

The Boy Scouts Patrol

Ralph Victor

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THE BOY SCOUTS PATROL

BY RALPH VICTOR

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THE BOY SCOUTS PATROL

CHAPTER I

A MONKEY TRICK

"I think--" began a tall, slenderly-built lad of sixteen, speaking in a somewhat indolent way; then suddenly he paused to look down through the trees to where the river gleamed below.

"What's on your mind now, Rand?" his companion queried, a boy of about the same age, nearly as tall, but more stoutly built, and as light in complexion as the other was dark. The two were standing at the top of the road that wound down the side of the mountain from the town of Creston, which was perched, like the nest of some great bird, in a hollow of the Palisades.

"I think--" repeated the first speaker, pausing again.

"That's right, Randolph," approved his companion briskly, "always think twice before you speak once."

"I always do, Donald Graeme," retorted Rand; "but what I was really going to say when you interrupted me with your irrelevant remark, was--"

"Hurrah!" broke in Donald, waving his cap in answer to the hail of another boy who was just then seen hurrying down the road toward them. "Here comes Pepper in a rush, as usual."

It was just after dawn of a June morning that the boys were assembling. It was still dark and gloomy, for it had rained during the night and the storm had not yet passed, but the boys having planned a fishing trip for this morning were not to be deterred by the fear of a wet jacket.

"Hello, fellows!" panted the newcomer, who was smaller and slighter than either of the others, but who made up in activity and energy what he lacked in size. His hair was a glowing red and with it went a temper so quick that the nickname, Pepper, that some chum had given him, was most appropriate. It is doubtful if any of his comrades really knew his Christian name. Certainly he was always "Pepper" to every one, even at home, although he was christened Philip.

"I say, I was afraid you'd be gone when I got here."

"Well, we would have been," drawled Randolph, "only we knew you'd be late, and we took our time."

"Now that isn't fair, Rand," laughed the other, "you know I'm not always late."

"Well, maybe not ALWAYS," conceded Rand; "but almost always. What was the matter this morning--breakfast late?"

"Now, you know I didn't wait for breakfast," protested Pepper, adding rather reluctantly, "though I did stop for a bite. But even if I am late I'm not last. Jack isn't here yet, and he left home first."

"Oh, he's out on the trail somewhere, I suppose," surmised Donald. "He's always chasing for news. He'll be coming along presently with a whole budget. I believe he thinks the paper couldn't go on if it weren't for him."

"That reminds me," as Dick Wilson says," interrupted Rand, taking a pamphlet from his pocket and holding it out to his companions, "speaking of trails, what do you think of that?"

"What is it?" asked Pepper, eying it suspiciously. "Looks as if the cat had been walking on it." goodness, I hope not. I thought you were always hungry, but if you are only beginning I foresee a famine ahead of us. And to think of all the good food that is wasted on you, Pepper," went on Donald reflectively. "Why, to look at you any one might think that you never had had enough to eat."

"That shows how deceiving looks are," replied Pepper. "Though I never did have enough," he added plaintively.

"Of course not," returned Donald, "there isn't as much as that anywhere."

"As much what?" asked Rand.

"Food, grub, provisions, victuals," replied Donald, setting off along the road at a pace that put a stop to any more talk.

They had gone perhaps about halfway down the hill toward the boathouse when a big bay horse, drawing a light wagon in which were three boys, came quickly around a turn in the road. It bore down on them so suddenly that only by a rapid scramble up the bank by the side of the road did Rand and Donald save themselves from being bowled over.

The newcomers would have driven on with a jeering laugh only that Pepper, angry at what obedience, neatness and order are Scout virtues. Endurance, self-reliance, self-control and an effort to help some one else are Scout objectives."

"Ah, cut it out!" protested Pepper. "As Alphonse says 'that makes me the ennui.' It sounds like a boarding school prospectus. Tell as what it's about."

"Well, then," replied Rand, "in words adapted to your comprehension, it is about hunting, scouting, camping, tracking; and Colonel Snow is interested in the organization. He says that it is fine."

"Speaking of tracking," interjected Donald, "in my opinion it were no bad plan to be making tracks toward the boathouse if we are going to get anywhere the day. It is getting bright in the east and it looks like a clear day, after all. And I may also take occasion

to remark that I haven't had my breakfast yet, and this Boy Scout business doesn't sound inviting on an empty stomach. We can discuss it with more comfort when we have had a bite."

"That's the talk!" approved Pepper. "That suits me down to the ground. I'm beginning to get hungry myself."

"Beginning!" exclaimed Donald. "My

"That isn't a bad guess," laughed Rand. "It is supposed to represent the track of a bear."

"What are you going to do, Rand?" questioned Donald, "hunt bears?"

"Not at present," answered Rand, "though I should like to well enough. This is a booklet about the Boy Scouts."

"The Boy Scouts!" demanded Pepper; "what's them?"

"Shades of Lindley Murray!" exclaimed Rand, "do I hear aright? What's them! And you a graduate of number one. Really, Pepper Blake, I don't believe we can let you in on this. What do you think about it, Don?"

"I have my doubts about it," replied Donald gravely.

"But what is it?" persisted Pepper. "It sounds good to me."

"That is better," drawled Rand. "It not only sounds good, but it is good, as you elegantly express it. IT, according to the pamphlet that I have here, is an organization for boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen to train them in self-reliance, manhood and good citizenship. The movement is not essentially military," went on Rand, "but the military virtues of discipline, looked like a deliberate attempt to run over them, sprang to the horse's head as it was passing, catching the bridle, and with a loud "whoa" he brought the outfit to a stop.

"What are you t-t-trying to do, Jim Rae!" he shouted to the youthful driver, "run over us?"

"Aw, g-g-go on, kiddie!" retorted Jim, a stout lad of about Rand's age, with a freckled face and a shock of aggressive red hair, mimicking Pepper, who, when excited, sometimes stuttered. "Aw, g-g-go on. Little boys shouldn't play in the road."

"If you can't d-drive without getting all over the road," went on Pepper, "why d-don't you let somebody d-drive that knows how--"

"Aw, g-g-go chase yourself," cried Jim. "You ought to bring youse mamma along to take care of youse. Get up, Bill!" with a flourish of the whip and a jerk on the lines.

The horse made a jump, but Pepper held firmly to the bridle and brought it to a stop.

"Let go that horse!" shouted Jim.

"Hit him with the whip, Jim," urged one of the boys in the wagon.

"D-d-don't you dare hit me with that whip," warned Pepper as Jim snapped the whip close to him, "or you will wish you hadn't."

"Aw, what would you do?" retorted Jim, tauntingly flourishing the lash dangerously close to Pepper's face. "You ain't big enough to scare me baby brother."

"You had better not try it, Jim Rae," asserted Pepper, "or I'll pull you out of there so quick that you will think a cyclone struck you."

"You mean a wind bag, don't you?" sneered Jim, aiming a blow at Pepper, who now loosened his hold upon the horse's bridle to jump toward the wagon, whereupon Jim changed his purpose and struck the horse with the whip. With a loud "giddap" they started with a bound, missing Pepper by a hair's breadth, and driving on down the road at a rattling pace.

"That's a regular m-monkey trick, Jim Rae, all right!" shouted Pepper. "but I'll get even with you yet!"

The only answer of the boys in the wagon was a taunting laugh as they drove away. Randolph and Donald had taken no part in the controversy, not exactly approving of Pepper's disputing with the enemy, but they had stood at hand ready for any emergency should one arise.

CHAPTER II

FINDING MONEY

The three boys stood for a moment looking after the rapidly disappearing wagon, then, stooping down, Rand picked up something from the road.

"It isn't worth trying, Rand," advised Donald. "You couldn't hit him if you wanted to, and you wouldn't want to if you could. You can get even with him some better way."

"Right as usual, Donald," laughed Rand, "but I wasn't looking for anything to throw at him. I just happened to see this lying on the ground and picked it up." Holding out a coin he had found, he added: "What do you make of it?"

"W-w-what is it?" stammered Pepper, all excitement. "It l-looks like an old-fashioned cent."

"You have got me," replied Donald. "I never saw any money like that."

"Let's have a close look at it," put in Pepper.

The boys studied over the coin, which was of the size of the early copper cent, for some time without being much the wiser.

"See, there is a representation of a ship under full sail," remarked Rand, "with the name Constitution on it. I wonder what it means?"

"And it has the words 'Webster Credit Current' around it," added Pepper.

"And on the other side is shown the ship wrecked on some rocks. Something about wrecking the Constitution, I suppose," added Rand. "This side says, 'Van Buren Metallic Current,' with the date '1837'," put in Donald.

"I have it!" suddenly ejaculated Rand.

"Of course you have," admitted Donald, "but do you know what it is?"

"I see I must speak by the book, as Hamlet says," laughed Rand. "I mean I know what it is."

"What is it, then?" demanded Donald.

"It is some kind of a token, I think," replied Rand, "but I will ask Uncle Floyd about it. He will sure know."

"I w-w-wonder if there are any more of them," stammered Pepper, looking along the road. "Yes, here is another one."

"Is it like this?" asked Rand.

"It looks very similar," replied Pepper, still hunting about.

"Find any more?" called Donald.

"Not yet."

Nor were there any more found, although they looked long and carefully up and down the road for some time.

"What is the difference between them?" questioned Pepper, when they had finally given up the hunt and sat down by the side of the road to compare the two coins.

"Why, instead of a ship this one shows, on the one side, a man in a chest with a sword in one hand and a bag of money in the other, and around the edge are the words, 'I take the responsibility.' The other side has the wreck like the first one," concluded Rand after he had examined them.

"It's a very curious thing," he continued, handing the one coin back to Pepper.

"I don't see anything very curious about them," demurred Donald.

"I mean it is very curious how they got here," explained Rand.

"I don't see anything very curious about that, either," went on Donald. "Why shouldn't they be here as well as anywhere?"

"I don't know, I am sure," laughed Rand, "only I don't see why they should be here, or anywhere, for that matter."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Donald. "Somebody probably dropped them as they were going along."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Rand. "I don't believe that they grew here. But who dropped them and how did they happen along here?"

"Ask Jack," suggested Donald, "he'll make a whole story out of it."

"They certainly are not common," went on Rand, "and people don't usually carry them in their pockets. I'd like to know the history of these and how they came here, but I don't suppose I ever shall. But, speaking of curious things, what do you suppose Monkey Rae was doing with that horse and wagon?"

"Driving them," drawled Pepper. "What do you think he was doing with them, using them for an aeroplane?"

"No," returned Rand, "I thought maybe he was using them to dredge for clams. But, speaking of clams, which would you sooner do or go a-fishing?"

"Go a-fishing!" cried Donald and Pepper, starting off on a run down the hill to the boat-house.

"Well," began Pepper as soon as they were fairly inside the house, "didn't I hear somebody say breakfast?" at the same time starting to get out of the locker the various utensils that the boys kept at the house to cook with on their fishing trips.

"Hold on there, Pepper," remonstrated Donald, as Pepper continued to pull out one pan after another. "We don't need all that stuff. What do you think you are going to do, get up a banquet? If you are going to use all those pots and pans, son, you will have to wash them by your lonesome."

"Huh!" replied Pepper, "there wouldn't be any novelty about that. The dish-washing seems to gravitate my way anyhow."

"That's because you use so many more of them than the rest of us," explained Donald.

"Why, I don't use any more of them than you do," expostulated Pepper. "Well, maybe you don't use any more," admitted Don with a judicial air, "but you use them more."

Pepper was about to retort in kind when there was a quick step outside the door and an alert-looking, brown-haired, brown-eyed boy, with his cap perched upon the back of his head, dashed into the room.

"Hello, fellows!" he cried, "I thought I wasn't going to get here in time, but I see I struck it at the psychological moment. I am as hungry as a bull pup."

"Hello, Jack!" responded Rand, "we began to think you weren't coming. What's the latest in Creston?"

"Oh, there is something worth while to-day," replied Jack, drawing a box up to the plank that served as a table. "Pass me some of those biscuits, Pepper, if you don't mind sparing a few, so I can eat while I talk."

"Better not try it, Jack," cautioned Rand, "for if you eat as fast as you talk or talk as fast as you eat you will either starve yourself or choke."

"All right," laughed Jack, "if that is the case I'll eat first and talk afterwards," and this he would do, notwithstanding the pleadings of the others, anxious to share in any exciting news.

CHAPTER III

TWO AND TWO

While the boys are finishing their breakfast it may be well to introduce them to the reader. The four, who were known among their acquaintances as the "inseparables," had been classmates for several terms at School No. 1, of Creston, from which they had graduated the previous year and were now students of the Hilltop Academy, where they were preparing for college.

Rand--Randolph in full, surname Peyton--who was slightly the eldest of the four, was the nephew of Mr. Scott, president of the Creston National Bank. He was a native of Virginia, having come to Creston after the death of his father some two years before this time, with his mother and sister. He was bright, but inclined to be indolent, except when aroused, when his energy knew no limit. He was slow in speech, having the soft Southern drawl with a tendency to slur his r's, and was a natural leader among his companions, both in their sports and their studies.

Donald Graeme, sometimes nicknamed Old Solomon, was the son of the chief engineer of the Creston Paper Mills, and one of a considerable family of boys and girls. He was of Scotch descent and inherited many of the characteristics of his ancestry as well as many of their superstitions. Something of the burr clung to his tongue, and he was given to the occasional use of a Scotch word or phrase. He had also the Scotch canniness and never committed himself by a positive opinion. Although not as quick as Rand, he was more persistent and usually carried out, to the end, anything that he entered upon.

Jack Blake was the oldest son of Mr. Blake, editor and publisher of the Crest, the newspaper of the town. Brought up in the newspaper atmosphere, Jack had early developed a nose for news and was the best reporter, although unofficial, on the paper. He was always on the lookout for items and always putting two and two together, sometimes with most surprising results.

Lastly, Pepper Blake, Jack's younger brother, who was of a quicker, more nervous, disposition than the others and given to stammering when excited. Impetuous and quick-tempered, he was always getting

into difficulties, but always finding a way out. Romantic and imaginative, but with a streak of hard horse-sense beneath.

"Well," observed Rand, when Jack at last rose from his box with a sigh of satisfaction, "what is the exciting thing you have got to tell us this morning? Whose barn is being painted now?"

"Judge Taylor's office was robbed last night," replied Jack laconically.

"What's that!" cried Rand.

"Judge Taylor's office was robbed last night," repeated Jack, enjoying the sensation his news had made.

"W-w-what!" stammered Pepper. "Who did it?"

"That's what we all want to know," answered Jack.

"What did they get?" asked Donald.

"How did they get in?" went on Pepper.

"One at a time, boys," put in Rand. "Come, Jack, tell us the whole story."

"Well, all I know is, Officer Dugan found a window open this morning and the place all upside down. The judge hadn't come down yet, so they don't know what's missing. From the tracks around it looks as if some boys were mixed up in it."

"That's queer," commented Rand. "I wonder who it could have been, and what they were after?"

"Money, of course," said Pepper.

"I don't think so," returned Jack. "If it was money I think they would have picked out a more likely place. I guess it must have been papers, or something like that."

"Pooh!" criticized Donald, "what would anybody in their senses want to steal papers for?"

"There are more unlikely things than that," replied Jack. "I have read of such things."

"Pshaw!" retorted Donald, "that's nothing. I've read of robbers' caves and all that sort of thing, but I've never seen any."

"Which proves there never were any," retorted Jack sarcastically.

"Have you got any dues, Sherlock?" asked Rand laughingly.

"Not yet," replied Jack seriously, "but I am looking for them. They sometimes turn up in the most unexpected places."

"Huh!" sniffed Donald, "your turnips run mostly to tops."

While talking thus, the boys had been putting their supplies and

tackle into the boat which they had run out into the river.

"Which way do you want to go?" asked Rand when they were ready to start.

"Up," said Pepper.

"Down," said Jack.

"What do you say, Don?" continued Rand. "Either way," replied Donald. "Let them toss up for it."

Taking the coin he had picked up in the road from his pocket Rand tossed it into the air. "What do you say, Jack?" he asked.

"Heads!" responded Jack.

"Tails it is," announced Rand as he picked it up. "Pepper wins. Up, we go."

"What have you got there, Rand?" asked Jack, who had been eying the coin Rand had tossed; "something new?"

"It's something that I found in the road this morning," replied Rand, handing the coin over to Jack. "Pepper found one, too."

"Found it in the road!" cried Jack, instantly on the alert. "That's serious. Tell me about it."

"There isn't much to tell," replied Rand. "Monkey Rae tried to run us down this morning and we had a near-fight and after he had gone we found them."

"Well?" questioned Jack.

"That's all," replied Rand.

"Now I wonder," mused Jack, when the story of the encounter with Monkey Rae and his companions had been gone over in detail for his benefit, "what Monkey Rae has to do with these things," jingling the coins in his hand.

"Not as much as you or I have," announced Donald. "I can no see any connection between the two."

"Of course you can't, old wisdom," returned Jack. "You lack imagination, but I think it is there just the same. Whose horse and wagon was it?"

"That's another strange part of it," replied Rand. "I never saw them before. I was wondering whose they were, and where he got them."

"That's so," agreed Pepper. "I never thought of that; the truth is, I was so busy with Monkey that I didn't look at them."

"Well," broke in Don, "if you ask my opinion I think it would be more to the purpose if we went on our own business instead of wasting time in speculating on what is no concern of ours."

"All right, Solomon-Donald," said Rand; "it sounds wise."

"Even if it is mostly sound," growled Jack.

CHAPTER IV

UP THE RIVER

"Are you all ready?" called Rand, who was stroke. "Pull!"

The boys bent to their work in earnest, and but few words were spoken while they sent the boat along, mile after mile, until they had gone some half dozen miles up the river.

"Phew!" exclaimed Pepper at length, "what is the matter with stopping here?"

"Tired?" asked Donald.

"Well, I feel as if I had been doing something," replied Pepper, resting on his oar.

"I suppose there isn't much choice in the matter," remarked Rand; "one place is probably as good as another."

"Only some of them are better," put in Jack.

"And this is one of them," asserted Pepper, "and there is a nice green place over there on the shore where we can put in and cook some fish for dinner."

"If we have any to cook," suggested Donald. "You know you have first to catch your fish before you can cook them."

"We'll do that, too, old Solomon the Second," returned Jack, who was in the bow. "That's what we came out for. Shall I let go the anchor, Rand?"

"All right, let it go," ordered Rand. "Easy now, if you don't want to scare all the fish away. What are you trying to do?" as Jack gave the anchor a swing and, failing to let go of the painter, promptly went overboard with it.

"I just went down to see if the anchor got to the bottom," explained Jack a moment later, as he scrambled over the side.

"We thought you were going to dive for the fish," said Pepper, "like the hawks do."

"Maybe I will try that later," replied Jack, shaking himself like a dog to get rid of some of the water. "Now, then, who is going to get the first bite?"

For the next few moments the boys were busy getting their tackle in order and into the water, after which they settled down to await

results.

"I had almost forgotten," broke in Jack after a pause, as the fish did not seem eager to be caught. "I met Colonel Snow this morning--"

"Indeed," said Rand sarcastically, "that's news."

"Now you needn't go off at half-cock," retorted Jack, "wait until I get through."

"Well, what about it?" asked Donald.

"Why, he said--Hurrah, I've got a bite!" cried Jack, pulling in his line.

"He did!" exclaimed Rand. "That was a queer thing for him to say."

"No, the colonel didn't say that," explained Jack, as he landed a good-sized perch in the bottom of the boat, "there's one for luck. That was a comment of my own. Wait until I put a fresh bait on and I will tell you what he did say. He said--"

"Hurrah, I've got one!" interjected Pepper, pulling in his line and landing another fish.

"Why, that's the same thing he didn't say before," commented Donald, referring to the colonel.

"He said--" began Jack again, but the fish were now biting freely and the boys were so busy pulling them in that, for a time, they quite forgot the colonel and what it was that he said.

"If you haven't forgotten," began Donald, a little later, when there came a lull in the biting, "I would like to know just what it was that the colonel did say."

"Why, he said," resumed Jack, "that he wanted us to form a patrol."

"A patrol!" repeated Donald. "For what? Ain't there enough police?"

"This isn't a police patrol," laughed Jack, "this is a patrol in the Boy Scouts. It's a company of from six to eight boys. Two or more patrols form a troop under a scoutmaster who teaches them a lot of things."

"What kind of things?" asked Pepper.

"All kinds of things about woodcraft and how to hunt and fish and follow trails and camp out and--and--all the rest of it."

"That's a pretty comprehensive programme," said Rand. "We were talking about that very thing this morning."

"Geel!" cried Pepper. "T-t-that would be fine. Let's do it--"

"There's quite a lot of things we have to do first," went on Jack. "Maybe Rand can tell you more about that part than I can."

"For the first thing," said Rand, "we have to get at least six boys

to start with."

"That's two more than us," interjected Pepper; "that's easy."

"And form a tenderfoot patrol," went on Rand.

"Why tenderfoot?" put in Donald.

"Because we are all tenderfeet until we learn to be scouts," continued Rand. "Then if we pass the examinations we become second-class scouts."

"Second class!" objected Pepper. "Why can't we be first class?"

"We can," replied Rand, "if we keep on and pass the examinations."

"Examinations!" cried Pepper, "why that sounds like school."

"What do we have to be examined in?" asked Donald.

"On joining," went on Rand, reading from a pamphlet he had in his hand, "a boy must pass a test on the following points: Know the scout law and signs and salute."

"The scout law!" said Pepper, "what's that?"

"The scout law," read Rand, "is: "1. A Scout's honor is to be trusted.

"2. A Scout is loyal to his country, his officers, his parents and his employers."

"Wait a minute," interposed Jack, "until I land this fellow," and another fish was added to their mess. "All right, drive ahead."

"3. A Scout's duty is to be useful and help others.

"4. A Scout is a friend to ail, and a brother to every other Scout, no matter to what social class the other belongs.

"5. A Scout is courteous."

"Now it is my turn," interpolated Rand, pulling in another fish.

"6," he went on, "A Scout is a friend to animals.

"7. A Scout obeys orders by his parents, patrol leader, or Scoutmaster, without question.

"8. A Scout smiles and whistles under all circumstances.

"9. A Scout is thrifty."

"Crickets!" cried Pepper when Rand finished, "there's a whole lot to learn, ain't there? We shall have to get busy. Is there any more to it?"

"Know the composition of the National flag and how to fly it," read

Rand.

"I guess I can get ten on that, all right," remarked Pepper.

"And tie four of the following knots: Reef, sheet-bend, clove-hitch, bow line, middleman's, fisherman's, sheepshank," finished Rand.

"We can pass on that all right," commented Pepper. "Say, what time is it? I begin to feel as if I would like a bite--one of the other kind. Don't you think we have fish enough?"

"Do you think so?" asked Don gravely. "Better look them over and be sure. The rest of us may want some, you know."

"Oh, I guess there is enough to go around," replied Pepper, with a laugh. "I am not so bad as that."

"Well, if you are sure there are enough," said Rand, "we might go on shore and do some cooking. I say, pull up the anchor, Jack, and you needn't go after it, you know."

"Oh, just as you say," replied Jack, hauling up the kedge.

CHAPTER V

OUT OF THE RIVER

"Here comes the Dart," announced Jack, as a hoarse whistle sounded down the river. The anchor had, by this time, been lifted into the boat and they had started to row toward the shore. "She has a whistle like an ocean liner."

"You want to look out for the swell," warned Pepper, "she kicks up a bigger swell than any other boat on the river."

"As big as the Hudson or Fulton?" asked Donald. "Why, they are half a dozen times as big as she is."

"She isn't one-eighth their size," replied Jack, "but she has got more power, for her size, than any of them. She has three smokestacks like the Fulton. Just see her come!"

The Dart, a long, low, white yacht, was coming up the river at full speed, the water curling away from her bow in a miniature cascade, the powerful engines driving her through the water with the speed of an express train.

"Gee!" cried Pepper, "look at her come. Say, she'd make Fulton with the Clermont think he was traveling backward if he was here. She is sure some boat."

"Who owns her?" asked Donald.

"She belongs to Mr. Whilden," replied Jack. "He is president of

the Dart Motor-cycle Company, you know."

"Gee!" cried Pepper, "I wish he was my uncle, or something."

"What for, Pepper?" queried Rand. "Want him to invite you to go yachting?"

"That wouldn't be bad," affirmed Pepper, "and maybe if he liked my looks he might take a fancy to me and give me a cycle. Say, fellows, wouldn't it be great if we all had motor-cycles!"

"In my opinion," interjected Donald, "'tis just a waste of time wishing for what ye'll no get."

"Oh, there is no harm in wishing," returned Pepper. "You might just as well wish for a big thing as a little one."

"Just look at the wave following her," interrupted Jack. "It must be more than five feet higher than the level of the river. We will have to keep head on if we don't want to be swamped."

"See that canoe over there," broke in Pepper, and pointing to another boat. "They will be in trouble pretty soon if they don't watch out."

"Where away?" asked Rand.

"Over there by the other shore," replied Pepper. "They will turn turtle sure, if that wave catches them sideways."

The boys were resting on their oars, watching the rapidly-approaching boat.

"Maybe we had better row over that way," suggested Donald. "There are a couple of girls in the canoe and they may need some help."

"That chap is all right," concluded Rand, after he had watched the canoe for a little while. "He knows how to handle it. He is doing fine. See, he is just touching the water with his paddle, so as to keep it head-on. Maybe he thinks we will need some help."

Nevertheless, the boys kept on a course that would bring them near enough to the canoe to aid its occupants if they should need it.

"Now look at that!" cried Donald suddenly, when the boys were a hundred yards from the canoe. "Did you ever see such a fool trick as that? Just when he was coming out all right, too. Pull for ail you are worth, boys!"

Even as he spoke the boys had gripped their oars and sent their boat at racing speed for the canoe.

What had called forth Donald's exclamation was, that just as the Dart was passing the canoe one of the girls, who was seated in the stern, had suddenly risen to her feet to wave her handkerchief at some one on the yacht. As she stood up the swell from the yacht caught the light craft, rolling it from side to side, and the girl losing her balance pitched headlong over the side of the boat, capsizing it. In a moment they were all struggling in the river.

As the canoe went over the man caught the girl nearest to him and helped her to the boat and then turned to aid the other girl, but she had disappeared.

"Nellie!" he called, striking out in the direction he had last seen her. "Nellie, Nellie! where are you?"

By this time the boys had reached the scene of the upset.

"Keep up your courage," shouted Rand, "we'll pick you up!"

[Illustration: "They were all struggling in the water."]

"Never mind me!" called the young man as they came near. "See if you can't save my sister. She doesn't know how to swim."

"All right," called Rand, "we'll find her."

"Where has she gone?" asked Donald.

"I don't see anything of her," said Rand, who was standing in the bow of the boat intently watching for any sign of the girl. "Yes, there she is." A pale face had appeared for a moment on the surface. "Straight ahead, boys!"

As the boat came to the spot where he had seen her Rand made a long dive overboard, coming up a moment later with the inanimate body of the girl. He was joined almost immediately by Donald, who had followed him overboard, and so aided him in supporting her until Pepper and Jack had reached them with the boat.

It required no little effort on the part of the boys to get the helpless girl into the boat, but it was finally done, and they rowed back to the assistance of the others. The other girl was helped from the overturned canoe, to which she was clinging, into their boat which was now loaded to its full capacity.

"Never mind me," called the man, who was about twenty-two or three years old, "I can hold on behind until we get ashore!"

"Is she alive?" asked the other girl, as she was helped into the boat, looking fearfully at the girl lying in the stern. "Very much so," answered Pepper, who had been feeling her pulse. "The first thing to do is to get some of the water out of her lungs, if there is any there. Hold her with her head down. That's all right! Now, then, let's get ashore as fast as we can."

As the canoe had overturned the captain of the Dart, who was in the pilot house, seeing the accident, had rung for slow speed and, putting the yacht about, hurried back to the place. But, except for the fortunate presence of the boys, it is doubtful if he would have arrived in time to be of any assistance.

"Can we help you in any way?" called Mr. Whilden, the owner of the yacht, who was standing at the gangway as it ran down close to the boat. "I was afraid we wouldn't get here in time."

"There is an unconscious girl here that would be better on your boat," replied Rand.

"All right," responded Mr. Whilden, "we'll take her on board. Can you come alongside?" This end was shortly accomplished, then, lifting the girl up in their arms, Donald and Rand passed her to Mr. Whilden and the captain.

"Have you a doctor on board?" called Pepper. "She needs attention right away."

"Yes," responded a gentleman who was standing by. "I am a physician, I will take care of her."

At this moment there was a scream from a lady on the yacht as she caught sight of the girl. "Why it is Nellie! She is dead!" she cried, and would have fallen to the deck if she had not been caught by Mr. Whilden.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed. "How in the world could Nellie get here?" adding a moment later as he looked more closely: "Surely it is she. Is there any hope for her, Doctor?"

"Of course there is," replied the physician. "She is coming around all right, thanks to these young men, who rescued her."

"And where are they?" asked Mr. Whilden. "I had almost forgotten them in the excitement," turning to the boys, who had come on board to learn as to the fate of the girl. Shaking hands with them again and again, he explained: "She is my daughter. I hadn't any idea she was anywhere near, and I don't see how it happened yet. Why, hello, Frank!" addressing the young man who had been in the canoe, and who was now wringing the water from his clothes. "What in the world were you doing here?"

"Why, Nellie and I," explained Frank, agitatedly--he had not yet recovered from the shock of his experience--"came down to visit Mabel, and we went out for a cruise on the river."

"But how did it happen?" interrupted Mr. Whilden, "I thought you knew how to handle a canoe."

"I thought I did, too," replied Frank, "but Nellie saw you on the deck and, forgetting where she was, attempted to stand up to wave her handkerchief to you, and, the next thing we knew we were all in the water."

"I can't thank you enough," began Mr. Whilden, again turning to the boys.

"Not at all," protested Rand, "we are very glad we were in time. Come on, boys, it is time we were getting along."

"Now," went on Mr. Whilden, "isn't there something I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you," replied Donald. "Now that Miss Nellie is all right--I see that she is herself again--we will say good-by and go on."

"Good-by, then, and good luck," said Mr. Whilden, "and if I can

ever do anything for you, be sure and let me know."

"I want to thank you and to know you, too," added Frank.

"All right," replied the boys as they pulled away from the yacht, "we shall be glad to see you anytime."

Giving three blasts of her whistle as a farewell salute the Dart resumed her course up the river,

"Who were the boys?" asked Mrs. Whilden a little later. "I want to reward them."

"Why I don't know," replied Mr. Whilden. "I clear forgot to get their names, after all."

"Well, I mean to find out for my own account," said Frank. "They are worth knowing."

CHAPTER VI

THE ENEMY MAKES A RAID

"You think we had better stop and see if we can catch any more fish before we go ashore?" asked Rand, when the Dart had gone.

"Why," asked Jack, "there's enough, ain't there?"

"There was," allowed Rand, "but it is a good deal later now."

"I think we had better go on," said Jack laughingly. "There is a good place I can see. That strip of beach over there is a natural landing place."

"And a green spot back of it that would make a dandy place for a camp," added Pepper.

"I wish we could come up here and camp," said Jack. "Wouldn't it be fine?"

"I s-s-say!" cried Pepper.

"Well, s-say it," said Donald.

"Let's organize a patrol and come up here and camp out."

"You hit the bullseye that time, Pepper," cried Jack enthusiastically.

"'Twould no be a bad idea," admitted Don.

"Ah done reckon dat am a fac', for shuah," drawled Rand in the negro dialect, of which he was master.

"We will get Colonel Snow to start us," added Jack.

"Agreed!" cried the others.

"And we will see him just as soon as we go back."

"And start the thing right away."

Talking enthusiastically over their plans, the boys pulled the boat in to the shore.

"See that curious-looking house up there," broke in Don. "I didn't know there was anybody living up here."

"House! Where?" asked Rand.

"There, among the trees. It is covered with bark so you would hardly notice it."

"Oh, yes, looks like a big tree," said Jack. "Must be a hermit."

"But I thought hermits always lived in caves," demurred Pepper.

"Well, here is one that doesn't," replied Jack.

"Let's go and see him," suggested Rand.

"I don't think we had better," doubted Pepper. "If he's a hermit he doesn't want visitors, and maybe he is an outlaw."

"An outlaw," laughed Jack. "What have you been reading lately?"

"Why, there ain't 'no sich things,' at least around here," added Rand.

"Well," persisted Pepper, "there's no use rushing into things you don't know anything about, and besides we want something to eat first."

"Pepper wants to make sure of his dinner, whatever happens," said Rand.

"Somebody else thinks the same way, too, from the smoke up there."

"Smoke, where?" asked Donald.

"Up there on the top of the mountain," replied Rand. "See that haze floating away."

"I thought that was a cloud," said Jack. "I wonder what it means?"

"That some hunters are making a fire to cook with," volunteered Donald.

"Of course that is it," agreed Rand. "You can always depend upon old Solomon to knock the romance out of anything."

"Well, I don't know," continued Jack. "It looks queer to me."

"Oh, everything looks queer to you," argued Donald. "You are always seeing mysteries."

"Yes," retorted Jack, "and you can't see them until they come up to you and hit you over the head. I've got more than half a notion to go there and see what it is. Any of you want to go?"

"Not I," replied Rand. "It's a good two miles up there, if it is one, and my curiosity isn't strong enough to carry me that far."

"Nor I," added Donald. "I can find all the trouble I want without going to the top of the mountain hunting for more."

"Trouble," said Jack. "Now, who said anything about trouble?"

By this time they had reached the shore and, jumping out of the boat, dragged it up on the beach.

"Now," called Rand, when they had landed, "who wants to be cook? Don't all speak at once."

"I'll do it," volunteered Jack, "but--"

"Say no more," interjected Rand, "we couldn't do worse and Don is almost as bad. I reckon, Pepper, it must be you or I."

"If we don't want to starve," agreed the boy.

"If you and Jack will clean the fish and Don will bring the water and wash the dishes I'll do the cooking," went on Rand. "Is that fair?"

"That's fair, all right," agreed the others.

"All right, then," ordered Rand, "get busy."

While Jack and Pepper were getting the fish ready, Rand brought the stove from the boat, set it up and had it burning, and the pan hot by the time Pepper came with the first installment of fish.

"Gee! that smells good," called Jack a little later when the frying fish, under Rand's skillful manipulation, began to send forth savory odors. "You can sure cook, Rand."

"Ah done reckon dat am a fac', foh shuah," said Rand.

"Hurry up, Rand," broke in Pepper. "I can't wait much longer."

"All ready, sah," called Rand. "Dem fishes am prognosticated to ah turn."

Something passing on the river attracted attention, and the boys all walked a few paces toward the water.

At this instant, as their backs were turned, a boy ran swiftly from a nearby clump of bushes, snatched the pan from the stove, overturning the latter as he did so, and silently dashed back into the woods.

It was done so quickly and adroitly that Pepper, who was the first to catch sight of him, had scarcely time to shout:

"There goes Monkey Rae, and he has got our fish."

"What is it?" asked Rand in bewilderment.

"Monkey Rae," cried Pepper; "he's stolen our fish! Come on, boys. After him!"

"Well, of all things!" exclaimed Rand, "that takes the cake."

"I t-t-think it takes t-t-the fish," amended Pepper, as he dashed away.

The boys set out at once in pursuit of the thief, but he had too long a start, and perhaps, some knowledge of the locality, and after a vain hunt they straggled back to the boat without having found any trace of him.

"Well, that's the meanest thing yet," grumbled Pepper, looking at the overturned stove. "The oil has all run out and we can't cook any more," he went on, with so gloomy an expression that, in spite of their anger against Monkey Rae, the others could not help laughing.

CHAPTER VII

THE COLONEL

"What's the matter, boys?" said a cheery voice behind them, and they turned quickly to meet the smiling glance of a man who was sitting on a rock at the edge of the glade.

He was tall, erect, and of military bearing. Quick and alert, in spite of his snow-white hair and mustache.

"Why, Colonel Snow!" cried Jack in astonishment; "where did you come from?"

"Oh, I saw you some time ago as you were coming ashore," replied the colonel, "and I walked down to meet you. What's the trouble, the enemy been making an attack?"

"Looks that way," answered Rand. "Monkey Rae made a raid on the commissary and carried off the fish we had cooked."

"That's nothing to be concerned over," continued the colonel. "Why don't you cook some more?"

"Can't," replied Pepper, "he upset the stove and spilled all the oil we had."

"Stove!" ejaculated the colonel in scorn. "What do you want with a stove?"

"Why, you can't cook without a stove," replied Pepper, "and, besides, he stole our pan."

"Pan!" exclaimed the colonel, "and plates, too. When you are out on a tramp all you need is a knife, a tincup and a match. Anybody got a match?"

"Yes, sir," replied Jack, "lots of them."

"We only need one," answered the colonel. "A good scout doesn't use more than one match to light a fire. Why, when I was out in Arizona we would make one match do for a whole company."

"Crickets!" exclaimed Pepper, "that was going some."

"Suppose you let me show you how to cook without a stove. Jack, see if you can't find some dry leaves and small twigs. Rand, you can get some bigger pieces, plenty of them. That's the kind. And, Pepper, you and Don bring up a lot of that clay from down there by the water. That's the stuff. Now wrap your fish up in a coat of clay. Never mind the scales. Coat them all over and pile them up here as fast as you get them ready. If we only had some flour we'd have a dinner in the real scout style."

"I don't see how you are going to cook them in that clay," put in Jack.

"We are going to bake them," replied the colonel. "Build a good, hot fire on top of them."

"Like they do with a clam bake?" inquired Rand.

"That's the idea," said the colonel, who, while talking, had been packing the fish in two layers on a flat rock. "Now put your leaves on--not too many--lay on your pieces, Rand, pile them up so as to leave a draught. That's it; now, Jack, touch it off."

Jack struck a match which flickered for a minute and went out.

"Tut! Tut!" cried the colonel, "that won't do!"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Jack, "I've plenty more."

"No," corrected the colonel, "you should rely on only one. Now, suppose we are out on the plains and this is your last match. Let me show you how to do it."

Stooping down, the colonel waited a moment until there was a lull in the wind, when he struck the match, shielding it with his hand until it blazed up, and then touched it to the leaves, which, catching the fire, were soon blazing fiercely.

"Now, then," went on the colonel, "we don't want the enemy swooping down on us again. Don't you think it would be a good plan to throw out a picket to keep guard?"

"I think it would," replied Rand, "although I don't think that he will come back."

"You mustn't depend upon that," cautioned the colonel. "Always think he will do the most unlikely thing. A good scout is always on the

alert, especially in the enemy's country."

"We didn't know we were in the enemy's country," said Rand, "but I guess it is the enemy's country, wherever Monkey is. I'll take the first turn," going off and circling about the place. "I guess he's gone," he said to himself, but no harm looking!"

"Now," said the colonel, after a time, "I think our fish must be pretty nearly cooked. Rake one of them out, Don, and try it, but don't disturb the others until you find out. How is it?"

"Fine!" cried Pepper, who had assisted in the operation. "Couldn't be better. Hadn't we better put on some more?"

"You will have to build another fire," replied the colonel. "Now, see how well you can do it. Do it just as I did and light it from this fire. We had only one match, you know."

"But what do you do when that is gone?" asked Pepper.

"Oh, that's a different story," laughed the colonel. "We'll come to that later."

"Now," began the colonel, when they had finished their meal, unanimously voting it the best dinner they had ever eaten, "I know you all have been wondering how I happened to be here when you came along."

"Yes, sir," admitted Jack, "we were talking about you just before we came ashore."

"Speaking of angels, I see," said the colonel. "The fact is, boys, I've got a little shack down here in the woods and whenever I get tired of town I come out here and get a breath of the woods, and I was out here to-day."

"That was lucky for us," interjected Donald.

"Is that your house above here?" asked Rand, "the one covered with bark. We saw it as we came along. Pepper was sure an outlaw lived there."

"And you weren't so far out of the way at that, were you, Pepper?" answered the colonel. "How would you like to take a look at it?"

"'Twould be most interesting," said Donald.

"Come along then. I see the enemy were out in force," he added when they had gone part of the way.

"How was that?" asked Rand.

"Monkey Rae," replied the colonel. "There were a number of them."

"Of Monkey Raes?" cried Rand. "Gee! I hope not."

"I mean," laughed the colonel, "there were more with him."

"Yes," said Rand, "he and Sam Hopkins and Red Burns are always

together."

"Who was the man with them?" went on the colonel.

"Was there a man with them?" asked Jack. "I wonder who he could have been?"

"A man who walked with a limp," continued the colonel.

"Man with a limp," mused Jack. "What was he like, did you see him?"

"No," replied the colonel. "I only see his track. They came along this way."

"Where do you see that?" asked Rand.

"Here is the trail," replied the colonel, pointing it out as he spoke. "Here is the print of a foot on the dirt and here is another. Here is a bigger and a heavier one; a man made those. You can see one of them is deeper than the other, showing more weight on that side."

"But, how can you see all that?" questioned Pepper. "You have hardly looked at them, and I couldn't see them at all until you pointed them out."

"Practice and observation," answered the colonel. "That trail is as plain as day. There wasn't any attempt to hide it. Why, out on the plains a scout would follow it at a gallop. See how far you can track it."

"'Twill no be far, in my opinion," confessed Donald. "'Tis no over plain."

But with much care and patience the boys were able to follow the track for a considerable distance, losing it every now and then and picking it up again, Rand being the quickest and Donald the most persistent; all of them getting a little more expert as they went on.

"Where does it go now?" asked Jack after a while, when they had lost it and were unable to pick it up again.

"That's doing very well for a beginning," commended the colonel. "They went off here, I think to avoid the house, and we are almost there."

A short walk brought them to the shack, which was set in a little clearing in the woods. It was one-story high and about sixteen feet square, with a small kitchen in the back. It was provided with two doors, numerous windows, and had a small porch in front. It was ceiled inside and scantily furnished with a few chairs, a couple of tables and a couch, but the walls were ornamented with the heads of deer and elk, as well as the skins of smaller animals, and the floor was covered with bear and panther skins. Over the big fireplace hung a shotgun with a couple of rifles, and several Indian bows stood in one corner.

CHAPTER VIII

TALKING IT OVER

"I thought you didn't use a stove," remarked Jack, opening his eyes in astonishment at the sight of the colonel's well-appointed kitchen.

"Why not?" asked the colonel, smiling at Jack's surprise. "I don't sleep on the ground from choice, when I have a comfortable bed."

"But, you said--" continued Jack.

"This is a permanent headquarters," the colonel went on. "When I go on a march I don't carry all these things with me. What we don't have we get along without, as part of the day's task."

"That's a grand pair of horns on that elk's head," admired Rand, who was looking at the trophies of the chase that hung on the walls. "Isn't there a story that goes with that?"

"Not much of a story," replied the colonel. "It was killed on a trip I made up in the Canadian Northwest, and it was a narrow escape for me, too. It was killed by an arrow from one of those bows there."

"An arrow!" exclaimed Rand. "I didn't know that an elk could be killed with an arrow."

"An arrow is as deadly as a bullet at short range," replied the colonel. "You have read of the English archers and their famous long-bows, haven't you?"

"And Robin Hood," put in Pepper.

"Robin Hood, of course," continued the colonel. "The Indians were dangerous foes, too, even when they had nothing but their bows and arrows."

"I wonder if I could learn to shoot with one of them," mused Rand, drawing back one of the bows, a feat that required all of his strength. "Say, boys, I've got an idea."

"Hold fast to it," counseled Donald. "You may no get another."

"Let's organize an Indian patrol, and we can carry bows and arrows."

"It might be worth thinking about," admitted Donald.

"That's what we wanted to talk to you about, colonel," said Jack, "but I am afraid it's too late to take the matter up to-day."

"Why too late?"

"Because it is time we were starting for home," answered Jack.

"No trouble about that," replied the colonel. "I will walk back with you, and we can talk it over as we go along. Let's see, there

are four of you here?"

"Yes, there are four of us," replied Pepper.

"Then you need two more to start with."

"Don't you lock your door when you go out?" was Jack's irrelevant query when they were ready to start.

"Not usually," replied the colonel. "There is no one to bother us up here in the woods. Do you think there is any need of it?" he asked quizzically.

"I should think there was," declared Pepper, "if Monkey Rae is about."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted the colonel. "Giving me some of my own advice, aren't you? Always be prepared. I don't know but what I had better follow it."

Going back into the house he returned with a padlock with which he fastened the door.

"There's Gerald Moore, he would join us," began Jack, taking up the subject of the patrol again.

"Gerald Moore!" exclaimed Rand in a doubtful tone.

"What is the matter with him?" asked the colonel.

"He is the son of the janitor at the bank," replied Rand, "and--"

"Anything wrong about him?" continued the colonel.

"No," replied Rand, "but--"

"Oh!" said the colonel dryly, "I see. I suppose you all know the scout law."

"Not yet," replied Jack. "Rand read it to us, but we haven't learned it yet."

"Let me see," continued the colonel musingly, "how does number four go?"

"It says," read Rand, "a scout is a friend to all and a brother to every other scout, no matter to what social class the other belongs. A scout accepts the other man as he finds him, and makes the best of him."

The colonel made no comment, and the boys walked on in silence.

"I was wrong," acknowledged Rand after a little hesitation. "I have no objection to Gerald."

"When we are going into battle, my boy," said the colonel, stopping on the way for a moment, "we don't stop to consider to what class the man who is fighting alongside of us belongs, and this is a battle you are going into, one to make the most you can out of your

lives, and if you can help some one else at the same time so much the greater is your reward."

"I see," replied Rand, "and I won't forget it."

"He was in our class, at school," went on Jack.

"He quotes poetry," added Pepper.

"Who does?" asked the colonel.

"Gerald."

"That's bad," said the colonel gravely, "but perhaps you could cure him of it."

"He says he is descended from Tom Moore," continued Pepper.

"Well, we needn't hold that against him," suggested Donald. "It was no altogether his fault."

"Then there's Dick Wilson," proposed Jack. "He was in our class, too."

"All right," agreed the others, "it's Gerald and Dick."

"Very well, then," observed the colonel, "we will consider that settled. When you are ready let me know and I will swear you in. You know what you have to do?"

"Yes, sir," the boys answered.

By this time they came within sight of the landing where they had left the boat, and Pepper, who had run on ahead, suddenly raised such an outcry that the others rushed forward in alarm.

"What is the matter?" shouted Rand.

"The b-boat," stammered Pepper.

"What is the matter with it?" asked Donald.

"It's g-g-gone!"

"Gone! where?" demanded Jack.

"How should I know?" replied Pepper. "All I know is that it is gone."

Sure enough, there was no boat to be seen.

CHAPTER IX

THE PURSUIT

"It must have drifted away," said Rand.

"Sure of that?" asked Jack.

"I knew it!" suddenly broke in Pepper.

"Then why didn't you tell us," demanded Rand. "What did you know?"

"Monkey Rae," replied Pepper.

"Well, what about him?" cried Jack.

"He has taken the boat," answered Pepper.

"How do you know?" questioned Donald.

"There is his track on the sand."

"He is certainly very much in evidence," said the colonel.

"I wish I could get hold of him once," cried Rand vindictively.

"I'd much prefer to get hold of the boat just now," put in Donald.

"There is certainly something queer going on here," observed Jack.

"More mysteries, Jack?" asked Rand.

"Yes," answered Jack. "That man is mixed up in this, too."

"What man?" asked Rand.

"The man with the limp," replied Jack.

"Where is he?"

"He was here, and I believe he went off in the boat," went on Jack.

"You can see his tracks around here."

"Jack is right," confirmed the colonel, "the man has undoubtedly gone off with the boat."

"Hem," said Pepper, "there doesn't seem to be anything safe here."

"What are we going to do now?" asked Rand.

"Walk home, I guess," said Donald. "I don't know how else we will get there."

"There they go now!" cried Jack, suddenly pointing to their boat near the other side of the river. "Oh, if we only had a boat to follow them in."

"I have one," said the colonel. "We can take that. Come on, boys!"

Starting off at a pace that kept the four youths on a run to keep up with him, the colonel led the way back to the house. Just before coming to it he stopped.

"Take that path to the left, it leads down to the landing," he directed. "Get the boat you will find there ready, and I will be with you in a minute."

"Are you going with us?" asked Rand.

"Do you think I am going to be left out of this?" returned the colonel. "Not for a minute!"

Following the colonel's directions, the boys went down to the landing where they found the Scout, a 25-foot cat-boat, moored. Jumping on board they made ready to cast her loose, took the stops off the sail and had it partly hoisted when the colonel came along bringing with him a gun.

"Are you going to shoot them?" asked Pepper.

"I hope not," replied the colonel, "but it is just as well to be prepared for all emergencies. You are first-rate sailors," he added, stepping on board. "Cast her off and up with the sail."

"How is that?" called Rand.

"A little more on the peak; that's it, now pull it home and make fast."

During this time the boat had drifted away from the landing and now, as the wind filled the sail she glided out into the river, running free.

"See anything of them?" asked the colonel.

"Not yet," answered Rand, who was in the bow looking up the river.

"'Tis my opinion," said Donald, "that we'll be no likely to find them." "There they are!" cried Jack.

"Where away?" asked the colonel.

"Over there by the other shore," replied Jack. "You can just see them."

"They have such a long start," doubted Rand, "that we will never catch them."

"You can't most always tell until you try," observed Jack.

"And sometimes not then," added Pepper.

With the wind on her quarter the Scout sped up the river on a course that would bring her near to the opposite shore, a little in front of the boat they were pursuing, the occupants of which, evidently having no thought of pursuit, were rowing in a leisurely fashion. It was not until the Scout was almost upon them that they gave it any attention, and then only enough to change their course sufficiently to keep out of her way.

"Boat, ahoy!" finally shouted the colonel.

To this hail those in the small boat made no answer, but apparently realizing that the Scout was pursuing them, changed their course to run directly to the shore.

"In with the sheet!" called the colonel, quickly bringing the Scout around; "there, that will do!" as Rand and Donald hauled in the sail until it was trimmed in as close as it would hold the wind, the boat laying over until her gunwale was under water. Holding her up in the wind until the peaks shivered, the colonel kept her on that course until she had run some hundred feet beyond the other boat.

"Look out, boys!" called the colonel; "we are going about," at the same time bringing the boat up in the wind, and then, as the sail filled again, heading for the other boat.

But the man in the small boat was as wary as the colonel, and as the Scout came about he changed his course at nearly right angles, and then as the sailboat went by, resumed his former course.

"He's an old fox and not easily to be caught," decided the colonel, when this maneuver had been repeated two or three times. "He is making for the other shore, and if he gets in among the shallows over there I am afraid we will lose him yet."

The Scout was now so close to the smaller boat that the occupants could easily be distinguished.

"There is Monkey Rae," declared Pepper.

"And Sam and Red," added Jack, "but I don't know who the man is."

"Boat, ahoy!" shouted the colonel.

"What do you want?" snarled the man.

"You!" shouted the colonel. "Lay to until we come alongside!"

"Come on," responded the man, "and you will get more than you are looking for!" at the same time displaying a pistol, which he pointed toward the larger boat.

"Drop that!" commanded the colonel, going forward and covering the man with the gun, while Rand took the helm. "If you make any attempt to use that pistol I will disable you at once."

With a muttered imprecation the man let the pistol fall and, seizing the oars, began rowing for the shore.

"Shall we follow him?" asked Rand.

"There is a sand-bar there, I think," replied the colonel. "If you pull up the centerboard, perhaps we can slide over it. It's no use," he added a moment later as the boat fell off, "we shall have to go round."

By this time the small boat had been pulled in close to the shore, where the man, picking up a package from the bottom of the boat, sprang over the side and, followed by the boys, ran up the shore

and disappeared in the woods, leaving the boat to drift.

"Shall we follow them?" asked Rand.

"I don't want them," said Donald.

"Better let them go, I think," added the colonel.

"Well, I hope I have seen the last of Monkey Rae for a good while," went on Pepper.

"Then as Dogberry says: 'Let us call the watch together and thank God we are rid of a knave,'" quoted Rand.

Picking up the drifting boat the Scout was headed down the river and in a few minutes they were off the colonel's landing. Here, the boys would have taken their boat and rowed home, but the colonel insisted on carrying them down to Creston, which was quickly done in the bracing breeze.

"Remember, as soon as you are ready," he said as he left them, "I will swear you in as Scouts."

CHAPTER X

LOOKING FOR A CLUE

"Hello, Jack," called Rand, meeting the former on the street the following morning, hurrying along in his usual fashion, "what's the latest?"

"About what?" asked Jack in turn.

"About everything. Anything new about the robbing of Judge Taylor's office the other night?"

"Haven't heard much yet," replied Jack. "I was just going around there to see if they had found out anything more."

"Looking for clues?" questioned Rand.

"Not so much for clues as news," responded Jack. "Perhaps I can pick up some of both. You never can tell when they'll pop up. Don't you want to go along?"

"And see how you do it," laughed Rand. "I don't mind if I do. Written up yesterday's story yet?"

"About your heroic rescue of a lovely maiden from the angry waves. Of course; did it last night. Want to see it? I was going to put a head on it: 'Heroic Rescue by a Creston Boy.'"

"You don't mean it, Jack Blake!"

"Wait until you see it on the first page, double leaded, with a

scarehead."

"Really and truly?"

"Really and truly."

"Please don't, Jack."

"Why, don't you want it?" asked Jack in mock surprise. "I thought you would be delighted to see your name in print."

"You know I don't want to be made ridiculous!"

"All right," responded Jack, "I'll kill it if you say so, but it would have made a sensation."

"I don't doubt that," laughed Rand, "but I'd rather not be the victim. I wonder," he went on musingly, "if we will ever see them again."

"Who?"

"The Whildens."

"Hardly likely," replied Jack. "If we do they will probably have forgotten us."

"Still I'd like to know how she came out."

"Oh, she came out all right," replied Jack lightly. "A little cold water won't hurt her. You know, the doctor said she was out of danger."

"It's a curious thing how they got in," he went on after a little pause, his thought turning on the robbery, which was uppermost in his mind just then.

"I don't see anything curious about it," returned Rand.

"You don't!" cried Jack. "Maybe you can explain how they did it then."

"I don't know as it needs any explaining," retorted Rand. "They got in a trough of the waves, and--"

"Trough of the waves!" cried Jack.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why, about the Whildens, of course. What are you talking about?"

"Oh, pshaw! I was talking about the burglars."

"Oh, I see," said Rand. "How did they get in?"

"That is what we would all like to know," replied Jack. "There isn't anything to show how they got in or how they went out, unless they went out through the door and locked it after them."

"That is possible, isn't it?" asked Rand.

"I suppose it is possible," admitted Jack, "but I don't see how they managed it."

"Not if they had a key?"

"It must have been that way," agreed Jack, "but where did they get this key? That don't lessen the puzzle. It was a Yale lock, and keys to them are not to be had easily, and they must have had one for the front door, too."

"Well, if they could get the one they could get the other," said Rand.

"I suppose so," agreed Jack. "It probably wouldn't be much harder to get two than one."

"Why couldn't they get in through a window?" pursued Rand.

"The windows were all locked on the inside as well as the doors."

"I see. They must have been professionals."

"Then I don't see what they wanted there."

"Why not?"

"Because they wouldn't get enough swag to make it worth while," answered Jack,

"Swag?" questioned Rand.

"Oh, that's slang for plunder," explained Jack.

"You seem to be pretty well up in their slang," commented Rand.

"Oh, that's part of the newspaper business," was Jack's response.

By this time they had come to the building in which Judge Taylor had his office, which was on one of the main street corners of the town. A little description of the building is necessary here to make the situation clear. It was an old-fashioned, two-story brick structure, having been erected some years before. At the time of its erection there were no other buildings near it, and there were windows on all four sides. Some time later another building had been put on the adjoining lot, leaving a space of a little more than a foot between the two, thus making the windows on that side practically useless. The wall of the other building upon that side was blank, and it was upon this space that the side windows of the judge's office opened. In the rear was a yard of the width of the building and about twenty feet deep, with a low fence upon the side next to the street.

"Let's take a look around before we go upstairs," proposed Jack.

"All right," responded Rand. "I'm green at this business, you know."

Going in at the front door Jack led the way into the hall, from

which a broad flight of stairs ascended to the second story. By the side of the stairs was a narrow passage, through which Jack continued to a small hallway in the rear, in which were two doors, one giving access to the cellar, the other opening on the yard in the rear.

"Do you think that they could have come in through the cellar?" asked Rand, when they entered the back hall.

"I had thought of that," replied Jack, "but every one says that these doors were bolted, and I don't see how they could bolt the doors after they had gone out."

"It does seem just a little difficult," admitted Rand.

Going out in the yard, the boys examined the rear of the building.

"They couldn't have got to the windows up there without a ladder," decided Rand, after a study of the situation. "And you say the windows were fastened?"

"That's what they say," responded Jack, "and I don't believe burglars carry ladders around in their kits. Besides there is an electric light right here, so that a ladder could be seen quite plainly from the street. "I wonder," he mused, looking into the space between the buildings, "if any one could get up through there."

"Not unless he could fly," returned Rand. "There isn't room enough for a man to get in there, and he couldn't manage a ladder if he got in."

"A boy might," remarked Jack.

"But this wasn't a boy's work," objected Rand.

"Can't always tell," replied Jack, "almost anything is possible."

Going back into the building, Jack led the way up to Judge Taylor's office, where they found an officer in consultation with the judge.

"Good morning, judge," said Jack as they entered. "We came in to see if there was anything new about the robbery."

"Good morning, boys," replied the judge. "Looking for news, as usual, eh, Jack? Well, I am sorry to say there isn't any. We are just as much in the dark as ever. It is beyond my comprehension how any one could get in and out of this place and not leave any signs to show how they did it."

"It beats me," chimed in the officer. "It was a good job, too. Looks as if there were two or three in it, the way they handled the safe," pointing to the large, old-fashioned safe, good enough in its day, but not offering much resistance to modern tools, which was standing in the middle of the room.

"They certainly made junk of it," remarked Rand; "how did they do it?"

"Steel wedges," replied the officer. "It wasn't very much of a job

for yeggmen, such as these must have been. They drove the wedges in alongside of the door and burst it open,"

"But didn't that make a good deal of noise?"

"Not if they used pieces of cloth to deaden the sound of the blows," explained the officer.

"Did they get very much?" asked Rand.

"Not very much," replied the judge, "some papers and a few coins."

"Hello!" interjected Jack, who had picked up a sheet of paper from the floor.

"Found something?" asked the judge; "what is it?"

"What do you make of that?" asked Jack, handing him the paper.

"Not very much," answered the judge, looking it over. "There seems to be a smudge of dirt on it, that is all."

"Nor I," chimed in the officer. "Nothing there."

"Looks to me like finger marks," said Rand.

"That's it, exactly!" cried Jack excitedly. "Look at it this way!"

"I see," said the judge, "some one has left the impression of a dusty hand."

"It was a small hand, too," went on Jack, "not much bigger than mine."

"That seems right, too," assented the judge, "but what do you make of it?"

"It was a boy or a small man who made it," continued Jack.

"That's logical," agreed the judge, "but--"

"That may be," criticized the officer, "but I don't see that it leads anywhere."

"One minute," returned Jack, "his hand was dusty because he came in through a dusty way."

"Plato, thou reasoneth well," laughed the judge, "but we are still up against the original puzzle. What was that way?"

"How long since these windows have been opened?" asked Jack, going to one of the windows that looked on the wall of the next building.

"Not in years, I think," answered the judge. "Why?"

Without replying Jack opened one of the windows and looked out; then going to a second he did the same.

"You don't think that they came in that way, do you?" questioned

the officer.

"What do you expect to find, Jack?" asked Rand.

"There you are!" he cried triumphantly, when he came to the third window; "there is where they got in!"

"How do you make that out?" demanded the judge.

"See there!" replied Jack, "this window sill is almost free of dust, while the others have half an inch or so on them. It was rubbed off of this one by some one climbing through; see, there is the print of a hand---"

"By the shade of Coke, I think you are right!" exclaimed the judge, "but how in the world could any one get up to this window?"

"A boy might work his way up between the walls," answered Jack. "Lots of boys could do it."

"I guess you have hit it," assented the officer. "Then the boy opened the doors and the others walked in as easily as if they owned the place. A man with one eye could see it now."

"And went out the same way," concluded the judge. "But why did they need to make such a mystery of it?"

"Wanted to give us something to think about, I guess," hazarded the officer. "Perhaps they wanted to make it look like an inside job. Looks as if there were two or three men and a boy mixed up in it. That's a due, anyway, and I will send word around the country to look out for them."

"Do you think that they came from around here?" asked Rand.

"Don't think so. I don't think we have any one here smart enough to pull off a job like that. Hello, what now?" as Jack, acting upon a sudden thought, rushed from the room. "What is he after now?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Rand. "Just thought of something, I guess. He often does that when he has an idea strike him."

"Here he comes back," said the officer a moment later, when Jack was heard bounding up the stairs. "I wonder what he has got now?"

"Found something more?" questioned the judge, when Jack came into the room with a rush.

"Found these between the buildings," replied Jack, showing a thin steel wedge and a small steel cold chisel. "It just happened to strike me that they might have forgotten something, so I took a look around and I found these."

"Some of the tools they used on the safe," said the officer, taking them. "Nice bit of work they are. It wasn't any burglar who made them. Now, if we could find where they were made we might get on the track of these fellows."

"Why, I saw one just like that in Wilson's blacksmith shop the

other day," observed Rand.

"Wasn't just like it, was it?" asked the officer.

"Looks like the same one," replied Rand, taking the chisel in his hand.

"Guess they wouldn't look so much alike if they were together," demurred the officer, though he noted it down with the thought, "That's clue worth following."

"See if you can find anything else," suggested the judge, but a careful search about the office failed to reveal any more clues, and the boys finally went off to see, as Jack expressed it, what they could pick up on the outside.

"Come in again, Jack," said the judge when the boys were leaving, "always glad to see you. You have cleared up part of the mystery, anyhow. You are so much better a detective than we are," he added laughingly, "that I don't know but what we shall have to put the case in your hands."

"Oh, it wasn't anything, judge," responded Jack, "just putting two and two together."

CHAPTER XI

FORMING THE PATROL

"Don't you think," began Pepper.

"Why not, Pepper?" asked Rand.

"What objection is there to our thinking?"

The four boys were, a couple of days later, on their way back to the town from the river, where they had been for an early morning swim.

"None whatever," retorted Pepper, "if you were capable of doing it."

"Now listen to that!" cried Rand. "Pepper thinks he's the only one that can think. If you have got any thinks in your think-tank open the valve and let some of them escape."

"One at a time, Pepper," added Donald; "make it easy for us."

"All through your interruptions?" asked Pepper; "because, if you are, I'll elucidate."

"Ah, what's that?" cried Rand, "you'll do what? How do you spell it?"

"Elucidate--explain--make dear," replied Pepper. "Do I make myself

comprehensible?"

"Another one," groaned Rand. "Say, Pepper, skip the hard ones, and tell us what's troubling you."

"What I was going to say," went on Pepper, "was, don't you think--now don't interrupt--that it would be a good idea to have Gerald Moore and Dick Wilson meet with us to have a talk about the Scout business?"

"Seems as if it might be," admitted Donald.

"What made you think of having Gerald join us, Jack?" asked Rand. "I suppose you had some good reason."

"Well, I hardly know," responded Jack. "It just came into my head while the colonel was talking the other day. He's an all-around good fellow, you know, even if he does not have much money. Full of fun, and you can depend upon him every time."

"That's reason enough," agreed Rand. "I don't know much about him, except that he was in our class at school, and I'm afraid I have had a little grudge against him."

"What for?" cried Pepper.

"I guess it was because he made me work so hard to keep up with him in the class," responded Rand laughingly. "It was all I could do, too."

"Dick's a jolly good fellow, too," put in Pepper.

"For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow," sang Jack, whereupon they all joined in the refrain.

"Said anything to them about it?" asked Don, when they had sung it over and over until they were tired.

"Well, hardly," replied Jack, "considering it was only the day before yesterday that we thought of it, though I suppose if we are going to do anything it is time we were getting about it."

"Ah reckon dat am so," drawled Rand, then changing his tone he went on: "What do you say to having a meeting to-night and talking it over? We can have Gerald and Dick come and make a start if we like."

"That's the way, Rand," approved Pepper, "if you are going to do things, do them!"

"I see no objection," concluded Donald.

"Of course you don't," returned Pepper. "Do you know why?"

"Why, Pepper?" asked Donald.

"Because there isn't any," retorted Pepper.

"Where will we meet?" asked Jack.

"I will ask Uncle Floyd if we can have the room in the attic for a club room," went on Rand. "I know he will be interested in what we are doing."

"Then we are all fixed," cried Jack.

"What shall we call it?" asked Pepper.

"Call the room?"

"Of course not," returned Pepper; "I mean the patrol."

"Better wait until it is started," advised Donald, "it's no sure yet."

"All right, Solomon," conceded Pepper, "but if Randolph says so it's as good as done."

"Then we will consider that settled," concluded Rand, who, as a matter of course, assumed the leadership, as he usually did in most things the boys undertook. "Wait a minute," he went on as they were about to separate when they came to his house, "I will ask uncle now."

Then a few minutes later he called from the house: "It's all right, uncle says that we can have it."

"Hurrah!" cried Pepper.

"Three cheers for Mr. Scott!" after which the three went off, singing "For he's a jolly good fellow."

"What is the first thing to do?" asked Pepper when they met that evening in the room which Mr. Scott had allowed them to use.

"Well, if we are all agreed," replied Rand, "I suppose the way to organize is to organize."

"Then I move that we form a patrol of the Boy Scouts," proposed Pepper.

"Second the motion," added Jack.

"In my opinion--" began Donald deliberately, as usual.

"Now for a solid chunk of wisdom," volunteered Pepper.

"The first thing to do is to select a chairman."

"Anything to please," assented Jack. "I move that Randolph Peyton be chosen as chairman of the meeting. All in favor, say aye!"

"Aye!" shouted the boys in a chorus that made the room ring again.

"Now then, Mr. Chairman," said Jack, "get busy."

"I nominate Donald Graeme for secretary," cried Pepper.

"All in favor--" began Rand.

"Aye!" shouted the boys again.

"Then," announced Rand, "I think we are ready for business. Now, Pepper, your motion would be in order."

"In my opinion--" interrupted Donald.

"Now for another chunk," sighed Pepper.

"Order!" called Rand.

"It would no be a bad idea," went on Donald, "to read over the requirements again, so we will know what we are about."

"Oh," protested Pepper, "this is too much. Say, fellows, wake me up when he gets through."

"Now," said Rand, when Donald had finished the reading, "shall we go ahead?"

"How is it, Don?" asked Pepper; "any more objections?"

"I don't see any," returned Donald.

"All right, then, Mr. Chairman," cried Pepper; "let her go!"

"I move that we form a patrol of the Boy Scouts," said Jack.

"Second it," cried Gerald.

"Aye!" shouted the boys before Rand had time to put the motion.

"Carried," decided Rand. "Now," he went on, "I wonder how many of you can pass the examination."

CHAPTER XII

ORGANIZED

"Oh," returned Pepper, "that's easy. First class in Scout lore, stand up!"

"Is it?" asked Rand, "then tell us the composition of the American flag."

"Red, white and blue," said Pepper confidently.

"Good--as far as it goes," returned Rand, "but that applies just as well to the French tricolor. What do you say, Jack?"

"Stars and stripes," replied Jack.

"Good," said Rand, "but not good enough. What do you say, Gerald?"

"Forty-six stars representing the forty-six States of the Union, in a blue field in the upper right-hand corner," replied Gerald, "with thirteen alternate stripes of red and white, representing the thirteen original States."

"Correct," commended Rand. "Now, how many red and how many white stripes?"

"Blessed if I know," admitted Pepper.

"I thought you said it was easy," said Rand. "There are seven red and six white, beginning and ending with red."

"Gee!" cried Pepper, "there's a lot more to it than I thought, but I guess we have got it now, all right."

"Now about the knots," went on Rand, whereupon they fell to tying the different knots until they had mastered them all before it was time to go home.

"Well, young gentlemen," began the colonel, a few days later, when the six boys met at his house in the woods to be sworn in as tenderfeet, "I suppose you know the requirements and that you are all ready?"

"All ready!" responded Pepper.

"Know the Scout law and are willing to obey it."

"Yes, sir."

"The composition of the American flag."

"I think we do," responded Pepper, repeating what he had learned the other night.

"And know how to fly it?"

"Union up," replied Jack.

"What does it mean with the Union down?"

"Signal of distress."

"Very good," commended the colonel, "and now about the knots?" producing some pieces of rope. "Can you tie them?"

"Like an old salt," replied Pepper.

The boys set to work on the knots and in a few minutes had them all tied, to the colonel's satisfaction, whereupon he proceeded to administer the Scout's oath.

"Raise your right hands, with the thumb resting on the nail of the little finger, the other three fingers pointing upward. This represents the three promises of the oath. Now, repeat after me: On my honor I promise that I will do my best:

"1. To do my duty to God and my country.

"2. To help other people at all times.

"3. To obey the Scout law.

"You all promise this--"

"We do," responded the boys.

"Then," concluded the colonel, "you are now members of the Boy Scouts, and I know you will be an honor to it."

"We will do our best," responded Rand.

"And now," continued the colonel, "in celebration of the organization of--By the way, you haven't chosen a name yet, have you? What kind of a name do you want?"

"Oh, I s-s-say," stammered Pepper.

"Sing it, Pepper," suggested Donald.

"L-let's have an Indian name."

"Want to indulge your savage instincts and live in a wigwam?" asked Rand.

"It's a tepee, not a wigwam," corrected Pepper. "But we can go hunting and have a good time in the woods."

"All right, Pepper," agreed Gerald, "an Indian name is good enough for me."

"Have you any name in mind?" asked the colonel.

"The Oneidas used to roam about here, didn't they?" asked Jack.

"No," replied the colonel, "they were farther north."

"What Indians were in this section?" asked Rand.

"The Haverstraws held all the land about here," replied the colonel.

"We want something more original than that," said Jack.

"Something aboriginal," put in Gerald.

"I guess that's it," laughed Jack. "How about Mohicans?"

"I have it!" cried Pepper. "What's the matter with Uncas?"

"Who were they?" asked Dick.

"It wasn't they," replied Pepper, "it was him. Don't you remember he was the last of the Mohicans."

"That's a very good name," commended the colonel.

"Then Uncas it is," agreed the boys.

"Now that you have agreed upon a name," continued the colonel, "what do you say to having a real Scout dinner in the woods?"

"That s-strikes me favorably," exclaimed Pepper.

"Then if you will make a fire I will go on a hunting expedition and see what game I can secure," said the colonel. "Better get to work, boys, for I won't be long. You will find some meal and salt in the shack, Rand, to make some bread."

"All right," responded the boys, "we will have everything ready when you get back."

The boys fell to work at once, Jack and Don gathering the wood for the fire, while Rand and Pepper mixed the dough for the bread, Dick and Gerald agreeing to do the cleaning up afterwards. By the time the colonel came back the fire was blazing and the bread baking on some stones, which were set up in front of the fire.

"How did you make out?" asked Pepper of the colonel when he returned.

"Pretty well," replied the colonel; "I got a saddle of venison and a couple of prairie chickens."

"Really?" asked Pepper, his eyes snapping.

"Well, we'll call them that," replied the colonel.

Under the colonel's direction the chickens and the saddle of mutton were suspended over the fire and kept slowly turning until they were thoroughly roasted.

"Done to a turn," as Gerald expressed it.

"Better put out a sentinel, hadn't you?" suggested the colonel when they had all gathered about the fire to watch the cooking of the dinner.

"A sentinel!" exclaimed Rand. "What for?"

"Well, we don't want our dinner carried off before our eyes," replied the colonel. "Are you sure that your agile enemy isn't watching us from somewhere and just waiting for it to be done to his taste before making a raid on us?"

"Monkey Rae!" cried Pepper, starting up. "You haven't seen anything of him, have you?"

"No," replied the colonel; "but, still it's well to be on the lookout for him. He's rather a tricky sort of a chap, I believe."

"He certainly is," admitted Rand, "but it's mostly fun with him; but Sam Tompkins, he's quite a different sort."

"What is the matter with him?" asked the colonel.

"I don't know," drawled Rand, "except he was just born that way. I think he is bad just from love of it."

"Isn't that rather a sweeping condemnation, Randolph?" asked the colonel.

"Oh, he's the worst of the bunch," put in Pepper decidedly.

"That's all true," added Jack. "There hasn't been any mischief perpetrated in town for the last four or five years that he hasn't been at the bottom of it."

"He puts the other boys up to do all kinds of things and keeps in the dark himself," continued Pepper.

"He would have been put away long ago," went on Jack, "if it wasn't for his father's political pull."

"Where did you learn all these things, Jack?" asked the colonel.

"Oh, we find out a good many things in the newspaper business, you know."

"So it seems," admitted the colonel. "What has Master Tompkins been doing lately?"

"That's hard to tell," replied Jack laughingly, "he does so many things. I hear he is going to get up an opposition patrol."

"Who would he get to join it?" asked Gerald, scornfully.

"Oh, he can find plenty to do that," replied Jack. "You know he always has plenty of money to spend."

"There's Monkey Rae and Looney Burns," said Pepper, "they would be in it."

"And Kid Murphy," added Dick.

"I wonder--" began Jack, and stopped, seemingly lost in thought.

"What is it now, Jack?" asked Rand, "trying to put two and two together?"

"I was," replied Jack, "but it don't seem to come out four."

"What is it this time, addition or multiplication?" asked Donald.

"Must be division, I think," laughed Jack. "I was wondering if Sam had anything to do with the robbery of Judge Taylor's office."

"Of course not," asserted Pepper. "What would he want to do that for?"

"I don't know," answered Jack, "or what any one else would, for that matter. But it would be just like him."

"I don't think he was guilty of that," remarked the colonel, "that was the work of men."

"But there was a boy in it," asserted Jack.

"It wouldn't be Sam," declared Pepper. "He might put others up to it, but you wouldn't find him climbing in any windows!"

"See anything of Monkey lately?" interjected Rand.

"Not since the day he stole the fish," returned Pepper.

"Haven't seen him in three or four days," said Dick. "It's queer, too, for he used to come in the shop almost every day. Nor Sam either; they must be camping out somewhere."

"Hope it isn't around here!" cried Pepper. "Say, fellows, we had better take a scout through the woods and make sure."

"Come along, then," said Rand, "and we will rout him out if he is anywhere about."

Starting out under the leadership of Rand the boys explored the woods in every direction for some distance from the camp without seeing any signs of any one being in the neighborhood.

"Going back to the flag," said the colonel, when the boys had returned, "while we are waiting for the dinner to be done, can any of you tell the history of the flag? Of its origin and how it came into being?"

"The first American flag was made in Philadelphia by Betsy Ross, in 1775, was it not?"

"According to tradition," replied the colonel, "but history doesn't bear it out. The earliest flag to be used by the colonies was the Liberty Flag, which was presented to the Council of Safety of Charleston, by Colonel Moultrie, in September, 1775."

"What was it like?" asked Rand.

"It was adapted from the Boston Liberty Tree, and was a blue flag with crescent in the dexter corner and the word 'Liberty' running lengthwise."

"There were other flags, too, weren't there?" asked Jack.

"Yes, there was the Rattlesnake Flag."

"The Rattlesnake Flag!" cried Pepper. "What was that like?"

"The Rattlesnake Flag was of the same date, 1775. It was a yellow flag with the representation of a rattlesnake coiled, ready to strike, in green, and the motto below it: 'Don't tread on me.'"

"Gee!" said Pepper, "it must have been a beauty."

"Were there any more?" asked Gerald.

"There was the Pine Tree Flag, with the motto 'An Appeal to Heaven.' This motto was adopted April, 1776, by the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts as the one to be borne as the Flag of the Cruisers of that colony. The first armed vessel commissioned under Washington

sailed under this flag. It is thought that this flag was used at the battle of Bunker Hill."

"I didn't know," said Rand, "that the American flag had such a history. Can you tell us when the first Union flag was made?"

"The first Union flag was raised by Washington at Cambridge, January 2, 1776. This flag represented the union of the colonies--not then an established nation--and while this flag, by its stripes, represented the thirteen colonies, the canton was the king's colors."

"Then, when did the stars and stripes become the national flag?" asked Jack.

"On the 14th of June, 1777, Congress adopted the resolution that the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternating red and white, and that the Union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation. But I think the dinner must be ready by this time, and I have no doubt you are. You know the Scout motto is, 'Be prepared.'"

"We will do our best," responded Pepper.

"Well," said the colonel when, a little later, the dinner had been eaten to the last scrap, "how do you like Scout fare?"

"It's ail right," conceded Pepper, "as far as it goes," looking longingly about him.

"You think there wasn't enough of it," laughed the colonel. "You have a real Scout appetite."

"To change the subject, what about uniforms?" inquired Jack.

"We will have to have them, I suppose," replied Gerald.

"Sure," returned Pepper; "that's all right, they won't cost much."

"I have an idea," broke in Rand.

"Clutch it, Randolph, ere it flies!" cried Pepper; "what is it?"

"I think," went on Rand, "that it would be a good idea if we, each one of us, earned the money ourselves to buy our uniforms."

"'Tis no a bad idea," assented Donald.

"I think it is a very good one," commended the colonel. "You have caught the spirit of the organization."

"How shall we do it?" asked Jack.

"Any way you like," replied Rand. "We will have to work it out, each one for himself."

"All right," responded Pepper, "I am going to get busy right away."

"Right now, Pepper?" asked Dick.

"Now, that don't remind you of anything," warned Pepper. "Not just this minute, but as soon as I get back to town."

"What's your scheme, Pepper?" asked Donald.

"Can't give it away," replied Pepper, "or you would all want to do it."

"I think," broke in the colonel, "it is time we were starting back. If you like, we will have a game on the way."

"A game?" asked Jack.

"Yes; a chase."

"Hare and hounds?" asked Pepper.

"In a way," replied the colonel. "Gerald, you and Pepper will be the hares and the rest of us the hounds."

"Do you mean to scatter papers?" asked Rand.

"Hardly," replied the colonel. "Nothing as plain as that. Remember, we are scouts, and we are going to try and follow the trail they leave. Now, then, hares, off with you. Go any way you choose, and in ten minutes we will take up the trail and see if we can follow it."

With a whoop Gerald and Pepper were off, racing down the road.

"Now, boys," went on the colonel, when the hares had gone, "study their foot-prints so that you will know them again."

"They all look alike to me," replied Rand.

"Study them a little," suggested the colonel; "isn't there any difference between them?"

"I think," began Jack hesitatingly, "that one is broader than the other."

"That's one thing; anything else?"

"This one shows the whole of the sole," said Donald.

"And this one only part," added Rand.

"This one is pressed in deeper on one side than the other," put in Jack.

"You are getting the idea," said the colonel. "Think you would know them again?"

"I think I would," responded Jack.

"Then follow them."

Starting off, the boys followed the trail, each one alert to notice any little peculiarity in the foot-prints that would enable them to

recognize it again. The trail was readily followed along the road until it turned off into the woods, when they lost it.

"Keep on," directed the colonel, "perhaps you can pick it up again."

Scattering through the woods the boys diligently sought for the foot-prints, but were unable to discover them.

"We have lost them," announced Rand, after they had searched for some time. "Can you help us to find it?"

"It is a little difficult," the colonel answered, "but there is a trace here and there," pointing out slight indentations on the ground. "It is quite hard here and they didn't leave much impression."

"Here it is again!" cried Rand a little later, when they came to a spot of soft earth. "Here is Pepper's track. I think I would know it anywhere now."

"Good!" commended the colonel; "you are learning fast. You will be able soon to follow any trail."

Going under the colonel's guidance the boys followed the trail through the woods until it came out again on the road, where Gerald and Pepper were waiting for them.

"Not at all bad for a first attempt," said the colonel. "We will try it again some day soon."

Which happened sooner and in a more unexpected way than any of them anticipated.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHALLENGE

"Well done, Pepper!" cried Rand, as the former, drawing back a stout bow nearly as tall as himself, let fly an arrow that struck in the third circle of the target set up at the opposite end of the green.

"'Tis a promising laddie ye are," commented Gerald Moore after a preliminary flourish of his bugle. "Ave ye live to be a hundhred and don't lave aff practice 'tis a foine shot ye'll be, I dunno."

"Let's see what you can do," retorted Pepper, with a laugh. "I don't believe you can better it."

"Begorrah, Oi don't belave it mesilf," replied Gerald, shooting an arrow that struck just on the outer edge of the target. "Faith, 'twas a narrow escape Oi made, and it's toime Oi was making another," starting off on a run as the others made for him.

"That reminds me," broke in Dick Wilson.

"It's your turn, Dick," interrupted Rand, as Dick, stepping in front of the target, after much careful aiming, shot his arrow close beside Pepper's.

"Shure Oi wouldn't have belaved av Oi hadn't seen it," remarked Gerald, who had cautiously ventured back.

This was some days later than the events recorded in the previous chapters, since which time, Rand had been selected as leader and Don as corporal, while Gerald, from his fun-loving proclivities, had been named the "Patrol's jester."

The mystery surrounding the robbery had not been cleared up, and was a frequent subject for conversation. Monkey Rae had not been seen about.

They had met upon this occasion for archery practice on the lawn in front of Mr. Scott's residence, where Rand was living. Immediately upon the formation of the Patrol Mr. Scott, who was one of the patrons of the Scout organization, had presented each member with a fine English bow and quiver of arrows, in the proper method of using which they were being instructed by Colonel Snow.

They were all dressed in the Scout uniform, which they wore when on Scout duty or out on an expedition, and were not a little proud of the fact that each one had bought his uniform with money earned by himself, the first money that some of them had ever earned. This the boys had done in various ways, each according to his own fancy, such as going errands, selling papers, working in stores and shops, etc. They were also provided with small bugle horns, upon which they had learned to sound various signals and calls.

"Now, Rand," said Donald, "show us how to do it."

"If I can," answered Rand, taking position in front of the target. "As good Hubert said: 'A man can but do his best.'"

Drawing back his bow to the full length of the arrow, with a quick glance at the target, he let fly the arrow, which whistled through the air and struck fair on the outer edge of the bull's-eye.

"A rare good shot, Master Locksley," said a laughing voice, and Rand turned to meet a frank-faced lad of his own age in the Scout uniform, who wore a first class scout's badge, and who gave the Scout salute as he stepped forward.

"Cans't thou mend it, brave yeoman," replied Rand in the language of Robin Hood's day, in which the other had spoken, returning the salute.

"I doubt it much," returned the newcomer, taking the bow which Rand had offered and stretching it the length of his arm. "A good bow and worthy of your skill. With your permission I will essay a shot."

"Rather we crave the favor," answered Rand, extending his quiver to the stranger, who carefully selecting an arrow, fitted it to the bow. Then drawing the bow back the full length of the arrow he measured the distance with his eye, and, loosing the string,

the arrow sped straight to the center of the bull's-eye.

With one accord the boys put their bugles to their lips and sounded the Scout salute.

"By my faith," cried Rand, in generous admiration of the other's skill, "'twas a noble shot and well placed. You might be the bold Robin himself returned."

"It was but a chance shot that I might not be able to repeat," returned the other modestly. "But I was a member of an archery club in our place and that brings me to my errand here. You are Randolph Peyton, leader of the Uncas Patrol, if I am not mistaken. I was told in the town that I would find you here."

"That is my name," replied Rand.

"My name is Wat Watson," announced the other with a smile. "It is an alternative sort of a name, but all I have. I have here," presenting a paper to Rand, "a challenge from the Highpoint Patrol."

"A challenge!" exclaimed Rand. "Not for an archery contest, I hope, or we are beaten before we begin. Master Watson, permit me to present Don Graeme, Jack Blake and his brother, Pepper, Dick Wilson, and last, but not least in his own estimation, Gerald Moore."

"I am heartily glad to meet you all," said Wat, shaking hands all around, "and hope I may often have the pleasure."

"The same to you," responded the boys.

"And may you live to be a hundred," added Gerald, "and may Oi be wid ye."

The paper which Nat had brought and which Rand had opened, ran:

"To the Uncas Patrol, Greeting:

"The Highpoint Patrol, of the Boy Scouts, hereby challenges the Uncas Patrol to a contest for the Scout championship of the Hudson, to be rowed by crews selected from said patrols, at such time and place as may be hereafter agreed upon.

"HIGHPOINT PATROL. JACK DUDLEY, Leader. TOM BROWN, Corporal."

"Well, boys, what do you say?" asked Rand, when he had finished reading the challenge. "After the prowess exhibited by their messenger, do you think we dare accept?" Whereupon there arose a babble of voices in which all sorts of opinions were expressed.

"Shure they can't bate us more than three miles," concluded Gerald.

"Then I suppose we may accept," said Rand.

"Shall I so report?" asked Wat.

"You can report that the challenge has been received and that we will send our answer by messenger."

"Thank you," replied Wat, "and now I must be off. Be sure and come and see us; we will try and treat you right."

"There can't be any doubt of that," replied Rand. "But, just a moment," as Mrs. Peyton appeared on the green with a tray of cakes. She was followed by a maid with a pail of lemonade.

"Isn't it time for a feast and a war dance or something?" she asked.

"We have just been having a pow-wow," replied Rand, "and our throats are dry with much talking. We have just concluded a treaty with the tribe of Highpoint and are ready for the feast of amity."

Wat would have declined to join in the festivities, but the boys were importunate, and the next half-hour was spent in an interchange of talk, in which the words: Scouts, patrol, tests, boats, were of frequent occurrence, and during which the cake and lemonade vanished as quickly as snowflakes in July, after which the Uncas escorted the messenger for a distance on his way, finally bidding him good-by with three cheers and a flourish on their bugles.

CHAPTER XIV

A DEFIANCE

"Well," began Rand on the evening of the day on which the challenge had been received from the Highpoint Patrol, "what shall we do with this challenge?"

"Accept it, av coorse," cried Gerald. "Shure, they can't bate us more thin foor miles."

"But we only row three," put in Jack.

"Thin it's a safe bet," went on Gerald, "Aven Don might bet on that."

"What's that?" asked Donald.

"That they won't bate us more than foor miles," replied Gerald.

"In my opinion," began Donald, "'tis no good accepting, for we have no boat, and if we did we have no time for practice, and---"

"Can't you think of a few more while you are at it," laughed Rand. "As for a boat we can get the use of the old shell of the Creston Club."

"And we no have any crew to speak of," continued Donald.

"That's easily got over," went on Rand. "There is Jack, Dick and you and I for the crew, with Gerald for coxswain."

"And where do I come in?" questioned Pepper.

"You don't come in," answered Gerald. "You stand on the bank and root for us."

"Root!" cried Pepper; "what do you think I am--a pig?"

"That reminds me--" broke in Dick.

"No it don't," objected Donald; "we have no time to listen to your anecdotes."

"Do you think we have any chance against them?" asked Jack.

"I would no say we had no chance," replied Donald; "but, in my opinion, 'tis no much to brag about."

"That reminds me--" began Dick once more.

"What, against?" said Donald.

"Oh, let him get it off his mind," advised Jack. "What does it remind you of?"

"It reminds me of the hunter that came over here from New York last fall and met old Uncle Zac Williams back in the country and asked him if there was any hunting around here.

"Plenty of it," said Uncle Zac.

"Where is the best place to go?" asked the hunter.

"Oh, mos' anywhere," said Uncle Zac; 'yo' can't miss hit.'

"So the hunter went on, and that night as he was going home he met Uncle Zac again.

"Hello!" he said, 'ain't you the man that told me there was plenty of hunting around here?'

"I reckon I be," replied Uncle Zac.

"Well, I've hunted all around here and I haven't seen the first thing to shoot.'

"Waal, ther wasn't nothin' ther matter with ther huntin' was ther?" said Uncle Zac."

"All right," said Donald, when Dick had finished, "we'll forgive you this time, but don't let it happen again."

The boys were in their club room in the attic of Mr. Scott's house, which had been given over to Rand's use. By one of the windows was the instruments of a wireless station with which Rand and his chums had experimented, and scattered about the room were golf clubs, baseball bats and other implements and apparatus of boyish sports.

"It isn't a question of winning or losing," went on Rand. "There would not be any sport in it if we only went in when we thought

we would win. We will do our best and if we lose we will cheer our loudest for the winners."

"That's the talk!" cried Jack. "We may not win success, but we'll deserve it."

"Then," continued Rand, "we agree to accept the challenge of the Highpoints. How's this for a reply?"

"TO THE HIGHPOINT PATROL, GREETING:

"The Uncas Patrol accepts with pleasure your courteous challenge to a contest on the Hudson. Time and place to be agreed upon."

"In my opinion," said Donald, "you should say 'rowing match' as being more specific."

"All right," replied Rand. "Are there any further additions or amendments? If not, I will declare it approved as read."

"Now, who will volunteer to carry it to Highpoint?"

"I will!" cried Dick.

"I will make the attempt," announced Donald.

"Lave it to me," said Gerald.

"I'll take it," responded Jack.

"I ought to be the one," pleaded Pepper. "You know I am not in the race."

"You can't all go," decided Rand; "how shall we settle it?"

"Take a vote on it," suggested Jack.

"We will each one write a name on a slip of paper and put it in the box," proposed Pepper.

For a moment each boy was busy with paper and pencil and then the ballots were thrown upon the table to be counted by Rand.

"Each one of you has received one vote; you each voted for yourself," announced Rand, when he had gone over them. "You will have to draw lots."

"Let's toss up for it," said Donald. "Toss up your lucky penny, Rand."

"How can you manage that?" asked Jack, "there are five of us and only one penny."

"That's easily fixed," replied Donald, "Jack and I will toss first and the winner takes the next one."

"Very well," agreed Rand, "what do you say, Jack?" giving the coin a toss in the air.

"Head!" said Jack.

"Tail it is," returned Rand, as he picked it up. "Now, Gerald, it is your choice."

"Head," replied Gerald.

"Tail again," said Rand.

"Faith, that's the toime tail came out a head," commented Gerald.

"Now, Dick."

"Head," replied Dick.

"Tail again," announced Rand. "Luck is with you, Donald. There is only Pepper left now."

"Only Pepper!" exclaimed that individual indignantly. "What is the matter with me?"

"Notin' at ail, me darlint," broke in Gerald; "shure, your the biggest banana in the bunch, av people only knew it."

"Well, Pepper?" said Rand.

"Heads."

"Head it is," announced Rand. "You're it, Pepper."

"Begorrah, 'tis a long tail that has no head," commented Gerald.

"Master Pepper Blake," began Rand, "has been chosen to carry our message of defiance to the tribe of the Highpoints."

"When do I go?"

"At the rise of the sun to-morrow," replied Rand, "you must be prepared to take the trail."

"Before breakfast?"

"We will not require that sacrifice of you," said Rand. "Here is the message. Fail not on your honor to deliver it. You are going through a hostile country beset with enemies--"

"Monkey Rae's," murmured Gerald.

"And the message must be delivered under all circumstances. It contains information of the utmost importance, which must not be allowed to fall into the enemies's hands. I will meet you to-morrow at the great oak to give you your final instructions."

"Very well, sir," replied Pepper, "I will not fail to carry out your commands to the letter."

"Bravo, boys, well done!" commended Mr. Scott, who had been standing in the doorway, unseen by the boys, enjoying the fun. "If I was only a little younger, there is nothing I would like better than

to be an Indian brave with you."

For a moment the boys were silent in the presence of the bank president, whom they all regarded with more or less awe, until Gerald broke the silence.

"Shure, 'tis niver too late to have fun, Mister Scott," he said. "We'd be plased to have ye for one of us. We'll make ye prisident an' ye'll find it a hape more fun than bein' the prisident av the bank."

"I don't doubt it," replied Mr. Scott laughingly, "but I'm afraid I am almost too old to keep up the pace you set. But I'll tell you what I am going to do. I am going on an outing some of these days and I am going to invite you all to go along with me."

"Hurrah!" cried the boys with a will.

"Ready Uncas!" called Don, raising his bugle, "the Scout salute!"

As the room rang with the noise Mr. Scott clapped his hands to his ears.

"Thanks," he said; "Mrs. Scott sent me up here to see if there was anything the matter, you were so quiet, but after that I think she will conclude that you are all right."

"What is that you have there, Rand?" he added as he caught sight of the coin that Rand had been using to toss up. "Where did you get it?"

"Those are the ones that we found in the road," replied Rand. "Do you know what they are?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Scott; "they are a political token issued in the time of Van Buren during the controversy over the currency. By the way, I shouldn't be surprised if these were some of the coins that were stolen out of Judge Taylor's office when it was broken into."

"Then the robbers must have gone away over that road," mused Rand, "and that is how they got there."

"That was doubtless the way of it," concluded Jack.

"Ay, but you thought there was some connection with them and Monkey Rae," reminded Donald.

"Are you sure there isn't?" answered Jack.

CHAPTER XV

PEPPER TAKES THE MESSAGE

When Rand arrived at the great oak, which stood at the fork of

the road on the outskirts of Creston, on the following morning, he found Pepper impatiently awaiting his arrival.

"I thought you were never coming," grumbled Pepper, when Rand made his appearance. "I expected to be half way there by this time."

"Plenty of time," said Rand. "How long do you think it will take you to get there and back?"

"How far is it?"

"Five miles, as the crow flies," returned Rand, "and near six by the road."

"That's an hour and a half on the road each way and an hour to stop. I ought to do it in four hours and a half."

"Then you should be back by dinner time," concluded Rand. "We will meet you here at 1 o'clock. Which road are you going to take?"

"The upper road," decided Pepper, "it runs through the woods, but it's by far the shortest way."

With a whistle the boy started off along the thoroughfare at a good pace. "Look for me at 1 sharp," he called back as he went off.

He had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile on his way when, as he was passing a small clump of bushes by the side of the road, there was a rustle behind the bushes, and a voice cried:

"Halt!"

Pepper, however, broke into a run which carried him past the clump, when again came the command:

"Halt, or I'll shoot!"

The boy hesitated for a moment as to whether he should stop or run, and as he did so Gerald and Jack came out upon the scene.

"Did we scare you?" asked Gerald.

"No," replied Pepper stoutly, "I thought it was a joke."

"We just wanted to test your courage," said Jack.

"That reminds me--" began Dick, who had now joined the others.

"That it is time for me to be getting along," broke in Pepper. "Good-by, fellows," starting off again.

"Good luck," called the boys after him.

The road which he was following ran through the woods along the top of the mountain and was comparatively little traveled, most persons preferring the lower road which, although longer, was not near so rough or hilly.

Pepper met but few people on the way, and had gone rather more than

half the distance when, as he was descending the slope of a small hill, he observed coming down the opposite slope a horse and wagon, about which there was something familiar.

"That looks like the rig that Monkey Rae was driving the other day," he thought, as he looked at it again. "If he is in it, I think I had better do the disappearance act until he goes by."

Stepping from the road he waited behind a small thicket until the wagon came nearer, when he saw that it was being driven by the man who had been with Monkey when they had taken the boat, and that, following the wagon was a big, ugly-looking, mongrel dog, that was dashing from one side of the road to the other, interspersed with little excursions into the woods.

"Gee!" thought Pepper, "I wouldn't want to fall into their hands. I think it's to the woods for mine," at the same time making his way as quickly as possible deeper into the underbrush.

"I didn't get out of the way any too soon," he continued to himself, for on coming to the place where Pepper had left the road the dog stopped, sniffed at the ground and gave vent to a gruff bark.

"What is it, Tige, old boy?" called the man, stopping his horse. "Sic 'em!"

With a deep growl the dog started on the boy's trail. Pepper could hear him crashing his way through the underbrush and ran as fast as he could, looking about him, as he ran, for a stick or a stone with which to defend himself, but could see none, and all the time the dog was coming closer and closer, his growl becoming more and more menacing. It was nearly upon him, and he imagined that he could feel its hot breath and expected every moment to feel the snap of its jaws, when he saw, a little way ahead of him, what looked like a stout black stick lying upon the ground. "Gee! that's lucky," thought Pepper, running to where the stick lay and, stooping to pick it up when, to his astonishment and terror, the supposed stick glided from under his hand and he saw that he had been about to grasp a large-sized snake. Springing to his feet he made a wild jump upward and, as luck would have it, caught at the branch of a tree above his head, and, getting a firm grasp, drew himself up just as the dog, with its teeth snapping, sprang at him.

"Crickets!" said the boy to himself, "but that was a close shave," meantime climbing up into the tree to a more comfortable perch. "I don't know which of them I like the least. It looks as though there was going to be something doing now."

So intent had been the dog in its pursuit of Pepper that he did not see the snake until he had run onto it as it lay coiled upon the ground when, with a cry of alarm, the dog bounded into the air, clearing the snake by half a dozen feet. Apparently forgetting the quarry which it had been so eagerly pursuing, the dog now turned its attention to the snake, which was the largest that Pepper had ever seen.

For a few moments Pepper was too fascinated to move, as he watched the strangest combat that he had ever seen going on beneath him. A combat in which neither of the combatants seemed desirous of assuming

the aggressive. Lying in a close coil, with its head rising from the center, its forked tongue darting in and out, and emitting every now and then an angry hiss, the snake, swaying its head from side to side, closely followed in its movements those of the dog, which circled about it barking furiously, and apparently watching for an opportunity to seize it back of the head, but which the snake was too wary to permit.

[Illustration: "The strangest combat that he had ever seen."]

"This beats the circus," thought Pepper, after he had watched the fight for a little time, "but this isn't getting the message to Highpoint. I don't believe I have time to wait for the finale. I wonder how I am going to get out of this. If I drop down there they will be making a show of me. Looks as though I might get over into that next tree. I'll try it, anyhow."

The trees here had grown so close together that many of the branches were in-lacing, and it seemed possible to Pepper that he could get from the one tree into the other.

"It looks kind of thin," thought Pepper, when he had picked out a limb which extended into the adjoining tree, "but, perhaps, it will do."

Crawling out upon the branch until it bent and swayed dangerously under his weight, he caught a branch of the other tree and swung himself over, narrowly missing a fall.

"So far, so good," soliloquized Pepper, working his way toward the trunk. "I rather like this way of going. Now for the next one."

The next tree was a little farther away, but by climbing out on a bough that extended into the other tree he crept on until he could just touch one of the opposite branches, but could not get a hold.

"Looks as if I would have to go back," he decided, after he had tried and failed to get a hold on the other tree. But this, he found, was more easily said than done, for when he attempted to turn around he slipped and only his quick clutch of the swaying branch saved him from a tumble.

"This is a nice scrape I have got into," he thought, when he tried to climb back onto the limb from which he had slipped, but found it impossible. "I can't get back, and I don't see how I am to go on. I hope it will let me down easy."

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE WAS PEPPER?

"Two o'clock," said Rand, closing his watch with a snap. "An hour behind time."

The boys had been waiting at the great oak since just after noon,

but Pepper had not yet come.

"Perhaps he got off the road and got lost in the woods," suggested Jack.

"Maybe he got back sooner than he expected by some other road and went home," said Gerald. "Shall I run over and see?"

"Go ahead," replied Rand. "We will wait for you here."

Darting off, Gerald was gone but a few minutes, returning on the run to report that Pepper had not been back since morning.

"Perhaps he has got hurt somehow," put in Dick.

"It is no way impossible," assented Donald. "It might no be a bad idea to walk along the road until we meet him."

"Which way did he go?" asked Jack.

"The upper road," replied Rand.

The boys acted upon the suggested and proceeded along the road, slowly at first, then more rapidly as their comrade did not appear. They had covered more than half the distance to Highpoint.

"Listen!" said Jack suddenly, as they stopped for a moment. "What is that?"

Faint and far in the distance sounded what seemed like a bugle call.

"It is a bugle call," cried Dick. "It must be Pepper."

"It may be possible," admitted Donald.

Putting his bugle to his lips Rand blew a long, clear call, but it brought no response.

"Which way did the sound come from?" asked Gerald.

"From over that way," replied Dick, indicating with his hand.

"What would he be doing away off there?" demanded Donald.

"There is it again," said Gerald, as the sound was repeated.

"It is over this way," declared Jack, designating another direction.

"No, it's over this way," asserted Dick, but still at variance with the others.

"Wait," said Rand, "maybe we can hear it again."

The boys stood silent for a few moments, when the call came faintly once again.

"It is over this way," declared Rand, leading the way to the right, but, although they stopped from time to time to listen, they did not

hear the sound again, nor did they find any trace of their missing comrade. For a half hour or more they continued their search, but in vain, and they were returning to the road when they heard the call again, but so faintly that it was lost almost as soon as heard.

"He is going away," decided Rand. "There is certainly something queer about it."

"In my opinion," began Donald, "'tis no use looking any more."

"Why not?" asked Rand.

"Because it was no mortal sound," replied Donald.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Rand.

"Nonsense or no," retorted Donald stoutly, "I don't like it."

"What is it, then, Donald, if it isn't mortal?" asked Rand.

"I can no rightly say," responded Donald, "but I don't believe you will ever find him."

"Pooh!" returned Rand; "he may be along any minute."

"Let us go on to Highpoint," proposed Jack, "and see if he has been there."

As nothing better was suggested the boys set out for Highpoint, which they soon reached, and a short hunt enabled them to find Jack Dudley, the leader of the Highpoint Patrol, from whom they learned that Pepper had not been there.

"What time did he start?" asked Dudley.

"Eight o'clock," replied Rand.

"It's very strange," said Dudley. "He may have met with some accident. I will hunt up our patrol and will help you search for him. If you will go back and start from the point where you searched before we will take up the scout from here and keep on until we find him, or we join forces again, unless you have something better to propose."

"I don't think there is any better way," said Rand, with which the others agreed, and thanking him for his offer, the Uncas boys, now thoroughly alarmed, set out again upon the search.

It was 5 o'clock when they got back to Creston, searching on the way, and Pepper had not returned, or trace of him found.

"What shall we do next?" asked Jack, as they stood undecided in the road.

"What is it now?" asked Colonel Snow, who had come up unperceived.

"We can't find Pepper," answered the boys.

"What is it," went on the colonel, "a game of hide and seek?"

"No, sir," responded Rand; "he went over to Highpoint this morning with a message; I mean he started for Highpoint, but he hasn't been there and he hasn't come back. We are afraid he is lost."

"Lost!" exclaimed the colonel. "How could that be."

"We don't know," answered Jack; "but we have hunted all over for him, and he isn't anywhere about."

"All over?" said the colonel. "He couldn't very well be all over at once, could he? But, come along, and we will see if we can't find him. Which way did he go?"

"On the upper road," answered Rand; "but we have been all along that."

"Well, we'll see if we can't pick up his trail," went on the colonel at once, leading off at a rapid pace. "Did any of you pick it up?"

"There are lots of tracks," replied Rand, "but I did not pick his out."

"Some who are expert, you know, can read tracks as readily as you read the paper. These look much alike, but we will follow them up and see if any diverge or break away from the road."

Walking rapidly along the road the colonel indicated one he thought might be Pepper's track, which the boys followed, with some success, after it had been pointed out until, all at once, the marks indicated that the person had come to a sudden stop and had turned aside.

"He left the road here for some reason," decided the colonel, "or the one who made the trail did. He went through here, you can see how these bushes have been thrust aside."

"I do now," replied Rand, "but I wouldn't have noticed it myself."

"Did he have a dog with him?" continued the colonel, following the trail through the woods.

"No," answered Rand.

"Probably the dog came from the other direction. Looks as if Pepper was trying to get away from the dog. They were both in a hurry. It stops here; he must have taken to a tree."

"Pepper!" he shouted, "where are you?"

But neither his calls nor those of the boys brought any response.

"He isn't here," went on the colonel; "but there has been a disturbance of some kind. There are dog's tracks all around as if the animal had struggled with something, but no footprints. There is the track of a snake, too."

"A snake!" cried Jack, in alarm. "Do you think it could have bitten him?"

"No," said the colonel, "if he had been bitten we would still have

his trail. He seems to have vanished into the air."

"I don't see how he could do that," declared Don.

"Neither do I," replied the colonel. "Spread out around the tree and see if you can find where he came down."

But a thorough search failed to reveal, to the investigators, any trace.

"I never saw anything like this," declared the colonel. "He seems to have disappeared completely."

"But where could he have gone?" asked Jack, anxious for the safety of his brother.

"I wish I knew," returned the colonel. "If there were any birds around here big enough we might suspect that one of them had carried him off, but we will evidently have to await Pepper's own explanation of the enigma." Then he added after a moment:

"Well, boys, we have got to the end of the trail. I don't know what to do next."

"That reminds me," started Dick, when there was a hiss, a snarl and a flash through the air from the tree, under whose branches they were standing, and an immense wild cat, spitting and clawing, landed on Dick's back.

"Help! Murder!" shouted Dick. "Take it off!"

For an instant the boys were so dumfounded by the suddenness of the attack that they all jumped in different directions, but the colonel, with a well-directed blow from the heavy stick he carried, knocked the animal off of Dick, but not before his coat had been torn and Dick himself scratched by its claws.

Snarling and spitting the cat now crouched, facing the colonel, and seemed about to spring.

"Knock him over the head!" shouted Donald. "Hit it in the head with a stone," looking about for a weapon.

"Look out!" called Rand, "give me a chance at it!" drawing back his bow and letting fly an arrow which pierced the animal's body and knocked it sprawling, when Gerald added a blow from a well-directed stone. With a wild scream the cat bounded into the air and fell motionless to the ground.

"Look out, Rand!" cautioned Dick, creeping back from the bushes into which he had fled as soon as he had gained his feet, as Rand went up to where the cat was lying. "Take care it don't spring on you!"

"No danger," replied Rand: "it's dead."

"Faith, thin, Oi w'udn't trust it, dead or alive," said Gerald.

"That was a good shot, Rand," commended the colonel, "and just in

time. A full-grown wild cat is an enemy not to be despised."

"I should say not," agreed Dick. "Ugh! I feel as if I had been scraped with a curry-comb. I wonder," with a look at his clothes, "if I couldn't get a job somewhere as a scarecrow?"

"But what has become of Pepper?" asked Don.

"That is the puzzle that we have got to solve," replied the colonel. "For the present the only thing we can do is to go back to Creston and see if we can't pick up some new clues."

The boys, with Colonel Snow, slowly made their way back to the town, carrying with them the body of the cat, the skin of which Rand proposed to have tanned for a trophy for the club room.

As they entered the town they were met by Officer Dugan, who put his hand on Rand's shoulder.

"I have a warrant for your arrest," he said.

The party were amazed, and the colonel was the first to speak.

"For what?" he asked.

"For robbing Judge Taylor's office," replied the officer.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MESSAGE

For a moment or two Pepper hung at the extremity of the branch to which he was clinging, when all at once there came an ominous cracking and the end broke away, but fortunately it had swung so low toward the ground that he dropped at the foot of the tree, not much the worse for his experience.

It had all happened so quickly that, before he had time to utter a cry Pepper found himself lying on the ground flat on his back.

"My goodness gracious!" exclaimed Pepper, feeling himself all over to make sure that he was all there. "The farther I go the worse it gets. This is certainly the worst yet. I think the ground is good enough for me after that."

A little dazed by his fall, Pepper, without stopping to consider his direction, started off as fast as he could go, turning this way and that as he went, to avoid the thicker growths of under-brush, until he had gone a mile or more, getting all the time deeper into the forest.

"I think," he mused, when he stopped for a breathing spell, looking about for some clue to guide him, "I had better be getting back to the road. Now, I wonder which way it is. Let me see, which is the North. That must be it, because this side of the trees have moss

on them; then the road must be off this way."

Starting off in the direction he had decided upon Pepper pursued his way, swerving now to the right and again to the left to avoid some all but impassable thicket or some swampy bit of ground, until he judged that he had gone at least a mile.

"Crickets!" he exclaimed at length. "I wonder where that road has gone. I was not that far from it, I know. I must have traveled about four miles since I left it, in the wrong direction at that. Gee! It must be pretty near noon, by the way I feel." Looking at his watch he saw it was 12 o'clock, and sat down to eat his lunch.

"Lucky I brought it along," he thought; "for, from the looks of things, I don't know when I am going to get any more. I wonder if the boys are waiting for me to return? Looks as though they would have quite a wait.

"Now, which way shall I go?" he questioned when he had finished. "There doesn't seem to be any choice in the matter, one way looks as promising as another."

Striking off at right angles from the way he had been going he decided to try that course for a while, but after traveling for an hour through the underbrush, which seemed to be getting thicker and more difficult to get through the farther he went, he again came to a halt.

"Looks as if I was lost," he mused, "and the farther I go the more lost I am. I suppose if Don were here he would toss up for the way to go, and I guess that's as good a way as any."

Taking a coin from his pocket he closed his hand upon the metal without looking at it. "if it is head," he decided, "I will go to the right, and if it is tail I will go to the left. It's head," opening his hand. "Now, I'll bet that isn't the right way, but I'll try it anyhow."

Taking the course the coin had indicated Pepper plunged into the brush and doggedly pushed on, although he was getting tired and somewhat discouraged.

"I am going to keep on this way," he determined, "until I get to the road or come out on the other side, if it brings me out in California."

Stopping to rest, after he had forced his way through a particularly heavy growth of brush, he was startled at hearing the angry bark of a dog not far away.

"Crickets!" he cried, "I hope I haven't run across that beast again I think I had better look for a stick while I have time. I don't want to be picking up any more snakes"

Looking about him he found a good-sized stick lying upon the ground, which he scrutinized closely before venturing to take possession.

In addition to the barking of the dog he could now hear voices, and thus encouraged, he advanced in the direction from which came the sounds.

"Perhaps I can find some one who can direct me how to get out of this," he thought. A few minutes' walk brought him near to a small opening in the woods in which stood a rudely-built cabin, and a little way off a smaller shack which, apparently, was used as a stable, as there was a wagon standing beside it, which Pepper recognized as the one he had seen on the road, and as the very one Monkey had been driving when he nearly run them down. There were a couple of kegs in the wagon and several tin cans. Perched on the roof of the cabin was a boy, whom he recognized as Sam Tompkins, who had, apparently, climbed there to escape the dog, which was jumping up, trying to get at him.

While Pepper watched, the man whom he had seen driving the wagon, came from the inside of the house and drove the dog away, at the same time calling to Sam to come down.

"That's what you get for teasing him," he growled. "He'll take a piece out of you yet."

Making a surly response Sam slipped down from the roof and disappeared into the house.

"Gee!" exclaimed Pepper. "I am glad I didn't walk in on them. Now, I wonder what is going on here?"

From a large chimney, which was built at the back of the cabin, which was nearest Pepper, the smoke from a wood fire was rising, and there was an unpleasant odor in the air.

"That must be the smoke we saw from the river the other day," concluded Pepper. "I wonder what they are cooking there? I can't say I like the smell of it, whatever it is, and I don't think this is any good place for me, either."

Slipping back as quietly as he had come, Pepper started on his away again. When he had gotten far enough from the place so that, he thought, it would not attract the attention of those there, Pepper sounded a call on his bugle.

"Perhaps the boys are out looking for me when I didn't get back on time," he said, sounding the call from time to time as he went on, but which brought no response.

"Thank goodness! I've got to the end of the woods," he exclaimed a little later, when he saw an open space not far ahead of him.

Hurrying forward he found himself, not, as he had expected, on the road, but on the top of a high bluff which descended almost perpendicularly for a hundred feet to a roadway, which was a welcome sight. Just below him, looking over the edge, he saw that there was a broad ledge about ten feet down and that, below this again, the cliff sloped at an acute angle to another narrow ledge, but below this again there was seemingly nothing but the bare side of the cliff.

"No use trying to get down that way," he soliloquized. "I'll just follow along the edge and see where I come out."

Turning, he was about to step back when the earth, where he was standing, gave way, sliding down to the ledge below and carrying him with it.

"Goodness!" he cried, picking himself up and shaking off the dirt with which he was covered. "I wonder what next? Now, how am I going to get out of this? I doubt if I can get back up there, and it don't look inviting below."

It was impossible to climb up the side of the cliff, as it was almost perpendicular, but upon the small ledge below he noticed that a stunted tree was growing from the rocks.

"I wonder if I can catch that tree," considered Pepper, preparing to slide down to the ledge. "I guess it ain't a question of can, I've just got to do it, and I won't be any worse off there than I am here, and I may be a good deal better."

Carefully calculating his distance he let go, sliding down until he reached the ledge where he clutched a tree and held on until he could gain a footing. The ledge, which was about a foot in width, ran but a short distance in either direction, but to the right, a few feet below, was another level space, which Pepper judged he might gain. Moving cautiously along until he was over the point he let himself down to the lower ledge. Following this along he was able to gain another, and so on, slipping at times and tumbling, until he finally came out upon a small plateau at the foot of the hill.

"Thank goodness!" he cried as he got up and shook himself. "I've got to the bottom, anyhow. I hope there isn't anything more coming my way or I won't get that message there to-day, and I've got to move pretty quick, as it is."

He had gone but a short distance when he heard a loud "hello," and looked up to see a strange boy in the Scout uniform standing on the rocks not far above him.

"Hello!" called the boy again; "who are you?"

"Hello!" he replied. "Pepper Blake. Who are you?"

"Tom Brown," replied the other, then, with his trumpet, sending out a call that went echoing among the rocks until it brought back an answering call. "Say, hold on until I get down there," he said, addressing Pepper, then clambering down until he stood beside the lost boy. "Do you know we have been hunting all over for you?"

"No," replied Pepper; "but I am mighty glad to see you just the same."

"How did you get down here?" went on Tom.

"Tumbled down, mainly," was the reply. "I took a drop from the top of the hill yonder."

By this time several more of the boys, who were members of the Highpoint Patrol, had joined them and began to ply the object of their search with questions.

"Hold on a minute," said one of them. "Say, Pepper, ain't you hungry?"

"Well, I had a bite," he confessed; "but that was a good while ago, and I want to get on with this message."

"I guess you have got there," said the boy, with a laugh. "I am Jack Dudley, the Leader; you can give it to me."

"All right," replied Pepper, with a sigh of relief; "I got it to you, anyhow."

"You certainly did," said Jack. "Lucky we brought along a day's rations. We didn't know how long we might be out. Now," as the boys got out their supplies from their knapsacks and spread them out on the rocks, "tell us how you got here." Whereupon Pepper related the story of his adventures.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Tom, when the story was finished, "I don't believe it is safe for you to be out alone. What do you say, boys, don't you think we ought to see him safe home?"

"Sure," agreed the others.

"It's getting dark now," continued Tom, "and there is no telling what he will find on the road."

So, in spite of Pepper's protests that he was all right and that once put upon the right road he could take care of himself, the boys insisted upon escorting him to the outskirts of Creston, which they reached without further misadventure.

"Do you think you will be safe now?" asked Tom as they were about to leave him.

"Of course I will," replied Pepper, with a laugh; "why, I am almost home."

"Well, then, good night," they called, and with three cheers for Pepper, the messenger of the Uncas, the Highpoint boys turned about and went on their way home.

Tired, but happy that he had succeeded in delivering the message, Pepper hurried on home. He was almost there when he was accosted by a schoolmate and was told that his brother Jack and others had been seen going into Judge Taylor's office. It was but a step farther, so thither he directed his course.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE JUDGE'S OFFICE

Colonel Snow and the greatly excited boys accompanied the officer and his charge to the judge's office.

"Good evening, Colonel; good evening, boys," said the judge, greeting them pleasantly when they came in under the escort of the officer. "I am glad to see you. Is this an official visit?"

"Good evening, Judge," replied Rand. "I suppose it must be. The officer said I was under arrest."

"Gracious, no! Not at all," said the judge. "That was a blunder, indeed. I merely told him I wanted to see you. I wanted to see if you could throw any light on the robbing of my office."

"Have you any reason to think that they know anything about it?" demanded the colonel indignantly.

"No sufficient reason," replied the judge. "Now, don't get excited," as the colonel was about to speak, "but there has been a lot of loose talk circulating, and I thought I would like to settle it."

"Loose talk!" exclaimed the colonel; "about whom?"

"About Randolph, Dick Wilson and young Blake," explained the judge; "and, by the way, where is Pepper? I don't see him here."

"We don't know where he is," replied Jack. "We have been hunting for him all the afternoon, but we couldn't find him."

"How is that?" questioned the judge.

Whereupon the story of the unavailing search was told.

"That is certainly remarkable," admitted the judge. "Perhaps we had better put this matter off until we see if we can't find him. Have you any plans, Colonel?"

"No," replied the colonel, forgetting his anger over the blundering arrest. "I am at a complete loss how to proceed. If the ground had opened and swallowed him he could not have disappeared more suddenly and more completely."

"We shall certainly have to start another search. The question is where to begin," mused the judge, and just then, catching sight of Officer Dugan, his mind reverting to the latter's inexcusable blunder, he gave the chagrined minion of the law a severe reprimand. How far the angry judge might have proceeded is not known, for just at this moment Pepper appeared in the doorway.

"Pepper!" cried Jack. "Where in the world have you been?"

"Where in the world haven't I been?" he responded.

"You evidently found yourself," asserted the colonel.

"Is it really you, Pepper?" asked Gerald; "and where did you hide yourself?" and other questions came thick and fast.

"Just returned from delivery of the message to the Highpoint Scouts," finally answered the boy when he was afforded an opportunity to speak.

"Highpoint! Why, we went to Highpoint!" cried Rand, "and you had not been there. Which way did you go?"

"Don't know," replied the messenger. "Round by Robin Hood's barn, I guess; but I came out on the side of the cliff, and the Highpoints fortunately found me."

"But how did you get out of the tree?" asked the colonel. "We couldn't find any trail."

"Did you know I was up a tree? Well, I climbed into the next tree," was the reply.

"Ah!" said the colonel, "that accounts for it. I never thought of that."

"Tell us about it," requested the judge.

"There isn't very much to tell," said Pepper, repeating the details of his trip, from the time of meeting the horse and wagon with Monkey Rae and the man.

"Of course," muttered Jack, "you could bet Monkey would be in it somewhere."

"S-s-say," went on Pepper, "how did that fight come out? I didn't have time to stop and see."

"I should think not," observed the judge; "it was your busy day."

"I think it must have been a draw," answered the colonel, "for each went his own way. But to return to our business. You said, Judge, there was some talk about these boys; what is it?"

"Well, you know," began the judge, "my office was broken into some time ago and some things taken."

"You don't think that these boys had anything to do with it, do you?" interrupted the colonel.

"Of course not," the judge assured him; "but there were some boys' tracks--now let me go on--and it has been said that these boys were out very early on that morning, and that they have been spending money pretty freely of late, buying uniforms and other things."

"But we earned that money ourselves," interrupted Pepper indignantly.

"Don't get hot, Pepper," counseled Donald.

"I don't doubt it," replied the judge; "and then it is reported that Randolph and Pepper claimed to have found money on the road."

"I don't know as you could call it money," demurred Rand, showing the coin that he had found. "I found this and Pepper found another."

"Ah!" remarked the judge, taking the coin, "that looks like one of those stolen from me. Where did you find it?"

"On the Mountain Road," answered Rand. "We did not know that they were yours, or we should have returned them."

"I don't know that they are mine," said the judge, "although they are similar. You had better keep them for the present. So that is the way they went," he mused; "they probably escaped in a boat. I'm afraid there isn't much chance of capturing them. That is all, boys. I just wanted to have a talk with you to straighten things out."

"Where did all these stories come from?" asked the colonel.

"Oh, I think it is mostly boys' talk," said the judge. "I think Tompkins said he heard it from his boy."

"Sam Tompkins!" cried Jack, "of course. He's trying to throw suspicion on us, but I guess he knows a lot more about it than we do."

"I think you have hit it, Jack," agreed the judge. "I believe that is a clue worth following up."

"But what about the tools?" asked the officer.

"Oh, yes," continued the judge, "I had forgotten about them. Do you know anything about these tools, Dick?"

"Yes, sir; they came from our shop," he answered.

"Ah! that's what I thought," said the officer to himself. "It isn't going to end here."

"They were taken from there," went on Dick. "We missed them several days before the robbery, but I don't know who took them."

"Then they must have been taken by some one around here," concluded the judge. "It seems to me that the farther we go the more mysterious it gets. Jack, I think that you had better set your wits to work and see if you can't clear it up."

"Very well, Judge," answered Jack, who had been going over the matter in his mind. "I think I have a clue that I am going to follow up and see what comes of it."

"Good," commented the judge. "While I do not believe for an instant that any of you young gentlemen had anything to do with the robbery, I would like to see it brought home to those who did it."

"And I, too," added the colonel.

"Good night, boys," continued the judge. "You have had rather an exciting day, and I think you had better be getting home. I think you want to look out for Pepper so that nothing more happens to him to-night."

"Good night, Judge," responded the boys, Jack adding as they went out, "I won't leave him out of sight until I have him safe in the house."

CHAPTER XIX

A NARROW ESCAPE

"Row, brothers, row," said Gerald "Kape it up, you're doin' fine."

"How are we going?" asked Rand.

"Almost as fasht as Oi c'ud walk," replied Gerald in his richest brogue. "Av ye hit it up a bit mebbe ye c'ud be in toime to see the ind av it to-morrow, Oi dunno."

"But truly, Geraid," asked Donald, "how are we doing?"

"As weil as c'ud be ixpected av a lot of farmers," replied the irrepressible Gerald. "Ye moight do worse, Oi dunno. Mebbe av ye tho't ye were hoeing potatoes ye c'ud do betther. Can't ye hit up a bit?"

"I guess we can; a little," replied Rand, who was rowing stroke, slightly increasing his effort. "How is that?"

"Betther," responded the other, and the boat shot ahead a little faster.

The Uncas crew were out for a final spin over the course before the race, which had been set for the following day. Beside the Uncas and the Highpoint, the Alton, from farther up the river, had also entered. It was not thought, even by their friends, that the Uncas had much chance against the others, whose crews, particularly the Alton's, were much heavier and stronger.

"Is that better?" asked Rand, after they had rowed a short time.

"'Tis a thrifle betther," replied Gerald. "Av ye do as well to-morrow, mebbe we won't be disgraced intirely, Oi dunno."

"Come now, Gerald," pleaded Jack, "tell us how we are doing?"

"Shure, Oi don't want to discourage ye intirely," replied Gerald, "but ye didn't do any betther than three minutes in the lasht moile."

"Three minutes!" shouted Don; "did we do it in that?"

"Hurrah!" cried Jack; "we'll be in it yet."

"In what?" asked Dick.

"In the water," chuckled Jack.

"You will be," retorted Donald, "if you spring anything like that on us again."

"That reminds me--" began Dick.

"What does?" asked Donald.

"What is the matter, Gerald?" broke in Rand, as the coxswain, with a sudden exclamation, threw the rudder hard down and called:

"Up oars, all!"

The boys raised their oars just in time as the shell grazed the stern of a heavy skiff, which a boy, who was rowing, had stopped just in the course of the shell.

"Hey, there!" shouted Rand as the boats swept apart: "what are you trying to do, run us down?"

"What are you trying to do, yourself?" retorted a man, who was sitting in the stern of the skiff. "Don't you think anybody has any right on the river but you? Think you own the whole place, don't you?"

"But you had plenty of room without getting in the way," persisted Rand. "I think you did it on purpose."

"Aw, go wan!" returned the man. "Don't get too funny or I'll come over there and take you over my knee."

"Come over and try it, if you think you can do it," replied Rand hotly.

"Monkey Rae again," murmured Jack. "I thought we had got rid of him."

"Keep cool, Rand," advised Don; "it isn't worth while making a fuss over."

"He ought to have his head punched," put in Dick.

"Who?" asked Jack. "Don?"

"No; that fellow in the boat," answered Dick.

"That isn't the way to teach him good manners," objected Jack.

"It's the only way you can teach some people," argued Dick. "Who is he?"

"Oh, that's the man that took our boat up the river," replied Jack.

"What do you think he was trying to do?" went on Dick.

"Trying to steal it, of course," replied Jack.

"I mean now."

"Oh, smash us up so we couldn't row to-morrow," guessed Jack.

"But what for?" persisted Dick.

"Oh, just pure ugliness, I guess," replied Jack.

"Then, you know, Monkey has it in for Rand for the thrashing he once gave him for beating his dog."

"Does he carry malice like that?" asked Donald.

"He will carry it all his life," replied Jack, "and then some more. Then Monkey doesn't like any of us because he was always behind us in school. He says we got ahead by favor, for we aren't any smarter than he is."

"Let fall!" ordered Gerald. "Let's try it again."

The boys bent to their work, but they had lost their vim, and they did not strike their pace again.

"I don't understand about Monkey," began Jack, as they drew into the landing. "There is something back of all this, and I mean to find out what it is."

"What have you been doing," cried Pepper, who was waiting for them on the landing, "fishing?"

"No; monkeying," answered Rand. "Jim Rae got in the way, and we had to stop for fear of smashing into him."

"Why didn't you do it and get rid of him?" asked Pepper.

"It would more likely have got rid of us," replied Rand; "and I guess that is what he was trying to do."

CHAPTER XX

A NIGHT ALARM

"Who's there?" called Rand sharply. He was sitting with Donald and Pepper on the steps of the piazza, in front of Mr. Scott's house.

"There is nobody there," declared Donald; "it's just your imagination."

"But I certainly saw something move behind that bush over there," insisted Rand.

"And I, too," confirmed Pepper.

"You are always seeing things, even when there ain't any," continued Donald.

"And you can't see them until they hit you with a club," retorted Pepper.

"Any one there?" called Rand again, going to the spot which Pepper pointed out, and followed by the others.

"Sh!" was the whispered reply from behind the bushes. "It is only

I."

"Who are you?" demanded Rand.

"Win Moore," replied a small boy, coming out.

"Why, hello, Win," said Rand; "what were you trying to do, play spook?"

"No," replied Win, "but I thought maybe Gerald was here."

"He isn't here," answered Rand. "Do you want to see him?"

"Yes," hesitated Win; "I have something to tell him."

"I am sorry he isn't here," continued Rand. "Anything I can do for you?"

"There isn't any one around, is there?" went on Win doubtfully.

"Nobody but Pepper, Don and I," replied Rand. "You know them. What is it?"

"They are going to smash the shell to-night," whispered Win, looking fearfully about him.

"They are going to do what?" exclaimed Donald.

"Say it again," said Rand, doubting that he had heard aright.

"They are going to smash the shell to-night, so you can't row to-morrow," repeated Win.

"Who are?" demanded Donald, still incredulous.

"Monkey Rae and Sam Tompkins," answered Win.

"How do you know?" asked Pepper.

"I heard them planning," explained Win. "I was up in the woods to-day and I heard some one talking, and I listened to hear who it was."

"What did they say?"

"Monkey said he guessed there'd be a surprise party here in the morning, when you found you didn't have any boat to row with. Sam asked how they could do it, and Monkey said they would go down to the boathouse to-night, after it got dark, and fix it. Sam didn't want to go very much, but Monkey said it was all right, and nobody would know who did it."

"Do you think he meant our shell?"

"Sure," replied Win. "He said he was going to get square with Rand Peyton and Pepper Blake. So I hid in the bushes until they went away, and I came down here to tell Gerald."

"Thank you, Win," said Rand; "we are ever so much obliged to you."

"Don't let them know I told you," pleaded Win, "or they will half kill me for telling."

"Sure not," promised Rand. "You can slip off again and no one will know you have been here."

"Well, what do you think of that!" exclaimed Pepper, when Win had gone.

"Shure, an' phat mischief are ye's plotting now?" demanded Gerald, who came across the lawn as his brother slipped away.

"More monkey tricks," responded Rand. "Monkey is going to surprise us to-night."

"Is he now?" asked Gerald; "and phat is he up to now?"

"He is going to smash the shell so we can't row to-morrow," replied Donald.

"Faith, I think he'll find it a hard nut to crack," asserted Gerald, dropping his brogue in his indignation. "Though there isn't anything surprising about that. I don't think Monkey could surprise us, except by trying to be good."

"And I don't believe he'll try that," laughed Pepper.

"What shall we do about it?" asked Gerald. "Tell the colonel?"

"I am no sure there is anything to it," said Donald. "And it may be possible we can take care of Monkey and Sam ourselves. In my opinion, it would no be a bad plan to go down to the boathouse and capture them if they come."

"That isn't a bad idea," agreed Rand. "We can slip away, one at a time, so if they see us they won't suspect anything. I will go first and the rest of you can join me later. There isn't any moon to-night, and we can easily find places to hide around the house."

"Faith," whispered Gerald, "we'll beat them at their own game."

Acting upon Rand's suggestion the boys separated, each taking a different course, meeting later at the boathouse. The place was in darkness when Rand, who was the first to arrive, got there. Making a hasty examination by the light of a match he saw that the shell was all right. Keeping in the dark, he waited until the others, slipping up like so many shadows, had come.

"Seen or heard anything?" asked Donald, as they consulted behind the house.

"Not a thing," responded Rand. "Perhaps they have given it up."

"You can no depend upon what they may do," commented Donald.

"That's right, old Solomon," agreed Pepper; "so it's just as well to be prepared for anything."

"What shall we do if they come?" asked Donald.

"Jump out and scare them to death," suggested Gerald.

"No," advised Rand. "Let's give them a chance to get in. If they go to the door or window, Don or I will give the call and we will all rush on them and grab them."

"Don't wait too long or they may spoil the shell," said Pepper.

"We will just give them a chance to get inside," went on Rand, detailing his plans. "I think it will be better if we each hide in a different place. Pepper can go over there behind those bushes and watch the road. Don can watch the door, and I will go on the other side and look out for the window."

"And phat will Oi be doing?" asked Gerald, who could not resist his fun-making instincts.

"You can hide down by the shore and watch the river."

"We ought to have some kind of a signal if we hear them coming," suggested Pepper.

"Like Paul Revere, 'one if by land, and two if by sea,'" quoted Rand. "If you hear them coming down the road, Pepper, you can give the whip-poor-will call, and Gerald, if he hears anything, can give the owl call."

"Owl right," responded Gerald, as they each went to their appointed stations.

The night was warm and pleasant. No sound, except the soft lapping of the waves on the shore, the chirp of a cricket or the occasional croak of a tree frog, disturbed the quiet of the night. As the time wore on, without any disturbance, the watches began to doze until Gerald was suddenly roused with a start by a splash in the water and saw a boat gliding silently toward the landing.

"Faith, it looks as if there might be some fun after all," whispered Gerald to himself, softly hooting a couple of times and concealing himself behind an upturned boat.

"What was that?" asked one of the rowers at the sound of Gerald's call.

"Aw, it's nothing but an owl," replied the other. "Whatcher 'fraid of?"

The boat was now at the landing, and the taller of the two stepping out fastened the boat and went toward the house, calling upon his companion to follow.

"There will be some fun here in the morning," chuckled the foremost, whom Gerald now recognized as Monkey Rae.

"Sure there ain't anybody 'round?" asked the other, hesitating.

"Of course there ain't," responded Monkey confidently. "Aw, come

on! What yer 'fraid of? Nobody knows anything about it but you and I, and we ain't a-shoutin' it."

"I thought I heard a noise," demurred the other.

"Oh, bother!" returned Monkey impatiently. "You're always hearing something."

"How are we going to get in?"

"Don't worry about that," answered Monkey, "I fixed the window all right to-day."

While talking Monkey had opened the window and started to crawl into the house. "If you're afraid to come in," he said scornfully to the other, "stay outside and keep watch. It won't take me more than a minute to crack this shell."

At this instant Rand, with a shrill, clear whistle, sprang out from his hiding place and in a moment all was confusion.

"Shure, the fat's in the fire now," chuckled Gerald to himself.

As the whistle sounded Monkey sprang back through the window, landing in a heap almost at Rand's feet, but was up and off before Rand could get a hold on him, and sped after his companion, who had started off at the first alarm, in a race down the landing to their boat.

"Hi! stop them, Gerald!" shouted Rand, dashing after them.

Donald, at the alarm, rushed toward the window, and, tripping over a coil of rope, stumbled against a stack of oars, sending them down with a crash that could be heard a mile. Picking himself up, he ran after Rand down the landing.

There was a splash in the water, and the sound of rapidly receding oars, but there was no one at the landing.

"What has become of Gerald?" asked Rand, looking around.

"He can't be far off," replied Donald, "Give him a call."

"Hello-o-o, Gerald!" shouted Rand, but Gerald did not answer.

"Hello, there! What's ail the noise about?" demanded Colonel Snow, who had followed Pepper onto the landing. "Why, boys, what are you doing here?"

"We can't find Gerald," explained Donald, who was looking in all kinds of impossible places.

"I shouldn't think you would in such a place as that," said the colonel, as Donald turned over some small boxes. "What is it now, hide and seek, or has Gerald been losing himself?"

"I don't know," replied Rand. "We heard that Monkey Rae was going to smash the shell tonight, so we came down to catch him, but he got away from us."

"Monkey Rae again!" exclaimed the colonel. "I should think there was at least half a dozen of him the way he gets around. But what has that got to do with Gerald?"

"Why, Gerald was out here on the landing, and now we can't find him. I don't know what has become of him, or if he is just hiding for fun," explained Rand; "though I don't see where he could hide here," he added.

"Sure of that?" questioned the colonel. "Let's take another look around." Lighting a lantern from the boathouse they made a thorough search of the place without finding anything of their missing comrade.

"Perhaps he got tired of waiting and went home," suggested the colonel.

"That wouldn't be Gerald," averred Rand and Donald. "He wouldn't go off and leave us without saying anything and, besides, he was here when they came, for he gave us the signal."

"Well, he isn't here now," decided the colonel after another look around. "Hello, Gerald!" he called, and the boys sounded the call on their bugles.

"He ought to answer that if he is anywhere around," said Rand.

"Do you think they could have carried him off?" asked Pepper.

"I don't know what to think," replied the colonel. "It's queer. You boys certainly have an amazing faculty for getting into trouble."

"But how did you get here?" asked Rand.

"I was just taking a stroll," replied the colonel, "when I heard the noise and came down to see what it was."

CHAPTER XXI

A SURPRISE

"W-W-WHAT was that?" stammered Pepper. "I t-thought I heard a cry. T-t-there it is again," as a faint call came from the river.

The three boys were standing on the landing with Colonel Snow, still discussing the mysterious disappearance of Gerald.

"T-that you, Gerald?" shouted Pepper.

"Where are you?" cried Donald; but, without waiting for a reply, he threw off his coat and shoes and plunged into the river, swimming in the direction from which the cry had come,

"He's all right!" came the reassuring cry from Donald a little

later. "I have got him," and shortly afterwards reappeared paddling a boat in which was the bewildered Gerald, who was helped onto the landing by the colonel and the others.

"H-h-how did you g-get into the boat, Gerald?" asked Pepper when Gerald had somewhat recovered from the effects of his experience. "Did you think it was a good time to take a row?"

"It looks that way," replied Gerald. "But when Rand called to me to stop them I ran out to try and head them off, but something gave me a rap on the head and the next thing I knew I found myself lying in that boat. Say, I feel as if I had a head like a pumpkin."

"I s-should think it would feel more like a s-squash," commented Pepper.

"That is going altogether too far," asserted the colonel indignantly. "It might have had a very serious ending. I think that there is a bad quarter-of-an-hour in store for that Rae boy if I can get hold of him in the morning."

As there was no likelihood that Monkey Rae would return to renew his attempt to injure the boat the house was locked and the boys went back to the town discussing, as they went, the events of the evening. The colonel was very indignant.

When they came near to the top of the hill they were met by Jack, who was running at full speed down the road.

"Hello!" called Rand when he came near. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Hello," returned Jack, slowing up and joining the others. "Where have you been? I have been looking all over for you."

"Down to the boathouse," replied Rand.

"Down to the boathouse!" exclaimed Jack. "What took you down there tonight?"

"Why, we heard that Monkey was g-going to s-smash the boat," answered Pepper.

"Monkey!" cried Jack. "I wish I had been there----"

"Wouldn't have done you any good," said Donald. "He was too quick for us."

"Was any one with him?" asked Jack.

"Only Sam Tompkins."

"Ah!" returned Jack. "What did I tell you?"

"Don't know," replied Pepper; "you tell us so many things that we can't remember them all. What did you tell us this time?"

"About Monkey Rae and Sam Tompkins, and the queer coins you picked up in the road that day."

"I believe you did say something about Monkey and the coins," admitted Donald, "but I no paid much attention to it."

"But what has that got to do with the present excitement?" asked Rand.

"Listen to this," exclaimed Jack, stopping under an electric light to read a circular that he drew from his pocket.

"Three hundred dollars reward. Escaped from jail. Three hundred dollars will be paid for the arrest and detention of one James Rae, alias 'Limpy,' who escaped from the jail at Melton on June fifth. Said Rae is about forty years old, stoutly built, and five feet eight inches in height. Has smooth face, red hair, and walks with a limp. James Robinson, Sheriff."

"W-w-why, t-t-that must be M-M-Monkey Rae's father," stammered Pepper when Jack had finished reading. "I knew he was away somewhere, but I didn't know he was in prison."

"Shure, there's lots of things ye don't know, me darlint," interjected Gerald.

"And he is the man who was with Monkey on the river," added Rand.

"And the man that was in the boat the other day," put in Dick.

"I hope they catch him!" said Pepper vindictively.

"Go for him, Pepper," encouraged Gerald.

"And that is what Monkey stole the fish for," continued Pepper.

"Of course it was," replied Jack. "Didn't I tell you there was something back of this monkey business?"

"But I no see it yet," remarked Donald.

"Of course you don't," said Jack. "You want it explained with a diagram. It was Rae who robbed Judge Taylor's office, and Monkey and Sam Tompkins helped him. He was hiding in the woods when we saw him."

"But what has that got to do with the coins?" demanded Donald.

"Why, they stole them out of the judge's office and lost them where Rand and Pepper found them. I've been studying this thing out ever since the night we were in the judge's office. You see, there was suspicion of some of us and I wanted to clear it off. It's all as clear as day now."

"Whin the fog's so thick ye c'ud cut it with a knife," put in Gerald. "Give us a diagram av it."

"Why, the robbery was done by Rae and some of his pals," explained Jack. "They sent Monkey up between the buildings and he opened the window and got in and then opened the doors for the others. When they got through all they had to do was to walk out, and Monkey

closed and fastened the doors after them and went down the same way as he got in."

"But how do you know that Rae did it?" asked Rand.

"By putting two and two together," replied Jack. "I knew that the coins you found were like some that had been stolen. Monkey Rae and Sam went over the road just before you found them. They had not been lying there long, or they would have been covered up in the dirt, or some one else would have found them."

"'Tis no way impossible," admitted Donald.

"Then some of the tools they used had been taken from Wilson's blacksmith shop, and you know Dick said that Monkey and Sam used to come in there almost every day, so that it was quite probable that they took them; that's number two."

"Go on," urged Rand. "It is growing interesting."

"Well, there isn't much more; but I saw, from this circular, that Rae had escaped from prison, so I concluded that the man we saw in the boat was Rae, and I put the two and two together and worked it out that it was he who robbed the judge's office."

"What was he after?" asked Pepper.

"I don't know exactly," replied Jack; "but it was papers of some kind."

"Well, it does look as if you were right," conceded Donald; "but you haven't got any proof."

"No," admitted Jack; "but I have given the officer the tip, and told him about the shack in the woods where Pepper saw Rae. They are going to make a raid on it tomorrow, and perhaps they will find some of the stolen property in their possession; then we have the impression of a hand on this paper, and we can get one of Monkey's hands and see if they aren't the same."

"Faith, hunting is wan thing and finding's anither," commented Gerald.

Which proved to be quite true in this case, for when the officers reached the cabin in the woods they found it deserted and dismantled. The occupants had evidently taken alarm and disappeared, leaving no trace, although the boys were destined to meet them again under decidedly unpleasant circumstances.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RACE

The race had been set for 9 o'clock in the morning, but, with the sun, there had come up a strong breeze from the west that had

stirred up the water into such a lumpy condition that any kind of time would be impossible, and the advantage would be all on the side of the Altons. So the race was put off from time to time in the hope that the wind would die down so as to equalize the chances, and it was not until late in the afternoon that the committee decided to have it rowed, although the wind was still blowing and the water rough.

The course, as agreed upon, was a straight-away three miles over a clear stretch of the river from off the Creston landing.

"What have you got there?" asked Dick, as Rand pulled a coin from his pocket and began rubbing it up on his sleeve.

"That's his mascot," laughed Jack. "It's the coin he found in the road, and he keeps it for luck."

"Well, I guess it has its work cut out for it, all right," went on Dick. "He will have his hands full--if it is a he--to keep us in the procession. Alton has a crew of blacksmiths."

"So much the more weight to carry," replied Rand, who made the best of everything.

"Not much chance for us," put in Jack.

"Oh, I don't know," returned Rand.

"'Stranger things than that have happened,' as the old woman said when she kissed her cow."

"You mean as the man said when he married his cook," corrected Donald.

"Well, there wasn't anything strange about that," returned Rand, "if she was a good cook."

"Or if her cooking was good," added Jack.

"Are you ready, all?" now called the starter, and each one of the different crews grasped his oar with quickened tension as the coxswains responded: "Ready!" and there followed the sharp report of the pistol.

As the report rang out the oars of the three crews, all like a piece of accurate machinery, struck the water at the same instant and the boats leaped forward as if shot from a spring.

At the start the weight of the Alton crew told, and their boat darted to the front, only to be hugged a moment later by Highpoint, while the Uncas trailed just behind them.

"Easy, boys, easy," cautioned Gerald. "There are three miles of it, you know."

The three boats were all together. Alton a bit in the lead, but without any daylight showing between them. The Uncas last, but still in the race.

"Shure, 'tis foine, ye'r doing," cried Gerald. "Ye have thim all scared. See how they are running away from ye!"

For the first mile there was no change, Alton still leading, but the pace was telling, and Highpoint was creeping up--Uncas still in the rear.

In the next mile there was still no change in the order, and it looked like Alton's race, but as the second mile was passed Highpoint poked its nose in front, Uncas still hugging them. "Now, then!" cried Gerald, as they entered on the last half mile, "hit it up, boys; we are still in it!"

"The mascot's working overtime," panted Dick, "but he's making good."

The boys quickened their stroke in response to Gerald's call, and inch by inch, the Uncas pulled up on their rivals and, just as the finish was reached, slid across the line a scant six inches in front. It was only six inches, but enough, and though the boys could scarce sit up, their fatigue was forgotten in the joy of the unexpected victory.

"Tra-la-la," trilled Gerald on his bugle, but its notes were drowned by the call of the leader of the Highpoints for three cheers for the Uncas, which were given with a will by both the losing crews.

After cheering each other, until they were hoarse, the three crews went their ways with an agreement to row another race later in the season.

"That's one for the mascot," drawled Rand, when the boat had been rowed to the landing, where the colonel, with Pepper and others, were waiting for them.

"Well, boys," said the colonel, after he had congratulated them on their victory, "you look as if you had been doing a day's work on a farm."

"Well, I don't know," responded Rand. "It was hard work, but I think, after all, I had rather be the man with the row than the man with the hoe."

"That reminds me--" began Dick.

"It does, eh?" questioned Donald. "Well, I don't know why, I am sure."

"That, speaking of roses--" went on Dick.

"Roses!" ejaculated Jack. "Who said anything about roses?"

"Well, talking about roses, anyhow--" continued Dick.

"I don't see anything about here to remind you of roses," contended Donald.

"Can you tell me," persisted Dick, "what kind of rows never come singly?"

"The kind you have to hoe," responded Donald, whose father had a garden.

"I guess that's right, Don," agreed the colonel

"Shad roes," proclaimed Dick.

"Pooh!" sniffed Don; "that has an ancient and fishlike flavor."

"Which reminds me," remarked the colonel, "that I provided some refreshments, as a consolation for your defeat, but as you won I suppose you won't care for them now."

"Speaking for myself," said Dick modestly; "it sounds good to me."

CHAPTER XXIII

CONCLUSION

"I hope I am not too late to congratulate you on your victory," said a pleasant voice, and the boys looked up to see a young gentleman standing in the doorway of the room, where, having finished the repast the colonel had provided, they were sitting around talking over the details of the race.

"I have been looking for you for a couple of weeks," he went on, coming into the room and offering his hand to Rand. "It was a splendid race and pluckily rowed, and you deserved to win."

"Thank you," replied Rand. "Did you say you were looking for me?"

"For all of you," replied the gentleman. "I see you don't remember me. I am Frank Whilden, whose sister you saved from drowning the other day. Come in, Nellie," he called to a young girl who was standing outside. "These are the young men who came to our rescue."

"I just want to thank you all--" began Nellie.

"Oh, it was no anything," returned Donald.

"It was very much to me," began Nellie.

"I mean," explained Donald confusedly "it's no great thing to make a claver about."

"But it was a great thing to have saved you," interposed Rand, with an emphasis on the you.

"That's very nice," replied Nellie. "Won't you shake hands with me, all around?"

"Faith, you won't be asking me twice to do myself the favor," replied Gerald. "Sure I wasn't there to have the pleasure of saving you, but I would have been there if you had sent me word."

"Don't forget the most important part, Nellie," her brother reminded her when she had finished shaking hands.

"Mother sends her regards to you all," went on Nellie, "and hopes you will accept the little present she has sent you."

"But we don't want any reward for what we did," protested Rand. "It was reward enough to have helped you."

"This isn't a reward," continued Nellie; "just a little token of her esteem. We had it sent down to-day. Frank and I thought if you didn't win the race it might console you a little. We do hope you will like it."

Frank had gone from the room, but returned now with a handsome Dart motorcycle.

"Crickets!" cried Pepper. "I-i-it's a beauty, ain't it?" while the boys gathered around it to examine it. "S-s-say----"

"Whistle it, Pepper," said Jack. "I don't know what it is you want to say, but I guess we all agree with you."

"We can take turns using it."

"We can draw lots for the first ride on it."

"Or toss up for it," proposed Donald.

"I am glad you like it," began Nellie.

"We most certainly do," chorused the boys; "and we are ever so much obliged. We couldn't have had anything that would have suited us nearly so well."

"There are five more just like it outside," went on Nellie; "one for each of you, and we hope you will get a lot of pleasure from them."

"But we can't accept all these," protested Rand, while the others stood silent in stupefied amazement.

"Crickets!" exclaimed Pepper. "I will be awful sorry to-morrow."

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