was the same abiding affection that generally may be found between twins.

"Hear! hear!" shouted the boys once more.

"Let's have it, Wallace, old sport. It's bound to be a jim-dandy idea!" declared a loud voice that seemed to spring from the ceiling; but no one was deceived, for they knew only too well how Bobolink could throw his voice pretty much where he pleased.

"Silence!"

When Paul, who in the absence of a regular scout master, occupied the chair, uttered this one word every sound ceased; and after that there was no excuse for Wallace to hesitate longer.

"Some of us have been talking it over, Mr. Chairman, and we would respectfully request that you name an early date when we can go out into the woods for several tests of skill. There is much keen rivalry among a number of us already, which can only be settled by an open trial. First of all there is the interesting water-boiling test of woodmanship. We want to know who is the leading light in that class so we may push him forward to enter the general competition with other Boy Scout troops. Am I understood, Mr. Chairman?"

"I think you have made your meaning plain, and the one particular competition you mention happens to be the most interesting of all," replied Paul.

"Then may we hope that you will name an early day for the trial to come off? Unfortunately school begins shortly now, and outside of Saturdays and holidays the several Fox patrols may not have much chance to practice before the grand trial comes off. Make it as early as possible, Mr. Chairman."

"How would to-morrow do?" asked Paul, only too anxious himself to ascertain how the boys would "toe the mark."

Wallace looked at his backers, and there were vigorous nods in answer to the question seen upon his face.

"It seems to be the unanimous consensus of opinion, Mr. Chairman, that to-morrow would suit first rate. Please give us the hour for assembling, and you can depend on our being on deck," Wallace remarked.

"Two o'clock ought to answer. That will give us plenty of time to try out a lot of stunts I shall arrange for."

"Where shall we meet?" asked Jud Elderkin.

"H-h-how about our b-b-barn, fellows?" queried Bluff, grinning.

There was an instantaneous howl of derision, and every right hand went up so that the thumb and forefinger might compress a nose.

"Another year might do, Bluff!" called one.

"What isn't fit for storing tobacco can't be a proper meeting place for respectable Boy Scouts!" declared another, energetically.

"Oh! he's only bluffing, fellows; don't mind him!"

"In fancy I can smell it now," sang another, mockingly.

"We'll meet just outside this very blacksmith shop, and at two sharp," declared the chairman, decisively; "and any scout who is tardy will be given one or more bad marks that he must carry as a load in the competition. Punctuality is a leading trait in Stanhope Troop No. 1, you understand. Any other proposition?"

The boys began to talk among themselves, and for a short time there was a constant buzz that sounded like a big hive of bees.

Jack found himself in contact with Paul while this was going on. He had been doing his duty to the best of his ability as he understood it; and while the meeting was in progress had proven conclusively that he had a thorough knowledge of the many things a full fledged scout must know.

Jack meant to graduate from the tenderfoot class in the shortest possible space of time. Any scout may do this by being diligent in the pursuit of various lines of woodcraft.

"Well," said Jack, as he pushed alongside his chum, "this has been a dandy meeting, all right. And there are four new fellows knocking at the door; with perhaps more to follow, when Stanhope learns what great times we have."

"Yes, and I guess we'll need new recruits right along. You know that some of the boys will fall by the wayside soon after the novelty has worn off," remarked wise Paul, who delighted in studying human nature as he saw it around him.

"Listen! fellows! The fire alarm!" shouted Joe Clausin, just at that instant.

Every voice was hushed.

Clear upon the night air rang out the sound of a tocsin---the stroke of a hammer upon a steel rim from a locomotive wheel, and which was hung aloft in the only firehouse in Stanhope.

It was a thrilling sound at any time, and especially to a company of boys newly enlisted in the great cause of humanity---of lending a hand to neighbors who might be in trouble. So after several more clear, resounding strokes had pealed forth, calling the volunteer department out to fight the fire demon, one scout started wildly for the double doors of the smithy.

He was immediately followed by others, and in almost the twinkling of an eye the Carberry blacksmith shop was emptied of its late noisy crowd.

CHAPTER XIV

JACK'S CHANCE

"Wow! look at that, will you?"

"It's a barn most likely!"

"Don't you believe it. I can see the roof of the house! Say, I believe it must be that old Bradley place! Come along, fellows!"

"There are the firemen on the run! They'll have old Rescue No. 1 on the jump in a jiffy. Hey, fellers, let's get busy, and pull the hose cart for 'em!"

"Bully idea. Lead the way, Paul! It's up to you to show us how!"

With these and many more cries the Boy Scouts bore down on the building that sheltered the lone fire department of the town. This consisted of a cast-off engine in good repair which had been purchased from some big city, where they were installing an auto in place of horse power for propelling their machines; and a hose reel, the latter to be drawn by a line of men.

Of course the assembling firemen were only too glad of the offered aid. To have a score of husky boys appear so readily on the scene, ready for business, was in the line of a "snap."

Accordingly, while some of the men got the horses hitched to the engine, and others started the fire going, the hose cart was rushed out, and its long rope eagerly seized by the waiting boys.

Paul was at the end of the line, for a scout leader must live up to his reputation as a general, no matter what the emergency.

"Pull!" went forth the cry, and immediately the hose reel started off in the direction where a flash of fiery red announced that the excitement was centred.

Nothing could please such an energetic lot of lads more than a chance to make themselves useful in this way. They pulled with a will, and passed along the road leading out of the town, on a wild run.

The one who had declared that it was the old Bradley house that was on fire must have had the situation well in mind. Perhaps he lived in that neighborhood, and was better able to judge than the balance of the boys. At any rate all of them had by now made sure of the fact.

Paul remembered that a family, in which were quite a number of children, had lately come to town, and taken the big ramshackle building.

The thought gave him a thrill, and inwardly he found himself hoping that none of them might be caught in that fire-trap.

"There comes the old machine!" shouted the fellow who, not being able to get a grip on the rope by which the hose wagon was drawn, trotted in the rear, and made out to push.

Yes, they could hear the shouts of the excited fire laddies now, and also catch the sound of galloping horses.

Looking over his shoulder, Paul saw a medley of moving lights, evidently the lanterns carried by the volunteers. These were doubtless clad in their old toggery and fire hats, the foreman with his silver trumpet in evidence, without which no respectable fire would think of allowing itself to be quenched.

And a rising column of sparks attested to the fact that the fire in the engine was in full blast, so that steam would be ready by the time the scene of operations was reached.

"One side, boys, and let them pass! Give them plenty of room!" called Paul.

He had seen that old engine booming along to a fire on many an occasion, and remembered that the driver, Hank Seeris, was inclined to be a reckless hand; for as a rule the machine was wobbling from side to side, and threatening to overturn at any minute.

Up to this date that catastrophe had never happened; but Paul remembered the old saying that "a pitcher may go to the well once too often;" and he had fears.

It proved that they were well grounded too, after the hose reel had safely negotiated the last bend in the road, and the burning dwelling was in plain sight.

"Look at them coming, full tilt! They will be over at the turn!" shrieked Bobolink, who, being near the tail end of the double line could observe what was taking place without hindrance.

Immediately there arose a chorus of loud shouts, as of warning. But apparently Hank Seeris must have been indulging in more liquor than was good for him; or else he happened to be in an unusually reckless state.

"They're going over!" howled Bobolink.

"Smash!"

"Oh! there goes our only engine to the scrap heap!" exclaimed Jud Elderkin, in dismay; for his father happened to be the foreman, and it looked just then as though the gallant fireman might be without a job.

Paul ran back, as did most of the boys, thinking that something terrible must have happened.

The plunging horses had been pulled down, and a man was already sitting on the head of each to keep them from kicking further. There are generally some wise persons present in such a calamity, who know just what ought to be done.

Willing hands were already unhitching the horses, so that they could be taken out of the way, and the ditched engine upraised.

"Where's Hank, the driver! Is he hurt?" asked some one; and Paul recognized the old minister, who must have been on the way home from visiting when the alarm burst out, and hence he had accompanied the fire fighters, eager to lend a hand at the rescue work.

"Here he is, and just comin' to, after being knocked senseless. Hank ain't hurted, I reckon," answered a citizen who had run with the machine.

"How about the engine---is she much damaged?" asked the foreman, as men set about raising the heavy Rescue No. 1.

"Out of business for this trip, Elderkin. She'll never work again till she's gone down to the city for repairs," came the answer.

A groan of dismay went up.

"That settles the fate of the old Bradley house, then," declared many, as they saw the flames and smoke apparently increasing.

Everybody was now anxious to get on the scene, and the engine was left in charge of a watcher, while the crowd rushed along, exchanging views of the accident, and the chances of saving the building by means of a bucket brigade.

The foreman proved himself to be the right man in the right place. He instantly organized a double line of men and boys, leading from the creek near by, up to the house that was burning.

Every imaginable species of bucket and tin pail was pressed into use. Men and boys invaded the kitchen and captured all sorts of utensils, from milkpans to butter firkins.

These were put into use, and passed along as rapidly as those at the creek end could plunge them in, and fill them with water.

At the other terminus the foreman and his assistants took the water pails, and dashed the contents here and there as opportunity arose.

The Boy Scouts were nearly all somewhere in the line, and working valorously. For the time being they utterly forgot they were dressed in their new suits of khaki, and that the pails slopped over continuously, soon soaking them to the skin.

Cheered on by the appeals of their leader they never flinched. It was the first chance Paul had of seeing how his enlisted followers could forget self, and rise grandly to an occasion.

When any one showed signs of tiring he was quickly crowded out of the line by another eager willing worker. Indeed, there seemed to be three applicants for each job; and had there been more buckets several lines might have been formed to make use of that accommodating creek.

Jack, after a little, found himself pushed aside by another scout, who wanted to exercise his muscles, and could wait no longer.

Seeing a group around some children, and hearing sudden cries from a woman, Jack hurried across the lawn. Somehow he seemed to fear that new trouble had broken out; and when he saw a half-clad figure wringing her hands, and shrieking, he realized that his suspicions were going to prove true.

"What is it?" he asked, of another scout, coming away from the group.

"Her baby. She says it is in the house!" replied the boy, whose face was white with the horror of it all.

"What?" cried Jack; "did she forget her own baby, then?"

"She thought her husband had it. He's a sick man too. See, that's him they are holding back there. He wants to go in for the baby, and they won't let him. Oh! Jack, I'd like to do it, but I'm afraid of fire. I just dassent!" sobbed the boy.

Jack waited to hear no more. His blood seemed to be on fire, and his teeth came together with a click.

Another moment and he was in the group, eagerly plying the almost distracted mother with questions as to which room her baby had been in. Fortunately Jack had once known a boy living in the old Bradley mansion; so that the interior of the house was not strange to him.

"Our bedroom---it is the corner one where the tower stands. The one that has the alcove!" the lady managed to cry, as she caught his arm, and looked, oh, so pleadingly, in his boyish, determined face.

After that Jack would have risked anything in the attempt to save that innocent little one. He rushed off without saying a word. Several put out a hand to stop him, under the belief that it was useless, since that portion of the building seemed to be a mass of flames by now. But Jack dodged them just as he did when running with the ball on the football field.

When he dashed into the house, disappearing in the volume of smoke that poured from the open doorway, a groan went up from the great crowd; for they doubted as to whether he would ever be seen alive again.

CHAPTER XV

THE HONOR BRAND

"He's gone!"

"Who was that boy?" called the foreman of the fire company, as he came running up, waving his speaking trumpet.

"Jack Stormways, the lumber man's boy!" some one answered.

"Well, he's a good one, all right; but I'm sorry for his mother!" said the experienced fire-fighter, as he looked anxiously at the flames pouring out from several windows directly under the room next the tower.

Paul had dropped out of the line. He could not pass another bucket after seeing the chum he loved so well plunge into the doomed building. From right and left he heard many things spoken, and presently understood what it was induced Jack to attempt what seemed so like a foolhardy thing.

So it would have been, had the object of Jack's attempt been the securing of valuables, no matter what the amount. But a human life counts for more than earthly riches; and a brave soul never stops to consider the risk when a fellow being is in peril of a terrible fate.

Jack found himself in the midst of dense smoke as soon as he plunged across the doorsill. He had foreseen this, and with a wisdom beyond his years made simple preparations to combat the evil.

On the way to the door he passed close by one who carried a bucket of water, and some happy inspiration caused him to snatch out his handkerchief and dip it into the cool liquid, not wringing it out to any extent.

This he clapped over his nose, so that in breathing the wet cloth would keep much of the suffocating vapor from being drawn into his lungs.

His eyes began to smart furiously. By the time he was half way up the stairs he could not see a thing around him save murky clouds of smoke, lighted by the tongues of flame that darted like serpents out of many places.

He staggered up still further, and fell on the landing. But gaining his feet again he pushed on, still heading in the right direction. Only for the knowledge he possessed regarding the interior of the building, Jack would have lost his bearings then and there. The result must have been serious indeed.

Along the hall he went. It seemed to grow hotter the further he pushed; but even that did not daunt him. Once enlisted in a good cause he must go on, no matter what faced him. Had not Paul said words to that effect, after telling them what it meant to be a tried and true scout?

And here the opportunity had come to him not half an hour after the thrilling words were spoken!

Those outside while still sending the buckets of water along, in the effort to save one portion of the large house, were waiting to see what came of Jack's attempt at rescue.

"He's lost!" declared one, as the fire broke out in a new place; "see, that's the tower burning now, and she said the baby was in the room next there."

"Poor old Jack! to think it should be him to go!" groaned Bobolink; "see, Paul, there's his father passing the buckets along. He don't even know his boy is in the old shack! Oh! my, whatever did he take chances like that for?"

"Because he couldn't stand and see that poor mother shrieking for her baby. Because he's got the strongest heart of us all! That's why!" declared Paul, his voice vibrating with love for the chum he might never see alive again.

And Bobolink said to himself:

"By the jumpin' Jehosaphat, I believe Paul would have gone if Jack hadn't. He's lookin' at that house now like he wanted to run right in and tear it to flinders."

"There he is at the window!" whooped a man's heavy voice.

Instantly every eye ranged along the front of the building, wherever the columns of smoke permitted. And many a finger was pointed at the one where a waving hat served to draw attention.

"He's shouting something. Keep still, everybody!"

A dead silence immediately ensued. Only the roaring and crackling of the hungry flames could be heard, as every ear was strained to catch what it was the imperiled boy was saying.

"He's got the baby---look! he's holding her up!"

A shriek came from the agonized mother, and she fell on her knees with clasped hands.

"Listen to what he says!"

"Go to back of house---get ladder to window there!" called Jack huskily, at the top of his voice.

"Hurrah! we understand, old fellow! We'll have you out of that yet!" whooped Bobolink, starting on the run around the end of the mansion.

"A ladder---bring it around, boys! Let's save the brave youngster!" howled the tall foreman.

The ladder happened to be up against the building at a point where the flames had now burst forth, driving the fire-fighters back. Himself, the foreman led in a bold forward rush to capture the required ladder; nor was he to be denied, scorning the efforts of the licking tongues of fire to daunt him.

Then, with a swarm of followers, he pushed around the corner. Here, to be sure, there did seem to be less of smoke and blaze, owing to the direction of the night wind.

Now they were placing the ladder. It reached up to a window, and if only Jack would show himself all might be well. Seconds were like an eternity to those who crowded below, every face upturned, and every eye ranging along the side of the house.

The fire was pushing in this direction too, for it suddenly burst out of a broken window. From many pairs of lips there burst a groan. Well did they know that every second counted against the boy, who was doubtless groping his way along halls and through rooms filled with that overpowering smoke.

"There he is!"

It was like a sudden electric shock, that cry. The clarion notes of a bugle would not have thrilled that vast crowd one half so surely as did the appearance of a head at a window on the left.

Jack had been shrewd enough to pick out a room that was further away from the devouring flames. A hoarse shout went up at sight of him.

"He's got the baby too!" was the tenor of that victorious cry; and it was as though every man and boy and other person present felt a personal interest in the success of Jack's daring venture.

The precious baby was saved; yes, he was hugging the bundle to his breast; and during a lull in the clamor they plainly heard the lusty cries that proceeded from that shawl-wrapped package. Those were doubtless the most blessed sounds that ever reached the strained ears of the praying mother.

Quickly was the ladder lifted and rushed along the wall of the house until it stood beneath the window where Jack had shown himself.

The foreman himself mounted as soon as it was in position. But Jack refused to hand over his burden, nor could Mr. Elderkin insist. It was only right that the one who had saved the little darling should have the pleasure of placing her in the arms of the frantic mother.

But he could and did guide Jack's feet as they sought the rounds of the friendly ladder, so that presently the boy, with singed hair, and begrimed with smoke, was lifted to the ground.

Hardly had Jack landed than a pair of arms encircled both him and the baby; for in that happy moment the mother realized what she owed this brave lad; and her heart was brimming over with gratitude.

Such shouts as went up then! Those still coming to the scene must have thought the wearers of the fire hats had succeeded in running a line of hose into a position where victory was assured.

Again the bucket brigade got busy, working with renewed zeal, though but little hope of saving any portion of the big building now remained. But every one was roused up to fever pitch by the excitement of the hour. And Jack's valiant work had helped inspire them to renewed deeds of endeavor.

Paul led his chum away, for Jack was almost exhausted. Then came Mr. Stormways on the run, having just learned what his boy had done. He seized Jack in his arms, and shed tears over him; though at the same time his heart must have swelled within him with satisfaction that one of his brood had acquitted himself so well in a crisis that called for a cool head and nerves of steel.

The flames kept on eating into the old building. It was now doomed, and the fire laddies confined their efforts to saving any furniture that could be carried out.

Paul called his scouts around him, at the request of the old minister. They were rather a sorry looking group, though just as full of a desire to assist as ever. The fine new uniforms were bedraggled with mud and water. Several had holes burned in their coats, and that of Jack was a sight to behold.

But who cared? After all, the uniforms were but an insignia of their connection with a great organization. New or old they stood for a principle; and gallantly had Stanhope Troop No. 1 responded when the need arose.

The old and highly respected minister, whose heart was filled with a great love for the rising generation, shook hands with each and every scout, declaring that he was proud of the privilege.

"Don't mind the soiling of your new uniforms, lads. Every mark found upon them to-morrow must serve as a badge of honor to the wearer. After this it will be the tried and true scout who can point to a burnt hole in his smart coat, and say 'I got that the night of the great fire up at Bradley's!' And what shall I say of this fine member of your patrol who so bravely risked his own life to save that of a mother's baby? Only that his own mother has reason to thank God to-night because of such a son. We all love him!" and a tear fell on Jack's hand as the old man squeezed it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRE TEST

"All here, Paul!"

Jack saluted as he said this, and smiled to see the look the scout leader gave his scorched and discolored uniform.

Although Jack had spent an hour and more that morning trying to clean up his suit and leggins, they showed many signs of the hard service to which they had been put on the previous night.

Several of the fellows carried cameras. They had signed for the photographic test, and hoped to get some fine views of the troop in action. These would possibly be entered for competition when the other commands in the county lined up to strive for leadership in the last great event--the winning of the banner.

Presently the town clock struck the hour.

"Fall in!"

Two by two they marched out of town. People came to the doors to watch them; and many a girl waved her handkerchief vigorously. But there was no response. Much as some of the lads might have liked to raise a hat, and send back an answering salute, they had already learned how to keep their eyes to the front, on penalty of being given bad marks that might tell against them later on.

More than one parent looked to see how the boy nearest their hearts bore himself. Proudly they watched the long double line swinging down the street, keeping excellent step, considering how little time they had had for drill.

Other boys there were who stood on the corners and mocked. Of course these were the followers of Ted Slavin, envious of the popularity already attained by Paul's patrol. Some of them had been at the fire, and witnessed the deed of daring carried out by Jack Stormways. Jealous of the other troop they tried to taunt them by various cries; but without success.

However, most of them did not venture to tag after the marching corps. They knew that even the wonderful patience of these fellows would have its limit, and that a sudden turn might be made upon the tormentors that could hardly prove pleasant for the minority.

Out of the town limits they went, still keeping step. Ted and Ward trailed behind, but there was no more taunting done.

"They mean to follow, and see what we are up to," said Jack, when he came alongside the leader again.

"Well, we can't stop them from doing that, I suppose. The woods are free to all. Let them look. If they can pick up a few pointers, well and good. When we lead, you know we can afford to laugh at those who follow," returned the other.

"Sure, because they'll never catch up with us in a year," laughed Jack.

For a full mile they continued, never once breaking ranks.

"We're nearly there, fellows. You're doing fine, I tell you. Keep it up through to the end. Why, you march like veterans already!"

In this fashion did the scout leader warm every heart, and cause those who were beginning to tire of the jaunt to grit their teeth, and resolve that nothing must be allowed to interfere with the completion of the march.

"Left wheel!" came the command, as the van drew abreast of an opening where a wagon road entered the woods.

Still those two curious ones trailed in the rear, determined to ascertain what it was that took the Fox Patrols out of town this day.

Presently, surrounded by the giant trees, still green with their summer foliage, Paul gave the command to halt and break ranks.

Immediately the twenty-six lads began fraternizing. Those owning cameras started to look around for openings where some promising view offered. But most of the scouts clustered around the leader, eager to hear what the programme of the day would embrace.

"First comes the fire test. There are a dozen fellows who have come prepared to qualify for that. And I think we shall have an interesting competition. Here, all who have hatchets get busy, and cut wood."

Paul himself led the way, for he delighted in using the little camp axe which he often "toted" into the woods, when hunting or camping.

The sound of chopping soon resounded through the timber, and by degrees quite a pile of wood had been accumulated. But all this was simply to loosen up the muscles of the competitors; for they were not to be allowed to use any of this fuel, which was for the main campfire.

Once this had been started, Paul distributed a dozen tin kettles that had been brought along. These were all of the same size. Moreover, they had a plain mark two-thirds of the way up, which was to limit the amount of cold water from the near-brook which they must contain.

"Here are five matches for each one of you. Every fellow is placed on his honor not to have a single other one in his possession. You are not to use any kind of paper in kindling your fires. Just imagine that you are adrift in the wilderness, where a newspaper is never seen. And in the end when a kettle begins to boil the owner of it must shout and raise his hand. I will have inspectors appointed whose duty it will be to see that all is fairly done."

"Don't we get more than these five matches?" asked one of the contestants.

"That is all. And remember, that if two are tied when the quart of water boils, the fellow who can show the most *unused* matches comes in ahead. That is a valuable point, for it proves that he knows how to conserve his resources. A match is sometimes of priceless value to a man lost in the big timber."

"Tell us again what we must do, Paul."

"Form a line right here. When I say 'go,' every fellow dart off to some place he has in mind. With your hatchets you are to chop wood, and get a fire started as quick as you can. Then place your kettle on it, and keep on adding fuel until the water boils. I will time every contestant myself, and keep a record. But this is just a preliminary trial. We'll have another later on. Ready, all?"

The twelve contestants lined up, while the others watched operations. Even the two outsiders had kept getting closer, so as to understand all that was done. And as Ward had his gold watch in his hand it was evident that he intended to do a little timing himself.

"He wants to see how our best compares with what some of his fellows will do," remarked Jack, to Paul.

"All right. He's welcome. The more the merrier. If they have any fellow who is more at home in the woods than Wallace Carberry for instance, I'd just like to know it," returned the other, promptly.

"How about you, Paul? I guess Wallace would stand a mighty poor show if he ran a race with the head scout," returned the second in command.

"That's something we've never settled yet. Wallace and I must have a chance at each other some day; but not yet. Now watch them scurry around. Every fellow has his mind made up where he can cut wood easiest. I've made them bring in all loose stuff, you see, so that they start on an even thing. Here goes!"

Paul raised his hand, and exclaimed:

"Go!"

Immediately the dozen lads darted frantically off. Several came near having a collision right in the start, which would have been fatal to their chances for winning out; since the water in their kettles must have been spilled; and according to the rules of the contest they could not refill the same without journeying to the creek, which Paul had made sure was fully fifty yards distant.

It was a laughable, as well as interesting sight.

Having reached the various places mentally selected as the scene of their intended operations in fire building, the boys set down their kettles, and commenced to feverishly whack away at dead branches, or other wood.

In several instances two of them happened to pick out the same place, and naturally there was considerable rivalry between them, as well as an exchange of remarks intended to irritate and delay.

"Look at Wallace, will you!" observed Jack, presently; "nearly all the others have smoke going, but he's chipping away as steadily as you please. Why, he seems in no hurry at all. I guess he doesn't want to come in ahead!"

"Wait, my boy," laughed Paul. "You don't know that sly fox. He's up to all the dodges at fire making, and believes in a good start. Some of those smokes never will amount to much, for they just struggle along, and threaten to go out because it takes all the puffing the fellows can give to keep them alive. Now he's going to strike up. Only one match needed with Wallace, you see."

"And how his blaze jumps! You were right; he made sure he had enough fine kindling first, before starting in. Now he's adding larger stuff; and what's this he's doing with those stones?"

"What do you suppose?" said the scout leader, nodding his head approvingly. "Making a little fireplace where he can perch his kettle, and have the hottest part of his fire under it. Note also that the opening is in the direction of the breeze. That allows the flame to be fanned. Wallace will never have to blow out his cheeks and puff to keep his blaze going."

By this time some of the contestants were bobbing their heads to ascertain just how Wallace had done it; and made haste to follow suit. All were willing to take pattern from a past master who knew the wrinkles of the game.

One upset his kettle, and despairing of having any show, withdrew from the race.

Eleven fires kept on burning, some of them under protest, apparently, for they did not give much promise of landing their unlucky builders as victors.

"How long is it?" asked Jack, presently, as certain signs caught his eye that told him the end was near.

"Just nine minutes; but--"

"Look at Wallace," cried Jack; "he's raising his hat. There goes an inspector to see. He nods his head. The water must be boiling; and who would have thought it? Hurrah for the Carberry Twin! Look at Ted and Ward! They act as if they thought there was some trickery, for they're running up to see. I guess they've tried this game, and come in under the wire in about fifteen minutes. Hello! there's Bluff calling out. Good boy! He's going to run Wallace a race next time. But I'd like to see you make the test, Paul?"

CHAPTER XVII

CLEARING SKIES

Paul made no reply to this remark of his chum.

Having studied the charms of outdoor life always, he knew that he would be placing his friends under a heavy handicap if he ever attempted to compete with them in woodlore.

True, just as he said, Wallace was somewhat of an unknown quantity; for he, too, seemed to have a deep love for everything connected with life in the forest, and never tired of reading books that told of pioneers and their ways.

The scout leader immediately started some of the boys along another tack. They were given a chance to find a lost trail, to detect all manner of signs such as would be apt to tell how long previously some one had passed that way; and to discover where the tracks came out of the creek, upon the bed of which the unknown had walked quite some distance.

Of course, Paul had made the trail himself in the morning, running out here on his wheel so as to prepare the ground. And when they all failed to find out just how the party had left the creek, since the marked tracks did not seem to appear

anywhere along the banks, he pointed to where the limb of a tree hung down over the water.

"That's the ticket!" cried Bobolink, excitedly. "See, fellows, how it's skinned where his shoes scraped along it."

"As sure as shooting he climbed up into that tree!" declared one, excitedly.

"Then scatter, and examine the ground around the trunk!" said Paul.

A minute or so later a happy whoop announced that one of the searchers had discovered the wished-for signs; and away the whole troop went on a trot, following the leader.

Meanwhile the photographers managed to get in some of their efforts, possibly unbeknown to the rest. Exposures where the subjects are unconscious of their posing always turn out best; since they avoid stiffness, such as ruins so many otherwise interesting pictures.

Here, with the woods for a background, Paul, acting by agreement as temporary scout master, drilled his followers in scout law, sign, salute, and the significance of the badges which they wore, all of them, of course, of the tenderfoot type, since few had as yet started to qualify for any higher plane.

Signal flags had been brought along; and a class in semaphore work proved that some of the members of the troop were making rapid progress along that line. They had mastered the Morse code, too; and had the occasion arisen might have sent messages over the wire, although probably none save Paul could have received the same, unless the words came painfully slow.

The afternoon passed almost before they realized it; and more than a few declared that the sun must have dropped like a plummet, when they found twilight creeping upon the forest.

Both Ted and Ward had long since gone away, as though disgusted. They had tried to sneer at the work of Stanhope Troop No. 1; but every one knew this humor was assumed; and that secretly they were eating their very hearts out for envy.

No doubt there would be a hot time among their followers, when the leaders endeavored to drive them to beat the record Wallace Carberry had set in his fire starting, and water-boiling test.

"Suppose you come to supper with me, Paul," suggested Jack, when they were more than half way back to town, with the double column moving along like clockwork, every right leg thrust out in unison, as though forming a part of a well-regulated machine.

Paul looked quickly at him when Jack said this.

"Oh! I can see through a millstone, when it has a hole in it," he remarked.

"Which is one way of saying that you can guess I have a motive in asking you?" returned the other, smiling queerly; "well, I have, in fact, several. In the first place my mother told me to ask you. I rather think she wants to pump you about that affair last night. Father wouldn't tell her all she wished to know. Then again I'm still all broken up about those lost coins; and I thought perhaps you might have guessed the answer to the riddle."

"What's that? More of them gone, Jack?" asked Paul, lowering his voice, so that the two scouts at the tail end of the line might not hear.

"Don't know yet. Didn't have the nerve to go up into my den since this morning. To tell the truth that place has lost all charm for me. Whenever I find myself there I get to shivering, and looking around, just like I half expected to see a ghost step out, and pick up one of those miserable coins right before my very eyes---ugh! it's horrible to feel that way, and I used to be so fond of my den, too."

"Oh! I hope and expect you will be again, Jack, when we've settled this little thing. You say none of them were ever taken in the night?" said Paul, earnestly; while his knitted brows told how much he felt concerned over the mystery.

"Certainly not. Always in broad daylight. That's the queer part of it," returned the other, promptly.

"Sure, seeing that they always go in the daytime, and when you're away from home, too. Anybody else going to be there to-night?"

"To supper---oh! no. Karl went off after breakfast, to visit our uncle for a few days before school commences. I took him to the train myself, and then mustered up enough courage to climb up there, and once more count the coins," went on Jack.

"Six there then, eh?" asked Paul.

"Just as last night. And I purposely left the door unlocked."

"Both door and window open in the bargain?" asked the other; at which Jack looked puzzled.

"Of course; though that wouldn't matter at all; for any fellow could turn the knob, and walk in," he replied.

"But the door was open, just like a plain invitation to enter, should anybody think of going up to see---say that again, please," continued Paul.

"Well, I do say it again, though I can't understand why you should make that a point worth mentioning. Still, I have confidence in you, Paul. If anybody can get at the root of my trouble it's going to be you, old fellow."

"I hope you prove a true prophet. As for myself I'm not saying anything just yet, one way or another," smiled Paul.

"Yes, but I really believe that you've found out something that gives you a pointer, Paul. Your face tells me that. You're a wonder about following a trail in the woods. And I believe you see light in this darkness around me!" and Jack looked eagerly into the face of his chum as he said this.

"All I'm going to confess is that I believe I'm on the trail, and that it seems to be getting warmer the further I go. Just hold your horses a little while longer, Jack, and perhaps I may be able to tell you something."

"The way you smile gives me new courage, old fellow. Oh! I will be so glad if only it turns out all right. But here we are at the smithy. Shall you dismiss the troop here, Paul?"

"Yes. The boys must be pretty tired after last night's work, and this hike; as well as the many stunts they went through with," and the temporary master scout presently gave the order to break ranks, and head for home.

"Drop in at my house so I can tell my folks not to expect me to dinner," said Paul, as they approached his home.

There was not the slightest objection to the programme as arranged. His parents trusted Paul fully, knowing that, while as fond of fun as the next lad, he never did things likely to get him into trouble.

"Now, first of all," remarked Paul, after they were indoors again; "let's go up, and make sure that anything has happened."

The door to Jack's den stood wide open, inviting any one to enter.

Jack had a match lighted in his hand, and with this he quickly touched the wick of a lamp. Paul heard him draw a long breath as he approached the spot where the little box lay upon the table desk at which stood the chair used by the owner of the den when taking his leisure here.

He bent over, and seemed to be counting the coins. They dropped back into the receptacle one by one, and with such a ringing sound that even Paul was able to keep tally. Then Jack turned an anxious and white face around.

"Paul, there are only four here. Two more have gone!" he said.

"Yet you came up here and counted them; you are positive of that?" demanded Paul.

"I counted them, and there were six. Five times I did it, to be sure; yet you saw that there were only four just now?"

"You came up here after you saw Karl off on the train?" persisted his chum.

"Yes, after I returned from the station. But what makes you ask that? Tell me why you are grinning so, Paul? I know I'm awfully dull just now, but who could blame me under the circumstances? Please speak up!" Jack insisted.

"Why, don't you see, this clears Karl completely. Six here while he was riding away on the train this morning; and two taken when he is fifty miles away! Don't that satisfy you it wasn't your brother, after all, Jack?"

And Jack dropped down in that chair, letting his head fall in his hands, while a great joy overspread his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

CARLO DOES HIS TURN

"Paul, you're a wizard, I do believe!" said Jack, after a bit, as he looked up at his chum.

"Well, I hardly think so. This thing was easy; and ten to one you'd have thought of it sooner or later. For how could Karl have anything to do with the bad business while he was up at your uncle's?" laughed the other, with his customary modesty.

"But if not Karl, then who got my old coins?" persisted Jack, smiling now.

"Well, I'm not quite ready to say. I've got two ideas I'm chasing after now. Give me just a little more time on that, will you, old fellow?" replied the visitor, as he dropped down on a cot, and let his eyes rove along the exhibit of college colors illuminating the walls.

He drew the little box that held the coins toward him. When Jack was not observing, Paul took the contents out, one by one, and seemed to be examining them closely. He even scratched one with his finger nail, and the result appeared to please him, for he chuckled softly. Evidently he had made a discovery which he deemed important.

Jack, having finished some little task with which he had busied himself, came back to his chum.

"See here, Paul," he remarked; "I'm not going to ask you to tell me who it is you suspect; but do I know him?"

"Sure," replied his chum; "and perhaps after we've found out the wonderful secret, you may even find it in your heart to look on it as a joke, and forgive him."

"You don't say? Perhaps, though, I might hardly feel like forgiving a fellow who would be mean enough to sneak up here so often, and take my old coins. Think of the ugly feelings he's made me have toward my own brother. I'll never look Karl in the eye after this without feeling conscience-stricken. I don't know about forgiving him so easy as all that," grumbled Jack.

"Oh! well, don't cross a bridge till you come to it. That's a good motto for you and for me. Perhaps there are times when I feel the need of it. Perhaps there's one right now," and Paul shrugged his shoulders as he spoke, half laughingly.

"There, I knew that something had gone wrong with you lately. I've watched you when you thought I wasn't looking, and I've seen you frown. Suppose you take your old chum into your confidence, Paul? What's happened? Any trouble at home? Are you bothered over the Boy Scout troop we've been organizing? Is it about your school affairs?"

Paul shook his head each time the other brought forward a suggestion.

"You're a most determined fellow, Jack," he said, good naturedly; "and perhaps I hadn't ought to speak of such a thing to anybody; but we've been chums so long, and misery likes company, you know."

"Then you *are* in trouble; and you mean to confess to me? Thank you, Paul, for what you say. I don't think I ever had any cause for worrying that I didn't come straight to you for comfort. And I always got it, too."

"Even when you and Dorothy had that nasty little spat that began to look serious until I just happened to find the note that made all the trouble, and forced Eli Kosmer to confess he wrote it. You remember that time, Jack?"

"I guess I do. Dorothy often speaks of it to this day; for we're good friends, and always will be. But see here, why do you just happen to mention that business? Oh! I begin to see now," added Jack, as Paul turned red in the face, and laughed in a rather constrained way.

"I shouldn't wonder but what you did. I'm sure I've denied every other cause you could think of," he said, sighing heavily.

"It's Arline then. She's been doing something. Yes, I remember now that I saw her out riding with Ward Kenwood only yesterday. Say, that dude has been saying something that wasn't true about you, Paul, I'd just wager anything. He's gone and poisoned her ears with a yarn. It'd be just like the sneak!"

"Just go slow, Jack. You're saying something that you can't prove. Of course I believe myself that Ward wouldn't stop at anything like that; but without the least proof I can't accuse him of it," Paul said, severely.

"But you could ask Arline?" his friend went on.

"Could I? Well, when a girl chooses to turn me down without a hearing, and even smiles when she drives past me in the company of a fellow she knows I detest, and whom she has often said she disliked, what then? Think I would so far forget myself as to get down on my knees, and beg her to take me back into favor? Bah!"

"Is it so bad as that then? Oh well, there are other girls just as pretty as Arline; and you've always been a great favorite with them, Paul; but hold on, why not let me try to straighten this thing out? You've helped me all right; and tit for tat is fair play."

"H'm! how do you think you could do anything, Jack? I don't suppose you'd care to go straight to her, and ask her point blank what I'd done to make her treat me so cruelly? I shouldn't think of allowing that at all?"

Paul tried to display an air of indifference; but it was poorly assumed; and his chum knew full well that he was much more pained at these strange actions on the part of Arline than he cared to admit.

"Oh! there are ways and ways. For instance, you know that Dorothy is one of the crowd of high school girls Arline goes with. Ward's sister Mazie is another; and that might account for her being at his house so much. Now, suppose you let me tell Dorothy. She'll keep it a dead secret, and in some way manage to get a confession. Say you will, Paul!"

"Have it your own way, old fellow. I'm just about ready to wash my hands of the whole business. Besides, I've really too many irons in the fire to be bothering over the silly notions of girls."

It was bravely put, but did not deceive Jack even a little bit; for he happened to know just how very fond his friend was of the particular girl in question.

"All right, then. Consider that settled, and I won't say any more about it until I can report progress," remarked the latter.

"Let's talk of other things than my poor affairs. You insisted on knowing; and wouldn't take no for an answer. Hello! there's Carlo asking to come in again. Shall I let him past the door, Jack?"

"Why, of course. This is his den as well as mine. I keep sugar on tap, so as to put him through some of his paces. Here Carlo, how's your sweet tooth coming on?" and Jack snapped his fingers in a peculiar way.

Immediately the educated dog squatted on his hind quarters, sat upright with his forepaws drooping appealingly, and waited, cocking his eyes in a humorous way at his young master, who had opened a drawer in his desk.

"Just one piece left. Somebody else likes sugar as well as Carlo, I guess. Well, here you are, now. On trust, boy, on trust!"

So saying he laid the piece of sugar upon the nose of the dog, balancing it so there could be no falling off.

Carlo, knowing what was expected of him, sat there like a drum major, quivering with eagerness, yet not daring to move as long as he failed to hear the command.

"Say, isn't he a sport, all right, Paul? Don't he sit up like a soldier? Look at his eyes fixed on me. Did you ever see such agony?"

Paul was laughing now.

"He's speaking with his eyes, and begging you not to stretch it out too far, Jack. Have a little mercy on the poor beggar. Look at his tongue coming out and reaching up. I think he just wants to taste that sugar. Give it to him now!"

"Well, Carlo knows that he can't expect to have anything on trust; but it's a different thing when it's paid for!"

With the last two words, spoken in a natural tone, Carlo became galvanized into sudden action. He had received the cue for which he was waiting so patiently. Immediately he made an upward spring; the lump of sugar was thrown into the air, and as it came down one quick snap secured it, after which there was a crunching of canine teeth, and a look of bliss appeared on Carlo's dog face.

"There's the supper gong. Come on down to the bathroom and wash up, Paul! And you come, too, old dog. No more sugar here; see, the drawer is empty. Carlo never comes up here without sniffing at that drawer, and looking at me knowingly. Go ahead, Paul, and I'll put out the lamp."

So they went downstairs, and after a while sought the dining room, where Paul met both parents of his chum, as well as a gentleman who was visiting Mr. Stormways.

"Mr. Jared Pender, an old schoolmate of mine, and with whom I made several voyages abroad years ago," said Mr. Stormways. "He is in the employ of the Government now, and has to make visits all over the country, you know."

Paul had once met a gentleman who was a post-office inspector, and somehow took it for granted that Mr. Pender might be engaged in some similar business; at any rate it concerned him not at all he concluded, just what the gentleman's private affairs might be, and he gave the subject little thought.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WARNING OVER THE WIRE

After supper the two boys once more ascended to the snugger near the roof.

There was no further reference made to either the disappearance of the old coins, or Paul's little heart trouble with his girl chum.

They had a number of books loaned them by the good old minister and which were full of interesting facts connected with the wonderful Boy Scout movement, especially over in England, where it originated.

Paul was deeply interested in picking out all features that would appeal to American lads. Until they had found the right party to take the position of troop master he wished to play the part of scout leader in such fashion that no one could pick a flaw with his management.

Usually it is some adult to whom this important position is entrusted from the start; Paul, however, had long been known to be so deeply interested in many of the branches which concern life in the open, that his mates were only too glad to have him occupy the exalted position of leader for the time being.

When they knew as much as Paul did, they believed they would be well qualified to pass for a first-class scout's assignment.

So Paul, with the assistance of his comrade, was selecting many interesting competitions. By means of these the boys could be tested as to their knowledge of those things so important to the boy scouts.

He made many charts showing the different footprints of wild animals, as well as those of the domestic cat and dog. By following the tracks of a rabbit a most interesting as well as instructive story could be made out. It was possible just from the marks on the ground, or the snow, to tell how the animal had been frightened into wild flight, by what sort of enemy it had been pursued, where the swoop of owl or eagle had brought specks of blood upon the leaves or white snow, and finally the picked bones of poor bunny would reveal the secret of the windup of the chase.

So, in every case, the student of nature could weave a story out of the marks discovered. It was so in the days of the Indian, when old Leatherstocking and his long-barreled rifle were leading factors in the life of the wilds. Daniel Boone and his pioneers used to read such signs as easily as any boy might the pages of this book. And the deeper any lad dips into such fascinating studies the more he wants to learn.

When half past nine came Paul said he must be going.

"I've had a jolly evening of it, Jack, and enjoyed every minute with you. When we get the boys together again we can have half a dozen competitions going on at once," he said as he arose and stretched himself.

"That's so," replied the other, following suit; while even Carlo arched his broad back, and prepared to follow them downstairs; "and the best of this thing is that the more you go into it the greater it gets. I'm fairly wild to keep it up."

Just as the boys reached the lower floor the telephone bell rang, and Jack, being near, stepped over to the small table in the hall on which the receiver rested.

"Yes, sure, he's here. Hold the wire," Paul heard him say, as he smiled; and then turning to his friend Jack continued: "here, Paul, take hold. Somebody wants to talk with you. Says he called up your house, and they told him you were over at my home."

Paul of course wondered who could be wanting him so positively that he even followed him over to the Stormways house.

"Hello! hello!" he said, quietly.

"That you, Paul?"

"It's Bobolink, I guess," remarked Paul, for the benefit of his chum who stood by, listening curiously.

"That's right," continued the voice over the wire.

"What's doing to make you chase me up this way, Number Three?" Paul went on.

"That's the trouble; I just don't know for sure. But when I caught Ted's voice among the bunch I said to myself, they're up to no good; and I bet it's Paul they are laying for."

"Hey! what's that? Who's laying for me, and where?" demanded the startled boy.

"Listen, and I'll tell you all I learned. 'Taint much, but I know that critter so well that I wouldn't put it past him to try and knock you out, so that all our drilling in the woods would be upset, and his crowd get an advantage."

"Oh! bosh! What's this you're giving me, Bobolink?"

"Yes, I expected you'd say that. Think I'm stringing you, don't you, Paul? But I'm not, all the same. Listen again. Perhaps Ted and two of his cronies have gone and dressed up in some old Hallowe'en toggerly until they look like a set of bears or hyenas just to frolic around a bit. Well, mebbe they have; but tell me just why they are hiding close to *your* place?" continued the talkative yet determined Bobolink.

"When did you see them?" demanded the other.

"Not more'n eight minutes ago, Paul. Was comin' home myself. Been over to Bluff's house to fix up some surprises we expect to play on all you fellers later on, and show you what we know about this scoutin' business. On the way home I turned in and passed your house. Often come that way, you know," and the speaker paused as if for breath, or to hear Paul admit the fact.

"Sure. Go on, you slow turtle. You've got me keyed up now to my top-notch curiosity. Give us the rest of the yarn," said Paul, eagerly.

"Yarn! H'm! there you go, making out I'm hatching up a story. But take my word for it, Paul, three fellers are hidin' in the bushes close to your place, and expectin' some one to pass along in the dark. They started to jump out at me, and then I heard Ted's voice growlin' to 'em to fade away, that it wasn't the right one. Thought I'd just ask you if you could explain what it meant. When your mother told me you was over with Jack I saw a light, and that's what."

"Well, I'm glad you told me, Bobolink. A good scout is always on the alert to do his comrade a clever turn; and I won't forget this. That all?"

"But now I've told you, Paul, aren't you goin' to slip around the back way, and let them fellers take it out waitin'? Three to one is too much. They'll do you up, and make out 'twas only horseplay. Please give 'em the slip, Paul. We need you in our business, you know."

"I'll see about it, Bobolink. Thanks, good-bye!" and Paul switched off.

"Well, what's all this about?" asked Jack, as his chum turned toward him, with a frown on his face, and a gleam in his eye that the other knew stood for grim determination.

"He says there are three fellows lying in wait in the bushes near my place, all rigged up in their Hallowe'en toggerly; and that he believes they know I am over at your house. That's all," remarked Paul, with a little nervous laugh, and a clinching of his hands.

"Good gracious! you don't say; three of them waiting to pounce on you! Did he seem to know who they were?" asked Jack, looking worried.

"Well, you might guess that easy enough," replied Paul, scornfully.

"Ted Slavin and some of his ugly ducklings?"

"Bobolink says he recognized Ted's voice. And, I suppose my warm friend Ward is one of the others. He never loses a chance to get a dig in at me."

"I don't know," returned Jack, thoughtfully; "to tell the honest truth I hardly think he can be one of the bunch, because his sister took Arline home with her to supper; and I guess Ward couldn't be coaxed out while *she* is there."

Paul winced, but said nothing.

"Oh! well, it doesn't matter much after all. They're a lot of cowards, or else they wouldn't be concerned in such a low game. You can give them the slip by going around the back way," and Jack chuckled at the thought of those silly fellows waiting an hour or two for the expected victim who never came, and then going home in sheer disgust.

Paul shook his head.

"Now, that's just what Bobolink said, too; but I've made up my mind that I'm not going to sneak home, like a dog with his tail between his legs," he said, shutting his teeth hard together.

"You mean that you'll take the street that leads to the front of your house? Oh I well, they'll hardly tackle us when they see there are two," remarked Jack.

"And by that you mean you expect to go along. I won't let you do anything of the kind. Even if they allowed us to pass by, don't you think they'd be apt to take it out of you when you returned alone? No, I'm your superior officer, and I order you to stop right here where you belong; do you understand, Jack?"

"Well," grumbled Jack, shaking his head as if convinced against his will; "I know you too well to try and go up against you when your mind's made up; but just the same I think it's a mean shame that you won't let me walk home with you. Think if they did jump out at us what a jolly time we'd have handing 'em more than they expected."

"Give it up, old fellow. But I tell you what I can do. You remember that baseball bat of mine that's been lying over here so long? I'll carry it home now, and save you the trouble, thank you," nodded Paul.

"Bully! a good idea. Here it is behind the door. And Paul, don't spare the measly bunch; but whack 'em good and hard."

CHAPTER XX

SUCH GLORIOUS LUCK

Paul walked down the street, swinging the baseball bat carelessly, and softly whistling to himself.

He left the street on which his chum's house fronted, and presently came to his own thoroughfare.

"H'm!" he said to himself, as he boldly turned in here; "looks kind of half dark for a fact; but that always suits fellows up to a mean dodge. I musn't hit too hard, for this is an awful tough old bat, that has brought me in more than a few home-runs. Well, it's helping me make one now," and he actually snickered at the conceit.

As he advanced he braced himself for the expected fray. Of old he knew Ted Slavin was a muscular fellow, capable of enforcing obedience from his slavish followers.

What was that? He certainly heard the sound of voices a little further along. And somehow one of them seemed to give Paul a strange feeling; for he was positive that it was a girl's tones; and he recognized them too!

Ward Kenwood was taking Arline home; and for some unknown reason chose to select this very street as a part of his route, although it was a little out of the way.

How strange that they should all come together just at that very identical spot, where the trio of ambushed boys were crouching, ready to spring out.

Ah! Paul caught sight of something moving close by. He felt sure that it must be the concealed fellows, launching their boom. Yes, now he could make out their figures as they emerged from the bushes on the jump.

Some one screamed. It must be Arline, frightened by the appearance of these ugly, uncouth forms dancing upon the pavement.

Instantly the greatest confusion existed, with the ambushers attacking Paul, to shout in consternation when he began to thump them heartily on the legs and backs with his baseball bat; and the girl standing there trying to shut out, with her clasped hands, the strange sight, seen so dimly in the half darkness.

The patter of feet down the street told only too well where her protector had gone; but he was valiantly calling lustily for help as he ran.

Met by such a determined opposition, overwhelmed by the shower of punches and whacks that seemed to be freighted with painful reminders; and startled by the cries of the fleeing Ward, not to mention the little shrieks of Arline, the three boys who had been the cause of all this excitement soon had enough.

"Skip out, fellers!" roared Ted, as he almost doubled up when the swinging bat came with considerable force against his ribs.

The others were only too willing to obey. Away they clattered after the fleeing Ward, who, hearing what he took to be a hot pursuit, let loose more vigorously than ever, still crying for assistance.

Paul was laughing now, for the comical side of the thing seemed to have occurred to him. He took out a match and struck it. As the light flamed up, Arline, who had by now ceased her cries of alarm, possibly guessing the truth, stared at the face of the victor.

"Oh! Paul! is it you?" she said; and somehow he seemed to understand that she was more than glad of the opportunity to make up with him.

Boylie he pretended to hold back, and as the light went out, leaving them once more in the gloom, he remarked:

"Yes, those fellows were lying in wait for me. They expected to give me a sound thumping; but I was warned and ready. I'm sorry that you were annoyed by the row, Miss Blair. I'll stay here with you until your company comes back. I think he must have gone for help!" this with some bitterness and scorn.

She moved closer to him. Possibly the darkness made her afraid; and then again some other cause may have influenced her.

Paul felt her hand on his arm, and was thrilled when she said:

"Please don't mention him to me again. Oh! what a miserable coward, to run off and leave a girl that way. Won't *you* take me home, Paul?"

He could not say anything for a minute, he was so overcome. And perhaps Arline thought he must still be angry because she had treated him so shabbily of late.

"Please, please do, Paul. I want to tell you how sorry I am for believing what came to me in a roundabout way. I'll never forgive myself, never!" she went on, clinging to his arms.

Paul could hold out no longer.

"Of course I will, Arline, and glad of the chance. Come on before anybody hurries out to see what all this noise means."

So they walked down the street together, Paul with his faithful bat tucked under one arm, and a pretty girl clinging, oh! so confidently to the other.

But the boys of Stanhope often made more or less of a noise on the streets after dark, being filled with exuberant spirits; and so no one thought it worth while to investigate what all the racket meant.

Paul heard what had been carried to the ears of Arline, and had no trouble in proving to her complete satisfaction that he was entirely innocent of the charge.

"And to think that I allowed myself to believe it," said the girl, almost crying; "oh! Paul, will you ever forgive me? Nothing can ever make me listen to anything wrong about you again. I wonder if he had a hand in hatching that wretched story up. If I knew it I would tell him to his face what I thought of him!"

"You mean Ward. Please don't do that. I really can't believe any fellow would be so mean and low. It must have been just accident that coupled my name with that affair. But I'm satisfied if you say we're going to be just as good friends as ever," Paul said, warmly.

"Better than ever, I hope, Paul. I've had my lesson. It will never happen again, I promise you," she answered, pressing his arm as she spoke.

So Paul saw her safely to her door, and then said good-night; but Arline insisted upon shaking hands with him; and the tingle of his fingers as he walked down the street made him laugh with joy.

"What luck!" he kept saying to himself, as he made out to shake his own hand; "and what a mess of it Ward made of his chances. He thought to have the laugh on me if we met, and here the shoe is on the other foot. Oh! I'm not complaining a little bit. Everything's coming my way now."

Nothing further happened on his way home. But when he reached the house his father met him with the announcement that Jack was holding the wire, and waiting for him.

"On deck there!" he said, briskly, and heard an exclamation of relief.

"How is it, Paul? Anything doing? Seemed to me I heard an awful racket over your way; but the nine-forty train was just coming in at the station, and drowned it out. Did they tackle you, son?" demanded Jack, eagerly.

"Did they? Well, I guess some! Ask Ted," chuckled the one addressed.

"You're laughing, and that tells me you enjoyed the circus. What did you do to poor old Ted and his cronies, Paul?" entreated the other.

"I could tell you easier what I didn't do to 'em, Jack. I gave the boys about every style of punch and jab I could think of, and with my home-run bat too. Oh! make up your mind they're going to be a sore lot in the morning. And if you run up against Ted, just sniff the air for arnica. My word for it, he'll empty the bottle to-night on his bruises."

"Bully! bully! and again bully! I would have rushed to assist you only you made me promise to keep my hands off; and you're my superior officer, you see. Besides, I reckoned that with such a hunky-dory bat you'd be able to give just pie, which you did, Paul."

"But the half hasn't been told yet," went on the narrator.

"What! do you mean there's a sequel to this story?" asked Jack, burning with eagerness apparently, to hear.

"I guess that's what it is. Listen. Ward was just taking a young lady home. He chose to pass along our street, though now he wishes he hadn't; for they arrived just when Ted and his backers jumped out of the bushes. She screamed, and her escort sprinted down the street for help. After I had punched and pounded the three Hallowe'en left-overs from last year until they faded away, I had the pleasure of seeing the young lady to her door, yum! yum!"

"Hurrah! and I bet all differences are patched up again between you!" cried Jack.

"Everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high," sang Paul.

"Meaning poor old blundering Ward. He showed himself for a coward to the girl he's sweet on. Oh! my, oh! me, how is the mighty fallen. Congratulations, good friend, and then more of them. So the clouds have disappeared along your horizon, just as they did on mine. I only wish I'd had a hand in clearing your skies."

"So you did. You kept that baseball bat of mine until the right minute came. Only for that my name might have been mud," laughed Paul.

"And if you'd only open your heart now, and give me a hint about the fellow you believe has been playing that trick on me with my old coins---"

"Just you wait a little. It's coming soon. So-long!" and with a click the connection was cut off.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MEETING

"How are you, Paul?"

It was Mr. Jared Pender who came out of the post-office as Paul happened to be passing the next day, and addressed the boy he had met on the preceding evening at the house of the Stormways.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Pender? Been at work, I see," replied Paul, with a suggestive look in the direction of the post-office.

The tall dark gentleman looked a little perplexed, and followed Paul's glance. Then an expression of understanding passed over his face.

"Ah! yes, I see, you are a good guesser, Paul. But please do not mention the fact to any one. We Government officials sometimes have to work *sub rosa*, as the saying is; that means without any one knowing what we are at. You understand, Paul?"

"Yes, sir, I guess I do; but I hope there's nothing wrong here at our post-office. We all think the world of Mr. Mygatt, and his clerks," said Paul.

"Oh! don't mention such a thing. We have to investigate many times just to discover how smoothly things are going on. Isn't that Jack's dog coming out with a package of papers in his mouth? Has he actually been down for the mail?" went on the gentleman.

"That's Carlo, all right. Sometimes they give him the mail when there are no letters, as you see."

"And will he carry the bundles home safely, without stopping to play with other dogs, or to fight?"

"Oh! Carlo knows his duty. He never forgets what is expected of him. There, sir, look at him halting for a minute at the open door of the butcher shop, to wag his tail, and peep in. It smells mighty inviting to him, I wager; but will he go in? Not much. See, there he goes along, heading straight for home. If another dog picked a fight with him, Carlo would lay that package down, give the cur a good licking, then pick the papers up again, and trot along."

"I see you know his traits well, Paul," remarked the gentleman, smiling.

"Some of them, but not all. He's a great dog, all right, and Jack's fond of him."

"I suppose money couldn't buy him, then?" suggested Mr. Pender.

"It would be useless to try it, sir, I think. Will you stay long with Mr. Stormways?"

"That I cannot say. My business may be completed in a day, and it may keep me in this vicinity for a week. That depends on circumstances. You have been around more or less, Paul; do you happen to remember seeing a large red touring car, with a khaki-colored cover, and occupied by two men, one of whom has a glass eye?"

Paul stared at the tall gentleman, as though he thought at first the other might be joking him; but seeing not a ripple of a smile on the dark face, he changed his mind.

"Why, no, sir; I can't seem to remember seeing that particular car. Of course red ones are common; but most of them have black tops, if any at all. Some friends of yours, Mr. Pender?" he remarked, naturally.

The gentleman allowed just a twinkle to appear in the corners of his eyes as he nodded his head, and said:

"Well, er--yes, very particular friends of mine, Paul, and whom I would be glad to see again right now. If you happen to sight such a machine, and I am still at my old friend, Stormways, I wish you would let me know about it."

"I certainly will, sir; and perhaps you'd like me to speak to the gentlemen, and tell them how anxious you are to see them?" Paul went on; at which the other gave a laugh.

"I see you are on to me, my boy. You guess that such is the very last thing I would want you to do. Now, I'm going to take you into my confidence, Paul," he went on, bending his head lower, and giving a quick glance around.

"Yes, sir; that's very kind of you, Mr. Pender," said the lad, smiling.

"Oh! I don't know. I have an axe to grind in doing so; for I believe that you can be of assistance to me. The two men in that motor car are criminals, for whose capture I have come to this part of the country, Paul."

"Goodness! that sounds interesting, sir. What have they been doing?" asked the young scout leader, with boyish curiosity brimming over.

"I won't tell you that, Paul; but they are wanted by the Government. And sometimes we agents have to go about our business with great caution, in order to discover enough evidence on the suspects to convict. So, above all things, I do not wish to alarm these clever gentlemen unduly, lest they manage to hide, or get rid of the only burden of proof. In other words, as a common expression has it, I want to get them with the goods on. You understand?"

"Yes, sir; I think I do. And if I see or hear anything about that red car, I'll tell you. But is it true that you and Jack's father were chums long ago?"

"That's the positive truth, my boy," replied the agent, nodding; "why, we took several voyages together, and had lots of queer adventures. I never dreamed that my wild old friend Alan would settle down to this humdrum life, as a lumber merchant, and the head of a family. But I suppose it all came of his meeting a girl. And after knowing his fine wife I don't blame him a bit; though I've kept right along in the same old groove, and see more or less of adventure."

"He's a mighty fine man, and they think lots of him here," declared Paul, who was amazed to learn that his chum's parent could have, once upon a time, been reckoned a wild blade.

Paul walked on with his lips puckered up as if whistling, and his face filled with the new interest that had taken possession of him.

He had read accounts in the papers of Boy Scouts being concerned in many useful enterprises; and he wondered whether he and his patrol might not find a chance to assist the officers of justice in rounding up a couple of rogues who had apparently broken the laws of the land.

Then other things came up to draw his attention elsewhere.

He ran across boys on the street, who asked dozens of questions about the many interesting features of the new organization.

These were often lads who had begun to think of uniting with one of the rival troops; and Paul was only too glad to give them all the information in his power.

They wanted more recruits, provided the applicants were of the right sort. Those their committee rejected might find solace in joining forces with Ted's crowd, who, not being at all particular, would receive them with open arms.

That afternoon there was another meeting in the woods, at which every member of Stanhope Troop No 1, as they now determined to call their organization, did his best to be present.

Paul had given several of the boys duties to perform, that were part and parcel of the grand scheme to whip his company into first-class shape in a shorter time than it had taken any other troop.

Reports were received and filed of numerous things done which would count in the final summing up. These were to be accompanied by vouchers from the persons interested, which could be filed away for inspection when the committee appointed by the giver of the fine banner looked through the records of the several patrols competing for the prize.

Andy Flinn and Philip Towns reported that they had cleaned up the beautiful green in front of the town high school, and which was generally known as the campus. It was kept mowed by the town authorities; but numerous scraps of paper and trash, blowing hither and thither in the wind, gave it an unsightly appearance.

"Never forget that you have taken our campus under your protecting care, Numbers Three and Four of the Gray Fox patrol," said the head scout, after reading the report; "of course it is always your privilege to enlist smaller boys in the job, if you can do so without actually hiring them. That is expressly forbidden."

Then came Wallace Carberry and Tom Betts, telling how they had started a crusade to cover the entire town with receptacles to contain stray rubbish. Half a dozen cans had already been ordered, each one of which was to have in startling red letters the significant picture of a staring eye, and followed by the words, "Eat Trash!"

"We've got a contribution box ready, and every scout is privileged to drop in pennies and nickels that he has earned. No others accepted; and no larger amount at one time from any boy desired. Have already enough to pay for two of the cans; and hope to increase the order soon!"

Cheers greeted this announcement. Others, who had heard about the good work being started by Numbers Seven and Eight of the Red Fox patrol, arose to announce that their mothers had promised to throw all sorts of opportunities for earning money in their way, if it was to be devoted to such a fine purpose.

"The Women's Club is to bring this thing up at its next meeting. My mother says it shames them to know that the boys of the town are taking such a leading part in cleaning it up," said Bobolink, when he found an opening.

"Who's next to report?" asked Jack, who had charge of this end of the meeting; while the "honorable secretary" made notes, and filed away the various papers submitted.

Immediately all eyes were turned toward Bobolink and Bluff, which team was known as Three and Four.

Bluff started to rise, when a groan greeted him; but he was not dismayed.

"Our r-r-report will be d-d-delivered b-b-by my c-c-confederate!" he simply said, and subsided with a grin, as though he thought he had hoodwinked his friends.

Bobolink arose slowly. When he chose he could be very tantalizing; though in an emergency none might excel him in speedy action. But when he had something to tell that he knew was being eagerly awaited, he liked to keep his chums in

suspense just as long as he dared.

Immediately all sounds died away. Every one seemed to know that Numbers Three and Four had been delegated to attempt an actual scouting trip that morning, into a hostile territory, so as to learn what progress a rival camp was making in the various degrees of efficiency.

They had already heard about Manchester, and a few believed that they would have little difficulty in excelling that town when it came down to an actual test.

With Aldine it was different. From all sources had come hints to the effect that the troop in that town was working most faithfully, with an eye on that coveted banner. And every scout in Paul's patrol felt wild to know how much truth there might be in these reports.

CHAPTER XXII

SCOUTING IN EARNEST

"Hurry up, old molasses! Winter's coming."

"Hit up the pace, won't you, please, Bobby?"

Bobolink grinned. This was apparently just what he liked. When, however, he saw a restless movement among some of the more impatient, as though they were stooping down to gather chips to shy at him, he knew the time had come to open those sphinx-like lips, and speak.

"Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen," he began, when a roar interrupted him, so that he pretended to hastily remedy his error---"I mean just gentlemen; I have the honor to report that your committee waited on the brothers of the Aldine troop, though unbeknown to their keenest scouts, and watched the entire operations at their called meeting this morning."

"Good! Fine! Keep it up, Old Leatherstocking!"

"We learned that they are working like mad to excel in all the arts that interest the scouting fraternity. Competitions were being run off in every branch of the woodcraft business. We saw fires started, camps made, trails followed, boats mended, fish flies tied, rods that had been made by single members; we heard of all sorts of clever things that were being done in Aldine that would give the troop marks in the grand round-up. We listened to splendid speeches from the really efficient scout master, and our hearts warmed within us toward the gallant foe against whom we must soon be pitted; just as our bones ached because we had to squat there high up in that tree over their camp, like a couple of roosting monkeys."

"Hear! hear! Bully for our monkeys! They're all to the good!" shouted some of the more demonstrative boys, waving their hats wildly.

Bobolink stopped to give a few melancholy dabs at his thighs, just as though they still ached from the long service in the tree; while Bluff managed to emit a series of sympathetic groans.

Then the orator took up his theme again; and when Bobolink chose he could even run Wallace Carberry a warm race on the school rostrum.

"Some people might think that it was hardly fair in us to spy on our rivals; but we are running our troop under strictly military rules. It's always fair to try and find out what you are going to be up against when entering a competition. We are badly handicapped, because both of these other troops in the county have been working all summer; and we've got to come up from behind in our attempt to capture the prize. That's right, isn't it, fellows?"

"Sure! We only want to know if they're going to make a big fight; or whether they expect to have a walk-over. Besides, I happen to know that there was a Bald Eagle from Aldine watching us work yesterday. He had a field glass, and was hidden where he could see all that went on."

It was Jud Elderkin who made this astonishing declaration; and what he said created quite a stir among the assembled scouts.

"All right. We didn't go there expecting to steal any of their thunder, fellows," said Bobolink.

"Of course not," asserted the nearest scouts.

"Well, how did you find it?" demanded William.

"I didn't see that they had anything on us. Of course they did lots of things better, because they've had a heap more experience; but there's time between now and Thanksgiving for the scouts of the Stanhope troop to get a move on, and shake all rivals out of their boots. That's all," and Bobolink made a sudden duck to get out of the lime-light.

"Hurrah! Well done, Three and Four of the Red Fox patrol! Whenever we've got any more climbing to do, we know where to get the monkeys!" cried William, with a mock bow in the direction of the blushing Bluff, and the grinning Bobolink.

"I congratulate the scouts on the way they carried out their mission. It was worthy of the annals of Cooper. May I ask how they learned just where the camp of the Aldine Troop was to be pitched?" asked Paul.

Bluff was no longer to be repressed; but sprang erect.

"I d-d-discovered that they always w-w-went to a p-p-particular p-p-place; and w-w-when we s-s-saw that noble tree, why, we j-j-just l-l-looked at each other, and s-s-shook hands. Then we c-c-climbed up before the f-f-first eagle f-f-flew that way. T-t-thank you gentlemen f-f-for your k-k-kind attention."

"Wow! he got that in pat, all right. When Bluff makes up his mind to hustle he can beat the band. I move a vote of thanks to these most efficient scouts," said Wallace, pushing forward.

They were given with a will; after which other reports came to show what was being accomplished in numerous lines.

The troop photographers produced their prints, which were passed around for examination, and brought forth an abundance of good words. To see themselves in the new suits of khaki made many a fellow's heart thrill with pride.

"We must have a meeting every day up to the beginning of school," declared the acting scout master, finally; "for these busy Eagles have stolen a march on us while we slept; and we've just got to hustle now to catch up."

"But we've got some mighty fine things to our credit already, and don't you forget it, boys. I haven't heard of a horse being stopped, and a child's life saved over in Aldine or Manchester," declared Wallace, with a proud glance toward

Paul.

"Or any account of the rival troops attending a fire in a body, and working to beat the band until their new uniforms were next to ruined," spoke up Nuthin'.

"I guess the boys of Manchester must feel pretty small when they listen to the story of how a Red Fox scout walked right into a burning building, and snatched up a baby that had been forgotten; hey, how about that, fellers?" shouted William, pointing his finger at Jack.

"We're hitting up the pace. We're going strong, and bound to make things hustle right up to Thanksgiving Day! Every fellow do his level best to bring that banner home to Stanhope!" cried Jud Elderkin.

"We can do it!" yelled half a dozen in chorus.

"Why, its easy money, boys. Just organized, and not a second class scout in the troop yet, but look at what we've done. Give us a little time, and we're going to make the Beavers and Bald Eagles, and all the rest of 'em, sit up and take notice!" avowed Nuthin'.

"And wait until you hear the inspiring sound of my bugle, which I expect to have at the next meeting," said Bobolink, proudly.

"Huh! that won't h-h-hold a c-c-candle to my d-d-drum!" declared Bluff, waving his arms wildly, as though he could already imagine the great fun in store when that instrument came to hand.

And so the meeting broke up, with the scouts disbanding for the day. Some lingered to try once more the various stunts that interested them most. It seemed as if every fellow's heart might be wrapped up in the desire to win that coveted trophy, and bring the banner to his home town.

Strange to say there had not been a single mention of the other Stanhope organization. None of them believed that Ted and Ward would be able to make the least show in the competition. They knew the habits of these fellows only too well. As a rule, they never won, save through trickery; and in the eyes of the committee appointed by the donor of the banner, anything that smacked of double dealing would be rigidly barred from the game.

Paul and Jack, as usual, walked home together, arm in arm.

As the recognized leaders in the movement that had so lately struck the boys of Stanhope, they must always have much to talk over.

Besides that, they had their own personal affairs to discuss.

"Well," said Jack, finally, when they found that they were alone, the nearest comrades being far behind on the road; "the four coins are still there in the snug little box, Paul."

His companion looked quickly at him.

"You carried out my suggestion then?" he asked.

"Yes. The door has been closed and locked all day. Even the window was shut down and fastened," replied Jack.

"That made the little den as tight as a drum, eh?" laughed his chum.

"I should say it did. If any one got in there to-day he would have to slip through the keyhole," came from Jack.

"Unless he happened to have a duplicate key," Paul went on, seriously. "And since you found the four coins there that could hardly have happened. Sure you counted four, are you?"

"That's positive," returned his companion; "but to tell the truth I did get a little scare. At first I counted only three."

"But you found the fourth all right, Jack?"

"Oh! yes," replied the other. "It was gummed fast to the side of the box. I had to scrape it off before I put it back. But when do you mean to tell me what you know about this strange affair, Paul?"

"I guess to-morrow," answered his chum.

"Bully for you. I'll be glad to get it off my mind. What do you want me to do, Paul, in the meantime?"

"Nothing," came the ready response.

"Shall I leave the den shut up as it is, then?" demanded Jack.

"Until I see you in the morning, yes," laughed Paul. "Don't be surprised if I pop in on you unexpectedly. Perhaps I may not want any one to see me go in your house, and so I might come by the back door."

Jack looked at him in a whimsical way and shook his head.

"You've got me guessing, all right, my boy," he declared.

Paul instantly changed the subject, after a way he had.

"The boys are getting on fine in that water boiling test, aren't they? Four had it in nine minutes, and Wallace beat his own record by nearly half a minute. That is going to be one thing Stanhope must excel in," he said.

"Yes," remarked Jack, falling in readily enough with his companion's desire to "talk shop," "and those photographs couldn't well be beaten. What a lot of new and interesting facts some of the trackers have dug out of the trails they followed. The papers read fine. Paul, I really begin to believe we're going to make a strong bid for that banner."

Paul did not reply, and on Jack turning his head to ascertain why, he found his chum staring at a red automobile that had just whizzed past!

It had a khaki-colored top!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RED CAR

"What's the matter with you, Paul?"

Jack asked this question, for of course he could not understand why his chum should take such a deep interest in any automobile that passed them on the road.

"Did you happen to see inside that red car as it went by?" asked Paul, turning eagerly on his friend.

"Why, er---yes, I did chance to be looking over your shoulders just then; I was a little afraid the wheels might graze you," admitted Jack.

"Do you know the machine, then?" asked the other, in some suspense.

"Don't believe I ever saw it before; but then, what of that? Don't dozens pass along here every day, that come up from the city? It's common to see a strange car, even if it has got a khaki-colored top, instead of a plain black one. Hey, Paul! what ails you?" demanded Jack.

"It wasn't Colonel Strange, was it?" asked the other; for the gentleman mentioned happened to possess a red auto.

"Of course it wasn't, because his car has a black top; and besides, neither of the two men was the fat colonel," replied Jack, immediately.

Paul had learned something already.

"Then there were two men in it, you say?" he went on, casually, as though much of his interest had abated.

"Yes, and one of them was staring at me to beat the band. Perhaps he has lost a boy, and thinks I look like him. Don't let him kidnap me, will you, Paul?" went on Jack with pretended anxiety, as he clung to his companion's arm.

"Say, look there, the car's stopped. I believe they're waiting for us!" declared Paul, in some excitement.

"Well, that's what gave me such a scare, you see. That's why I'm shaking all over, Paul. But in union there is strength; and I'm going to hang on to you, if he tries to coax me to get aboard. I'm not in the long lost class."

"Oh! come along, and let's see what they want. He's leaning over the top now, and keeps beckoning to us."

Paul started on a run. He could feel his heart beating very hard; indeed it was strange, he thought, that his companion did not hear it pounding away, and make some sort of remark.

The chance that he had been hoping for seemed to be within his grasp. Not only had he discovered a car that answered the description of the one mentioned by Mr. Pender; but the occupants were plainly desirous of obtaining information of some sort, and had selected him and Jack as the ones most likely to give it.

As he hurried on, he tried to control himself. It would never do to show more than natural curiosity in his actions. If these two men were the ones the gentleman stopping at Jack's house wanted to find, they must be smart enough to read his secret, unless he took warning.

No sooner had he come abreast of the car than looking up he found himself staring into the dark face of a man who had a cruel look about him. What thrilled Paul, however, was the fact that one of his eyes was undoubtedly artificial. He had guessed this fact when Jack stated that the party *stared* so at him.

All doubt was gone now, and he understood that by the strangest of luck he had come upon the parties for whom Mr. Pender was searching. The official must have known that they were headed this way for some purpose or other.

"Live around here, bub?" asked the man with the glass eye, as he looked piercingly at Paul.

"Yes, sir; in Stanhope," replied the boy, surprised himself to find how steady his voice turned out to be under the trying circumstances.

"How far ahead is that place?" continued the man.

"About half a mile, sir. You can see the steeple of the Methodist church after you turn that bend ahead," and Paul pointed with a steady finger.

"Huh! I wonder now if either of you happen to know a Mr. Solus Smithers?" and as he put the question the man shot a quick glance toward his companion; at which the shorter party nodded his big head, and grinned approvingly.

Paul turned to his chum.

"Say, Jack, isn't that the name of the man who took the old Grimes farm up at the milldam?" he asked, though he knew positively that it was so.

"Smithers---why, yes, I reckon it is. Is he a tall man, with a hooked nose; and does he dip snuff?" queried Jack, innocently enough.

"That's Solus to a dot. You see, boys, he's from North Caroliny, where even the wimmen use snuff, only they rub it on their teeth with a stick. Now, mebbe one of you boys would be so obligin' as to direct us to the shortest way to where this old mill stands," continued the man with the bogus orb.

"I guess the quickest way to get there is to drive through Stanhope, and pick up the Deerfield road on the other side. It's only a few miles off; but the road turns lots of times to avoid the hills."

Paul noted that the taller man seemed to invariably look to his companion for support. It was as though they worked in common, and neither wished to become responsible for action without the other's assent.

After an interchange of low words, which the boys did not catch, the spokesman once more turned around. He held a silver half dollar in his hand.

"Here's something for your trouble, boys. But look here, ain't there another way to get to that old abandoned mill without going through the town? To tell you the truth we lost our number away back, and might get hauled up because we can't show a tag on the back of the car."

Paul had already noticed this significant fact. It is the business of a scout to take note of even trifles. One of the tests of memory is to look in at a store window for just one full minute; and then, going away, make out as complete a list of articles it contained as is possible.

And still, he did not believe that this was the true reason these men disliked passing through Stanhope if it could be avoided. Perhaps they had some suspicion that Mr. Pender was visiting there; and did not want to take chances of his meeting them face to face.

"Sure there is," broke in Jack, who saw no reason why he should not believe the artful excuse given; for Jack did not know all his chum had learned about these parties; "after you pass the bend yonder, just turn to the left. You can't miss the road, for its got a big maple tree right at the junction. We call that the Grapevine Road, because it twists and turns so; but it will fetch you out right at the old dam, mister."

Many a time had Jack himself walked along that same winding path when coming home with a string of bass, taken in the mill pond. It was longer, to be sure, but there were some fine apple trees on the way; and the walk through the dense woods was so much more enjoyable on a hot summer day than the open stretch that marked the other route.

The man flipped the coin in the air, and as it fell at Paul's feet he felt constrained to stoop and pick it up. To do anything else might have aroused the suspicions of the man who stared. And at the worst it meant another contribution toward the various funds which the boys were raising for many purposes.

Boys as a rule have little objection about receiving "tainted money." And while Paul understood that these men had been breaking some of the laws of the land, he was not supposed to know the particular way in which their money had been gained.

"Much obliged for the information, boys; and please don't report us in town as being short a license tag. We'll get a new one just as quick as we can. So-long!"

As the shorter fellow started the machine his companion waved his hand at the two chums on the road, both of whom of course returned the salute.

Jack watched his friend out of the corner of his eye as they walked on. Perhaps he was entertaining a dim suspicion that Paul might be keeping something from him.

But he asked no questions; and the other volunteered no information. A scout is supposed to know when to hold his tongue, especially when in the company of his superior officer; and so Jack let the matter drop.

"See, they've turned in, all right, Paul," he said, as he pointed to the broad marks of heavy tires leaving the main road, and passing under the spreading maple that stood at the junction with the Grapevine.

"That's so," returned Paul, apparently not in the least interested; and yet as they continued to walk briskly toward home he frequently turned a wistful look over his left shoulder, as in fancy his thoughts followed those two strangers up to the old farmhouse at the mill pond.

Who was this Solus Smithers? Could he be in league with these two men whom the Government expert was sent to watch? Paul remembered that he had heard several people talking about the man and his ways. He seemed to have plenty of money, yet he made no effort to farm the place he had rented that summer.

As soon as they reached town he started to accompany his chum home, hoping to have an opportunity to see Mr. Pender in secret.

Catching sight of that gentleman walking down for the evening mail, he made some excuse and broke away from Jack; who looked after him in bewilderment, grieved because Paul, for once, seemed to be keeping some secret from him.

Mr. Pender presently came out of the post-office. He had a letter in his hand, and was apparently much displeased at what it had contained.

"Why, hello! Paul, my boy! Glad to see you. How is the patrol coming on? Some day you must allow me to watch your manoeuvres up there in the woods. I'm deeply interested in all such goings-on, you know," he said, shaking hands, heartily.

"Yes, sir; I'll ask the boys for permission to invite you," began Paul.

"Were you looking for me, my boy?" asked the other suddenly, his keen eyes having doubtless detected something in the manner of the young scout master that gave him his idea.

"Yes, sir, I was," replied the one addressed.

"I wonder now if, on the top of bad news from Washington, you could be about to bring me new hope. Have you learned anything you want to tell me, Paul?"

"I've seen that red auto, and talked with the gentleman who has the glass eye!" said the boy, trying in vain to keep his eager voice from trembling with excitement.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CALL FOR HELP

Mr. Pender swooped down and seized Paul's hand, which he squeezed so heartily that he almost made the tears come to the boy's eyes.

"That sounds good to me, my boy. Please tell me about it. Where was it at the time? And do you think it can have gone beyond Stanhope? I hope you didn't give the gentleman any idea that you had ever heard a word about him or his car?"

"Oh! I give you my word, sir, that they never dreamed I knew a thing about them. A scout has to learn how to keep his feelings in check, you see, Mr. Pender. I acted just as naturally as Jack did; and he knew nothing."

"Well, tell me about it now, please."

Stopping at the corner, Paul started in to relate all the incidents connected with that meeting on the road. The gentleman hung upon every word. He certainly looked pleased, and Paul realized that he had done something worth while. To his credit be it said that never once had he entertained the thought of receiving any sort of reward for his services.

"All this is of the greatest importance to me, my boy. I am frank to tell you that the successful capture of those two men you have so ably described, thanks to your scout training, will mean much to me. And depend upon it, if success rewards my efforts, I shall certainly remember that you gave me very valuable assistance in the undertaking."

"Then you think I might have a reward, don't you, Mr. Pender?" he said.

"I most positively do, and right now and here I'm willing to promise you---"

"Wait a little, Mr. Pender. There's only one thing you could do to pay me for the little assistance I have been to you. Some time later on, after you get back to Washington, write me a letter on your official paper, stating just what aid the Boy Scouts of the Red Fox patrol were to you in furthering the ends of justice. That's all any of us could accept, sir."

"By Jove! I'm proud to know such boys, and proud to shake hands with the fine scout leader at their head!" exclaimed the Government representative, as he cordially thrust out his digits.

But "once bit, twice shy"; and Paul shook his head as he caressed his fingers.

"Excuse me, won't you, Mr. Pender; but once at a time is enough. I expect to have a lot of use for my right hand to-night, sir," he laughed.

"Oh! pardon me, my dear boy!" cried the other, "I was forgetting that it wasn't the hand of a tiller of the soil I squeezed. I'll be more careful next time. But your news was so unexpected, coming at a moment when I had received some depressing information by mail, that I quite forgot myself. Please continue to keep these facts to yourself for a little while longer, Paul."

"Yes, sir; until you give me leave to speak I won't tell anybody, not even my own folks at home. And if we are so fortunate as to get that letter from you, Stanhope Troop will have a big advantage over other competitors. You know, sir, we are competing for an elegant banner; and the other patrols have been working all summer; so that we've just got to get busy if we hope to have a show in."

"I don't care if they've been going along a year, I'd be willing to wager that Stanhope will win the prize. That shows what faith I put in the leader of the Red Fox patrol. Nothing is going to ever hold you back. I can see the spirit glowing right now in your eyes," and Mr. Pender nodded his head wisely as he said this.

Paul turned red under the praise.

Mr. Pender was apparently anxious to know all he could about the place around the abandoned mill.

"Have you seen this party named Solus Smithers?" he asked, presently, as they walked slowly on in company.

"Yes, sir; several times. He's a very tall and thin man, with a face I never liked. He's driven some of us boys away from the mill pond this last summer. We have always fished there, and nobody ever said a word; but he acted as if he had an idea some of us would steal his old house. He even brought out a gun once, and warned three fellows off. After a while no one cared to go up there. Some of the boys even said they believed the old man was daffy, and that he might shoot if anybody made him real mad."

"Oh! yes; I see; and he didn't want trespassers on his farm, eh? Does the mill pond stand on the ground he's rented?" asked the gentleman.

"Oh! yes, and all the ground around there. It must cover four hundred acres, but most of it is in woodland, you see, sir," replied Paul, promptly.

"Can you tell me what Smithers looks like, Paul?"

"He's very tall, stoops quite a lot, uses snuff like they do down in North Carolina, and has small blue eyes and a queer nose. Some of the boys say it looks as if it had been broken. That man in the red car knew it when Jack called it a hooked nose, sir."

Mr. Pender slapped his thigh as though in great glee.

"Well, this is great luck, sure enough. From your description I believe that I know this Mr. Solus Smithers, though that isn't his name at all. It keeps on getting better and better, the deeper I grub. And if all turns out well, I shall owe you a heavy debt, my dear boy."

"Make it up in that letter then, sir. The stronger the better. And if you happen to need any further assistance don't hesitate to call on us. We've got some dandy trackers in the Red Fox patrol; and it would have to be a pretty smart fellow to pull the wool over their eyes, sir."

"Good for you, Paul," said the gentleman, warmly; "always ready to sound the trumpet for your comrades; but if the truth were told I reckon I'd find the scout leader at the top of the bunch when it came to a knowledge of woodcraft."

"Please don't, sir," pleaded Paul.

"Jack has been confiding to me all about how you've always been deeply interested in outdoor life," went on Mr. Pender; "but as you have told me all you know about this red car that has gone along the Grapevine Road, headed for the old mill pond, I believe I'll have to leave you. Take my hand, won't you, Paul? I promise to be good, and not put on pressure, though my heart is very warm toward you, lad."

So Mr. Pender hurried away.

Paul turned back. He had noticed an air of unusual excitement inside the post-office, and his curiosity was stirred. While Mr. Pender and his strange mission was in the foreground, of course, he had been able to pay little attention to anything else; but now that this was shelved he could not resist the inclination to return, and ask what made the people stand around in knots as though exchanging views.

He discovered Ted Slavin and three of his friends jabbering away just inside the door, and heard one of them exclaim:

"Course we will go along; it'd be a big feather in our cap, fellers, if we'd be the ones to bring him back."

"Yes, send out word for the boys to get together, Ted. We'll show 'em what we fellers that has hunted since we was knee high, know about follerin' a trail!" another remarked.

"Let up, you; d'ye want to give the whole snap away? See who's here!" whispered Ted; but in such a hoarse tone of voice that Paul could not help hearing.

Of course his curiosity was still further aroused. Whatever could have happened in quiet Stanhope, to cause all this gathering of people, and such earnest consultations?

He saw Chief Billings, who was in charge of the police force in the town, leaving the post-office, and noted that a large delegation trailed after him.

Could it be possible that the local authorities had in some manner become aware of the fact that law breakers were abroad in the land? Was Mr. Jared Pender, the Government expert, about to have rivals in the field? When those cronies of Ted spoke of following a trail could they have had any reference to the track of the wonderful red automobile with the khaki-colored top; and occupied by the two parties whom Mr. Pender wished to catch, as he said, "with the goods on?"

Paul hoped not. It would complicate things very much; and in the confusion the rascals might manage to slip away. Paul had known Chief Billings to undertake a clever piece of business before now; but never succeed in accomplishing one.

Some one banged into him as he turned a corner in the building.

"Why, hello! Paul, that you?" said a voice.

It was Si Growdy, who claimed to be a nephew of old Peleg, but who had never been known to be recognized by the crusty old farmer. He clerked in one of the general stores, of which Stanhope boasted several big ones, where everything, from a package of pins to a coffin could be purchased.

"What's all the row about, Si?" demanded the acting scout master, as he seized hold of the clerk, to head him off; for Si seemed to be in a hurry as usual; he worked for a man who was a driver, and had to give an account of every minute of his time.

"Ain't you heard nawthin' about it, Paul? Where you ben all this afternoon?" was the way the clerk answered one question with another.

"Up in the woods with the scouts, doing stunts. But tell me what's gone wrong? Another robbery at the jewelry store; or has some one sneaked away with one of the coffins your house carries?" pursued Paul.

"If anybody ever got off with a pin that didn't belong to 'em at our emporium, the fact ain't never been known. I've seen the boss chargin' customers with the cracker they eat when samplin'. We got orders to make light weight if they buy. But about this rumpus; they's a child lost!" said Si.

"Who's child?" asked Paul, instantly deeply interested.

"Mr. Boggs' little Willie. The Chief was just in to talk with him. He's all broken up over it, because you know, he uses a crutch, and can't help hunt."

Paul knew Mr. Boggs assisted the post-master in his duties; and many a time had Paul chatted with the pretty little chap who played around the building while his father was assorting the incoming mails. Willie Boggs had always been a universal favorite. He was the sweetest child in all Stanhope, and everybody loved him.

Paul was shocked at the news. Still, he hoped it might not be as bad as Si said.

"Where did it happen? How do they know? Who saw little Willie last? What has been done to find him?" he fired at the clerk like the discharge of a Gatling gun.

"Glory! expect me to tell the hull story, with my boss a settin' there inside the store, watchin' the clock, an' dockin' me for every minute I'm late? All right, who cares? And besides, Paul, p'raps that troop of yours might be useful in follerin' the tracks of poor little Willie," Si went on.

"Where, when, how?" demanded the scout master, resolutely.

"This mornin' it happened. Willie went with Annie Spooner to get some leaf mould in the edge of the woods, for her ma's flowers. She came back just at noon an' sed Willie had strayed away in the woods."

"Did anybody go to look for Willie?" asked Paul.

"Three boys went out to bring him in. They hunted high an' low, but he wa'n't there. Then a dozen people set out to search the woods. Just now they come back to say Willie ain't to be found high nor low. That stirs the big chief some. He 'low he knows how the thing's to be did; and so he's agoin' to organize a hunt for the lost child. That's all. Now, let me get back to my slave tasks, Paul."

"And night coming on," murmured Paul, as he looked out of the door to where people were assisting the crippled Mr. Boggs across the square in the direction of his nearby home, where his wife was no doubt waiting eagerly for some news of the missing darling.

Si Growdy shot out of the door, and headed in the direction of the store where he gave his valuable services daily from seven in the morning until late in the evening, for a miserable pittance.

Paul walked thoughtfully out of the post-office. He was tired from his exertions of the afternoon; but all that was immediately forgotten when he mentally pictured the weeping mother in that little cottage where the honeysuckle climbed above the door. Then he thought of the terror of the little fellow, wandering about in the great woods with night coming down, and all sorts of strange noises arising to chill his blood.

"I'll do it!" exclaimed Paul presently; "the chance is too good to be lost. Why let Ted and Ward have the inside track? Just as soon as I can send word around we'll test our new system of bringing a bunch of the Fox scouts together. And then, if the boys are willing, we'll try and discover where Willie Boggs has wandered. It's a glorious opportunity to find out if what we've learned is worth having. Here goes then, to send out the call for help!"

CHAPTER XXV

A CAMP IN THE WOODS

"Why, Paul, what's all this hurry mean?"

"I just want to get a few bites of supper, mother, and then rush off. I've sent out the call for a hurry meeting of the patrol. Some people call it the emergency signal. Every one of the scouts knows what it means. Those who can get out will be gathering here inside of half an hour."

"But it must be something very unusual that urges you to do this. You've been on the go all afternoon, and I don't know that it is wise to bolt your supper in such a style, just to be ready to greet the boys when they arrive."

"Mother, you don't understand. Father hasn't come back from his afternoon round of visits, has he? Then you couldn't possibly know," went on Paul.

"Know---what, my son?" questioned his mother, seeing that the boy was worked up more than usual.

"We're going to organize a searching party. Perhaps some of the scouts may be smart enough to get on the track. It's poor little Willie Boggs, mother."

"Searching party---Willie Boggs! Is the child lost?"

"Yes, and has been ever since before noon, in the big woods. You see it's just beginning to get dark now. Think of the poor little fellow wandering perhaps miles off in the woods. What if a storm should come up?" and Paul's manner told how he felt.

"But there are no wild animals large enough to injure the child. The most he could suffer would be exposure to the night air; that and the fright of finding himself alone. Oh! it is a terrible thing though; and little Willie is all his poor father has left. It would kill him if anything happened," declared the good lady, whose heart was very tender.

"Now you see why I'm in such a hurry to get a bite, mother. Every minute might count, for perhaps he is wandering further and further away. You'll let Jane get me something in a jiffy, won't you, now?" continued the eager lad.

"Gladly, and help her too, after you have told me more. How do you boys expect to look for the child in the blackness of those woods?"

"Every scout will carry a lantern, with which we have practiced signal wig-wagging until we are able to send messages back and forth. Besides that, we can form a long line across the woods, and comb nearly every bit of it, looking into every stack of brush and waste to see if Willie has lain down. And mother, think if we should just find him, how glad you'd be that we went out!"

"Indeed, I should! I shall pray that you succeed, my boy. And it does you great credit that you are so earnest in your desire to help others. Sit down, and I'll wait on you myself," and Mrs. Morrison bustled away toward the kitchen as she spoke.

As Paul was hastily devouring his supper, for he was as hungry as a wolf, who should come in but the doctor. And of course he had to be told; though Paul's mother took this task upon herself, giving the boy a chance to eat.

Through the window Paul could see that already several fellows had gathered; and other lanterns were meanwhile coming like giant fireflies through the gathering gloom of the night.

The prospect of bringing his scout troop into action for such a good cause was particularly pleasing to the boy who temporarily filled the office of leader. Spurred to do their very best by a recollection of the vows they had so recently taken, the members of Stanhope Troop might be depended on to bring credit to their organization.

By the time Paul issued from the house there were a full dozen of his chums present. He was glad to see that all the original charter members forming the Red Fox patrol were on hand. They happened to live closer than others who had joined later; and boys of a particular community generally flock together.

Immediately a great hubbub ensued. Those who did not know what all the fuss was about had to be "put wise," as William said. And Paul was called upon to explain his plans for the tracking of little Willie Boggs, who had become as a chip on the torrent, a wanderer in that mysterious forest, the end of which few Stanhope fellows had ever reached in their wanderings up over the hills.

There were now fourteen present, and Paul determined not to wait for any more of the troop to come to time.

"Fall in!"

Down the street they marched, the lanterns flickering as they swung to and fro.

No wonder people, rushing to the doors as shouts arose, began to ask eagerly if the lost child had been recovered.

"It's the Boy Scouts; and they're going out to join the hunt!" some one shouted.

"Oh! they're about a mile behind Ted and his crowd!" jeered one fellow who must have had leanings toward the Slavin party; he had been detected in cheating so often in every game boys played that for months now he found himself left severely alone by decent fellows, and it was reported had applied for admission to the patrol Ward and Ted were getting up.

Out of the town, and straight to the spot where the lost boy had last been seen Paul led his squad. He knew that it would be only a miracle if the many feet that had trod the ground over would have left any trace of the child's little shoes; but he still had hopes that the training some of his scouts possessed would bring more or less success.

The unique sight of all those lanterns on the road had attracted many people, so that when they arrived at the spot Paul had in mind, fully thirty followed, a number of them boys who came only to make sport of the scouts.

"Spread out, fellows," said the scout leader, quietly, "and examine every foot of ground. If you find a single impression of Willie's little shoe, give the signal, and I'll come; but hold your places every one."

Immediately the scene became an animated one. Lanterns flashed hither and thither, swinging close to the ground; while young eyes searched diligently for a trace.

In less than five minutes the signal sounded, and Paul hurried over to the one who had given the same. Jack was at his elbow, and between them they examined the mark, to ascertain in what quarter it pointed.

Then the advance was taken up in that direction.

Again came the thrilling cry that told of a new footprint that had been found.

This time it was Wallace Carberry who had made the discovery. He talked so intelligently about it that Paul determined to keep him close by. Wallace would be a valuable advisor in case he and Jack disagreed at any time as to what the signs meant.

So they went on for an hour, finding a footprint now and then to encourage them. These came at more frequent intervals when they got far enough away to avoid the trampled soil where the crowd had hunted all the afternoon.

Those who had followed were now missing. They had seen that the scouts meant business, and did not care to wander so far from town. Hence, Paul presently found that he and his patrol had the woods almost to themselves.

Several times though he had seen other lanterns wandering around, and guessed that these were carried by some of the Slavin crowd, also diligently combed the woods in the hope of being the lucky ones to find the missing boy.

The chief of police and his party had gone off in an altogether different direction.

"How long can we keep this up, Paul?" asked Jack, when they had been moving on for two hours, with no end in sight.

"Don't know, but we ought to be able to put our best foot forward just as long as that little fellow does, don't you think?" replied the other, reproachfully.

"Why, of course, and don't think I'm showing the white feather so early in the game. I've made up my mind never to go back until he's found. Why, we can camp right in the woods if it comes to it. And that would be a bully experience for every Fox in the bunch. Think of having to make beds out of branches! Ain't I glad some of us brought our camp

hatchets along."

"And Jack, it would leave us in a good position to take up the hunt again in the morning; for you see we'd be right on the ground where the little chap passed along. Suppose you call out again. He might hear, and answer."

Jack obeyed, and repeated the name of Willie in a loud voice again and again. But only the echoes of the great woods answered. If the boy were within reach of that cheery hail he must be wrapped in the sleep of exhaustion, and unable to reply.

Finally Jack ceased to call, for he was growing very husky.

The search still went on with unabated zeal, each boy trying to vie with his mates in the endeavor to make some new discovery. Paul examined every faint print of that little foot, desirous of fixing the time it was made. Wallace joined him in this, and it was clearly shown that hours must have elapsed since the child passed that way.

"Still, he may be within fifty yards of where we are. Let's keep at it as long as we can, and only camp when some are too tired to go on," declared Paul, greatly disappointed to think that they had thus far been baffled by hard luck.

It was astonishing to see how far the little fellow had wandered; but fear always lends wings to the feet; and all the while Willie doubtless really believed he must be heading toward home.

And Paul noted another fact that somehow gave him new interest in the enterprise. By degrees the trail had swung around to the left, as is nearly always the case when grown persons are lost; and the principle seemed to hold good in the case of even a child.

In itself this was not strange; but Paul knew that if they kept on for another hour the chances were they would come upon the old mill pond, nestling in the valley. The fact caused him to remember his friend Mr. Pender; to once more mentally see that red motor with the khaki-colored top; and to picture the two strangers who had asked him so many questions.

Was this really an accident, their being drawn out toward the farm of the unneighborly Sol Smithers; or might it turn out to be the working of destiny?

He was aroused by a call that he had been expecting to hear for some time now.

One of the scouts felt forced to admit that he was "all in." They had done manly work to keep up the tramp all this time, being but boys at best.

It meant that camp must be made, and the balance of the night spent there in the woods, waiting for day to come to renew their search.

Poor little Willie was destined then to pass still more hours, surrounded by the terrors of the black and unknown forest. But probably by this time he must be so exhausted through his unusual exertions that he was dead to the world in sleep; so it would not matter very much.

Soon all was bustle as the fourteen lads began to make ready to spend a time in open camp. The sound of hatchets made pleasant music, as branches were cut, and beds made close to the fire that had been started.

Some of the smaller lads were so utterly exhausted that they just dropped to the ground, and went to sleep. Paul and Jack passed around to see that these wornout fellows did not lie too near the blaze; and that they were fairly comfortable.

In an hour's time it seemed as though every one were taking solid comfort after such rude fashion as could be devised. One of the boys had brought his camera along, keen to secure novel effects; and without warning he set off a flash that gave him a picture of the slumbering heroes on their lowly beds, that would be ever afterwards treasured as invaluable.

At the brilliant illumination several sat up, and one even gave a cry of alarm, thinking perhaps that lightning had struck a tree close by; but with the coming of darkness again they settled back.

But Paul could not sleep. He was only waiting until some of the more restless souls quieted down. Then he and Jack, together with Wallace, meant to again tackle the job of seeking for further imprints of those worn little shoes among the dead leaves, and in the soft soil under the giant trees.

Somehow Paul believed that the hunt was bound to carry them to the very door of that farmhouse on the mill pond. He was induced to suspect this because the last time they had examined the small shoeprints, the mark of a much larger foot had appeared beside it; and after mature deliberation he and Wallace came to the conclusion that some man, walking through the forest, had discovered the trail of the child, *and was following it!*

He looked around him. As near as he could tell every one of the tired scouts was slumbering soundly.

So Paul silently arose, touching Jack on the shoulder, who immediately gave Wallace Carberry the signal.

The three uttered no word, but moving softly back from the circle of firelight, carrying their almost exhausted lanterns, made ready to once more start out into the depths of the wood; with the lonely farmhouse now rented by the surly Sol Smithers just half a mile further to the north!

CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT WOODCRAFT TOLD

"There it is again, Paul!"

"As sure as you live we're being followed, boys!" and Wallace allowed his voice to rise just above a hoarse whisper when he made this energetic remark.

The three were crouching in the bushes.

As yet Paul had not caught a glimpse of the object which seemed to disturb both of his friends; but he was looking sharply now.

"Why, yes, I do believe you are right, fellows," he said, calmly.

"Well, you take it mighty cool, I must say," declared Jack.

"Because I see no reason to get flurried over such a little thing, boys," was what the leader replied.

"Little thing, when you know Ted Slavin and a bunch of his toadies came up here to get all the glory they could out of this business! Don't you understand, Paul, that if they thought they could down us, they'd just as lief waylay us in the woods, and put an end to all our expectations?"

This was a very unusual way of talking for Wallace, but it only went to show how the boy was worked up over the situation, and made nervous by the continuous strain.

"But how do you know those moving figures are Ted and Ward, or even any of that crowd?" demanded Paul.

The others hesitated, and finally Jack remarked:

"Well, for a fact we don't know; but you remember we saw signs that even you declared proved what I'm saying---that some of those fellows have wandered as far as this."

"Yes, that's a fact. I'm not apt to forget it. Now, how many figures have you seen dodging along back there, just as if they didn't care to be seen---yet?"

"How about it, Wallace?" queried Jack, doubtfully.

"Two, anyhow; I'm sure of that," came the hesitating reply.

"Yes, at least two, Paul," the other echoed.

"And we are three. That's one reason why I don't see any reason for getting nervous over the discovery," observed the leader, his voice now apparently showing a trace of humor that was bubbling up near the surface.

"But where there are two there may be more, Paul?" objected Jack.

"Yes, possibly eight or ten more," went on the calm leader.

"Goodness! and you say there is no need of our worrying?" exclaimed Wallace.

"Yes, explain what you mean, old fellow. Eight or ten would give us a warm time don't you think?" demanded Wallace, gripping Paul's arm fiercely.

"Hardly, if they were all sound asleep around a dying campfire, dead to the world," quoth Paul, chuckling now.

But the others uttered low but vehement exclamations.

"Don't you see what he means, Wallace?" asked Jack.

"Sure. What a couple of fools you and I were," came the scathing reply.

"We've been followed by two of our own boys. They must have watched us crawl out of camp, and not wanting us to have all the fun, here they come creeping after us. What shall we do, Paul?" Jack queried in the other's ear; for the flitting figures were now very near.

"Open our arms and welcome the recruits. If they're just bound to join forces with us, why should we make any kick. I'm glad of it."

Then raising his voice a little, Paul continued:

"Hey! there!"

They could hear the murmur of voices. Evidently the two shadows were talking it over, and must have arrived at some quick conclusion, for presently came a hail.

"Hello! Paul, Jack!"

"It's Bobolink, for one," muttered Jack, immediately.

"Then it's a sure thing William is tagging along," said Wallace.

"Come on, both of you fellows. No danger!" called Paul, softly.

After that assurance the shadows boldly advanced, and quickly joined the three who stood under the spreading oak.

It proved just as Jack and Wallace had predicted, for the newcomers turned out to be William and Bobolink. They were chuckling, as though considering it a good joke.

"Thought you'd give us the quiet sneak, and gobble all the glory yourselves, hey?" said the latter, as they bustled up; "but William and myself had it all fixed. We were on to your curves, all right."

"Yes," broke in William, just there; "didn't we see you with your heads together a lot, and wasn't we wise to what was in the wind. Bobolink was awake, and it was my turn to snooze. He gave me a kick in the seventh rib that made me think a comet had dropped on me. But we showed up game. Now, what's doing, fellows; and do we get a grab at the scout?"

"If you both feel like trotting around a whole lot more, why you're just as welcome as a shower in spring," asserted Paul, promptly.

"I should say, yes," declared Jack; "and if the whole bunch could stand the racket we wouldn't have crept away like we did. But most of the poor fellows are all in, and dead tired, and we thought it would be a shame to invite them to hike some more."

"Did you bring your glim along?" asked Paul.

"Our lanterns? Well, William didn't want to, but I insisted. I knew that if we missed you fellows, and lost ourselves in the bush, they'd come in mighty fine for company," returned Bobolink.

"Then let's light up. After that we'll spread out, and try to find the trail," with which remark Paul set the example.

Presently five lanterns glowed like giant fireflies.

"Think it lies in this direction, Paul?" asked William.

"I'm sure of it. After that man's track came alongside the print of the little chap's shoe, there was no more wandering about; but it struck straight ahead. That told me the trail was heading for a house," came the ready reply.

"A house. Say, is there any other place up here but the old farm alongside the mill pond? I don't seem to remember any," remarked Bobolink.

"And that's just where I expect we'll bring up sooner or later," observed Paul.

"Then why not put for the old place at full speed right away?" suggested William, always impetuous.

"To do that we'd have to drop the trail again. And besides, what does an hour, or even two of them, matter in the end? Slow but sure is the successful scout's motto, boys. Hello I look here, what's this?"

Paul thrust his lantern down close to the ground. Bending over to look, the others could see the plain impression of a child's little shoe. It was heading due north, just as many similar tracks had been of late.

"Now if you look at this you'll see it's nearly crushed out by the big print of a man's foot; while just beyond the child has stepped into the impression made by the man. That can mean only one thing; the two were going on in company, and for a minute he let go the little one's hand, so that first the child was in front, and then behind."

"I guess you're right, Paul. But see here, what does this mean? The small track has dropped out altogether," remarked William.

"That is where the big fellow picks the boy up in his arms, and is carrying him," said Wallace, before Paul could answer.

"Right you are, that is just what happened. To tell the truth I don't know why he didn't do that before. He must have been toting some bundle along, and couldn't well carry the boy too. Come back a bit. I want to look around," and Paul retraced his steps until he had reached the spot where a confusion of tracks met his gaze.

He followed the man's trail a few paces, and found himself under a tree. Raising his lantern he carefully examined the bark of the trunk, and finding several fresh scratches, pursued his investigations still higher.

One accommodating limb grew rather low. In fact a man could, by reaching up his arms, clasp it easily; and that was what Paul believed had been done.

"Give me a push, somebody; and then hand up my lantern," he said, clasping his arms about the tree as well as he was able.

Ten seconds later William was handing him up the light; after which Paul began to ascend slowly, looking about him as though constantly on the watch for signs that would tell another had preceded him.

"All right; it's here. I'm coming down, fellows," he soon called out.

Reaching that friendly lower limb he held something in view.

"Take hold of this, Bobolink, and handle it carefully, because we don't know what's in the package. It might be dynamite!" he remarked.

"Oh! I hope not!" exclaimed the one in whose arms the bundle reposed; and he did not look any too happy at the prospect ahead.

"Don't be silly," said Paul, as he dropped beside them. "But whatever it may be, we might as well hide it in a new place. Then if the fellow should come back here to get it, he's going to meet with a disappointment, that's all."

"But what d'ye think it is?" argued the one who clasped the large package in his arms, though with evident reluctance.

"That is none of our business just now. It may be honest enough, and we'd get into a peck of trouble if we peeked. So let's just chuck it in some hollow stump as we go along, and muffle our trail behind us so he can't find where we put it. Later on I think I know some one who will be glad to look into what it contains."

"Perhaps I do too," remarked Jack; and the two chums looked at each other, with mutual astonishment marked on their faces.

"Oh!" remarked Paul, "are you on, too? Did he tell you the secret?"

"I happened to pick up an envelope he dropped, and wondered whose it was; so I went around, asking. He laughed when I came to him, and told me a little bit of news that surprised me. But Paul, he asked me not to breathe a word, even to you. That was a mean joke, when you knew all along," Jack complained.

"Remember the red car on the road, and the two men in it?"

"Oh! did they have anything to do with his coming up here? Yes, now that I think of it, you were pretty much excited over that same red car. You guessed something then, didn't you, Paul?"

"He had asked me to watch out for a red car with a khaki-colored top, that might have two men in it, one of them owning to a glass eye."

"Good gracious!" said Jack; "that tall chap did have a bogus eye, for a fact. And when you left me in town you hurried around to the post-office to find Mr. Pender, didn't you? I see it all now. He never came home for supper, as far as I know. I reckon he must have got a rig of some sort, and put out for the mill pond. But what about Solus Smithers---they asked after him, you know?"

Paul pointed to the marks on the ground.

"Unless I'm wrong those are his tracks. I noticed that he had big feet at the time he came out and ordered us to clear away from the pond, and threatened us with his gun. Yes, perhaps he got home to find visitors waiting for him," Paul observed, just as though he could read all these things from the trail.

"Then we go on, do we?" asked Bobolink, eagerly.

He had been listening to what passed between his two comrades, and while it was partly Greek to him, enough of the truth filtered through to give him a creepy sensation, as though cold water were being poured down his back.

Bobolink was no coward though, and while he shivered it was more through a delicious frame of mind over the chance of an adventure than because he felt fear.

"Straight on, as long as these lanterns hold out. I see yours has begun to flicker already, William. There, it's puffed out; and my own isn't near as strong a light as it was."

Paul seemed to be a true prophet, for inside of five minutes the lanterns "gave up the ghost," the last to expire being that of Jack.

"What's doing now?" demanded Jack.

"Gather up all the matches in the crowd. Then I'll strike them one by one," was Paul's immediate response.

This emergency torch lasted for a little while. Finally the last match was gone, and still they were some distance away from the mill pond.

"Listen," said William, suddenly; with a thrill in his voice; "whatever do you suppose that is?"

CHAPTER XXVII

TED FINDS SOMETHING

"Sure it wasn't an owl?" asked Paul, when a full minute had passed away, without their hearing a repetition of the sound that had reached the ears of his comrade.

"Didn't sound like it. I kind of thought it was somebody calling for help!" said Bobolink, quivering with the suspense caused by the situation.

They stood in a group, listening eagerly. The night wind stirred the tops of the tall forest trees softly, and even this gentle sound boomed on their strained nerves like the strokes of a bass drum.

"Oh! there! Didn't you hear it that time?" whispered Bobolink.

"I guess we did," replied Paul; "and you're right in saying it is somebody shouting. But all the same I don't feel sure it was a call for help. Let's remember, fellows, that Ted and his crowd must be somewhere about up here. And you know from past experiences what dodges he's up to when he wants to play a trick on anybody."

"Do you mean he'd like to draw us off by shouting that way, while some of his fellows went along to the farmhouse, and got the lost boy?" asked William.

"That would be just like Ted. He's as full of tricks as an egg is of meat," Jack took it upon himself to say at this juncture.

"Well, what are we going to do about it, boys?" asked Wallace.

"I leave it to Paul; whatever he says ought to be good enough for me," replied Wallace.

"And me," came from the others without hesitation.

"Thanks, fellows. I hope that my plan will prove the best after all. But don't blame me if I should make a mistake. Let's head for the road, which I take it ought to be somewhere over yonder," remarked Paul, pointing through the darkness.

"The road, eh? I see, you mean that once we get on that we'll have it easy all the way to the pond. That suits me all right. Count William in."

"Yes, seeing that our lanterns are out, and not a match in the crowd, I guess the sooner we get our feet planted on the highway, the better for our noses. I've barked mine already against a tree, and another dose will spoil my classic beauty," grunted Bobolink, rubbing tenderly at the spot in question.

"Then come along, the rest of you," said Paul, starting off.

"Seems to me it's getting lighter," announced Wallace, presently.

"Mebbe our eyes are used to it, that's what," Bobolink remarked.

"Mine are closing up right fast, I warn you, fellers," said William; "and before long it's going to be a case of the blind leading the blind. That branch took me across the face. Hey! ain't that the same old shout?"

"Sounds like it; but much nearer," returned Paul, with a vein of uncertainty in his voice, as if he might be commencing to doubt whether they were doing the right thing in paying no attention to the calls.

"Oh! I guess I know what it means," remarked Jack; "I've been trying to make it out all along. That's sure a different voice. Some of Ted's crowd have got separated, and they're just trying to get together again. You've heard quail calling, after being flushed and scattered. How, Paul?"

"Perhaps you've struck it, Jack. Anyway, we are on the road here, and had better push straight along to the pond first."

"Right enough," uttered Bobolink, as he broke through a cordon of brush, and jumped out on the highway, though it might be only an apology for a road after all, being scantily used; "and after that experience it's going to be something big that drags me into the woods again."

The little group stood there for a minute to recover their wind, which had been more or less exhausted in the last desperate push through the dark woods.

"Ready to move on, fellows?" demanded Paul, who had apparently not changed his mind, and was more than ever bent on covering the last lap lying between themselves and the pond.

Jack and Wallace fell in on either side, and the march was begun. Since the other pair did not wish to be left behind, they were forced to accompany themselves to the movements of the trio.

Thus they walked perhaps a full hundred yards along the winding road, with the stars showing overhead, and the black mysterious woods flanking them on either side.

The shouts had apparently ceased; at least none had been heard since the five lads reached open territory.

Again it was Bobolink who caught a sound of some sort.

"Tell me again I'm hearing owls, will you, fellows? If that ain't a gasoline wagon climbing a hill ahead there I'm off my guess," he whispered.

"Chug! chug!" came the plain sound, as the air current veered more toward the point toward which they were heading.

"I know that hill," Paul observed, as if talking to himself; "it's just this side of the mill pond. That means the car is coming this way. The two gentlemen are separating themselves from their dear friend, Solus Smithers. Why, I wonder? Would Mr. Pender have anything to do with it?"

"Wow! did you see that?" gasped Bobolink, proving that his plaint about his eyes closing up could hardly be based on solid ground.

"Somebody struck a match, and it went out! Whoever it is, he's on the road just ahead of us, fellows!" whispered Jack.

"Back up into the scrub here. Quick! for perhaps he's got another match!" said Paul, following up his words by instant action.

They managed to cower down in the brush, though Bobolink muttered something to the effect that he had received another jab in the neighborhood of his wretched eyes.

"Look! he's done it, Paul, just as you said he would!" whispered Jack.

"Yes, he's shielding it from the breeze till it gets strong. There---well, what d'ye think of that, fellers?" gasped William.

"It's Ted!" muttered Wallace, staring hard at the figure that seemed to be huddled up on the road a little distance away.

"What do you suppose the silly goose is doing on his knees?" came from Jack.

"He's found something, and he's looking at it. See, now he's managed to open it up. Seems to me like a leather bag, boys," Wallace managed to wedge in with.

"Just what it is, old cat eyes. A hand bag! Now, however did that thing happen to be lying there in the road? Nobody ever comes up here but Solus, and he isn't the one to own a bag like that."

"The red car," said Paul, as Jack seemed to hesitate.

"That's it, as sure as you live. Dropped out of the machine; and by jinks! the fellers are comin' back to look for it. Never missed it till Sol got home!" his chum declared.

All this talk between the five boy scouts was carried on in the lowest of whispers. The sound of their voices would not have carried twenty feet; and the kneeling Ted was several times that distance away.

Besides, he seemed to be so fascinated by what he had discovered in the leather grip that he had eyes and ears for nothing else just then.

"The motor is coming closer!" remarked Wallace, as the sound of the engine was borne more distinctly to their ears.

"Sure. She's just at the top of the rise, and now it's down-grade. Reckon she'll be here in a minute. Push back further, fellows."

"Look! Ted hears it now! He's jumped up! Seems like he just don't know what to do, cut and run with the bag, or wait till the car gets there. Hey! watch that, will you?" gasped William.

"He threw the bag as far as he could into the woods!" said Jack.

"That looks like he meant to try and keep it," suggested Jack; "I imagine that the leather grip holds something that took Ted's fancy. But all the same I reckon it isn't going to be easy sledding for him. Will he run, fellows?"

"He's debating that same question now; but it's too late. He waited just half a minute too long," Paul remarked, as a sudden flash of dazzling light shot around a bend a short distance ahead, and the red car with the khaki-colored top came into view, making fairly fast time.

They could dimly see the inmates apparently surveying the road ahead with the utmost eagerness, as though anxious to make a discovery. The loss of that bag must have rather upset their plans, and given them a jolt.

Every one of the five hidden scouts crouched low, so that their faces might not be discovered by that fierce white glow.

Plainly to their ears was borne the shouts of the men in the machine, as they discovered the figure of Ted on the road. The Stanhope bully had evidently made up his mind that the bag was well worth struggling for, and that he must make some sort of a fight to retain possession of it.

Paul could guess what his plan of operations would be. He had seen Ted play innocent more than once before, when caught in the act of doing some mean thing. And as a rule the fellow could carry out the game fairly well.

But he was up against a different proposition now; and these keen-eyed men were not apt to be hoodwinked so easily as a parcel of schoolboys.

Ted stood there, looking at the car that was bearing down upon him.

No doubt he had assumed the innocent air of a rustic, and tried to make himself appear as stupid as he could. The two men in the red car were no longer calling, for they had seen that the boy on the road showed no signs of wanting to run.

As they bore down upon the spot the car slowed up, and came to a full stop within a few yards of the waiting Ted. Every scout lying in the screen of bushes held his breath as he listened to catch what was going to follow.

"Say, gimme a ride, mister?"

That was Ted speaking, before either of the men could say the first word. Indeed they were too busy clambering out of the car to surround him, and cut off any chance of escape, to think of anything else.

Without answering they bore down on Ted, and he found himself confronted by two eager faces, while a rough hand clutched his arm.

"He ain't got it, Brad!" exclaimed the shorter of the pair, as though disappointed over something.

"Hey, what'd you do with it, son?" demanded the taller traveler, looking furiously at Ted, though pretending to speak gently.

"With what, boss? I ain't got nothin' that belongs to you, sure I ain't!" whimpered the boy; and Paul came near to chuckling at the way Ted put on the agony.

"We lost a leather bag out of the car. I saw it after we turned into this here twisting side road just back a piece. We've looked over every foot between here and the mill pond, and ain't seen it. I'm going to ask you again, son, what did you do with it?"

The man did not threaten, as yet, but there was something deep down in his voice that seemed to tell of all sorts of terrible things that might happen to the boy unless he came to time, and confessed.

But at any rate Ted was game. His covetous nature had been aroused by something he had glimpsed inside of that same bag; and he did not mean to give it up unless pushed to the last resort.

"Ain't seen no bag, mister, 'deed an' I ain't," he whimpered; "I got a lantern here, an' I was ahuntin' a little boy that was lost from home. Lots of other fellers in the woods adoin' that same. But my light give out. Then I struck this here road. I'm clean tired out, mister, and I'd like to get a ride home, if so be you're goin' my way. A bag, mister? Sure I ain't knowin' nawthin' about no bag. Cross my heart if I do. Gimme a ride to Stanhope, mister, please!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

FORCED TO TELL

The two men looked at each other.

Apparently they hardly knew whether to believe Ted or not. Paul saw them put their heads close together, as though exchanging confidences. Then the tall fellow once more whirled on Ted, who had been standing on one leg, with a most forlorn look upon his face.

"We both think that you lie, son," said the man who was minus one of his optics, as he thrust his face close down to that of Ted, as though he would look straight into his heart; but this was something that no one else had ever succeeded in doing, and the attempt did not prove very successful.

"Tell him who we are, Brad," growled the shorter of the twain, who looked angry enough to devour the unfortunate Ted.

So the one called Brad took something out of his coat pocket that made a peculiar jingling noise, and held it up before the boy.

"D'ye see them, son? We call 'em bracelets, and they're meant to go on the wrists of criminals. D'ye understand now? We're officers of the law, and we've just made a grand haul. But some of the evidence has slipped away from us. It's in that same bag you picked up on this here road. Now, don't you dare deny it again, or we'll take you into town with these pretty toys clasped on your wrists. I'm going to give you another chance to tell us, son. Where did you put that bag?"

Ted winced and whined. He showed all the signs of injured innocence. Surely he must have made up his mind quickly that the contents of the bag were well worth taking all sorts of chances for.

"Ain't seen no bag. Sure I'd be on'y too glad to tell you, mister, if I had. All I wants to do is to go home. I'm tired, an' nigh sick with all this huntin' for that kid," he whimpered.

The man suddenly pounced on him, and despite Ted's struggles and entreaties, he seemed to succeed in accomplishing his purpose. At any rate the concealed scouts heard a snap; and when Ted reeled back he was holding his two hands close together in a suspicious way, and staring at something that seemed to be in the nature of a connecting link.

"Now you are in for it," said the tall man, shaking his head threateningly as he stood over the prisoner; "we'll have to take you to town, and put you in the lockup as an accessory after the fact. D'ye hear that, you young fool? And all because you refuse to help honest officers of the law in their legitimate business. Why, you may get ten years at hard labor, yes, twenty. Better tell all you know, and perhaps we'll let you off."

"You can do anything you like to me, mister, but I ain't agoin' to say what I don't know. Ain't seen any bag of no kind. Cross my heart if I have. I'm willin' to help you hunt for it, even if I am dog tired. Don't you believe me, mister? Sure, I wouldn't lie to you. What would I be wantin' with a bag; we got plenty at my house. Ted Slavin's my name, and I live in Stanhope. Gimme a ride, mister, if you're goin' that way, won't you?"

Again the two men talked together, while Ted watched them out of the corner of his eye. He might even have tried to run but the fact that his hands were fastened together with that steel chain prevented such a thing.

Once more they turned upon him, and the tall man pointing down, thundered:

"You've been kneeling in the dirt!"

Ted glanced down at his trousers involuntarily; but even then he was not taken off his guard.

"I fell ever so many times after my lantern went out. See here, mister, how I scraped the skin off my hand. That's the honest truth I'm givin' you!" he cried.

Undoubtedly it was, but all the same the men showed no signs of yielding.

The taller one, called Brad by his companion, deliberately detached one of the lamps from the car. With this he bent down to examine the road.

"He'll see the marks of the bag!" whispered Bobolink to Paul.

"Watch him while I scurry along the road a bit, to see if he left it," was what the man said, and then moved down toward the spot where the five boys lay in hiding.

When he came opposite them they hardly dared to breathe, lest his keen ears catch the sound, and he pounce upon them.

But he went past, scouring the road closely, and looking for some sign of the missing bag. They saw him pass on, and the light grew dim. Meanwhile Ted sat down on a log, and seemed to be very dejected and forlorn. Once or twice when the shorter man was not looking Paul saw him glance around, as though sizing up the chances for a sudden plunge into the forest.

"He's coming again," said Bobolink; and the brilliant glow from down the road bore evidence of the truth of this remark which was whispered in Paul's ear.

Brad walked hastily back, and soon rejoined his companion, with whom he talked earnestly for a minute.

"Get up!" he said, turning to Ted, and giving the boy a kick that made him climb to his feet hurriedly, groaning with pain.

"Bring him along into the woods, Wash!" the tall man continued, turning aside.

"Oh! what are you goin' to do?" cried Ted, in real or pretended terror, as he caught hold of the man's coat, and sought to hold him back.

"You'll find out right soon, son. Before we're done with you perhaps you'll wish you'd told us about that ere bag us the beginning. We're just going to make it warm for a feller of your size. This night air has made you too cold to speak up; but we'll fix all that, I reckon; we know how to do it, don't we, Wash?"

"Do we? Well, I should smile we did. But they's no need of our goin' far, old man. This here is a right smart tree, and looks like it might answer. 'Sides, they seems to be lots o' loose wood lyin' 'bout this part!"

Paul felt a chill pass over him. Could it be possible these rascals meant to torture Ted until he told; or were they just trying to frighten him? If it came to the worst they just could not stand by and see such a thing done.

Ted, of course, was considerably worked up when he heard what the shorter fellow said. It was so very plain he could not mistake the meaning.

"Say, mister, you wouldn't go to hurt a poor feller what never done you no harm, now, would you? Wish I on'y knowed where I could find a bag; I'd get it for you like hot cakes. Please don't smoke me. I ain't a ham, mister, an' I never done you any harm. Let me go, won't you? I'll never come up here again, sure I won't. And I'll promise to bring you all the bags in our house, mister."

Paying no attention to his pleadings and his groanings the men stood Ted up against a tree. Then the rope brought from the car was wrapped around both boy and tree several times.

"Get busy, Wash, and scrape up all the dead leaves you can find. Then begin and pile up some brush and stuff. Oh! yes, it's a cold night, but we ain't agoin' to let a poor critter what's lost his way, suffer. Here you, stop that sniffin'. Time enough to beller after it begins to hurt."

He struck Ted again in the face, making his nose bleed. Paul had crept out from the brush and commenced to approach the spot. He knew that the other four scouts were probably close on his heels.

Every boy's heart beat like a trip hammer with excitement. They bit their lower lips to keep from shouting out loud, such was the strain upon them. But not one had the least thought of turning back. With such a leader, how could they?

The shorter ruffian was scratching right merrily among the dead leaves, making all the noise he could, so as to impress the prisoner with a sense of his perilous condition. While he worked he kept talking, half to himself, and no doubt uttering all sorts of terrible threats calculated further to alarm the boy.

"We forgot one thing, Wash," said the other man, suddenly.

"What was that?" asked the one on his knees.

"To search the varmint. I might as well do it right now, while you go on getting his jacket warmer ready."

At first Ted tried to make all the resistance possible; but this only brought quick punishment in the shape of ugly blows and threats. So Ted had to stand and allow the other to have his way.

A minute later the man uttered a loud cry.

"Look here, Wash, what did I say?"

He was holding something up. Seen in the light from the lamp belonging to the red car it looked very much like a fat wad of greenbacks, tied together with a cord.

Wash sprang up, and bent over to examine the object in the light. Then he laughed harshly.

"It's the boodle, all right, Brad. He found the bag, sure as thunder! And now he's *got* to tell, or it's all up with him!"

Both men turned furiously on the bound boy. Ted had held out against all odds up to this critical point; but of course he must admit himself beaten, now that they had found the evidence in his pocket.

Nearer crept Paul, with his chums tagging close at his heels. And nobody thought to look beyond the line of brilliant light cast by the lamp which rested on the ground at the foot of the tree. Fortunately its powerful rays were directed away from the quarter occupied by the creeping Boy Scouts.

"Now, I reckon you're agoin' to tell all you know about that ere bag, son?" said Brad, in a terrible voice.

"I guess I'll have to, mister. I was just holdin' out to see if so be you was what you says. Now I know you be, and I'm ready to tell the hull thing if you'll only let me go free. I don't want to be smoked, just yet anyway," Ted whined.

"You did find the bag, then?" demanded the other.

"Yep, that's what I did."

"And took this wad of dough out of it?" pursued the other, savagely.

"It looked too nice to throw away, so I cabbaged it, mister. Wisht I hadn't now."

"What became of the bag after you took this out---go on, now, and tell, or---"

"Oh! I throwed that away, mister, right over here in the woods somewhere. If you look around you'll find her close by. Please let me go when you dig her out!" said Ted, really alarmed now for his safety.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CAPTURE

Paul knew where that bag was.

By the strangest chance in the world he was kneeling alongside it just then. In creeping forward so as to draw closer to the scene of action, and avoid the rays of light cast by the car lamp, he had happened to put his hand on some object that felt soft to the touch; and he guessed what it must be.

What if the tall man came straight toward that spot, looking for the missing object? Dared they rise up and defy these two scoundrels? If some one cast Ted loose would he join forces with them, and make common cause against the ruffians?

Judging from what he knew about the fellow, from past experiences, Paul thought no dependence could be placed on Ted. As likely as not if his hands were free, he would seize the very first chance to snatch up the bag and scamper off, leaving the others to bear the brunt of the men's anger.

But perhaps they would not have to face the tall chap just yet. He seemed ready to start into the bushes across the way first, taking the lamp with him.

"Keep on piling up the trash, Wash. Get him surrounded good and plenty. For if we don't run across that bag mighty soon we're bound to make it warm for this Smart Aleck. But don't put a match to the heap till I get back. I want to see the fun, you understand."

"Oh! mister, it's just like I was tellin' you. I stood in the road and guv the bag a throw when I see your light over the top of the hill. She jest *must* be close around here somewhere," Ted wailed.

"If Brad finds her, all well an' good; but if he don't--well, you'll have a sweet time soon, that's all," growled the shorter man, still on his knees, and engaged in scraping more leaves together.

"If you on'y would let me, I'd stand on the road jest where I was when I throwed the old bag. Then you could figger where she landed. Let me loose, won't you, mister? I told you the truth this time; and you're sure to find that bag. They'll be wonderin' what's become of me at home, sure they will. I got a mother, and she thinks a heap of me, she does. You wouldn't break her heart, mister, by smokin' a poor boy?"

"Aw! dry up! you fooled us once, but you can't do it no more. It's the bag, or your hide gets a singein', my fine feller. That'll do for you, now."

The man had a temper as short as his stature; and Ted dared not stir him up any further. So he hung there alongside the tree, watching the glow of the lamp further up the road.

And as he stood in this disconsolate position, he suddenly became aware that something was taking place just beyond the kneeling Wash.

Perhaps, had his hands not been so snugly fastened together with that horrid steel chain, Ted might have tried to rub his eyes, under the impression that they were deceiving him; for he saw a face in the dim light, a face that looked wonderfully like that of Paul Morrison.

Some foolish boys would have been so thrilled by the prospect of relief that they must have called out, and thus betrayed the creeping rescuers. Ted chanced to be built on different lines. He stared and blinked, but gave utterance to no sound.

He saw other moving figures close on the heels of the leader. Then he understood that Paul was not alone, but some of his Red Fox patrol must be in attendance.

Closer still crept the newcomers. If Ted's heart ever warmed toward a living being it surely ought just then; when these lads, whom he was wont to regard as his bitter rivals, and enemies in everything at school, took such chances simply because they could not see a Stanhope boy in trouble.

Wash kept muttering to himself as he worked. The rustle of the leaves, and the crackling of the brush as he dragged it forward, kept him from hearing such sounds as might have been made by the tenderfeet scouts, who had not yet learned just how to do these things as might an Indian or an experienced woodsman.

Paul was on his knees now, and still rising, with Jack a close second.

They were not three feet behind the man who labored. A single plunge forward must send them full upon his back.

Some thought of his companion possibly crossed the mind of Wash just then; for he suddenly turned his head.

Of course he could not help but see what was behind him.

"Now!" whooped Bobolink and William in a breath.

There was a simultaneous movement on the part of the five lads. Wash, taken by surprise, could not get up on his feet. He had his hands full of brush at the moment, and this also handicapped him about making any effective use of the weapons Nature gave him.

He had just time to shout the name of his companion when the avalanche struck him, and he was bowled over as neatly as ever a football tackle got his man.

Paul knew that they could easily manage this one fellow. The trouble was Wash did not happen to be alone. When the tall ruffian came dashing quickly to the spot there was no telling what he might not do.

"Hold him down, you twins. Don't let him break loose. The rest of you follow me!"

Even while speaking Paul scrambled to his feet. He heard the mad patter of feet as Brad came dashing toward the spot, shouting in his excitement, and doubtless believing that the prisoner had turned upon his captor.

"Let me loose, Paul; quick, twist this rope around the tree!" shrilled Ted, who saw a chance to escape the punishment that had been hovering over his head.

Paul caught the end of the rope. Four times did he dash around that tree, in about as many seconds; then Ted, finding his bonds loose, squirmed free.

But Brad was now on hand, filled with astonishment and fury. Whichever way he turned the rays of his car lamp he seemed to discover fresh moving figures. The woods seemed to be full of enemies. They must be hiding behind each and every tree, ready to pounce upon him.

Already he could see that his partner was writhing on the ground, held down by an unknown number of strangers. In his eyes it might be these advancing figures each and every one must be a deputy sheriff, eager to have a hand in his arrest. So terror makes cowards of the best of men; and Brad turned to flee.

"Surrender!" shouted a voice behind him.

It was Paul calling out, but just then the alarmed culprit could not tell the voice of a boy from that of a hyena. Some one had called upon him to surrender, and the dread word conjured up all sorts of terrible conditions.

Into the darkness of the woods he would have plunged, regardless of the shock that must follow a collision with an unseen tree. But he did not go far. A figure arose straight in his path, and opened a pair of arms, into the embrace of which the fleeing rascal ran.

Before the lamp fell to the ground and went out Paul had one glimpse of a face.

"It's Mr. Pender, fellows! Brad's nabbed!" he could not help shouting.

Jack, realizing the need of more light, instantly flew over to where the car was standing, and detached the second lamp. With this he hastened back. Wash was still struggling; but the two boys had him on his face, where his superior strength was of little avail; and were sitting on him to keep him quiet.

When they rushed over to where Mr. Pender had been seen struggling with the taller of the ruffians, they found that he had subdued Brad; for the other was glaring down at a pair of steel bracelets which outshone those he had so pleasantly snapped on the wrists of poor Ted.

There was no more fight in him.

When the other man had been treated to a similar present, they were allowed to sit upon the ground and exchange words of doleful regret, while Mr. Pender went the rounds, and gravely shook hands with each one of the Boy Scouts.

"You've done me a good turn, boys, a mighty good turn. I was just on my way to the mill pond to arrest these chaps when I saw a light ahead, and creeping up, witnessed this interesting sight. When I've found that bag now, I imagine I'll have the case against these two worthies clean cut," he said.

Upon which Paul quietly stepped over into the bushes and fished out the article in question, which he delivered to the officer.

From Brad's pocket was taken the wad of bills which Ted had thought to purloin from the bag before he threw it and the rest of its contents away.

"This is counterfeit money, boys, made from the plates in the bag. They were taking these things to Solus, who had written them that he had secured a nice quiet retreat where they might work undisturbed. So you see, my boy," said Mr. Pender to Ted, "if you had made way with this it must have gotten you into a peck of trouble from the start. You're lucky to get out of it as easy as you do."

Ted was looking anything but cheerful.

"Oh! I knowed it was bad money all the while, sir, but I wanted to take it to the chief of police in town. I ain't ever goin' to run up against Paul Morrison and his crowd no more, after this white way they treated me. Not much. I'm goin' to turn over a new leaf after this. But please, mister, get that key from him, and take these things off. Makes me squirm to just feel 'em. But, mister, I'm glad I didn't have to smoke, after all," and that seemed to be the burden of Ted's thanksgiving.

As to his ever turning over that promised new leaf, well, Paul believed they were more apt to find potatoes growing on apple trees than that such a wonder should come about.

"But I'm not satisfied yet, boys," said the Government agent; "there's a third one to get; Solus Smithers, who is known to me by another name. Now, I wonder if I could leave these two prisoners in charge of several of you, while the rest went with me in the car? I'll make use of the rope, so they just can't possibly get away."

It was presently decided that William, Wallace and Bobolink should stay, also Ted if he cared to remain. Paul and Jack would accompany Mr. Pender, so as to render any assistance needed. They could also bring back little Willie Boggs, should he be found under the roof of the old farmhouse by the mill pond.

"The worst of it is I don't know how to handle a machine," remarked the gentleman, after they had stepped out on to the road.

"Both of us do, sir," remarked Paul; "so if you will jump aboard we'll soon be off."

"Well, I'd just like to learn if there is anything you Boy Scouts don't know how to handle?" observed the pleased agent, as he saw the two lamps put back in position, though only one was allowed to remain lighted.

It took them but a short time to draw close to the farmhouse by the pond.

Mr. Pender jumped out and advanced through the darkness toward the door. Just as he reached it the boys, looking, saw it open. Then the voice of Sol Smithers came plainly to them.

"Wall, did yuh run acrost the bag, Brad? I guessed 'twas on'y layin' down the road a piece. But what yuh mean a pushin' in on me thetaways?"

"You're my prisoner, Silas Westover. Don't try to run, or it will be the worse for you. I have plenty of help and your place is surrounded. Wash and Brad are already in irons. Hold up your hands!" came in the stern voice of Mr. Pender.

Of course the man who had called himself Solus Smithers did not offer any resistance, and he was quickly made a prisoner. When he found later that one man, assisted by a parcel of Boy Scouts, had captured three desperate characters, he was about as mad as a hornet; but it was too late then to remedy matters.

Paul and Jack immediately started a search for the missing Willie Boggs. The youngster was discovered fast asleep on a cot, just as the man who had found him in the woods had lain him down.

And when Mr. Pender saw this he nodded his head, and declared that because Solus had shown that he possessed a tender heart, for all his assumed fierceness, he would make it as easy for him when the case to trial, as he could.

After Mr. Pender had searched the place, and accumulated what evidence he needed, all of them got into the car, Willie still sound asleep. Then they started over the road for Stanhope.

The town was reached at just one o'clock. At police headquarters Mr. Pender delivered his three prisoners for safe keeping. After that Paul again took the red car out to bring in the remainder of the patrol, for they were miles away from home.

CHAPTER XXX

FOUND OUT AT LAST

"Why, hello! Paul! I didn't hear you ring. Did you fly in through the window?"

Jack sprang up from the easy chair he had been occupying in the library of his own home, when his chum suddenly appeared before him.

It was about ten o'clock on the morning following the hunt for the lost boy; and the remarkable occurrences that had accompanied it up in the woods above Stanhope.

"Oh! you know I told you I might slip in by the back door this time; and that is just what I did," replied Paul, speaking in an unusually guarded tone.

"That's a fact!" exclaimed Jack, beginning to show signs of excitement; "and I remember that at the same time you promised--"

"I'd try my best to solve the puzzle about those disappearing old coins, and tell you to-day," said his chum, breaking in. "Well, perhaps I may, though my most promising clue has turned out a bit of a fizzle."

"But you have another up your sleeve, you said?" continued Jack, eagerly.

"Yes, I believe I have," Paul admitted. "Some time later, when we get this queer affair off our hands, I want to talk with you about a lot of things connected with this scout movement. I got some good ideas from a bunch of papers left at our house for me. Guess who remembered us in such a bully way?"

"Give it up. I might mention every gentleman in town, and then some," laughed Jack; "for they're all watching what we're doing, with interest. But go on and tell me who it was, Paul."

"Mr. Peleg Growdy," came the surprising answer.

"Well, you don't say?" exclaimed his chum, delight showing in his voice; "so the old man has really seen a great light, has he? I guess he's taking more interest in our troop than anybody else in town. That night's work was the best thing that ever happened for the boys of Stanhope, as well as for Peleg. I take off my cap to him after this, Paul."

"But wait; that isn't all. You know that Si Growdy is a nephew of his? Well, he's without a home no longer. Peleg sent for him, and they had a long talk. Si told me this morning that he's really been adopted by his uncle, and is going to make his home with him. What d'ye think of that, Jack?"

"Just immense, that's what," declared his companion, slapping a hand on Paul's shoulder; "I'm glad we went there and cleaned up the old man's dooryard. Some of the boys thought it silly at the time; but they understand things better now. He was just needing something like that to touch his heart. Up to then he thought all boys were pests. We opened his eyes some, eh?"

"That's right, we did. But about those coins!" said Paul, smiling once more.

"Yes, first tell me who it was you suspected that has turned out innocent?" asked his chum.

"There he lies yonder, sleeping, with one eye open and watching us!" remarked Paul, pointing across the room.

"What! Carlo! You actually suspected him of taking my coins? Why, Paul, whatever put that notion into your head?" demanded Jack, in sheer astonishment.

"Well," returned Paul; "perhaps it was silly, but then you've taught him to fetch a basket from the baker's, and do lots of stunts. I didn't know but what the sly old chap might be helping himself to your coins, and palming them off on the butcher for a supply of bones."

"That would have been the limit!" gasped his friend. "But you found out that he was innocent, did you?"

"I finally went in and talked with Mr. Griggs; but he said Carlo just came in once in a while, looking so pitifully at him, that he didn't have the heart to refuse a bone. So none of your lost coins have gone into his till, Jack."

"Oh! that would have been the queerest thing ever, had he done it. But now about the other clue you have--tell me about it, Paul," continued the anxious one. Paul had seated himself where he could keep an eye down the street in front of the house. And while his chum was talking he had smiled as if he might have discovered something out there that pleased him very much.

"Come right up to your den with me, Jack, and leave Carlo shut in here," he said, rising; "and when we get upstairs open the window to air the room. Then I shall ask you to let me hide there behind something, while you go downstairs, pass out, and along the street in plain view."

"Say, that's a mighty queer thing to do," ventured the other.

"It's all a part of my plan. You must leave the door of the den open too. And Jack, after you get around the corner I want you to sneak back to the rear of the house, and come up again, crawling into the den here, if everything is quiet."

"Oh! all right, if you say so, Paul," Jack observed; "but you've sure got me guessing to beat the band, right now. Here's the window open. Now shall I get busy, and meander off?"

"Right away. Please carry it out just as I said. You ought to be back here inside of six or seven minutes; and I guess that will be time enough before the circus begins, Jack."

So the owner of the little den at the top of the house gave his chum one last look of bewilderment, and turning, hastened down the stairs.

Paul, with a glance around, chose a certain corner for his hiding-place. Here he could see without exposing himself to view; and squatting down he prepared to await developments.

A minute later he got up, and moved an old screen partly across the floor, so that it hid the open door. When Jack returned, he could crawl alongside the hiding boy without showing himself to any one in the room, or beyond the window.

Hardly had five minutes crept by when Paul heard a slight sound. It came from the stairs, and he smiled, knowing that his chum had lost no time in carrying out his part of the plot.

So Jack came sliding in, and was soon nestling down at Paul's side, brimming over with curiosity, yet deterred from asking questions by the fact that Paul had put up a warning finger.

Several more minutes passed by, when Jack was thrilled to see something moving in the direction of the partly open window. It seemed to be a long cane fishing rod, that had a dark colored lump at the end of it.

The rod continued to advance slowly into the den. It was, of course, in the hands of some one perched in the window of the attic belonging to the empty house so close by; and Jack could easily guess now who that person must be.

Scissors Dempsey, once his friend, but latterly a crony of Ted Slavin!

Now the end of the rod seemed to hover above the little box containing all that were left of Jack's old coins. And even as he and Paul looked they saw it descend until the light box was tilted partly over, when the point of the long rod was pushed into it vigorously. Jack was reminded somewhat of a human hand groping about. And then, as the fishing pole was rapidly withdrawn, he saw one of his few remaining old coins sticking to the black lump at its terminus!

The game was now clear. Scissors, inspired by a love of fun, or a desire to mystify Jack, perhaps make him suspect that one of his chums was taking the coins, had come every day into this empty house belonging to his father. Whenever he found the window in Jack's den open he amused himself with this strange fishing.

Paul beckoned to his chum, and then silently crept out of the den, which he was easily enabled to do, thanks to the screen he had placed to cover the open door.

Once down on the next landing Jack clutched his sleeve.

"Well, would you dream of such a thing as that?" exclaimed the latter, nearly ready to explode with laughter, yet feeling a bit angry at the same time. "What under the sun d'ye suppose he's doing such a stunt for, Paul?"

"We'd better put it up to Scissors," replied the other, quickly.

"Then you suggest waiting for him as he comes out, and telling him we know all about his fishing for my coins?" asked Jack.

"Come along. He might be satisfied with just one to-day. You see it's getting harder, with so few left in the box," and Paul led the way downstairs again.

"But what's he got on the end of that pole?" demanded his chum.

"I think it must be a lump of rather soft tar, or pitch," came Paul's answer, readily enough. "I found a little on one of the coins left the last time we examined them; and you said that the fourth stuck to the side of the box. Yes, that's what it is. Now, let's wait over by the front door, for that's the way he goes in."

Five minutes later the front door of the empty house opened, and a tall boy, with spindly legs, came slily out. He stopped to turn a key in the lock. Then, as he wheeled, it was to find himself facing two fellows who were probably the very last boys in Stanhope he expected to see.

"Just in time to explain how you came to think of that clever little fishing dodge of yours, Scissors," remarked Paul; "and to give back all those old coins you've been raking in so smartly. Thought it lots of fun, didn't you? And meant to twist my chum up so he'd think one of his own crowd had been taking them?"

"Yes," Jack said, in turn, looking as angry as he could; "and if you don't turn every blessed copper piece over to me right away, there's going to be trouble at your house, understand that, Scissors?"

The guilty one turned red in the face. Then he laughed as though he wanted to consider it a joke.

"Oh! come off!" he exclaimed, with a gesture of disgust; "can't you take a little fun, Jack? Of course I meant to give 'em all back again, after I'd had my sport out of the game, and got the last coin. They're upstairs here, right now. Come along in, and I'll show you. The slick trick is gone up in smoke now, anyway; since you got on to my curves. But I wouldn't make such a big fuss over nothing."

"It wasn't the coins, because they don't count for much; but just think how I felt at even suspecting that some fellow who was my friend had been taking them," said Jack, as he and Paul followed Scissors into the empty house.

And from the sneer on the other's face as he looked back, Paul was inclined to believe that this was just what he had been doing the thing for. He disliked Jack as much now as he had once cared for him; and would probably enjoy nothing better than to see him turn on some friend, perhaps even his best chum.

The coins were found, as he had said, in a marble-bag in the attic. While Jack was counting them, Paul knelt at the window, and experimented with the long fishing rod he found on the floor. He discovered that he could manage to tilt the little box on the table quite easily, though it needed some labor before he brought one of the coins across the open space, glued to the pitch at the point of the rod.

"All there, ain't they?" demanded Scissors.

"Yes," replied Jack; "though so sticky I'll have to wash them in something like benzine. Perhaps you did do it for a lark, Scissors; but I'll make sure that a screen is in that window whenever it's open after this."

"Huh! I guess the feller that invented this racket could get up somethin' just as good if he wanted," and that was all Scissors ever said about it to the boy he had wronged.

Jack, having recovered his property, did not care to do anything further about the robbery. Later on Scissors himself told his cronies, thinking it to his credit; and they more than a few times tried to joke Jack about his disappearing coins. But he took it all in good humor, and after a while the thing was apparently forgotten, because the boys of Stanhope had many other things of importance to engage their undivided attention.

CHAPTER XXXI

WELL DONE STANHOPE TROOP!---CONCLUSION

Days and weeks passed.

In season and out, the boys of industrious Stanhope Troop worked. Never had the good people known such a wave of enthusiasm to sweep over the town on the Bushkill. It seemed as catching as the measles, this spirit of energy, and a desire to do things worth while, which had taken possession of most of the boys.

Parents got together, and conferring, admitted that this new fad was by all odds the best thing that had ever happened. They determined to encourage it to the limit. Even those who were doubtful at the start, found themselves obliged to admit that never before had Stanhope presented such a clean appearance; and not within the recollection of the oldest

inhabitant had boys been so obliging.

After the Stanhope Troop had been fully received into the National organization an efficient scout master was finally secured in the person of a young man by the name of Alec Gordon. He had lately come from visiting across the water, where he had enjoyed the personal acquaintance of several leading lights in the scout movement in England. Besides that, he was naturally fond of the woods, and best of all, filled with a deep love for the boy of to-day.

Under his guidance the troop prospered, and made rapid progress along the lines started by Paul. The only trouble about the whole matter was that Mr. Gordon, being a traveling man, was liable to be called away just when his presence might be most needed.

Several times this had occurred, and feeling the need of leaving a deputy to fill his place, he put it up to the boys themselves. Of course there had not been a dissenting vote; and Paul was elected to play the part of guide, should an emergency arise; and in this way he became assistant scout master of the troop.

They need have no fear concerning his ability to fill the role. He had proven equal to the task before now; and there were not a few, particularly among those acknowledging the magical Red Fox as their totem, who secretly cherished a belief that Paul knew more about the secrets of Nature than any *two* mature scout masters.

Every chance that offered the scouts were abroad, as busy as bees in the honey season; only instead of laying up sweets these energetic chaps sought new information. They followed the trails of fox, 'coon and rabbit; they watched the habits of the noisy crows holding a caucus in the woods; they kept company with the red squirrel and the frolicsome chipmunk as they stored away the chestnuts and juicy hickories for their winter's supply of food.

And on every occasion they labored to make themselves perfect in those branches of wood lore, and the knowledge of useful things, which they expected would play a prominent part in the approaching competition.

Just as Paul and Wallace had predicted, it was found that nearly every fellow had a love for Nature and her wonderful secrets somewhere in his system; even though with a few this breath had to be fanned vigorously in order to keep it alive.

Of course they were annoyed again and again by Ted Slavin and his envious followers; for the bully of the town had drifted back to his old ways, as might have been expected.

When peaceful tactics failed to stop these malicious tricks, the scout master personally appealed to the authorities, and a warning was issued that, for a time at least, dismayed the disturbers of the meetings. But when they could do so in secret, they never lost an opportunity to play some sly trick.

Another thing that had been anticipated came to pass. This was the utter failure of Ward's cronies to maintain any interest in the duties of scouts. Those twelve cardinal virtues that must at all times be held up before the fellow who expects to become and remain a Boy Scout in good standing, failed to appeal to these rough and ready chaps. It would indeed require a revolution in boy nature to make Ted Slavin, or his crony, Scissors, trustworthy, loyal, helpful to others, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient to his superior officers, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent!

Just a few days before Thanksgiving the scout master came to Paul with the distressing news that he had received an imperative summons from his firm to go out on the road; so that it would debar him from being present when the long-looked-for-competition took place.

"But," said Mr. Gordon, as he shook Paul by the hand earnestly; "I firmly believe that you will be able to fill my place so well that my absence will not make the slightest difference," and Paul, of course, simply said he would do his best.

The fellows of Stanhope Troop knew full well what that "best" meant.

But as the boys of Manchester Troop and that of Aldine as well, learned through some of their energetic scouts, what a strong bid these patrols of the Fox were going to make, in the hope of winning that coveted banner, they seemed to be stirred to make new endeavors.

Paul managed to keep advised of pretty much all that was going on; since this was a part of a scout's duty; though no mean advantage was ever taken of the rival camps---he would not stand for that. In a quiet way he had learned how their meetings became more frequent, and the desire to excel, that had threatened to dwindle away for lack of rivalry, grew more keen.

Paul was glad of it. Competition is the life of trade; but it also encourages boys to do their level best. There would be a brave fight for that banner; and no walk-over. The troop that won it might well be proud of the honor. And Paul was still full of faith. He watched his scouts go through their various interesting stunts with a growing conviction that they must stand at the head when the day came for the meeting, and the report of the committee appointed to make the test was declared.

He knew that fortune had been very kind in allowing himself and Jack to make a heavy score in favor of Stanhope Troop. The stopping of the runaway horse, and the saving of the baby at the fire would bring them many points. Then there was the wonderful letter from Washington, on official paper too, in which Mr. Jared Pender told the story of how much he had been helped by the Red Fox patrol in his task of capturing those desperate rascals who were flooding the whole country with their bogus money.

But Paul was determined that, aside from the help afforded by these glorious deeds, the boys of Stanhope should excel all others in their knowledge of woodcraft, and the valuable things every boy with red blood in his veins should possess.

So they kept up the good work after the scout master had left them.

Long since had Bobolink received his bugle, and William his drum. Both proved very able in managing these musical instruments, and the shrill notes of the one, and the roll of the other, had become very familiar and acceptable sounds in Stanhope these fall days, when the first snow made its appearance.

Already had they planned a great camp for the next summer, and there was talk of a grand hike into the almost unknown, to them, country far to the north. What strange adventures were destined to befall them during this eventful outing, together with the fun that William and Bobolink afforded the troop, will be recounted in the next volume, to be called: "The Banner Boy Scouts on a Tour; or, The Mystery of Rattlesnake Mountain."

Even at school the teachers noticed that things seemed to move along much more smoothly than ever before. Some of them were inclined to suspect that a miracle had been wrought in boy nature; until it was shown that there were still quite a number of transgressors, and that not one of the bad ones belonged to the scouts. That opened their eyes, and after such evidence they were one and all heartily in favor of the organization that kept lads interested, taught them every noble duty that would make them better men later on, caused them to be manly, heroic, self-confident in time of sudden peril, and able to stand up for their rights.

Thanksgiving came at last.

The entire county showed a keen interest in the rivalry of the three troops for leadership. Each had its sturdy backers, who believed their home company to be the best; and hence when the choice of situation fell to Manchester, it looked as though nearly the entire population of Stanhope and Aldine had also gathered to cheer their favorites on.

The competition was keenly contested. A dozen different events had been scheduled some time back by the committee, as the more important elements that would enter into the struggle; and the scout master of each patrol had been notified, so that he might select those most competent to succeed.

Scout master Gordon, and later on his deputy, Paul, had been working with those who excelled in these various lines. Nothing was left undone to make them proficient in their work. When the critical time came, and before the eyes of thousands they lined up before the committee to take the test, Paul believed that success was sure to come.

Football was in the air for the afternoon; but that morning every school flag fluttered in that densely packed field where the arena was laid. Scores upon scores of pretty girls clapped their hands, and sang patriotic songs that had reference to their particular town, whenever a Stanhope, a Manchester or an Aldine competitor started to prove his superior knowledge of the arts of woodcraft.

Wallace Carberry brought the first honors to the Red Fox patrol. He had his quart of water boiling a full minute before either of his rivals; and retired amid thunderous applause. Wallace would show up in several other events, for he was the mainstay of Paul's contesting delegation.

Then came other interesting object lessons. Many present failed to understand altogether what they signified; but they were patriotic, and ready to cheer the victor to the echo.

On account of the lateness of the season several events that might have taken place at another time were debarred, such as swimming, fishing, and sports peculiar to the good old summer time.

Nevertheless, there were plenty of others equally as interesting. Three boys entered as contestants in the rapid photography class. They took a snap shot at a given word, darted into separate prepared dark rooms, developed their plates, dried the same, each after his own fashion, and presented a completed picture before the other competitions were done.

Meanwhile three others showed just how a scout should learn to follow a difficult trail, where all manner of obstacles stood in the way. While the crowd could not fully understand just how this was done, the committee seemed unanimous in awarding the victory once more to Wallace, for he had not made a single error, and he finished ahead of his rivals.

Others were set to work tying ten difficult knots, and the fun waxed fast and furious as they worked their nimble fingers, keeping an eye on each other the while.

In another place three tents were given to squads of boys from each patrol, and at the word they set to work to erect the same, dig a water drain in case of rain, and have everything in "apple-pie" shape. The committee gave plain warning that it was not speed alone that would count here, but the general ship-shape condition following the carrying out of the conditions.

And again the boys of the Stanhope Troop came in winners by a good margin.

Manchester drew a prize when the contest of landing a big fish came on. A boy played the part of the fish, and fought with all his strength and cunning to keep from being reeled in. But big Carl Evans, the Manchester fisherman, proved to

be too strong and able for those who competed, and had his fish landed minutes ahead.

The archers then took a turn. Here Aldine presented a clever expert, who had made this his especial hobby for some years. He could not be headed, though the other fellows from Stanhope and Manchester really made a very creditable showing.

One of the most interesting exhibitions of the morning, and one that excited considerable cheering, was the "first aid to the injured."

A boy was supposed to have fallen overboard into the river. In each case several contestants pretended to drag him out, placing him face downward, with his arms above his head, and his face a little to one side. Then one of the rescuers knelt astride the body, allowing his hands to press upon the spaces between the short ribs. By pressing downward the air was forced from the other's lungs, to creep in again when this was relaxed; and in this fashion an artificial respiration was induced that should grow stronger as minutes passed.

Of course, as no boy was so accommodating as to fall into the cold waters of the Bushkill for the occasion, the contestants finished at the same time. The committee, after mature consultation, awarded the victory to the team accomplishing their work in the most business-like fashion. Aldine was so fortunate as to receive the award, and her people shouted themselves hoarse.

In athletics the three competing troops proved very nearly even; and brought out rounds of cheers as they followed one another in carrying out the several events scheduled.

Possibly when William proved his great superiority as a camp cook, by making the batter, and cooking a luscious flap-jack long before any other fellow could accomplish the feat, his victory was the most popular one of the day. Fully five score of fellows made motions to prove they were starved, and that a bite from the airy pancake would possibly serve as a life saver. But after the committee had tested it, William calmly devoured the balance, to the tune of mingled groans and cheers.

Last of all came the wig-wagging contest, when boys sent and received messages fashioned by the committee, the nature of which was unknown at the other end. In this Stanhope again made a record that put her boys in the van, for Paul had secured and studied the army manual on using the signal flags, and to good advantage.

After the twelfth and last event had been completed, the committee went into session, examined the papers they already held, and finally announced that Stanhope had carried off the prize with six clean events, the others being equally divided between the two clever troops from the other towns.

It was undoubtedly a popular victory, judging from the record-breaking volume of noise that greeted the announcement. What else the chairman would have said, with regard to the great good the establishment of these patrols had brought to the county, was drowned in the wild clamor.

Paul, acting for the absent scout master, accepted the beautiful banner presented by the good old Quaker who loved peace above all things. He was immediately swept off his feet, and carried in triumph around the field, waving the emblem that would from that hour stamp the Stanhope Troop as the Banner Boy Scouts of the county.

Little Paul cared that some frowned, or that Ward Kenwood sneered as the procession marched past. Close by he could see the happy face of Arline, together with those of his parents; and it satisfied him to know that through his unflinching perseverance he had been able to land his scouts in the van.

Other trials and contests would doubtless have to be encountered; but with that banner to encourage then the Fox patrols could meet each emergency as it arose, and struggle on through difficulties to a glorious success.

THE END