

The Boy Scouts of the Air on Lost Island

Gordon Stuart

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by Gordon Stuart

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The Boy Scouts of the Air on Lost Island

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BY GORDON STUART

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The Boy Scouts of the Air on Lost Island

CHAPTER I

OVER THE DAM

Three boys stood impatiently kicking the dew off the tall grass in

Ring's back yard, only pausing from their scanning of the beclouded, dawn-hinting sky to peer through the lightening dusk toward the clump of cedars that hid the Fulton house.

"He's not up yet, or there'd be a light showing," grumbled the short, stocky one of the three.

"Humph--it's so late now he wouldn't be needing a light. Tod never failed us yet, Frank, and he told me last night that he'd be right on deck."

"We'd ought to have gone down right off, Jerry, when we saw he wasn't here. Frank and I would have stopped off for him, only we was so sure he'd be the first one here--especially when you two were elected to dig the worms."

"We dug the worms last night--a lard pail half full--down back of his cabbage patch. And while we were sitting on the porch along comes his father--you know how absent-minded he is--and reaches down into the bucket and says, 'Guess I'll help myself to some of your berries, boys.'"

"Bet you that's why Tod isn't here, then."

"Why, Frank Ellery, seventh son of a seventh son? Coming so early in the morning, your short-circuit brain shockers make us ordinary folks dizzy. This double-action----"

"Double-action nothing, Dave Thomas! I heard Mr. Fulton tell Tod yesterday he was to pick four quarts of blackberries and take them over to your Aunt Jen. Tod forgot, and so his dad wouldn't let him go fishing, that's all."

"Sun's up," announced Jerry Ring.

"So's Tod!" exclaimed Dave Thomas, who had climbed to the first high limbs of a near-by elm and now slid suddenly down into the midst of the piled-up fishing paraphernalia. "I just saw him coming in from the berry patch--here he comes now."

A lanky, good-natured looking sixteen-year-old boy, in loose-fitting overalls and pale blue shirt open at the throat, came loping down the path.

"Gee, fellows," he panted, "I expect you're cussing mad--but I _had_ to pick those berries before I went, and it took me so long to grouch out the green ones after it got light."

"I see you brought the very greenest one of all along," observed Dave dryly.

"Oh, you here, too, little one?" as if seeing him for the first time. "I didn't know kindergarten was closed for the day. I make one guess who tipped over the bait can."

"Ask Frank," suggested Dave with pretended weariness; "he's got second sight."

"Don't need second sight to see that worm crawling up your pants leg. We going to stand here all day! I move we get a hike on down to the boat. Maybe we can hitch on behind Steve Porter's launch--he's going up past Dead Tree Point--and that'll save us the long pull through the slough."

The boys picked up the great load of luggage, which was not so big when divided among four boys, and hustled out of the Ring yard and down the dusty road. They were four of a size; that is, Tod Fulton was tall and somewhat flattened out, while Frank Ellery was more or less all in a bunch, as Jerry said, who was himself sturdily put together. Dave Thomas was neither as tall as Tod nor as stocky as Frank; He looked undersized, in fact. But his "red hair and readier tongue," his friends declared, more than made up for any lack of size. At any rate, no one ever offered a second time to carry the heaviest end of the load.

Now, as they walked along through the back streets of Watertown, rightly named as it was in the midst of lakes, creeks and rivers, they began a discussion that never grew old with them. Tod began it.

"We've got plenty of worms, for once."

"Good!" cried Dave. "I've thought of a dandy scheme, but it'd take a pile of bait."

"What's that?" asked Jerry, suspecting mischief.

"You know, you can stretch out a worm to about three inches. Tie about a hundred together--allow an inch apiece for the knot--that would make two hundred inches, or say seventeen feet. Put the back end of the line about a foot up on the bank and the other end out in the water. Along comes a carp--the only fish that eats _worms_--and starts eating. He gets so excited following up his links of worm-weenies, that he doesn't notice he's up on shore, when suddenly Tod Fulton, mighty fisherman, grabs him by the tail and flips him----"

"Yes--where does he flip him?" Tod had dropped his share of the luggage and now had Dave by the back of the neck.

"Back into the water and makes him eat another string of worms as punishment for being a carp."

"You with your old dead minnows!" exclaimed Tod, giving Dave a push that sent him staggering. "Last time we went, all you caught was a dogfish and one starved bullhead. There's more real fish that'll bite on worms than on any other bait. I've taken trout and even black bass. Early in the morning I can land pickerel and croppies where a minnow or a frog could sleep on the end of a six pounder's nose. Don't tell me."

"Yes," put in Jerry, "and I can sit right between the two of you and with my number two Skinner and a frog or a bacon rind pull 'em out while you fellows go to sleep between nibbles."

"Bully!" exclaimed Frank. "Every time we go home after a trip, you hang a sign on your back: 'Fish for Sale,' with both s's turned backwards. I'm too modest to mention the name of the boy who caught the largest black bass ever hooked in Plum Run, but I can tell you

the kind of fly the old boy took, all the same."

"Testimony's all in," laughed Tod, good-humoredly. "And here we are at the dock of the 'Big Four.'"

"Yes, and there goes Porter up around the bend. We row our boat today. We ought to get up a show or something and raise enough money to buy a motor."

"I move we change our plans and leave Round Lake for another trip." It was lazy Frank who made the proposal.

"What difference does it make to you? You never row anyway. Plum Run's too high for anything but still fishing----"

"I saw Hunky Doran coming back from Parry's Dam day before yesterday and he had a dandy string."

"Sure. He always does. Bet you he dopes his bait," declared Tod.

"Well, you spit on the worm yourself. The dam isn't half as far as Dead Tree, and, besides, we can always walk across to Grass Lake. Jerry votes for the dam, don't you, Jerry?"

But Jerry only shrugged his shoulders. Frank and Tod always disagreed on fishing places, largely because their styles of angling were different and consequently a good place for one was the poorest place in the world for the other. So Jerry, who usually was the peacemaker, said nothing but unlocked the padlock which secured the boat, tossed the key-ring to Dave with, "Open the boathouse and get two pair of oars. Tod, take a squint at the sun--five-thirty, isn't it? An hour and a half to the Dead Tree, and an hour more to Round Lake. What kind of fish can you take in old Roundy after eight o'clock?"

"Oh, I knew we were going to the dam, all right. I give in. But if I've got to go where I don't want to, I'm going to have the boat to fish from."

"As if you didn't always have it!" snorted Frank. "The only one who fishes in one place all day, but he's got to have the boat--and forgets himself and walks right off it the minute he gets a real bite. Huh!"

Tod paid no attention to this insult. He and Jerry settled in their places at the oars, with Frank at the stern for ballast, and Dave up ahead to watch the channel, for Plum Run, unbelievably deep in places, had a trick of shallowing at unlikely spots. More than once had the _Big Four_ had her paint scraped off by a jagged shelf of rock or shoal.

They were all in their places, the luggage stowed away, and Frank was ready to push away from the dock, when he raised his hand and said instead: "Understand me, boys, I'm the last one in the world to kick--you know me. But there's one request I have to make of you before the push of my fingers cuts us off from the last trace of civilization."

"Sw'at?" cried the three.

"When we have embarked upon this perilous voyage, let no mournful note swell out upon the breeze, to frighten beasts and men--and fish--into believing that Dave Thomas is once more _trying_ to sing!"

Immediately a mournful yowling began in the bow of the boat, growing louder as they drew away from shore. And then, amid the laughter of his three companions, Dave ended his wail and instead broke into a lively boating song, the others joining in at the chorus. For Dave's singing was a source of pride to his friends.

So, Dave singing lustily and Tod and Jerry tugging at the oars in time with the music, they swung away from the dock and out in the center channel of Plum Run, a good hundred yards from shore. Once in the current, they swung straight ahead down stream. Before long the last house of Watertown, where people were fast beginning to stir, had faded from view. They passed safely through the ripples of the shoals above Barren Island, a great place for channel cat when the water was lower. Through the West Branch they steered, holding close to the island shore, for while the current was slower, at least the water was deeper and safer.

A mile-long stretch of smooth rowing lay ahead of them now, after which they entered Goose Slough, narrow and twisty, with half-hidden snags, and sudden whirlpools. More than one fishing party had been capsized in its treacherous quarter mile of boiling length. Then came a so-called lake, Old Grass, with the real Grass Lake barely visible through its circle of trees. A crystal-clear creek was its outlet to Plum Run, a thousand gleaming sunfish and tiny bass flashing through its purling rapids or sulking in deep, dark pools. There was good fishing in Grass Lake, but waist-high marsh grass, saw-edged, barred the way for nearly half a mile.

But just ahead of them Plum Run had widened out once more to real river size, its waters penned back by concrete, rock and timber dam, with Parry's Mill on the east bank.

"Land me on the other side, above the big cottonwood," decided Frank. "There's a weedy little bight up there where I predict a two-pound bass in twenty minutes."

"I'll try the stretch just below, working toward the dam, I guess. How about you, Jerry!" asked Dave.

"I'll stay with the boat awhile, I reckon. Where away, boatman?"

"Dam," grunted Tod.

"Not swearing, I take it?" inquired Jerry.

"No--fishing there."

Dave and Frank were dropped out at the cottonwood, where they were soon exchanging much sage advice concerning likely spots and proper bait. Jerry and Tod chuckled as they rowed away. Tod himself was keen on still fishing with worms or grubs; he liked to sit and dream while the bait did the work; but his quarreling with Dave and Frank was mostly make-believe. Jerry, the best fisherman of the four,

believed, as he said, in "making the bait fit the fish's mouth." His tackle-box held every kind of hook and lure; his steel rod and multiple reel were the best Timkin's Sporting Goods Store in town could furnish; they had cost him a whole summer's savings.

Tod rather laughed at Jerry's equipment. His own cheap brass reel and jointed cane pole, with heavy linen line, was only an excuse. Throw-lines with a half dozen hooks were his favorites, and a big catfish his highest aim. As soon as the boat hit the dam he began getting out his lines. Jerry jumped lightly over the bow.

"Shall I tie you up?" he called over his shoulder.

"Never mind, Jerry. I think I'll work in toward the shore a bit first, and, anyway, she can't drift upstream." So Jerry went on his way out toward the middle of the dam.

It was really a monstrous affair, that dam. The old part was built on and from solid rock, being really a jutting out of a lime stone cliff which had stood high and dry before the water had been dammed up by the heavy timber cribs cutting across the original stream. Concrete abutments secured these timbers and linked the walls of stone with the huge gates opening into the millrace that fed the water to the ponderous undershot millwheel. Just now the gates were open and the water rushed through with deafening force. Jerry made his way across the stonework section, having a hard time in the water-worn crevices, slimed over with recent overflows, for when the millgates were closed, Plum Run thundered over this part of the dam in a spectacular waterfall.

He had hardly reached the flat concrete before he noticed that the roar from the millrace had ceased; the gates had been closed. All the better; this part of the river was shallow; when the water rose, big fish would be coming in to scour over the fresh feeding grounds. So he moved a little nearer shore and quickly trimmed his lines. He heard a hail from the bank as he made his first cast. It was from Dave.

"Mind if I come out and try my luck beside you?"

"Not at all. Water's coming up fast. Best try some grubs or worms, though. No good for minnows here now."

"Sure," agreed Dave, settling comfortably beside him. "Water sure is filling up, isn't she? Guess the Miller of the Dee dropped a cogwheel into his wheat."

"Not wishing anybody any bad luck, but I hope they don't start up again all day. This'll be a backwater as soon as the current starts going over the dam. Another six inches--say! Look at Tod. If he isn't fishing right above the flume. Wonder if he's noticed."

"Noticed? He's got a bite, that's what! Look at him bending to it. It's a big one, you bet. Golly, did you see that!"

"I see more than that," exclaimed Jerry grimly, dropping his precious pole and starting across the slippery rocks on the run. "If he doesn't get out of there in about thirty seconds, he's going over the dam!"

But just as Jerry mounted the last clump of rocks, just as Dave's desperate shouts had aroused Tod to a realization of his danger,-- something happened. You have watched a big soap bubble swelling the one last impossible breath; you have seen a camp coffee kettle boiling higher and higher till _splush!_ the steaming brown mass heaves itself into the fire--the bending, crowding mile-wide surface of Plum Creek found a sudden outlet. And right in the center of that outlet was a plunging tiny boat.

"Help!" rang out one choked-off cry, as in a great rush of suddenly foaming flood, over the dam plunged a boat and a terrorized boy.

CHAPTER II

A HOPELESS SEARCH

In the brief instant that Jerry stood on the slippery point of rock he had the queer feeling that it was all a horrible dream, or at least only an impossible scene from a motion picture. Where a boat had been a second before was now only a seething, tossing down-tumbling wall of brownish foam.

But his stunned inaction was quickly gone. Down to the very edge of the flood he raced, almost losing his balance and toppling in. At a dangerous angle he leaned over and peered into the churning water-pit below.

Dave had come hurrying to his side, to miss his footing at the last and plunge waist-deep into the current. A precious moment was lost in rescuing him. When, both safe on the rocky ledge, they turned to scan the depths of the fall, it was to see a dark object suddenly pop up full fifty feet downstream. It was the boat--but no Tod.

"Did you see it!" cried Jerry excitedly. "Didn't it look like something blackish in the bottom of the boat?"

"She's full of water, that's all. Tod's down there under the fall. He's drowned, I tell you! What shall we do? What shall we do!" Excitable Dave was fast losing his head.

"Come on!" shouted Jerry, aroused by the helplessness of his companion. "We've got to get to the mill and have them turn the water through the race. Then we've got to get a boat out there--quick!"

But he had not waited for Dave. Across the river just below the dam was a house. If there was a telephone there--Jerry knew there was one at the mill--something might yet be done in time. There was of course no way of reaching the mill itself across that raging torrent. There _was_ a telephone at the house, but it seemed hours after Jerry reached it before he finally got a gruff "Hello" from the mill manager, Mr. Aikens. But, fortunately, Aikens was not slow to grasp the situation. In the midst of his explanations Jerry realized that there was no one at the other end of the wire.

Out of the house he dashed and down to where in his wild race he had seen a boat moored below the dam. The oars were still in place. Barely waiting for the panting Dave to tumble in, he pushed off, exultingly noting as he strained at the oars that already the volume of water pouring over the falls had lessened. Before he reached the main channel it had dwindled to a bare trickle.

"Take the oars!" he directed the helpless Dave, at the same time stumbling to the bow of the boat and jerking off shoes, shirt and trousers. Diving seemed a hopeless undertaking, but there was little else to do. Again and again he plunged under, coming up each time nearly spent but desperately determined to try again. Two boats put out from the mill side of the river, capable Mr. Aikens in one of them. A grappling hook trailing from the stern of the boat told that such accidents as this were not unusual in treacherous Plum Run.

Then began a search that exhausted their every resource. The ill word had speedily gone around among the nearer houses, and in the course of an hour a great crowd of men appeared from Watertown itself. The water was black with boats and alive with diving bodies. Hastily constructed grappling hooks raked the narrow stream from side to side. A big seine was even commandeered from a houseboat up the river and dragged back and forth across the rough river bed till the men were worn out.

But all to no avail. Every now and then a shout of discovery went up, but the booty of the grappling hooks invariably proved to be only water-soaked logs or mud-filled wreckage. Once they were all electrified at a black-haired body dislodged by a clam-rake, that came heavily to the surface and then sank, to be the subject of ten minutes frantic dragging, only to be finally revealed as the body of an unfortunate dog.

It was heart-breaking work, and the tension was not lessened with the appearance on the scene of Mr. Fulton, Tod's father. He said nothing, but his hopeless silence was more depressing than any words of grief could have been. Jerry and Dave and Frank, feeling in some queer way guilty of their friend's death, could not meet his eyes as he asked dully how it had happened.

The dreary day dragged to a weary close, and the sun sank behind heavy clouds black with more than one rumbling promise of storm. The boys toiled doggedly on, weak from hunger, for their lunches had gone over with the boat, and, anyway, they would not have had the heart to swallow a bite. Lanky, good-natured Tod Fulton--drowned! It simply couldn't be. But the fast darkening water, looking cruel now, and menacing, where it had laughed and rippled only that morning, gave the lie to their hopes. Hopes? The last one had gone when Mr. Aikens had said:

"Never heard of anybody's being brought to after more than two hours under water. Only thing we can hope for is to find the body. I'm going to telephone to town and tell 'em to send out some dynamite."

It was already dusk when this decision was made, and it was after nine o'clock before an automobile brought a supply of dynamite sticks and detonating caps. In the meanwhile a powerful electric searchlight had been brought over from the interurban tracks a scant

mile west of the river line, and the millwheel had been shafted to the big dynamo and was generating current to flash dazzling rays of light across the water.

Mayor Humphreys, from Watertown, and Mr. Aikens were chosen to set off the dynamite, while watchers lined the shores, sharp-eyed in the hope of catching sight of the body when it should come to the muddied surface of Plum Run after the dynamite had done its work.

Charge after charge was set off, and countless hundreds of fish were stunned or killed by the terrific force of the explosive, but no body of a hapless sixteen-year-old boy rewarded the anxious searchers. Up and down the river combed the dynamiters, and glare and crash rent the night for a mile down the stream. It began to look as if other means would have to be resorted to--the saddest of all, perhaps--time. Sometime, somewhere, after days or even weeks, ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred miles down the river, a sodden, unrecognizable body would be washed up on sand-bar or mud-bank. It was a sickening thought.

"Have all the river towns been telegraphed?" asked a bystander, of the mayor. A nod of the head was his only answer.

"We may as well go home," was the final reluctant verdict. "We can come back in the morning." Mr. Fulton alone refused to abandon the search, and Mr. Aikens kindly offered to bear him company till daybreak brought others to take his place. When all had gone save these two and the three boys, Jerry approached and tried to draw Mr. Aikens aside.

"Do you suppose," he began with a kind of despairing eagerness, "that he could have stayed in the boat?"

Aikens shook his head. "Not a chance in the world," he declared.

"But I thought----" began Jerry, to be interrupted by Mr. Aikens, who finally contented himself with merely repeating:

"Not a chance in the world." They were silent until at last Mr. Aikens, moved by some impulse of kindness, for he could hardly help guessing how miserable the boy's thoughts must be, added:

"You thought what, lad?"

"The boat was full of water, of course, but when she popped up, it looked like there was something black in the bottom----"

"You saw the boat go over, didn't you! It must have turned over and over a dozen times down there in that whirlpool, even if he had stayed in till she lit. But he couldn't have. And even if----"

"Yes" urged Jerry, but without enthusiasm.

"If he was in the bottom of the boat he would have been drowned just the same, knocked senseless as he probably was by the terrific force of the fall and the tons of water plunging on top of him. Mind you, I don't think there was one chance in a million but that he was dashed out long before the boat hit bottom."

"But where's the--the body, then?" objected Jerry miserably.

"If grappling hooks and seines and dynamite couldn't answer that question, don't expect me to. Look here, lad, I know you feel all cut up over it, but think of how his poor father feels----"

"I am--that's what makes me feel as if it was partly my fault."

"Now--now--don't take it like that. Man and boy I've lived on this and other rivers a good many years over forty, and a drowning I've known for every one of those years. The water's a treacherous dame--she smiles at you in the sunshine, and the little waves kiss each other and play around your boat, but the shadows lurk deep and they're waiting, waiting, I tell you. The old river takes her toll. It happened to be your friend, that's all. But it wasn't anybody's fault. Mr. Fulton would be the last one in the world to think so."

Jerry looked over at Mr. Fulton, who had finally ended his mute pacing up and down, and now sat, chin in hand, staring out across the water. A sudden impulse made the boy go over and stand for awhile, silent, beside the grief-stricken man. He wanted to say something, but the words would not come. So, after a little, he walked upstream to where Dave and Frank huddled against an overturned boat; the night was growing a bit chill.

"Moon's coming up," remarked Frank as Jerry settled down beside them. No one answered.

"It's awful to sit around and not move a finger to find him," shivered Dave at last. "Seems as if there ought to be something we could do."

"Do you know what I think?" replied Jerry, almost eagerly. "I think I was right about that boat. I've been trying to remember what we left in the boat that could have looked like--like what I saw when she came up. There wasn't a thing in the boat--not a thing. It was Tod I saw--I know it was!"

"But he never could have stayed in," objected Frank.

"That's what Mr. Aikens said--and everybody else. But tell me what else it could have been I saw. I saw some thing, that I know."

"We ought to have gone after the boat," admitted Dave, slowly. "We didn't do a bit of good here, that's sure."

"But we didn't know that at the time," Frank argued. "Everybody'd have blamed us if we'd gone on a wild goose chase down the river after an empty boat----"

"But nobody would have said a word if we'd found him in the bottom of a boat everybody else thought was empty. If the moon was only higher----"

"You don't catch me drilling off down Plum Bun at night, moon or no moon. There's a rattlesnake or copperhead for every hundred yards!" It was Frank who took up Jerry's thought. "Besides, it would be different if we hadn't waited so long. Tod--Tod's--he's dead now," voicing at last the feeling they had never before put into words.

There was a gruffness in Jerry's voice as he answered, a gruffness that tried hard to mask the trembling of his tones. "I know it, but--but--I want to do something for Mr. Fulton. Won't you fellows go along with me? I guess I--I'll go."

"Down river?" asked both boys, but without eagerness.

"Till we find the boat."

"It's no use," said Frank. "Our folks'll cane us now when we get home. Going along, Dave--with me?"

"How far do you s'pose the boat's drifted by now, Jerry?" asked Dave instead of answering Frank.

"Can't tell. She's probably stuck on a sandbar or a snag, anywhere from five to twenty-five miles down. Don't go along, Dave, unless you want to."

"Better come home with me," urged Frank.

"Do you need me along, Jerry?" queried Dave uncertainly.

"No--" shortly--"no I don't. Mr. Fulton does--Tod does."

Jerry rose stiffly to his feet and started slowly off in the faint moonlight, without so much as a look behind.

"So long, Jerry," called Frank. "Come on, Dave."

But Dave slowly shook his head and reluctantly followed the footsteps of his chum.

"Hold on a minute, old man; I'll stick with you."

CHAPTER III

LOST ISLAND

It was only a thin edge of a moon that now stood barely above the low line of tree-covered hills beyond the east bank of the river. The light it gave was a misty, watery sort of ray that was a doubtful help in walking over the broken shore line. The two boys were too occupied in watching their footing to do much talking. Jerry led the way, bearing to the water's edge, finally stopping where a light rowboat had been pulled well up on the rocky beach.

"We'll have to divide forces, I guess. In this uncertain light we never could be sure of seeing the boat if she was on the other side. I'll cut across while you go down this bank."

"Why not take the boat and go down the middle?"

"Too hard work getting through the shallows, and, besides, this way

we're closest to the place where the boat would most likely have been snagged. We can go lots faster on foot. We'll keep about opposite each other; we can yell across once in a while and it won't be quite so lonesome. You go ahead till you get below the riffles, and wait there till I catch up with you."

Jerry stepped into the boat and took up the oars. Dave gave the boat a mighty shove that almost put the stern under the water.

"Hey! What you kids doing?" bellowed a gruff voice that the boys hardly recognized as being that of Mr. Aikens.

"Just duck and say nothing," called Jerry guardedly to Dave. "He might try to stop us."

So Dave scurried into the shadows of near-by trees, while Jerry bent low over his oars and noiselessly shot the boat out into safe waters. It was the work of only a few minutes to push the nose of his boat high and dry on the sand of the opposite shore. He was in the heavy shadow of a big cottonwood and felt safe from peering eyes, so without wasting time to mask his movements he jumped out and scurried along the bank. A level stretch of a hundred yards carried him around a bend; he stopped for a brief rest and a glance toward the other side, where a great crashing of bushes told him that Dave was safely out of sight and well on his way toward the riffles.

A chuckle almost escaped Jerry as he listened to the thrashing about, but remembrance of their errand killed the laughter. In fact, the chuckle turned to a genuine sob, for Tod Fulton was his closest chum. So, without an instant's pause, he made his way to the foot of the riffles, where their search would really begin. How soon it would end, there was no telling; it might be one mile; it might be twenty. But Jerry grimly determined that he would carry the undertaking through to the end.

The riffles was really a succession of pools of treacherous depths, joined by foaming, rock-broken rapids. The bank was lined with great boulders through which a day-time path wound a difficult way. Jerry wasted no time in trying to follow it, but skirted far around through a waist-high cornfield. A barb-wire fence held him prisoner long enough to allow Dave to break cover first on the opposite shore and send a vigorous but quavery "hello" across the water.

"I'm stuck on the fence!" shouted Jerry in return. "Go ahead. I'll be along directly."

But he noticed that Dave stood waiting on the shore when he finally managed to release himself and broke through the thin fringe of willows. "All right, Dave," he urged. "Let's not be losing any time."

For a while the going was much easier. On Jerry's side a wide reach of sand lay smooth and firm in the pale moonlight. On Dave's side a few yards of sand lay between a steep bank and the water's edge, but every few hundred feet a shallow creek broke through and forced wading.

There was no chance for the boat to have stranded here, and the boys

hurried along. Within a mile the character of the ground changed. Now the water lapped along under high, steep banks, with tiny, willow-covered islands alternating with bass-haunted snags of dislodged trees barricaded with driftwood. The moon cast queer shadows and more than once Jerry's heart felt a wild thrill as he fancied he saw a boat hull outlined against the silvered current.

Every few hundred yards the two boys stopped and sent encouraging shouts across the widening water. It was a lonesome, disheartening task, with every step making the task all the harder. Deep bays cut into the shore line; the feeder creeks grew wider and deeper. The night air was chill on their dripping shoulders. Plum Run was no longer a run--it was a real river, and Dave's voice sounded far off when he came out on some bare point to shout his constant:

"Nothing doing--yet."

They were now on a part of the river that was comparatively strange to them. Jerry had more than once followed the Plum this far south, but it had always been by boat, or at best on the west bank, Dave's territory, where a chain of lakes followed the course of the river. Each new twist and turn sent a shiver of nervous dread through him. Many the story of rattlers and copperheads he had heard from fishermen and campers--and the night was filled with unexpected and disturbing noises, overhead and underfoot. Of course he knew that snakes are not abroad at night, but the knowledge did not help his nerves.

Moreover, they were drawing near Lost Island, and no boy of Watertown had ever been known to cast a line within half a mile of that dreaded spot. For Lost Island was the "haunted castle" of the neighborhood. It was nothing more than a large, weed-and-willow-covered five acres, a wrecked dam jutting out from the east bank, and a great gaunt pile of foundation masonry standing high and dry on a bare knoll at the north end.

It had a history--never twice told the same. The dam had been dynamited, that much was sure. By whom, no one knew. The house, if ever a house had been built over those rain-bleached rocks, had been struck by lightning, hurricane, blown up by giant powder, rotted away--a dozen other tragic ends, as the whim of the story-teller dictated. The owner had been murdered, lynched, had committed suicide--no one knew, but everyone was positive that there was something fearfully, terribly wrong with Lost Island.

It was one of the few islands in Plum Run which was not flooded over by the spring freshets, and the land was fertile, yet no one had ever been known to live there through a season; this in spite of the fact that Lost Island was known as "squatter's land," open to settlement by anyone who desired it.

And Lost Island lay barely half a mile farther down the river. Jerry fervently hoped that their search would be ended before they were in the shadow of that forsaken territory. His nerves were not calmed any by the tremble in Dave's voice as he shouted across:

"Lost Island's just below us, Jerry. Shall we go on?"

"Sure thing, Dave!" called Jerry with a confidence he did not feel.

"It can't be any worse than what we've already gone through--and we've gone through _that_ all right."

"Supposing," hesitated Dave, "supposing the boat's grounded on Lost Island itself----"

"It's the boat we're looking for, isn't it?" But Jerry knew as he spoke, that, hard as the going was, he would be well satisfied to discover the boat five weary miles farther on.

Once more they plodded along, the dark, forbidding hulk of Lost Island looming nearer and nearer. Just before passing behind the northern point Jerry came out to the water's edge and had cupped his hands about his mouth for a final reassuring shout, when a sudden discovery made him pause. A shout, that seemed to split in mid-air, convinced him that Dave too had just then caught sight of the astounding object.

It was a gleaming, flickering, ruddy light, and it came from the very center of Lost Island!

Jerry's first thought was fright. But that soon gave way to the wildest of conjectures. Suppose Tod had been in the boat. Suppose he had come to in time, but too weak to do more than remain in the boat till it grounded here on Lost Island. A waterproof match-safe easily accounted for the fire. Jerry refused to allow himself to reason any further. There might be a dozen reasons why Tod had not swum the scant hundred yards to shore.

"Do you see it!" finally came a shout from the other side.

"It's a camp fire," called Jerry. "Do you suppose it could possibly be----"

"It couldn't be Tod, _could_ it!" came the answer, showing the same wild hope that had surged through Jerry.

"Oh--_Tod!_" rang out from two trembly throats on both sides of the river.

There was no reply. At least there came no answering shout. But the next instant Jerry rubbed his eyes in bewilderment. The camp fire had been blotted out as if by magic. Only the deep gloom of thick-set willows lay before him.

"The fire's gone!" came in alarmed tones from Dave.

"_Tod--Oh, Tod!_" rang out once more through the still night air.

This time there was an answer, but not the one the boys expected. A gruff voice demanded angrily:

"Say, you idiots--what in the thunder you want!"

"We're looking for a boy who was drowned up at----" began Jerry, who was closest to the high point where a man was presently seen stalking through the fringe of bushes.

"Boy who was drowned? _Calling_ for him! Ye crazy loons!"

interrupted the man.

"We don't know whether he was drowned or not," answered Jerry hotly.

"Well I'll never tell you," was the surly response. With a disgusted shrug of the shoulders the great hulk of a man slouched back toward the center of the island, pausing just before he disappeared once more in the wilderness to warn:

"Any more of that howling's going to bring a charge of buckshot, and I don't care which of you I hit."

"Do you care if we come over and look along the shore of the island?" shouted Dave at the retreating figure.

The answer, which was more like a growl than a human response, left no doubt of the man's meaning. Neither boy felt the slightest desire to swim across to Lost Island. Instead Jerry waved his arms over his head and then pointed downstream.

So once more they trudged along, disheartened more than ever, for somehow the actions of that weird figure on Lost Island had made their search look more of a wild goose chase than ever. The island was soon passed, but Jerry found himself peering hopelessly across a sluggish, muddy-bottomed slough that promised many a weary minute of wading before he could hope to establish communication with his companion again.

So it was with a great feeling of relief that, once more on solid ground, he heard Dave's call.

"Say, Jerry, we're pretty near down to Tomlinson's wagon bridge. What you say that we hustle on down and meet halfway across--and wait there for daylight. I'm about woozified."

"Good!" agreed Jerry, pleased that the suggestion had come from Dave. "Even the thought of it rests my old legs till they feel like new. I'll just race you to it!"

But it was a slow sort of race, for neither boy was willing to take a chance in passing the most innocent shadow--which always turned out to be a water-soaked log or a back-eddied swirl of foam. Nevertheless, it was a spent Dave who sank gasping to the rough plank floor of the middle span of the wagon bridge a scant second ahead of another puffing boy.

A good ten minutes they lay there, breathing hard. Then both rose and walked over to the edge and leaned heavily against the girders as they looked gloomily down the river.

"Looks almost hopeless, doesn't it!" admitted Jerry, finally.

"Worst of it is we don't really know whether she's down below yet or if we've passed it. She was riding pretty low."

"Wonder what that man was doing on Lost Island?" speculated Jerry, crossing wearily to the north edge of the bridge and peering through the gray dawn-mist toward the island, barely visible now. A mere twinkle of light showed among the trees, and he stood there for a

long minute. Dave came to his side, and the two waited in silence for the dawn. Jerry had almost fallen asleep standing up, when a sudden clutch at his arm nearly overbalanced him and sent him tumbling off the dizzy height.

"Look!" gasped Dave.

"What is it?" exclaimed Jerry, turning to his companion, all sleep gone.

"I'll swear it's the boat--right under us!"

CHAPTER IV

MORE THRILLS

It was only a bare few seconds before the floating object had passed within the shadow of the bridge, but there could be no doubt about it; it was a boat, riding so low that only her outline showed. Jerry rubbed his eyes in disbelief, but for only an instant. Then he sprang to the other side of the bridge, shedding hat, coat, trousers, shirt and shoes, on the way. So, at least, it seemed to Dave, who caught his chum's arm, as Jerry poised himself, his body white and gleaming in the moonlight, on the high rail that ran along the edge.

"What you going to do, Jerry? It's a good thirty feet to the water--and you don't know how deep it is down there."

"I'm diving shallow, Dave; two feet is all I ask below. We can't take any chances of losing her. Carry my clothes along the bank, will you? I'll try to make the east side--it looks a little closer."

In the few seconds they had talked, the boat had drifted under the bridge and now cut through the silver-edged shadow of the last timbers.

There was a quiver of the flimsy railing, a slender body cut through the moonlight, parted the water with a clean sush! and bobbed up almost immediately, within three feet of the boat. Jerry Ring did not have the reputation of being the best diver in Watertown for nothing.

Now ensued a great kicking and churning as Jerry's legs transformed themselves into propellers for the salvaged "Big Four." Progress was slow; the waterlogged craft lay in the river like so much cordwood. More than once Jerry had to stop for a few minutes' rest. But little by little he neared shore, encouraged by Dave, who impatiently awaited the landing, wading out finally waist-deep to help.

Neither one said a word as the boat was at last beached. No more than the barest glance was needed to tell that there was nothing in the boat but water. Theirs had been a fruitless chase.

"Well," said Dave, slowly, after a long silence, "I guess that ends our last hope."

"I'm afraid you're right," agreed Jerry dejectedly. "But there's one thing that puzzles me--do you notice how much water there is in the boat? It's a good ten inches from the top--how full would it have been when she popped up from under the falls at the dam?"

"She'd have been right up to the top, I suppose. Why?"

"Well, what I want to know is: How did it get out? And, what's more, I'd like to know how it would have taken the boat all these hours to float those few miles. Plum Run's got a six mile an hour current up above, and it's at least four here. There's something mighty funny about it all to me."

"But mightn't it just have been snagged or shoaled up above, and finally worked loose?"

"Sure, I know that. But I know the boat was drifting about as fast as we were walking, and that being the case, she must have cleared Lost Island just about three minutes after we talked with that man!"

"You're getting excited, Jerry--over nothing."

"Nothing! You call the water that was baled out of the boat nothing. It was baled out, I tell you. And look at that rope--it was cut loose. Somebody was in too big a hurry to untie knots, that's my guess."

"But, Jerry, what in the world are you driving at, anyway!"

"I don't know. Something about the way that man back there on Lost Island acted set me thinking away in the back of my head. I didn't realize what it was that was going on in my cranium until I noticed this cut rope and say!" Jerry's voice rose in high excitement.

"Dave! Dave!--do you remember? The bucket!"

Dave only stared at his friend in bewilderment. "Wha--what bucket?" he at last managed to gasp.

"You remember last week when we were out, and the storm caught us and pretty nearly swamped the boat? Tod said he'd bet we'd never be caught without a bailing can again--and he put a lard pail on a snap hook under the back seat. It's gone!"

"But what if--why, pshaw, it could easy have worked loose and floated away. I don't see what there is to be so worked up about."

"But, Dave, don't you see----" Jerry was trembling with excitement. "Suppose Tod had stayed in the boat, and he came to, and he didn't have any oars. First off he'd try to bale her out, wouldn't he? He'd bale out just enough so she'd ride easy, and then he'd try to get to shore. Maybe he landed on Lost Island. Suppose he did, and suppose that ruffian we saw didn't want him to get off again. What else would the man do but cut loose the boat when we came along!"

"Jerry, don't you think we'd better be getting on home?"

"What's the matter with you, Dave?"

"Why, nothing, Jerry----"

"Then what you talking about going on home when I'm running down a clew like that?"

"It's almost morning, Jerry, and you've had a hard day and been up all night--and the lonesome chase through the dark----"

"Now look here, Davie! If you think I'm getting soft in the head, just forget it. I never was more in earnest in my life. Don't you understand? I think Tod's alive--_back there on Lost Island!_"

"But we don't know he was in the boat----"

"Look here, Dave, if you were falling, what'd be the first thing you'd do? You'd grab at the nearest thing to you, wouldn't you! And if you got hold of that boat-seat, for instance, you'd pretty near hang on, wouldn't you? I saw _something_ in the bottom of the boat when she came up."

"Yes, but we don't know the boat touched Lost Island----"

"No, of course not. But most always when I see a sign that says 'No fishing allowed,' I know there's fish there."

"You certainly talk as if you were out of your head. What's fishing got to do with it?"

"The man was not overly anxious to have us come out and make a search of _his_ island. I'm going back up there and I'm going to swim across or _get_ across and I'm going to find out what he has there he doesn't want us to see. Are you game to go along?"

"But supposing there's nothing there, and the man----"

"That island doesn't belong to anybody. We've got as much right there as he has. The worst he can do is to kick us off, and there's only one of him against _two_ of us. Come on."

Before they left, however, they tipped their boat over and emptied out nearly all the water. Then, as they had no oars to row her back, they tied her by the short length of rope left, to a stout willow. Jerry resumed his clothing, and shivering a bit in the cool morning air, was eager to warm up with a good brisk walk.

They were on the east side of the river, and the trail would have been hard enough even in broad daylight, but Jerry would waste no time in crossing over when a few minutes later they halted at the bridge. Home lay on the other side of the river, and Dave, still unconvinced, stubbornly insisted on following the west bank, but Jerry soon cut short the argument by striding off in disgust. After a minute of uncertainty Dave tagged along behind. Neither spoke; to tell the truth, they were both decidedly cold, hungry and cross. The damp, fishy smell of the river somehow set their nerves on edge, and the long drill through swamps and across creeks and sloughs appeared none too enticing.

"I say, Jerry," called Davie finally, "let's stop for a breath of air; I'm about petered out."

"Can't," replied Jerry shortly. "Sky's getting gray now. We've got to get there before daylight. If we can catch our friend on the island asleep it'll make things a lot easier. Pull your belt up a notch and see if you can't put the notch into your legs."

Dave grumbled but obediently hastened his gait. In single file they cut across the last stretch of knee-deep mud and halted opposite Lost Island. There it lay, beyond the narrow stretch of steaming, misty black water, dark and forbidding. There was something shivery about its low-lying-heavy outline, with nothing visible beyond the border of thick willow growth.

"Looks like some big crouching animal, doesn't it?" remarked Dave as they stood an instant peering across.

"Well, we know it can't spring--and it won't bite, I guess."

"I'm not so sure. How are we going to get over?"

"Swim it, unless--no, I guess we won't swim--not, at least, if there's a pair of oars in that flat-boat I see yonder. Funny we didn't stumble over it when we came down."

"Maybe it wasn't here then. Maybe the man came over in it. We better not stand here in the open. We don't know what minute he might be back."

"Well, if it is his boat, at least we don't need to worry about running onto him over there on the island."

"You're going to swim over, aren't you, Jerry? If the man came along and found his boat gone, he'd know we were over there and----"

"And he'd be stranded on this side until we were so kind as to bring back his boat. You can bet he isn't going to swim over, and I bet you I don't either."

The boat proved to be a cumbersome flat-boat of the type used by clam-fishers. In fact the smell that simply swirled up from its oozy bottom left no doubt that the boat had been used for that purpose. A pair of unbelievably heavy oars, cut from a sapling with a hand-axe, trailed in the water from "loose oarlocks." Dave gave a gasp of dismay as he "hefted" the rough implements.

"Let's swim it, Jerry," he said disgustedly. "The boat'll never hold up the oars and us too. They weigh a ton."

"Pile in," answered Jerry, with the first laugh since that tragic moment when he had seen a different boat swept over the dam many weary miles up the river. "We'll each take an oar and try some two-handed rowing. This craft was built for ocean-going service. Hold tight; we're off."

But they weren't. Jerry's mighty push ended in a grunt. "Come on; get out here and shove."

"Maybe if we took the oars out we could start her," Dave jibed. "I hope you've got a freight-hauling license."

"Get out and push. Your witty remarks are about as light as those young tree-trunks we have for paddles. All together now!" as Dave bent over beside him. A lurch, a grinding, thumping slide, and the flat-boat slid free of shore.

"It's a mighty good thing if that man isn't on the island," remarked Dave as he took up his half of the propelling mechanism. "Because when our craft took the water she certainly did 'wake the echoes of yon wooded glen,' as the poet says."

"Poetry's got nothing to do with this boat. It doesn't rhyme with anything but blisters. Let's see if we can move her."

Thanks to some tremendous tugging, the flat-boat moved slowly out from shore. Inch by inch, it seemed, they gained on the current.

"The old tub's got speed in her," grunted Jerry, between sweeps of his oar.

"Ought to have it in her," returned Dave. "I'll bet you nobody ever got it out of her. Ugh!"

"Always grunt out toward the back of the boat--keep your head turned. It helps us along."

"I've only got one grunt left; I'm saving it. How far have we gone?"

"All of ten feet. I'll tell you when we hit the island. Lift your oar out of water when you bring it back. The idea is to move the boat, not merely to stir up the water."

So they joked each other, but their hearts were heavy enough, for always in the back of their minds was the thought of their friend, who, in spite of the wild hope that Jerry had built up, might--must, Dave was sure--be lying at the bottom of treacherous Plum Run somewhere, drowned.

At last they seemed to be nearly halfway across, and they rested a brief spell, for every inch of their progress had to be fought for.

"All right," said Jerry, taking up his oar, "let's give her another tussle."

But Dave did not move, although he still hunched over his oar.

"Come on, Dave," urged his friend. "We don't want to lose any time. The sun ought to be up almost any minute now."

"Look behind you, old man. Right where we're headed, and tell me what you see."

Jerry turned in his seat. He took one quick glance toward Lost Island, now less than a hundred feet away, and then gave a low cry of dismay.

CHAPTER V

A STARTLING CLEW

There was a streak of light in the western sky, whether caused by the low-hanging, mist-hidden moon or a freak reflection of the coming dawn. Against that patch of brightness the northern headland of Lost Island loomed up high and barren save for its one tall tree. But it was neither headland nor tree that caught Jerry's attention and caused the gasp of dismay.

Standing there, bold and menacing, looking like a giant against the queer light, was a man.

Whether it was the same one who had hailed them earlier in the morning, the boys could not of course know. But there was no doubt about the equal unfriendliness of his attitude, for through the crook of one elbow he carried a shotgun, while even as Jerry turned in his seat, the other arm was raised and a big fist shaken.

The next instant they were assured that this was the same man as had warned them away before. There was no mistaking the voice that bellowed across the water. Neither was there any mistaking the meaning of the brief sentence:

"Get to thunder out o' here!"

Jerry stood up in the boat and waved a friendly hand in the general direction of the angry man, and called pleasantly:

"We were just coming over to see about a boy we think landed on your island last night or early this morning. We found his boat down at the bridge and we figured that he must have----"

As Jerry talked, Dave had been slyly urging the boat closer to shore, but at a sudden interruption from the island, both he and Jerry paused.

"You come another foot closer, you young idiots, and I'll fill you full of rock salt. I loaded up especial for you when you raised that rumpus last night; I knew durned well you'd be coming back."

"Have you seen anything of our friend?" cried Dave anxiously, trying to smooth things over by being civil.

"If he's anything like you two, I hope I never do."

"You've got no right to keep us off Lost Island," began Jerry hotly.

"I don't need any right; I've got a shotgun. You two just pick up your paddles and blow back to shore--and be sure you tie up that boat good and tight or I'll have the law on you. Git, now!"

There didn't seem to be anything else to do. The two boys muttered to each other, and neither one was willing to admit believing that

the man would really shoot, but somehow they were unwilling to put it to the test. Reluctantly they took up the oars again and turned the nose of the boat back toward the east bank.

Facing the man now, Jerry sent one last appeal across the slowly widening space.

"We didn't mean any harm. A friend of ours was drowned yesterday, we think. We're looking for him--or his body. All we want is to know if you've seen anything of him."

"I told you this morning I hadn't."

"But why don't you let us look on the island? We're almost sure our boat was stranded there a long while. He might have been in it. If you'd just let us look, we'd be satisfied."

"I guess you'll be satisfied anyway, youngster. Just keep on rowing. Where was young Fulton drowned, anyway?"

Jerry made no answer. When Dave undertook to shout a reply, Jerry silenced him with a savage look. Then he stood up on his seat. Making a megaphone of his hands he yelled derisively:

"Yah! He wasn't drowned!_"

Then he sat down again and caught up his oar and began lunging desperately at the water. "Hurry, Dave, hurry!" he commanded excitedly.

"What's got into you?" exclaimed Dave impatiently. "You've been flying off on about forty different angles lately. What new bug has bitten you?"

"Bug! Dave, do you mean to tell me you didn't hear what the man said?"

"Course I did--but we're going, aren't we? He didn't say he'd shoot unless we kept on coming ahead."

"Oh--that! Well, you've been up all night, so no wonder you're half asleep. Didn't you hear him say: 'Where was young Fulton drowned?'"

"Sure."

"Well?"

"Well what? What in thunder's got into you? Why shouldn't he ask that?"

"He should have. He should have asked it the first time we talked to him. But, gee whiz, Dave, he shouldn't have known it was young Fulton unless--unless it was young Fulton himself who told him. Dave--Dave! Don't you see? We never mentioned his name."

"Great guns!" gasped Dave.

That was all he said, and for that matter, all that either one said.

The man stood on the point of Lost Island till he was satisfied that the boys had tied the boat safely and did not mean to loiter in the neighborhood. Then he disappeared among the trees of the lower part of the island. But the boys did not pay much attention to their late antagonist, save for a bare glance as they topped the high ridge that followed the river course.

Miles to the north they could see a big square white building that they knew as Carter's Mills, really only a grain storage elevator. Almost due west of that was the milldam, which was about the only place they could hope to be able to cross Plum Run--and Watertown lay on the other side. Of course, they might follow the river bank on the chance of meeting some good-hearted fisherman or camper who would row them across. But the chance was too slim. They decided to cut across country till they reached the mill.

It was a long, hard drill on an empty stomach. Up hill and down dale, and every step kept time to by a pang from the inner man.

"Do you think it's a sin to steal?" This from Dave.

"Certainly."

"Apples!"

"Apples? A sin? Not if you know where there are any. Lead me to them."

"Oh, I don't know where any are. I just wondered what you thought of it,"

"Do you think it's wrong to punish criminals?" This from Jerry.

"Put 'em in jail you mean?"

"Well, whatever way seems best."

"No, I can't say as I do. Why, Jerry?"

"I'm going to thump you good and plenty for fooling me about those apples, that's why."

"Catching comes before thumping!" and Dave was off with all the speed his weary legs could muster. Fortunately Jerry's legs were in no better shape, so the race, while exciting enough, was a long, slow one. Before Jerry was able to overhaul his chum, he was so tired out that anything so strenuous as thumping was quite out of the question.

"If you'd just kept running straight ahead, instead of ducking and dodging, we'd be home by now," he complained as he released the puffing Dave.

But at that they had made good time through their chase and within a very few minutes the last bend of the river showed them the milldam. The place was deserted.

"I guess Mr. Aikens persuaded Tod's father to go back home and get breakfast and rest up a bit," remarked Dave. "If there doesn't

happen to be a boat on this side of the river we may have to wait some time for that breakfast you've been promising me the last ninety-eight miles. We sure can't get across the dam, with all that water rushing over."

"I'll swim it before I wait," grimly declared Jerry. "Do you suppose Mr. Aikens took the mill boat?"

"Most likely. Where'll you try it, below or above? Swimming, I mean."

"No chance below, with that current. But I guess we won't need to. I see Pete Galpin's clam-boat down at his dock. It leaks like sin, but if one bails while the other rows I guess we can make it."

No one was astir at Galpin's shanty, a houseboat pulled high and dry on shore, and almost hidden by great piles of driftwood snagged upon the bank to serve as winter fuel. Old Pete Galpin lived there all alone, fishing and clamming and occasionally taking a wood-cutting contract to help out through the scant winter months. Once he had been known to work with an ice-cutting gang, but quit because he was afraid he'd make so much money that it would tempt somebody to rob him.

The flat-boat that was moored down at Galpin's "dock"--four railroad ties roped together--was none too substantial looking, having been built by Galpin himself from odds and ends picked up from scrap heaps and driftage. As Galpin himself said, the only whole part about the boat was the name, which had been painted in red on a single thin board sticking a full two feet past the stern--
"UPANATUM."

But the boys did not waste a great deal of time in admiring the beautiful lines of their borrowed craft. Jerry made at once for the oar seat, leaving Dave to untie and push off. For all the tremendous leak which at once developed, the boat responded easily to the strenuous tugs of Jerry's muscular arms and back.

They beached the boat and made their way up the bank and across a field where oats had just been cut, the bundles lying yellow as gold in the early morning sunlight. Just beyond was a narrow, plum-thicket bordered lane, which in turn led into the newly graveled "county" road. The boys found the walking much easier in a path that twisted along next to the fence. However, within a mile, along came a farmer, hauling a load of early potatoes to town, and the boys gladly accepted his invitation to "hop on."

Within a quarter of a mile both were sound asleep, nor did they waken until the springless wagon rattled over the interurban tracks less than two blocks from Dave's home. Rubbing their eyes in a vain attempt to drive out the sleep, they stumbled along the quiet street.

"Where will I find you after breakfast?" asked Jerry, as Dave turned in at his gate.

"In bed. I'll be lucky if I stay awake till after breakfast."

"But we've got to tell Mr. Fulton."

"You tell him, Jerry. I just know he won't pay any attention to what we say--I don't more'n half believe it now myself----" Dave had to stop for a tremendous yawn.

"If that's the case, you might just as well sleep." Jerry was out of patience, but Dave was too sleepy to care very much.

"I'll see you--see you--later, Jerry," he said drowsily as he turned and staggered up the walk.

Jerry, after an undecided second or two, faced about and began to retrace his steps. He cut through the Ellery back yard and came out on the cross street at whose corner the Fultons lived. The house was a big ramshackle affair of a dozen rooms or so, far too large a place for the Fultons, since there had been only the two of them, Tod's mother having died when he was only a little tad. Indeed, as Tod said, they only used three rooms, the kitchen and two bedrooms. But that was hardly true; there was a big basement under all the house, the most of it used as a workroom, and here it was that the two of them spent the better part of their waking hours.

Mr. Fulton was an odd sort of man, a bit inclined to think his business his own business. But it was no secret among his neighbors that all sorts of queer contrivances were planned and made in that combination machine shop, carpenter shop, forge and foundry below stairs.

Mr. Fulton was an inventor. True, for the most part he invented useless things; he had inherited money and did not need to make any more. But the boys, who were allowed to roam through the workshop at will, were wildly enthusiastic over the ingenious devices schemed out by father and son, for Tod was a chip off the old block.

Now, Jerry did not go up to the front door, even though it was standing ajar. Instead he hurried to the little side porch and reached high up under the eaves, where an electric button was concealed. He pushed it, hard, well knowing that if Mr. Fulton were anywhere in the house he would hear that bell. That was why it had been so well hidden.

But there was no response. Again Jerry rang; he could hear the shrill br-r-r of the bell. After a long time he heard footsteps, but something told him they were not those of Mr. Fulton. The door swung open. There stood Mr. Aikens.

"Is Mr. Fulton here," demanded Jerry.

"Asleep," nodded Mr. Aikens.

"I've got to see him."

"All right--if you don't wake him up."

"I've got to talk to him--I've got big news."

"Big news? Of--of Tod?" Big Mr. Aikens was not the kind of man to become easily excited, but his manner was eager enough.

"Of Tod--yes!" cried Jerry.

"What is it? Have you found his--his body?"

"Better than that, Mr. Aikens--Oh, I'm almost dead sure!"

Jerry was so excited himself that his voice shook. As for Mr. Aikens, he leaped over and caught Jerry's arm and was shaking it wildly up and down. Neither one noticed that a white-faced man stood in the opposite doorway, and that his eyes were simply blazing with expectancy.

"What do you mean? What _can_ you mean!" demanded Mr. Aikens.

"I believe that Tod Fulton is----"

"Not alive?" almost screamed a voice from across the room. "Not alive!"

"Alive and on Lost Island!"

CHAPTER VI

TO THE RESCUE!

This much of the interview was perfectly clear to Jerry afterwards, but what followed he could not quite understand at the time or later. For a moment it was almost laughable. There stood Aikens fiercely clutching one arm and waving it up and down as if to pump further information from him. Mr. Fulton, after the first dazed instant, darted across the room and grabbed Jerry's other arm.

"_Where_ is he? Tell me--quick!" he demanded.

Then it was that Jerry could not understand, for the look that came over Mr. Fulton's face at his reply was neither belief nor doubt. His eyebrows almost met in a frown as he repeated mechanically:

"On Lost Island, you say? But--but--how do you know? You weren't _on_ Lost Island, were you?"

"No--o," answered Jerry slowly.

A look of relief, quickly hidden, came to Mr. Fulton's face, but Jerry saw it, and wondered.

"Did someone tell you he was there, then?"

"Someone told me he _wasn't_ there----" began Jerry, when the ting-a-ling of a telephone bell cut him short.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Fulton and hurried from the room. His muffled voice could be heard in a lengthy conversation. Jerry impatiently awaited his return, anxious to tell the rest of his story. Imagine then his surprise when Tod's father delayed his return unreasonably,

and his only response to Jerry's eager sentences was, "Yes, yes, I know."

Jerry's heart sank unaccountably--he sensed the fact that Mr. Fulton was not listening, was only waiting, in fact, till the boy should finish and he could decently get rid of Jerry. The story was consequently hurried through. Disappointed beyond description, Jerry left the house, not even noticing that Mr. Fulton had left the room even before Jerry had reached the door.

Something was wrong somewhere; Jerry had expected that his story would be literally snatched out of his mouth; instead it had been smothered under the dampest kind of wet blanket. Feeling not a little sore over his failure to impress the two men with the importance of his discoveries, Jerry plodded along home, determined that as soon as he had gulped down a little breakfast he would hike back to Lost Island alone and make one more attempt to gain the cover of its wooded banks.

Even that plan was doomed to disappointment. Jerry's mother had saved a goodly breakfast for him, and bustled about making him comfortable. Contrary to Jerry's expectations, she had no word of blame for his having remained away overnight without asking consent, and even listened with sympathetic ear to the story of his adventures. But just at the moment when Jerry was about to announce his intention to return, Mrs. Ring was called to the back door, to return a few minutes later with the announcement that it had been Mr. Aikens, and that Jerry was not to worry any more about Lost Island.

"But I've simply got to go back, ma," sputtered Jerry, his mouth uncomfortably full of pancake. "Mr. Fulton isn't going to--well, he didn't show much interest in my theories---"

"But Mr. Aikens seemed to think he did. You just rest easy, son. If two grown men can't take care of your Lost Islander--and your theories, too, why, well--you just get ready to pile into bed, that's all."

"But, ma--there's the boat."

"It'll take care of itself till you get there."

"But, ma----"

"Hush up, now. Into bed with you."

"But can I go after the boat when I----"

Mrs. Ring caught up a flat piece of wood from the back of the kitchen range, and laughingly but firmly put an end to the coaxing, Jerry retreating hastily to the shelter of his bedroom.

Both Jerry and his father stood in awe of tiny Mrs. Ring, who barely reached to overgrown Jerry's shoulder.

"Wake me up at twelve, will you, ma?" called Jerry, in his most wheedling voice. His mother only laughed, but Jerry felt sure she would. Besides, there was his dollar alarm clock.

Jerry repented his request when sharp at twelve o'clock he was called for noonday dinner. He was sleepy and cross and not a bit hungry. His muscles were sore, and the drill to Lost Island did not have quite the romance by broad daylight that it had had a few hours before.

Jerry watched his father put on his hat and hurry back to work, with a great deal of relief. His mother was much easier to handle in a case of this sort.

"You won't mind if I don't get back till late?" he asked, hoping she would give her unqualified consent to his remaining away as long as he saw fit. "You promised me I could go camping this summer--let me take it now, _please_, ma."

"Will you promise me to come back and let me pick the birdshot out of you after you've made a landing on Lost Island?" she asked in mock anxiety. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Ring was about as proud of her big boy as a mother well could be without making herself a nuisance to the neighbors. From his earliest boyhood she had cultivated the independence of spirit he showed with his first pair of real trousers, and now she often strained a point to let him exercise it. To be sure, she sometimes wondered how much was genuine self-confidence and how much was a reckless love of adventure.

Now she raised her eyebrows in denial, but at the eager look on the boy's face she relented. "Trot along, Jerry," she agreed, with a quick pat at his shoulder--the Rings were not much at kissing each other. "If you can't take care of yourself by now, you never will be able to. I know you're as anxious as you can be about Tod--I do hope it turns out that you are right about him."

With a muttered, "I've got to be right," Jerry set about making himself a couple of substantial sandwiches and stuffing them in the pocket of his canvas hunting coat, which he took along for emergencies. "Good-bye, ma," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be back as soon as I can bring Tod with me."

Once outside, he wasted no time but struck off at once cross-lots to rout out Dave Thomas and Frank Ellery. Fortunately Frank came first, otherwise Jerry might not have been equal to the task of waking up Dave. They tried everything they had ever heard of. They tickled his feet; they set off a brass-lunged alarm clock under his very nose; they dumped him roughly out of his bed, but even on the bare floor he slumbered peacefully on. Cold water brought only temporary success. They were in despair.

It was Frank who finally solved the problem. Seating himself on the foot of the bed, he raised his head much in the fashion of a hound baying at the moon--the sound that issued from his throat would put to shame the most ambitious hound that ever howled. Jerry caught up a pillow and would have shied it at the head of the offender, but the perfectly serious look on Frank's face withheld his arm. Gradually it dawned on him that the boy was trying to sing--and, more than that, it was one of Dave's favorite songs he was murdering.

Then it was that Jerry understood Frank's strategy. The bed-clothes

began to heave; they had piled them all atop Dave as he lay on the floor. Frank began on the chorus. A wriggling leg emerged from beneath the comforts. Jerry joined in, his voice a villainous imitation of Frank's discords. Another leg came to view.

They began to repeat the chorus, further off key than before. One line was all they were suffered to torture. A catapult of boy, bedclothes and pillows bounded from the floor and sent Frank spinning into the bed, while Jerry barely saved himself from a spill on the floor.

"You will yowl like a lot of bob-tailed tomcats, will yuh!" yelled Dave, dancing up and down on one foot--he had stubbed his toe against one of his shoes in his charge across the room.

"You will snore away like six buzz-saws on circus day, huh?" snorted Frank, neatly catching Dave in the pit of the stomach with a pillow caught up from the floor.

For a second it looked like a free-for-all, but Jerry had no time to waste.

"Get your clothes on--hustle. We're going back to Lost Island."

"Suppose my mother won't let me?"

"Suppose you tell her we've got to go and get our boat? She'll let you go all right. You just want to get back to bed, that's all that's worrying you. Hustle, Dave. We can't lose a minute."

"But didn't you tell Tod's dad about what we--found out?" Dave hesitated over the last. It was plain to be seen that he was none too sure in his own mind of the importance of their discovery.

"I did, and he--well, he acted so queer about it that I don't know what to think. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they--he and Mr. Aikens, you know--never went near Lost Island. They think we're just kids."

"But we don't really know anything, Jerry; we're only just guessing."

"Guessing, huh? Well, I'm only just guessing that you're wasting a lot of time about getting your clothes on, but in about half a minute I'm going to climb all over you."

At that Dave bristled up a bit, but his fingers became spryer with buttons and hooks and very shortly he stood fully dressed and ready to go downstairs. Jerry had already made peace with Mrs. Thomas, so little time was lost in waiting for Dave to snatch a bite to eat and be on his way.

"I've got four bits loose in my pocket," announced Jerry, once they were out on the street. "If we don't let any grass grow on the side streets while we're moving we can make the two-five express on the Dellwood Interurban. We can drop off when they slow down at Downers Crossing; that must be almost opposite Lost Island. It's hard going through the swamps to get to Plum Run, but I guess we're good for it."

They made the two-five--with about three seconds to spare. Their car was empty, so each dropped into a seat and sprawled out comfortably. Jerry smiled grimly to himself as he looked back perhaps five minutes later and saw how the two had slumped down in their seats. It did not need a throaty gurgle from Dave to convince him that the pair were sound asleep. "A fine pair of adventurers," he muttered to himself, not entirely without some feeling of resentment. It was well enough to be the leader, but--well, he wouldn't have minded a little snooze himself.

He did not feel quite so critical, however, when, perhaps a half hour later, at a terrific jolt of the train, he was roused from the doze into which he too had fallen. A hasty glance out the window told him that they were at Downers Crossing. With a yell that would have done credit to a whole war-party of Comanches, he pounced upon the two sleepers and dragged and pushed and pommelled them out onto the platform of the car. The train was beginning to move, so their descent was none too dignified.

"Why in thunder didn't you wake us in time so I could have got a drink?" complained Frank.

Jerry said nothing; he felt too guilty to risk any answer. After they had cut across to the wagon road that led in the general direction of the river, he consoled his chum with: "Downer's farm is only about half a mile in, and we can get all the buttermilk we want there----" adding mischievously: "----on Wednesdays, when they churn."

Both Dave and Frank promised instant murder for that, so he had to admit that they would reach the best spring in Winthrop County within three minutes.

"Saved your hide by just twenty-nine seconds," declared Dave as he plunged his face into the bubbling surface of the clearest, coldest kind of a hillside spring.

Their gait was much livelier after that, and in less than ten minutes Plum Run was sighted, But they did not come out as close to Lost Island as Jerry had predicted. In fact, they were not certain in which direction it lay, for to the north lay a cluster of trees apparently surrounded by water, and which might well be the place they sought. To the south lay another green spot away from shore.

"It's north of here," declared both Dave and Frank, but Jerry exclaimed triumphantly, after the first tangle of argument:

"It must be south. If Lost Island was north the wagon bridge'd be between us and it."

So south they went; and as they drew nearer they saw that the patch of green was indeed Lost Island. Once they were within close sight of it, they went forward with all caution. The last hundred yards or so they made on hands and knees, finding cover in every clump of bushes or willows on the way.

But finally they were ready to break through the last fringe of willow and spy out the prospect. Jerry, who was ahead, waited for

his two companions to catch up with him.

"Not a sound, now," he cautioned as they crouched beside him.

Stealthily they pushed aside the leaves that obscured their view. Suddenly, from behind them a yell, blood-curdling, absolutely hair-raising, rang out through the stillness. The three turned.

But it was too late. Breaking cover at the same instant, a half-dozen husky young chaps charged on the surprised trio.

"Up and at them, fellows!" came a roar. "They're part of the gang!"

CHAPTER VII

THE FLYING EAGLE SCOUTS

For a minute or two it was hard for the three boys to understand just what had happened. They were pounced upon and hurled roughly to the ground, in spite of their violent struggles, and there they were pommelled unmercifully. They fought back, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. It was no adventure-story fight where the lone hero engages a dozen husky brutes and by superior science and strength lays his assailants out one by one.

Too bewildered to be really angry, the three found themselves pinned to the ground. Then they were able to take stock of their attackers. Six boys they were, of about the same size and age as Dave, Jerry and Frank. They were dressed in some odd sort of uniform, like brownish canvas. Just now their faces wore triumphant grins.

"Here comes Phil," remarked one of the three who were standing, coming over to sit on Jerry's legs, Jerry having seized a favorable opportunity to attempt escape.

"What's the idea?" inquired the newcomer, a tall but well-knit chap with a broad, sunburned face and a mop of black hair showing under the forward brim of his wide hat.

"We caught them trying to sneak up on us, so we fooled them and jumped on them instead. It's part of that Lost Island gang," volunteered Dave's captor.

"We're not either," exploded Dave.

"Shut up!" exclaimed the one astride his stomach. "Didn't we see you slinking along through the bushes?"

"Well, so were you. But we didn't try any wild Indian game on you just on that account."

"Good reason why. You didn't see us," crowed the one on top, giving Dave a vigorous poke in the ribs to emphasize the point.

That was too much for Dave. His usual good nature had been oozing

out with every passing second. Now he gave a sudden twist, heaved, turned, heaved again, and in less time than it was told, was on his feet and presenting a pair of promising looking fists to the two others who had quickly come to their comrade's assistance.

"Hold on a minute," suggested the one they had called Phil. "Let's get the straight of this thing first and fight afterwards. You say you don't belong on the island?" he asked, turning to Dave.

"We certainly don't. We were trying to get onto it without being seen. That's why we were skulking along that way."

"Trying to get onto it? You haven't any boat."

"We could swim, couldn't we?"

"But what do you want to get onto the island for? Where are you from, anyhow?"

"None of your particular business," snapped Dave, but Jerry answered as well as he could with his shortness of breath--he too was "stomached" by a stout boy of his own size:

"Watertown."

"Know anybody there by the name of Tod Fulton? He's a cousin of mine--why, what's the matter?" for the three boys had cried out in dismay.

"Why--why--he's the boy we're after. He's our chum," stammered Jerry at last.

"Then what you after him for--if he's your chum?"

"Well, he's--he's----" began Jerry, and Dave blurted out:

"Drowned!"

"What!" cried the whole crew at that. "Tod Fulton drowned!"

"We don't know for sure. That's why we're trying to get onto Lost Island."

Then the story came out, piecemeal, for all three insisted on telling it. Phil stood as if stunned. At the end he said simply:

"He's my cousin. I'm Phil Fulton. We live at Chester. That's about ten miles south of here. We're the Flying Eagle Patrol of Boy Scouts--maybe you noticed our suits."

"Thought you were some kind of bushwhackers the way you dropped on us," complained Frank. "But what was the idea in thumping us because you thought we were from the island?"

"We had good reasons enough," declared Phil. "We left town at midnight last night, hiked all the way to our boat-landing two miles up the river, and made the long pull up the Plum in the dark just for the sake of getting an early morning chance at the best bass rock you ever heard of--just to get chased out at the point of a

shotgun after we'd landed the first one--a three pounder too. Can you blame us for being sore?"

"On Lost Island?" asked Jerry eagerly.

"No, off Lost Island. A big burly ruffian blew down on us, cussing a streak, and wouldn't hardly let us get into our boat. Chucked stones at us all the way across and promised us a mess of birdshot if we came back. Do you blame us for wanting to lay you out?" It was Dave's conqueror who spoke.

"If that's what you do on suspicion, I don't want to be around when you're sure of yourself. My ribs'll be sore for a week."

The boys had been talking excitedly; each one was wrought up over the fate of poor Tod and this was the only way they were willing to show their feelings. It was Phil who brought them back to earth.

"Well, fellows," he suggested, "let's get acquainted first, and then let's see if we can't frame up some way of getting across and going over that island from end to end. Line up, Scouts, and be presented."

The Scouts lined up in two columns.

"This is Sid Walmsly, nicknamed 'the worm,' partly because that's the way we pronounce his name, but mostly because it's a long worm that has no turn, and Sid says he's always the one to be left out. You can remember him by the wart on his left knuckle. Next is Dick Garrett; he's assistant Patrol Leader. This thin, long-drawn-out morsel of sweet temper is Fred Nelson. We tried to nickname him "Angel" but he licked everyone that tried it on him. Now comes our joker, we'd call him Trixie if we dared. His ma calls him Algy Brown. Frank Willis stands first in the behind row. He goes by the name of "Budge," chiefly because he won't unless he wants to. Barney Knowles, the littlest giant in the world--the one in the red sweater. He wears a sweater in July and shirt-sleeves in December. And last of all, but not least--far from it--Ted Lewis, the only grouchy fat man in captivity. Smile for us, Teddy." Teddy growled.

Jerry introduced himself and his two chums, and then turned anxiously to Phil. "Got any plan?"

"Why not just get into our boat and row over? We can tell that chump over there----"

"Thought you told us good Scouts were always respectful to our elders?" interrupted Ted, he of the "grouch."

"Respectful where respect is due," came the quick response. "We can tell the gentleman that we have sent the rest of the gang back for the sheriff----"

"And good Scouts never tell lies----" This from Ted again.

"Be still or I'll make it the truth by sending you back after him. We ought to make the try, anyway, because that makes our next move easier. If we can't get on the island in the open, we've got to use a little strategy. If we just could get our boat around to the other

side of the island----"

"I've got it!" cried Dave. "Our boat's down the river. While the bunch of us keep up a demonstration along the shore here, two of us could slip down and get the boat and sneak in at the lower end."

"Good. We'd best waste no time about it because it's going to be coming on dark before we know it. Who's going along with me?"

"To the island? I'll go. The man knows _me_," agreed Jerry. "Where's your boat?"

The rest waited in the cover of the bushes while Phil and Jerry quietly made their way down the river bank to where the Scout boat was moored. They sprang in at once, Phil pushing off and hopping lightly to the oars. There was only one pair, but he sent the boat skimming across the ripples. No one was in sight on the island, and they were in hopes of making a landing unobserved, but just as their boat touched shore the willows parted and the man stepped out on the high bank.

"Back again?" he demanded gruffly.

"Oh, yes," replied Phil easily. "We came back to see if you'd let us look for a box of tackle one of the boys thinks he left down where we were fishing this morning."

"Oh! And you," said the man sarcastically, turning to Jerry. "I suppose you came to look for a lock of hair from your drowned friend's head?"

The man's tone was so unfeeling that Jerry simply gasped, but Phil boiled over at once.

"I'll have you know that that boy was my cousin. We have good reason for believing that he's on this island and _we're going to search it_!"

"Oh, indeed!" and Jerry could have sworn that there was a twinkle in the man's eye for all there was no mistaking the threat in his voice. "Well, I can promise you a full-sized spanking unless you make yourselves scarce in just about one half minute. This makes the third time I've had to chase you off--and third time's the charm, you know."

"But why don't you want us to look for our friend? Surely you've got nothing against him--or us."

"Not a thing. Not a thing, sonny. Only I live on this place, and I can't have a troop of youngsters tracking mud in at my front door. That friend of yours couldn't very well be on my island without my knowing it, could he?"

"But you've never said out and out that he wasn't on the island," asserted Jerry boldly. "And you've acted so suspicious that--that we wouldn't believe you now if you did say it."

The man laughed at that, for Jerry had started out by trying to be diplomatic, but his feelings got the better of him before the end.

"I'll be careful not to say it then. As for the tackle box--here it is." Jerry opened his eyes wide; he had thought the box a pure invention on the part of Phil. "Now back water and keep backing."

"You think you've got us beat," shouted Jerry at his retreating back. "Never you worry--I've told Mr. Fulton, and he and Mr. Aikens will be coming down here with a posse. They won't be asking your permission if they can investigate an island that doesn't belong to you any more than it does to me."

"It belongs to Mr. Fulton, I suppose?" challenged the man, and turning around for a last laugh. Neither boy answered.

"You tell your Mr. Fulton that I said he was welcome to come any time."

"Now what?" asked Jerry, as Phil turned the boat about and headed for the other shore.

"What next? Night, mostly. Then I think we'll show your Mr. Billings a few Scout tricks he doesn't know about."

"I didn't say his name was Billings----"

"I know--but I did. I've seen him before. That may be the reason he's so touchy about having us land on the island. The last time I saw him it was down at dad's office. Uncle Ed--that's Mr. Fulton, you know--was there, and when I opened the door on them suddenly, he and this Billings were having the hottest kind of an argument. Dad hustled me out of there in a hurry, but not before Uncle Ed'd called him Billings--and a lot of other things."

"You think then that Billings is still sore at Mr. Fulton, and that he's holding Tod there----"

"Nothing more likely. We'll know to-night. At least we'll know whether Tod is there--and I guess we'll make a good strong try at getting him loose."

"How can we do it? What's your plan?"

"Leave it to the Flying Eagle Scouts. I'm not bragging, but we're one live crew!"

CHAPTER VIII

A VOYAGE IN THE DARK

Still, it was some time after the return of Phil and Jerry from their unsuccessful sortie into the enemy's country, before a practical plan occurred to the ten-brain-power plotters. But the scheme, once its details had been worked out, struck them all as having a fair chance for success. Briefly, it was this:

Two of the boys--Jerry and Phil were again chosen--were to go down the river to the bridge and cross over and get the _Big Four_. They were to come back up the river as quietly as possible, hugging the opposite shore to a point about two hundred yards below the island, where the east bank spurred off into a fairly high hill. Here one of the boys was to leave the boat, as near nine o'clock as possible--it was now seven--and climb the hill, where he was to signal across to Dick Garrett, who would be watching directly opposite.

Then Jerry and Phil were to make all speed to Lost Island, landing at the lower end. The Boy Scouts, and Dave and Frank, were to gather as conspicuously as possible--a flaring camp fire would show their intentions--and pretend that _they_ were about to embark for the island.

That _ought_ to leave the lower end of the island unguarded for the safe landing of Jerry and Phil. Once they were ashore, the dense bushes and the darkness ought to be sufficient cover for their search.

Little time had been lost, really, in making the plan, for the Scouts had been bustling back and forth, building a camp fire and preparing supper. Four of them had set up the tents, finishing the task begun by all of them when Jerry and Phil set out on their first trip to the island.

It was not a very fancy meal the boys sat down to. The food was served on paper lunch plates, so there would be no dish-washing. Each Scout carried knife, fork, spoon and tincup. There was no extra "silverware" save the cook's big utensils. So the three outsiders ate with fingers and pocketknives. A nice mess of perch had been caught in a near-by creek, and Frank Willis, whose turn it was to act as chef, had browned them most artistically. There were some ash-baked potatoes, and a farmhouse close by had provided a generous supply of buttermilk.

The last of the meal was eaten by the light of the camp fire, for the sky had clouded over and night seemed to drop suddenly from above. Licking the last morsel of the delicious fish from his greasy finger-ends, and wiping his greasier mouth on his sleeve, Jerry jumped to his feet and announced:

"I'm ready, Phil, if you are."

"I've been ready for a quarter of an hour--just waiting for the skillet to be empty, because I knew you'd never stir so long as there was a crumb left. Where do you put it all?"

"I've got to stow away a lot to balance my brains. I notice you're a light eater," retorted Jerry, but Phil only chuckled.

"All right, you two--be on your merry way," put in Dick Garrett. "This is no picnic excursion you're starting off on. And don't forget your oars, unless you expect to row your boat with your wits."

The two made no reply; a half minute later there were only eight boys in camp.

Something like a quarter of a mile inland was the gravel road that

followed the windings of Plum Run, to cut across at the wagon bridge. Two stealthy figures hurried through the woods and across the fields, to emerge on the other side of a barbed wire fence and trudge off down the dusty road.

"Some woodsman, you are!" snorted Phil in purposely exaggerated disgust. "When you skulked through the brush the limbs could be heard popping for a mile. How many times did you fall down?"

"Fall down? What you mean, fall down? Every time you stumbled over your shadow I thought you were ducking for cover, so I simply crouched to keep out of sight."

Phil snorted, and quickened his pace. Jerry put an extra few inches on his own stride and easily kept up. They passed a farmhouse--at good speed, for a dog came out and after a few suspicious sniffs proceeded to satisfy his appetite on Phil's leg. A loud ripping noise told that he at least kept a souvenir of the visit.

The dog's excited barking kept them company to the next farmhouse, which they passed as silently as possible, not particularly desiring to repeat the experience.

"It was your whistling back there that scared up that dog--see if you can whistle a patch onto my leggins," Phil suggested when they were once more surrounded by open fields.

Jerry did not answer, for just ahead of them the road forked and he was trying to remember which turn it was one took to get to the bridge. He had never gone this way, but he had once heard a farmer giving directions to a party of automobilists. However, Phil unhesitatingly took the branch that cut in toward the river, so he said nothing for some time.

"Ever been over this road before?" he ventured to ask when the road suddenly became so rough that they stumbled at every step.

"No--never been up this way. We always fish on the other side of the Plum."

"How do you know then that this is the right road?"

"It turned in toward the river, didn't it? And the other road angled off toward Tarryville."

"But the bridge road is graveled all the way, and if this isn't blue clay I'll eat my hat. It might just be a private road to some farm, and the other road might have swung around after a bit. This muck-hole doesn't look good to me."

"All the same, through those trees yonder I can see water. It's the old Plum all right. Shake a leg."

"I think we'll gain time by shaking two legs--back to the fork. That's the Plum, all right enough, but you'll walk through marsh all the way to the bridge if you try to follow the bank. I remember now: this is the old wood road. It hasn't been used since they cut timber on the Jameson tract."

Jerry did not wait to finish his argument but had already gone back a good fifty feet of the way to the other road, when he noticed that Phil was not following him.

"What's the matter, Phil?"

"Don't you think we've wasted enough time, without losing some more by going back?"

"We'll lose more by going ahead. And we're losing now by standing still chewing the rag about it. Come on."

"I'm going ahead. You followed my lead this far; I guess it won't hurt you to follow it a little farther. I'm Patrol Leader, you know."

Jerry sensed a little resentment in Phil's tone, and remembered that once or twice he had spoken to the Scout leader just as he did to his chums--and his chums always looked to him for commands.

"I'm not trying to boss you, Phil, don't think that. But I know that the other way is the best way, and I've got to follow it. So you go ahead, and I'll wait for you at this end of the bridge."

Without further word he strode off on the back road. It was so dark that he might have done so safely, but he did not look back. Nevertheless, a pleased grin spread over his face, for he was soon aware that Phil was tagging along not many paces behind. That had always been the way. Jerry was a born leader; the other boys followed him willingly because they never found any cause to lose confidence in his judgment.

"Phil, you're a genuine sport," was all he said as the other boy fell into step beside him as once more they reached the gravel roadway and turned into the right-hand branch.

Sooner than they expected they saw the gaunt skeleton of the upper bridgework against the dark sky. Jerry did not permit himself an "I told you so," but he said instead:

"We'll be in a pretty pickle if we get on the other side and find our boat gone."

Phil made no answer and in silence they walked across the hollow-echoing bridge. A series of giant stone steps led down to the river bank, and as soon as they reached bottom they saw that their fears were groundless, for there lay the Big Four as Jerry and Dave had left her eighteen hours before. Deep footprints in the mud bank, dimly visible in the dusk, told that someone had stopped to look the boat over. Perhaps had the oars been handy, the boat might not have remained so safely.

The boys were glad to relieve their shoulders of the pair they had taken turns in carrying, and without pausing to rest, they stepped into the boat, Phil finding some difficulty in making the Scout boat's oars fit the Big Four's oarlocks. But at last they were off and Jerry bent to his task. The Big Four had been built for speed, and the craft was trimmed just right for getting the most with the least effort. The current was fairly swift here, but Jerry hugged

the east bank and took advantage of every eddy. It was not long before Lost Island swung into sight.

"Let me spell you off," suggested Phil, but Jerry shook his head.

"After we land at the hill you can take her the rest of the way. I think I'll pull in at that little cove just ahead. It makes a little longer walk, but it's well out of sight of the island. Who'll climb the hill!"

"Leave that to me. I kind of want to try out a little signaling stunt that Dick and I have been figuring on. Here's a good sandy stretch; let's beach her here."

The boat grated on the pebbly shore; Phil sprang lightly out, and Jerry was left alone. He could hear Phil scrunching over the rocks and through the brush; then all was still. Jerry strained his eyes to see if he could make out the figure of Dick, who must be almost directly opposite, but only the dense black of the wood met his gaze. He waited patiently for the gleam of the flashlight, but minute after minute slipped by, and no signal appeared.

So he was somewhat surprised when after perhaps fifteen minutes he heard a footstep on the beach and he realized that Phil was returning.

"Our scheme worked fine," announced the Scout leader. "Bet you never even saw Dick's signal."

"No, I didn't," confessed Jerry.

"Good reason why. You see, I figured out that if you shoot a flash straight out in front of you very long everybody can see it. A quick flash--well, anyone who saw it might think it was just lightning or the interurban. So I just snapped about a dozen straight up into the air, until I got a return flash from Dick. Then I used this." He pulled out a little pocket mirror. "I pointed my light straight at the ground, and gave him a dot and dash message by holding the mirror in the light. Some scheme, eh?"

Jerry merely grunted, but way down in his heart a deep respect was forming for these Boy Scouts and their resourcefulness.

"Just flash a few signals to those oars," he advised, taking his place in the stern. "And be careful with that left oar--she squeaks if you pull her too hard."

But Phil soon showed that he needed no advice about handling a boat. Without a sound--without a ripple, almost--they moved away from shore and cut out into the current.

"Safe to get out into line with the island, I guess. If they're watching, it's the shore they'll be most suspicious of."

"They? We've only seen one out there."

"Maybe. But I'm betting on a pair of them at least. It's about time for the boys to--listen to those Indians, would you? I'm afraid they're overdoing it a bit."

From the far shore, out of sight behind Lost Island, rose a hubbub of cries that sounded as if the island were about to be attacked by a war party of Sioux. A Boy Scout yell sounded out, the voices of Dave and Frank heard above the rest.

"Guess your two must have deserted your banner and joined the Eagles," teased Phil.

The island lay dead ahead of them, dark and still. Both boys had a shivery feeling of being watched, but no sign was apparent as they floated in behind the point of the island and noiselessly beached the boat.

"We'd best stay close together," suggested Jerry in a whisper.

"And by all means don't whisper--talk in an undertone. A whisper carries twice as far," countered Phil. Jerry marked down one more to the score of the Boy Scouts.

But there was little need for talk. The brush was heavy, broken by thickets of plum trees and an occasional sapling of hickory; the ground was boggy in spots, and once Jerry sank almost to his knees in oozy mud. A screech owl hooted in a tree close by, and cold shivers ran up and down their backbones. Unbroken by path or opening, the island wilderness lay before them.

They walked hours it seemed, trying their best not to advertise their coming in breaking limbs and rustling leaves, for the night was uncannily still. It was a great relief, therefore, when the underbrush suddenly gave way to a few low trees and after that open ground. Jerry was for plunging right ahead, relying on the darkness, but Phil caught his arm.

"Circle it," he commanded, and Jerry, little used to obeying orders as he was, at once saw the wisdom of the idea and agreed. They were nearly halfway around the open plot when they struck a path, evidently leading to the river. But the other end must go somewhere, and they strained their eyes into the darkness.

"A house, I do believe," mumbled Phil.

"Shall we risk going closer?"

"Got to. Not a sound now. Let's take off our shoes."

In their stocking feet they stealthily drew nearer the dark blot against the background. When they were within twenty feet they saw it was not a cabin, but one end of a long, narrow, shed-like structure, perhaps twenty feet wide and running far back into the darkness. They approached it cautiously and began feeling carefully along the higher side for some sort of door or opening. They had gone a good thirty feet, their nerves tingling with the hope of next-instant discovery, when Phil broke the silence with a low-toned sentence.

"There's a house or cabin of some kind less than twenty feet away."

Jerry did not look. His groping fingers had found something that

felt like a door-edge. His hand closed over a knob.

"Here's the door!" he exclaimed eagerly, and then felt his heart almost stop beating. The knob had been turned in his hand! But before he could say a word, a sudden "Sh!" sounded from his companion.

"Did you hear it?" gasped Phil.

"What?" asked Jerry, his voice trembling in spite of him.

But Phil did not answer--there was no need. From the cabin came a sound that set every nerve on edge. It was a groan--the groan of someone in great agony.

CHAPTER IX

A RESCUE THAT FAILED

In the excitement of hearing that groan, Jerry forgot every other thought. Both boys jumped at once to the same conclusion: Tod was in that cabin! Perhaps he had been hurt, or perhaps, even, that ruffian was mistreating him. With one accord they broke for the cabin, making for where a thin pencil of light hinted at a door. They wasted no time fumbling for the knob, but put all the strength of their shoulders against the opening.

The door gave, suddenly, and they tumbled over each other into a dimly lighted room. It was fortunate for them that there was no one there, for in falling Phil overturned a chair, which in turn managed to become entangled in Jerry's legs, who came to the floor with a suddenness that did not give Phil time to get out of the way. Half stunned, they lay there panting, till a renewal of the moaning aroused them to quick action.

Phil jumped to his feet and caught up a leg of the chair, that had been broken loose in the triple fall. It was well to have some sort of weapon. The sounds seemed to have come from above, where a trap door indicated a loft or attic of some sort. The boys looked wildly about for some means of getting up to the trap door, but the light of the smoky kerosene lamp revealed nothing. The chair might have helped them, but it was wrecked beyond hope.

"Perhaps if we called to him, he might answer," ventured Jerry huskily.

"First see if you can reach the trap door if you stand on my shoulders." Phil made a stirrup of his hands and gave Jerry a leg up. Wabbling uncertainly, but managing to straighten himself, Jerry caught at the edge of the opening.

"Nailed!" he exclaimed disappointedly as he jumped to the floor. "Shall we call?" Phil nodded.

"Tod. Oh, Tod!"

Only silence. Again they called.

"Tod--Tod Fulton."

There was an answer this time, but not of the sort nor from the direction the boys expected. It was more like a whine than a groan this time, and it came from the far side of the room. For the first time the boys noticed that there was a door there, partly open. They made a rush for it, Jerry in the lead. But he got no farther than the threshold. As he reached it, the door was flung open in his face.

In the doorway stood a sixteen-year-old girl, a slim, black-haired slip of a thing, her black eyes snapping. One hand was doubled up into a fist that would have made any boy laugh, but there was no laughter in the other hand. It brandished a wicked looking hand-axe, and it was evident from the way she handled it that there was strength in those scrawny arms.

"You get out of here!" she commanded, advancing a step.

Jerry backed away hastily, but Phil only laughed, trying to balance himself on the two and a half legs of the wrecked chair.

"I've seen you before, Lizzie, and you don't scare me a bit with that meat axe."

"It's no meat axe; it's a wood axe--look out for your heads," she retorted scornfully. "Clear out of here or I'll make kindling of both of you."

"Put down that cleaver, Lizzie, and let's talk sense. We came here to get Tod Fulton--he's my cousin, you know----" but that was as far as he got.

The girl, her face showing a determination that made nonchalant Phil jump up from his chair and beat a quick retreat, walked up on them, the axe flashing viciously back and forth before her.

"You're going to get off this island," she exclaimed, "and you're going to do it quick. No tricks now! The first one who makes a break gets this axe in the back--and I can throw straight. About face, now. March!"

There was nothing to do but obey. Sheepishly enough the boys turned and meekly let her drive them out into the dark. As she passed the lamp she caught it down from the bracket on the wall with one hand.

Thus they marched across the open ground, along the narrow path and out on the waterfront.

"Our boat is down at the other end of the island" remarked Phil, turning his head ever so slightly.

"I'll have my father bring it over to you in the morning," answered the girl relentlessly. "I see your friends waiting for you over on the other side, so it wouldn't be fair to keep them in suspense."

"You're surely not going to make us try to swim it?" pleaded Phil, pretending great consternation, hoping that he might delay their departure till something might happen to give them the advantage.

"That's not all I am going to do." Setting down her lamp on a convenient rock, and changing her axe to her left hand, she stooped over and picked up a pebble. With a quick jerk she drew back her arm and then shot it out, boy-fashion. The boys heard the stone hum as it sailed through the air. An instant, and then a howl of pain arose from one of the Scouts dancing about the blazing camp fire on the other shore. It was a good hundred yards away.

"I just did that to show you what'd happen to you if you didn't head straight for that gang of pirates over there," she said grimly.

"You're some --tomboy!" exclaimed Phil, admiringly, Jerry thought, but the girl only laughed sarcastically.

"You first," she demanded. "You're just watching for a chance to catch me off my guard. I'm onto you."

Phil had no choice, so without more ado, he plunged in and began cutting the water neatly in the direction of the camp fire.

"He swims well, doesn't he?" remarked the girl, so easily that Jerry could have sworn she was about ready to laugh.

"He sure does!" he agreed. "He's got me beat a mile. Say," he coaxed, "we didn't mean any harm. We were just looking for a boy who was supposed to have got drowned up the river a piece but we believe landed here on Lost Island. Just tell me whether he's alive or not, and we won't bother you any more."

"Oh, you're no bother. In fact, I rather enjoyed your little visit--though I will admit you scared me a bit when you held the knob of the door to the hangar----"

"Hangar? What's that?"

"It's--it's French for--woodshed," the girl stammered. "It's your turn now," motioning toward the water.

"But won't you tell me about Tod?"

"Did you ask my father about him?"

"If it was your father, yes."

"And he didn't tell you!"

"No, and he wouldn't let us search the island."

"Well, I'm my father's daughter. So into the briny deep with you. I hope the fish don't bite you."

"But, look here," began Jerry, then fell silent and moved toward the waters edge, for the girl had picked up a handful of large pebbles and stood plumping them meaningly into the river.

The water was warm, and aside from his clothes, Jerry did not mind the swim. After he had stroked along perhaps a third of the way, he turned on his back. The light had disappeared from shore. He had a moment's impulse to turn back, but was afraid she might be waiting in the darkness to greet him with a laugh and an invitation to take to the water again.

He turned once more and swam steadily across the current. But after a little, once more he turned on his back, only kicking occasionally to keep himself afloat. He fancied he had heard some noise that did not belong with the night.

There it was again, that regular beat as of wood striking against wood. He listened intently, trying to place the sound. Finally, it dawned on him that it was a boat, rowed by means of a pair of loose oars.

His mind worked quickly. It could not be the Boy Scout boat, for the sound was not right for that. It could only be the man of the island, "Lizzie's" father--she had as much as said he was away. At any rate, Jerry decided, he would wait there and find out. If the worst came to the worst he could always dive out of sight.

Nearer and nearer came the boat. Jerry lay in the water with only his nose showing. He was too heavy-boned to be very good at floating, but the barest movement of hands or feet kept him from going under. At first he could make out nothing, but as his eyes focused more sharply he distinguished a slow-moving shape against the gray of the sky. It was barely twenty feet away, headed almost directly at him.

A few noiseless strokes put him inside the boat's path, but when he stopped paddling he realized to his horror that the boat had changed direction and was cutting in toward the island. It was almost upon him when he dived.

He was not quick enough. The landward oar caught him a flat blow across his eyes. Blinded, dazed, his mouth full of water, he flung up his arms. He had a vague sense of having caught hold of something, and he held on. Through a sort of mist he heard a voice saying laughingly:

"Hit a snag, John. Better be careful or you'll wreck the ship in sight of harbor."

Little by little Jerry's head cleared and he realized that he had caught hold of the stern of the boat. He could not see over the edge, but he could tell that there were two people in the boat, both men. They talked fitfully, but for the most part their voices came to Jerry only as meaningless mumbles. Once more the dark outline of Lost Island lay before him, and in Jerry's heart arose a new hope that perhaps this time he would not come away empty-handed. The boat grounded on the beach where he and Phil had stood only a few minutes before. The man who had been at the oars jumped out and pulled the boat well up on shore. Jerry, finding that he could touch bottom, had let go and now stood well hidden in the water.

"You might as well wait here in the boat," said the one who had gone ashore. "I won't be gone but a minute."

He moved up the bank. It was the same man Jerry had encountered twice before on his island visits. But who was the man in the boat? Jerry wished he dared come closer.

The minutes passed slowly, and the water did not feel as warm as it had at first. He was greatly relieved when once more he heard the rustle of someone coming through the tall grass. But though the sound came nearer and nearer, Jerry, his nerves literally on end, found the wait a long one. Would the man never get there?

But the delay was quickly explained. There were two instead of one crunching across the beach, and the other stumbled as he walked and would have fallen more than once had it not been for the supporting arm of his companion. Jerry could have shouted from joy had he dared, for some instinct told him that that swaying form belonged to no one but his chum, Tod Fulton.

And then, in an instant, the mystery was all made clear--at least for the instant. The man in the boat rose and struck a match so that the other could see to help wobbly Tod to a seat. As the light flared up full, Jerry had a good sight of the face of the man who stood waiting.

It was Mr. Fulton!

CHAPTER X

"TO-MORROW IS THE DAY!"

And then it was that Jerry saw that the temporary clearing of the mystery only made things darker than ever. For, why should Tod be rescued in this weird fashion? Why had the man refused to let Tod's friends come on the island? And why, why had Mr. Fulton laughed at Jerry's story--and yet followed his clue in this stealthy way? Jerry, up to his nose in the water, and deeper than that in perplexity, saw that the whole affair was really no longer the mystery of Tod Fulton's disappearance, but the mystery of Lost Island.

So, although he now felt safe from bodily harm, because of Mr. Fulton's presence, he made no sign, but waited there a scant dozen feet beyond the stern of the boat. He heard Tod answer a few low-toned questions of his father, but could not make out either question or answer. He saw Mr. Fulton pick up the oars and poise them for a sweep, dropping the blades into the water to exchange a last sentence with the shadow who stood waiting on the bank.

"Everything all right, then, Billings!"

"Varnish on the left plane cracked pretty badly, Mr. Fulton. I had to scrape it off and refinish it. It really ought to have another day to dry."

Jerry repeated, puzzled, to himself: "Left plane--what in thunder's

that?"

Billings went on:

"You won't forget to bring the timer. Elizabeth will get it at the usual place if you can leave it by noon."

"It'll be there, Billings."

Not a word more was said as the boat was swung about and headed out into the stream, save that Mr. Fulton chuckled:

"Old Billings rather had you worried, eh, son, until he gave you my message?"

Tod laughed, so heartily that Jerry, who had watched his chance to cut out into the wake of the boat and hold on behind with one hand, could not himself forbear a little happy ripple.

"What was that?" exclaimed Mr. Fulton, a full minute after.

"I don't know," answered Tod. "I was waiting for it to come again. Sounded like--only _he_ couldn't be here."

"Who couldn't?"

"It sounded like a laugh--and there's only one person, outside of a billygoat, who's got a gurgle like that."

"Your wetting didn't tame you down any, did it? Who's the goat you had in mind?"

"Jerry King--_well_, what in the world!"

Over the back of the boat clambered a dripping, wrathful figure.

"I'll be switched if I'm going to be dragged along at the tail of this scow and be insulted any longer. I laugh like a billygoat, do I? For two cents I'd scuttle the ship!"

But Jerry's anger was more put on than real, and under Mr. Fulton's banter and Tod's grateful appreciation of the attempted rescue, he soon calmed down.

"What was the matter with you back there on the island? We heard you groaning as if you'd green-applied yourself double."

"Groaning? Me groaning? Huh! Say, next time you go bearding damsels in distress and rescuing castaway fishermen, you learn how to tell the difference between a bulldog who's whining to get out and get at you, and a wounded hero. It's a good thing you didn't have a chance to follow up that 'groan'--you'd have _groan_ wiser."

"One more like that, Tod," suggested Mr. Fulton wearily, "and I think I'll take a hand myself."

"But why," Jerry wanted to know, "didn't you come back home right away--if you weren't hurt?"

"Oh, but I was. You try going over that dam once and see if your insides-out don't get pretty well mixed up. I got a terrific thump on the back of the head when the boat turned turtle, and if I hadn't had a leg under the seat, I'd be in Davy Jones' locker right now. When I came to I didn't know whether I was me or the boat. I had gallons of water in me and--and I think I swallowed a worm or two; the bait can got tipped over--and all the worms were gone--somewhere."

"But why did you stay----" Jerry began, feeling vaguely that Tod was talking so much to keep him from asking questions. But he was not allowed even to ask this one, for Mr. Fulton interrupted with:

"I got busy right away after you had told me about your Lost Island clue, and soon got a message through to--to Mr. Billings there. When he told me Tod was safe and sound, I thought I'd wait until I had finished some important business I just couldn't leave. That's how it was so late before I got here."

"Mr. Billings came and got you, didn't he?" remarked Jerry, trying to keep the suspicion out of his voice. If they had a secret that was none of his business, he wouldn't pry.

"Yes," said Mr. Fulton, and made no further explanation.

"But there were two of you on the island after me, weren't there? Who was the other hero?" Tod wanted to know.

"Where were you, that you knew there were two of us?"

"I was all doubled up in that little anteroom where the dog was--doubled up laughing." Then he added hastily, thinking he had teased poor Jerry far enough: "But I was locked in."

"Why locked in, if Mr. Billings had gone to bring your father? Afraid you'd up and rescue yourself?" Jerry's tone was downright sarcastic.

"No, Jerry--you see, the island--that is," looking toward Mr. Fulton as if for permission to go on, "that is, there's something going on on Lost Island that Mr. Billings figures isn't anybody else's business, and he didn't want to take chances of my nosing around."

"I see," said Jerry dryly. "So of course rather than row you across to dry land himself he brought your father here to get you. It's all as plain as the wart on a pumpkinhead's nose!"

"Now, Jerry, you're getting way up in the air without any cause. I'll tell you this much, because I think you've got a right to know: Mr. Billing's secret really is mine. Just as soon as I dare I'll tell you all about it. But what became of your friend--if there were two of you?"

"I was so peeved that I forgot all about Phil. It's Phil Fulton----"

"What!" cried Tod. "Cousin Phil. Where is he?"

"Standing on the bank just opposite Lost Island and figuring out how soon he ought to give me up for drowned or hand-axed by a savage

female. He may have gone for the sheriff by this time--or the coroner. Better take me to shore here and I'll go back."

Mr. Fulton began pulling the boat toward shore. "How did he happen to get into this?" he asked.

Jerry told him the whole story of the encounter with the Boy Scouts. "They've pitched camp there, so I guess I'll see if they can dry me out and put me up for the night," he finished.

As the boat neared shore Tod began to show signs of suppressed excitement. Finally, as Jerry was about to jump out into the shallow water, being already soaked through, Tod began coaxingly:

"Why couldn't I go on with Jerry, dad? You told me you'd let me go camping with the bunch, don't you remember? And I promised Phil I'd show him the best bass lake in the country----"

"I ought to take you back to town and let Doc Burgess look you over. Maybe the bones are pressing on your brain where you bumped your head. You act like it. But the fact is I didn't want to go back to Watertown--I ought to chase right down to Chester for that timer. It was promised for to-morrow, and there isn't a minute to be lost. There aren't any falls down this way, are there?" he asked with mock seriousness.

"Come on, dad, say I can go!" begged Tod.

"We-I-I," hesitated Mr. Fulton, "suppose we say I'll let you stay till morning--or night, rather. Then we'll see."

Jerry jumped out at this point and splashed his way to shore. He had a feeling that the two might want to talk without being overheard. Apparently he was right, as for a good five minutes the two conversed in low tones. Jerry tried his best not to hear what was said, but every now and then a sentence reached his ears. But it was so much Greek as far as he was concerned.

He had walked inland a bit, finally striking the narrow path that fishermen had cut along the top of the high bank. It swung back toward the edge, cut off from view by a rank growth of willows. He noticed that the boat had drifted downstream until it now stood almost opposite him, and only a few feet from shore. Thus it was that, as Mr. Fulton backed water with his left-hand oar and rammed the nose of the boat toward the shelving beach, he heard one complete sentence, distinct and understandable.

"It's up to you, Tod, to get them away. We can't afford any complications at this stage of the game. To-morrow is the day!"

"Trust me, dad!" exclaimed Tod, going up and giving his father's shoulder a squeeze. Jerry waited for no more. Bending low, he scurried far down the path, so that Tod could have no suspicion that his chum had overheard.

"Are you coming?" he shouted when he felt that he had gone far enough.

"Hold up a second and I'll be with you. Good night, dad."

"Good night, Mr. Fulton," shouted Jerry in turn, then waited for Tod.

The journey to the Boy Scout camp was made in silence, for Jerry did not feel that he dared ask any more questions, and Tod volunteered no further explanation. Just outside the ring of light cast by the deserted camp fire, however, Jerry halted and asked:

"Thought what you'll tell them?"

"Why, no. Just what I told you, Jerry."

"You can't--unless you tell them more. They'd never be satisfied with that."

"I'm sorry, Jerry. I'd like to tell you the whole yarn, but--but you see how it is."

"I don't but I guess I can wait. Only I do think you ought to have something cooked up that would stop their questions. Will you leave it to me?"

"Surest thing you know. What'll you say?"

"That's my secret. You play up to my leads, that's all you've got to do. Hello, bunch!" he shouted.

"Wow! Hooray! There he is!" came cries of delight from the darkness in the direction of the river, and a moment later the boys, who had been almost frantic with worry over the non-appearance of Jerry, came trooping up. When they found Tod with him, their joy was unbounded. Their excited questions and exclamations of surprise gave Jerry a much-needed instant in which to collect his story-inventing wits. At last Phil quieted down his dancing mob and put the question Jerry had been awaiting:

"How did you do it?"

"That's the funny part of it. I didn't. Tod's dad came along and did it for me."

"I hope he beat up that old grouch----"

"Huh, you got another guess coming. They're old friends----yes," as a cry of unbelief went up, "that's why Tod was in no hurry to be rescued. His name's Billings, and Mr. Fulton used to be in business with him. Is yet, isn't he, Tod?"

"Uhuh--I think so."

"Well, you may know there's fish around Lost Island. Billings is what I call a fish hog. He don't want anybody to know about the place--wants it all for himself. Tod drifts onto the island and the man can't very well throw him off, half drowned as he is. Then, when he gets the water out of Tod, all but his brain, he finds it's the son of his partner, and he can't very well throw him off then. There's a girl on that mound out there, and she comes in with a string of the biggest fish you ever saw. You couldn't drive Tod off

with a club after that. After the fish, I mean, not the girl. He gets a message to his father, and makes his plans to stay there all summer, but dad comes down to-night and spoils his plans by dragging him off. He kind of thinks he doesn't want all the fish dragged out by the tails--he likes to hook a few big ones himself. I'd got out into the middle of the Plum when I heard the sound of prodigious weeping--it was Tod, saying a last farewell to the big fishes--and the little girl.

"So I swam back. And here he is and here I am, and we're both pledged not to go back on Lost Island."

"Righto!" cried Tod, in great relief, Jerry could plainly see. "And dad asked me to coax you chaps to keep away from old Billings--he's a regular bear, anyway. But to make up for that, to-morrow I'm going to take you to the swellest pickerel lake you ever laid eyes on."

"You mean _bass_ lake, don't you?" asked Jerry maliciously.

"Pickerel and bass," agreed Tod without an instant's hesitation. "Let's turn in; we want to make an early start."

It was late, however, before the camp was finally quiet, for someone started a story, and that brought on another and another, till half of the Scouts fell asleep sitting bolt upright.

But as one lone boy, the last awake, rolled near the fire in his borrowed blanket, he chuckled knowingly to himself and said:

"Foxy old Tod! Dad sure can 'trust' him. But I'm just going to be curious enough to block his little game so far as I'm concerned. _I'm_ going to stick around!"

CHAPTER XI

A MID-AIR MIRACLE

Jerry had a hard time next morning explaining just why he couldn't go along on the proposed fishing trip. Tod was inclined to accept his excuses at face value, but Dave and Frank could not understand why Jerry should so suddenly about-face in his notions. Just the day before he had talked as if he was prepared to stay a week. But his promise of a speedy return--with his own fishing tackle--finally silenced their grumblings, especially when he agreed to make their peace with two mothers who would be asking some pretty hard questions on their own return.

But Jerry was not to get away without taking part in an incident that almost provided a disagreeable end for the adventure. It was while they were all at breakfast. Tod had been giving a glorious account of the thrilling sport he had enjoyed on his last trip to the bass lake he promised to guide them to. Suddenly, in the midst of a sentence, he stopped dead. His jaw dropped. He positively gasped.

"_There she is!_"

Then his face became blank. After a hasty glance about the circle of astonished faces, he went on with his fish story. But he was not allowed to go far.

It was Phil, taking a cousin's rights, who put the sharp question.

"Is your mind wandering, or what? 'There she is!' Who is _she_ --and where? We don't want to hear your old fish yarn anyway."

"I guess he's still thinking of that island girl," suggested Jerry, realizing that Tod had put himself into some kind of a hole, and wishing to help his chum out. But Phil was not to be so easily satisfied.

"There's something mighty queer about this whole proposition. That yarn of yours last night, Jerry, didn't sit very easy on my pillow, and it doesn't rest very easy on my breakfast, either. What's the idea? What you trying to hide, you two?"

"Nothing," said Tod, and Jerry repeated the word.

"Nothing! You make me tired. Now, out with it. I swam across that creek last night in my clothes on account of you, and I figure you've got a right to tell me why."

"And I figure you've got a right to believe me when I told you why last night."

"You didn't. You left it to Jerry to cook up a story that would keep us from asking questions. And now you yell out, 'There she is!' and sit there gaping at the sky, with your mouth wide open as if you expected a crow to lay an egg on your tongue. What does it all mean?"

"It means I'm still capable of taking care of my own business!" snapped Tod.

"Oh--very well. After this I'll let you."

It was an uncomfortable group that sat about the rest of the breakfast, even after Tod had begged his cousin's pardon for ungrateful loss of temper, and Phil had said that it was "all right."

Jerry was afraid for awhile that the fishing trip would be called off, but in the boisterous horseplay that went with the washing of the scanty dishes, all differences were forgotten, especially when Phil, scuffling in friendly fashion, put Tod down on his back and pulled that squirming wrestler's nose till he shouted "Enough!"

It was with feelings of mingled amusement and relief that Jerry watched the noisy crowd pile into the two boats, the Scout boat and the _Big Four_, and paddle downstream, soon to be lost sight of behind Lost Island. His satisfaction was somewhat lessened by the fact that Phil had felt it necessary that one of their number remain behind to stand guard over the camp, but Jerry was sure that he would have no great trouble in keeping away from Frank Willis,

trusting that "Budge" would live up to his reputation.

He began well, for hardly was the camp deserted before he went back to his blankets. "Now some folks like fishing," he yawned, "and I do too when the fish don't bite too fast; but I like sleep. It's good for what ails you, and it's good if nothing ails you. Take it in regular doses or between meals--it always straightens you out."

Jerry did not argue with him. A few minutes later his regular breathing told the world at large and Jerry in particular that so far as one Budge was concerned the coast was clear.

As a matter of fact, Jerry did not feel that there would be anything to see until late in the afternoon at best. The conversation between Mr. Fulton and the man Billings had seemed to indicate that nothing out of the ordinary was to happen that day, but Mr. Fulton's parting words to Tod gave Jerry hope. "This is the day!" he had said.

At any rate, he slipped out of camp and scouted about for a comfortable spot in which to keep an eye on Lost Island. But after he had sat there a half hour, he began to have twinges of the same disease that afflicted Budge and he saw that it would be necessary for him to move about a bit in order to stay awake. He regretted having left the camp without a fishing pole; that would at least give him something to do to pass the time away. With something like that in mind he started back toward the shady place where he had left Budge snoozing.

But as the walk started his blood circulating again, and his brain became active once more, he had a new idea. "Old Tod's a sly fox," he said to himself. "He's not going to be among the missing when the fun is on. He's going to take them down to his bass lake, and then he's going to slip away. He'll have to come back by land, so he'll probably take them to Last Shot Lake. It'll take them an hour to get there, but he can come back afoot in half that time if he's in a hurry--and I guess he is. He most likely will hang around half an hour before he thinks it's safe to make his getaway. That's two hours all told. In some fifteen or twenty minutes he ought to come skulking along through the woods.

"There's that hill yonder--it ought to make a good spy-post. Little Jerry bids these parts a fond adieu."

Something like a strong quarter of a mile down the river, and perhaps that much inland, stood a lonesome hill, almost bare of trees save a clump of perhaps a dozen on the very summit. It was an ideal hiding place. Leaving the road after cutting through the river timber and following it a few hundred yards, he plunged into a dense growth of scrub oak and hazel brush that extended almost to the base of his hill.

He came to one bare spot, perhaps an acre in extent, and was about to leave the shelter of the brush for the comparatively easy going of the weedy grass, when, almost opposite him, he saw a figure emerge from the trees.

At first he thought it was Tod, and he chuckled to himself as he thought how quickly his guess had been proved true. But when a second stepped out close behind the first, Jerry realized that

neither one was his friend, even before he noticed that both were carrying rifles.

A pair of hunters, no doubt, Jerry surmised, although he wondered idly what they would be hunting at this season of the year. Rabbits were "wormy" and the law prohibited the shooting of almost everything else. But "City hunters," Jerry derided, "from their clothes. They think bluejays and crows are good sport."

That the hunters were looking for birds was evident, for they kept their eyes turned toward the tree-tops. Thus it was that they did not see Jerry crouching in the brush a scant dozen feet from where they broke into the woods again. He was near enough to overhear them perfectly, but not a word could he understand, for they were talking very earnestly together in some outlandish tongue that, as Jerry said, made him seasick to try to follow. But as they talked they pointed excitedly, first toward the sky and then straight ahead, and that part of their conversation was perfectly understandable to the boy.

A sudden wild thought entered his mind. Here were two hunters out in the woods at a time when no real sportsmen carried anything but rods and landing nets. The mystery of their purpose reminded him of another mystery, and immediately his mind connected the two, even before he noticed the constant recurrence of a word that sounded much as a foreigner would pronounce "Lost Island." Jerry realized, even as the thought passed through his mind, that it was the wildest kind of guess, but it was enough to set him stealthily picking his way through the brush in the wake of the two.

He saw, just in time to avoid running smack into them, that just before they reached the road, although now out of the heavier woods, they had stopped and were talking together more excitedly than ever. Something had happened, Jerry realized at once, but he could not puzzle out what it was, although he looked and listened as intently as they seemed to be doing. He was about to give it up in disgust, when he became conscious of a queer droning noise, as of a swarm of bees, or a distant threshing machine. Strangely, the sound did not seem to be coming from the woods or fields about him, but from the blank sky itself.

Then he remembered how Tod had acted at breakfast--how he too, like these men, had been apparently staring into space. Jerry read the newspapers; he was an eager student of one of the scientific magazines; he had sat in Mr. Fulton's basement workshop and listened to many a discussion of the latest wonders of invention. But even then he did not at once realize that the sound he had been hearing really came from the sky, and that the purring noise was the whir of the propellers of an aeroplane.

He looked for a full minute at the soaring speck against the blue sky before he exclaimed aloud. "I'll be darned--an airship!"

Fortunately, the two men were too engaged to pay any attention to sounds right beside them. But Jerry glanced hastily in their direction as he dropped back into the shelter of a big clump of elderberry. Then he looked again. There could be no doubt the two were following the flight of the aeroplane. They stepped off a few feet to the right and Jerry could see only their shoulders and heads

above the bushes. He was curious to see better what they were doing, but he dared not cross the open ground between. So instead he turned his attention again to the soaring man-bird.

It was coming closer. It swung down lower and circled in over Lost Island, barely a hundred feet above the tree-tops. A sudden cry from the two men drew his eager eyes away from the approaching aircraft, but he looked back just in time to witness a wonderful sight.

Motionless, poised like a soaring hawk, the aeroplane, its propeller flashing in the sunlight, hung over Lost Island. For fully six seconds it remained there, not moving an inch. Suddenly it lurched, dropped half the distance to the trees, the yellow planes snapping like gun-shots. It looked as if it would be wrecked, and Jerry started forward as if to go to the rescue. In the half instant he had looked away, the machine had righted and purring like an elephant-size pussy, was darting out over the water. A cheer sounded faintly from Lost Island; Jerry wanted to cheer himself.

Now he heard another kind of sound, but this time there was no doubt in his mind as to its source. There could be no mistaking the put-put-put of a single cylinder motor boat. It was coming up Plum Run, probably from the "city"--Chester. He could see it swinging around into the channel from behind Lost Island. It crept close along shore, and with a final "put!" came to a stop just where the boat had landed the night before with Mr. Fulton. Three men crowded forward and jumped to shore; one of them, Jerry could have sworn, was Mr. Fulton himself.

As if the pilot of the aeroplane had been waiting for their coming he circled back toward the island. He had climbed far into the blue, but came down a steep slant that brought him within two hundred feet of earth almost before one could gather his wits to measure the terrific drop. Out across Plum Run he swept in a wide circle, and Jerry saw that the aeroplane would pass almost directly overhead.

He had forgotten all about the two men by this time, so keen was his interest in the daring aviator. He certainly had nerve, to go on with his flight after the accident that had so nearly ended his career only a minute back.

And then Jerry was treated to a sight that made him rub his eyes in amazement. The accident was repeated--it had been no accident. Now only a hundred feet up, directly above him, the big machine seemed to quiver with a sudden increase or change of power. A rasping, ear-racking sound--a spurt of blue vapor--and the aeroplane did what no other flying machine had ever done before; it stopped stock-still in mid-air.

Jerry could see every detail of the big machine, its glistening canvas, its polished aluminum motor and taut wires and braces. He could even see the pilot, leaning far over to one side, a smile of satisfaction on his face. Jerry could hardly resist shouting a word of greeting to the bold aeronaut.

He did shout, but it was a cry of horror, for all in a moment, a streak of flame seemed to leap out of the motor, there was a fearful hiss of escaping gas, a report that fairly shook the tree-tops, and with planes crumpling under the tremendous pressure of the air

rushing past as it fell, the aeroplane plunged to earth. Yet, even in his intense excitement, Jerry, as he raced to where the flaming machine had fallen, caught at a fleeting impression: There had been two explosions, and the first seemed to come from close beside him.

The aeroplane had come to earth a good hundred yards away, and Jerry made all speed in that direction. He passed the spot where the two men had been standing--they were still there, and seemed in no hurry to go to the rescue. One of them, Jerry noticed as he rushed by, shouting "Quick!" had just thrown his gun under his arm, but the action did not impress the boy at the time as having any significance.

He raced on, the flaming wreck now in sight. He fairly flew through the last dense thicket and jumped out, just in time to collide with another hurrying figure. When the two picked themselves up, Jerry saw that it was Tod.

"Hurry, Jerry," he cried. "I'm afraid that poor Billings is killed!"

CHAPTER XII

AN EMPTY RIFLE SHELL

In that few steps till they reached the smoking mass of wreckage, many things became clear to Jerry. He realized that Lost Island had been merely a building ground for Mr. Fulton's experiments in aeronautics, that this sorry looking ruin was his invention. He remembered the long, low shed on the island--that was the workshop.

Then they were at the verge of the twisted and wrecked machine, frantically tugging at rods and splintered wood in an effort to get at the unconscious form covered by the debris. Fortunately there was no great weight to lift, and there was really no fire once the smoke of the explosion had cleared away. In a very few seconds they had dragged the man clear and laid him out flat on his back in a grassy spot, where Tod remained to fan the man's face while Jerry hurried toward camp for water. Blackened and bleeding as the man was, Jerry readily recognized him as Billings.

He found Budge startled by the explosion and hesitating about leaving the camp unguarded to go to the rescue. Jerry's shouted command brought him galloping across the field with a pail of water, and the two boys made good speed on the way back. They found the man still unconscious but beginning to writhe about in pain.

"I think his leg's broken," cried Tod, his face white with the strain of helpless waiting. "From the way he doubles up every little bit I think he must be hurt inside. The cuts that are bleeding don't seem to be very bad. Let me have the water."

"Do you suppose we really ought to----" began Jerry, but paused, for Budge had answered his question effectually.

Without a word he stooped over the moaning man. Outer clothes were

taken off in a trice. Without jarring the man about, almost without moving him, garment by garment Budge gradually removed, replaced, examined, until every part of the man's anatomy had been looked over. Finally he straightened up, and for the first time the other two, who had stood helplessly by, saw how set and white the young Scout's face was.

"Leg's broken all right," he said slowly. "So's his arm--and at least two ribs. Maybe more. Side's pretty badly torn and I think he's bleeding internally. We've got to get a doctor without a second's loss of time. Tod, you chase along like a good fellow and see how quick you can get to a telephone. Jerry, lend a hand here and we'll fix a splint for his leg--lucky it's fractured below the knee or we'd have a time. I don't know whether I can do anything for his ribs or not. Hustle up, Tod--what you standing there gaping for?"

"Where--where'd you learn to do things like that?" blurted Tod, as he started away.

"What? This?" in surprise. "Every Scout knows how to do simple things like this." And he turned back to his bandaging, for he had brought along the camp kit, with its gauze and cotton. Out came his big jackknife and he cut a thumb-sized willow wand, which he split and trimmed. In less than no time he had snapped the bone back into place and wound a professional looking bandage about the home-made splint. He was just about to turn his attention to the injured side when a great crackling in the brush caused both boys to turn.

Three men came bounding across the open space, the foremost, Mr. Fulton.

"Is he alive?" he exclaimed before he recognized the two boys.

"Yes," answered Jerry, "but he's hurt pretty bad--inside, Budge says. Tod just----"

"Tod! He here? Did he go after a doctor?"

"Here he comes now. Did you get the doctor?" shouted Budge and Jerry together.

"I got his office. It's our own Doctor Burgess. I got Mrs. Burgess and she says the doctor is out this way, and she'll get him by telephone--she can locate him better than I could. He ought to be here most any minute. I'm to watch for him along the road." Tod darted back toward the line of bushes that marked the highway.

But it was a good half hour before a shout proclaimed the coming of the doctor, and in that time Budge had had a chance to show more evidences of his Scout training. After a hurried trip back to camp he fashioned bandages that held the broken ribs in place; he bound the scalp wound neatly, and stopped the flow of blood from an ugly scratch on the man's thigh. The others stood about, helping only as he directed. It was with a wholesome respect that they eyed him when the job was finished.

But it took the doctor to sum their admiration up in one crisp "Bully--couldn't have done it better myself."

He felt about gently and at last straightened up and remarked:

"He's good enough to move, but not very far. Where's the nearest farmhouse?"

"Half a mile, nearly," answered Tod.

"I think he'd want to be taken--home," Mr. Fulton said hesitatingly. "If we could move him to the river bank I guess we could get him across all right--to Lost Island, you know. His daughter's there to nurse him."

"Lost Island?" questioned the doctor, raising his eyebrows. "We-I-I--Son, can you make a stretcher?" turning to Budge.

"Come on, Jerry. Back in a minute," called Budge over his shoulder to the doctor.

Jerry followed to the Scout camp, where Budge caught up a pair of stout saplings that had been cut for tent poles but had not been needed.

"Grab up a couple blankets," he directed, setting off again through the brush on a run. Jerry was well out of breath, having contrived to trip himself twice over the trailing blankets, when he finally rejoined the group. Budge reached out for the blankets and soon had a practical stretcher made, onto which the injured man was gently lifted. Mr. Fulton and one of the strangers took hold each of an end and they set out directly for the bank of Plum Run.

For the first time Jerry had a chance to observe the two who had come with Tod's father. Heavy-set, rather stolid chaps they were, just beginning to show a paunch, and gray about the temples. They looked good-natured enough but gave the impression of being set in their ways, a judgment Jerry had no occasion to change later. They spoke with an odd sort of accent but were evidently used to conversing in English, although the first glance told that they were not Americans.

They were plainly but expensively dressed; they looked like men of wealth rather than like business men. They had come to see Mr. Fulton's invention tried out, Jerry surmised, and, if it proved successful, perhaps to buy it. Those two men he had seen with the rifles were foreigners too, but of a different station in life and, Jerry was sure, belonging under a different flag.

They were soon down to the water's edge, where was moored the launch Jerry had heard chugging over to the island not long before. Blankets were brought from the Scout camp and piled on the launch floor to make a comfortable bed, and poor Billings was carefully lifted from the stretcher and laid in the boat. The doctor and Mr. Fulton got in. The two men remained on the bank. Mr. Fulton looked at them questioningly, but their heavy faces gave no sign. So he asked:

"You will wait for me, I trust! I don't want you to feel that this--accident----" he hesitated over the word--"makes the scheme a failure. There is something about it all that I can't understand,

but a close examination may reveal----"

"Ah, yes," answered the shorter of the two, "we will want to be just as sure of the failure as we insisted on being of the success. But you understand of course that we feel--ah--feel considerably--ah--disappointed in the trial flight. Oh, yes, we will wait for you. You will not be long?"

"Just long enough for the doctor to find out what needs to be done. That slim youngster there is my son Tod. He knows almost as much about my--about _it_ as I do. Tod, you take care of Mr. Lewis and Mr. Harris till I come back. You'd best stay close to the _Skyrocket_; we don't want to take any chances, you know."

All the time he had been talking he had been tinkering with the motor, which was having a little balky spell. At his last words Jerry spoke up hastily:

"I'll chase over and keep an eye on the _Skyrocket_ while the rest of you take your time," and he hurried off, adding to himself: "_Skyrocket's_ a good name, 'cause it sure went up in a blaze of glory, and came down like the burnt stick." But he had other things in mind besides the mere watching of the wreck. At Mr. Fulton's hesitation over the word "accident" a picture had popped into his mind--two men carrying rifles and peering up over the tree-tops.

He was destined to see them again, for as he crossed the road he heard a crackling in the underbrush of someone in hasty retreat. He blamed his thoughtlessness in whistling as he ran along; perhaps he might have caught them red-handed if he had been careful. As it was, he saw the two scurrying toward the south, whereas before they had been going northward.

He did not go directly to the fallen aeroplane. Instead he picked his way carefully over the route the men had followed just after the explosion, stooping low and examining every spear of grass. His search was quickly rewarded. Just where the trampled turf showed that the two men had stood for some time he pounced upon a powder-blackened cartridge, bigger than any rifle shell he had ever seen before, even in his uncle's old Springfield. That was all, but it was enough to confirm his suspicions.

He walked over to the charred and twisted remains of the _Skyrocket_, fighting down his strong impulse to pry into the thing and see if he could discover the secret of its astounding exploits before the crash came. It did not take more than the most fleeting glance to see, even with his limited knowledge of flying machines, that this one was very much different from the others. He was glad when the others came up to save him from yielding to his curiosity.

Tod and the two men were deep in a discussion of Mr. Fulton's invention, but Jerry gained little by that, as most of the technical terms were so much Greek to him. Tod talked like a young mechanical genius--or a first-class parrot. The two men listened to his glowing praises in no little amusement, venturing a word now and then just to egg the boy on--though he needed none.

Jerry waited for a chance to break in forcibly. "I say, Tod," he interrupted a wild explanation of the theory of the differential, "I

expect I'd better chase along back home. I can just catch the interurban if I cut loose now. I--I want to hike back and spread the good news that you aren't decorating a watery grave."

"I s'pose I'll have to stay here and help the Scouts mount guard over the relics here--when will you be back?"

"To-morrow, maybe."

"You can come back with dad. He'll probably come back to Watertown to-night, after he takes these two gentlemen to Chester in the launch. He'll probably want you to help him bring down some repairs."

"You think he'll try to patch up the _Skyrocket?_" asked Jerry. "Doesn't look hardly worth while."

"Worth while!" exploded Tod. "Is a half million dollars worth while?" Then he repented having spoken out so freely, reminded by the sharp glances of the two men. "Oh, Jerry's all right," he apologized. "Dad thinks as much of him as he does of me."

"Well, I'll be off," said Jerry hurriedly. "Tell your father I'll see him either to-night or early in the morning--and that I've got something important to tell him."

"About the _Skyrocket?_" demanded Tod eagerly, but Jerry only shook his head teasingly and began to hurry across the fields and woods to the interurban tracks.

He was lucky, for hardly had he reached the road crossing before the familiar whistle sounded down the track. The motorman toot-tooted for him to get off the rails, as this was not a regular stop, but Jerry stood his ground and finally the man relented at the last minute and threw on the brakes.

Watertown reached, Jerry could not hold his good news till he got home, but to every one he met he shouted the glad word that Tod Fulton had been found, alive and uninjured. The open disbelief with which his announcement was met gave him a lot of secret satisfaction. In fact, he could hardly restrain an occasional, "I told you so." His mother was the only one to whom he allowed himself to use that phrase, but then, he _had_ told her.

He could hardly wait until Mr. Fulton should return from Chester, so eager was he to tell of his discovery there in the woods, but the slow day passed, and bedtime came without any sign of a light in the big house down the street. Reluctantly he finally went up to his room, but for a long time he sat with his nose flattened out on the window pane, watching patiently.

At last he was rewarded. Out of the gloom of the Fulton house he saw a tiny point of light spring, followed by a flood of radiance across the lawn.

"What are you doing, son?" came a deep masculine voice from the sitting room. "Thought you had gone to bed hours ago."

"Mr. Fulton just came home, pa, and Tod told me to tell him----"

"Guess it'll keep till morning, won't it? Besides, I expect Tod saw his father later than you did."

"I'll be right back, dad----" this from just outside the kitchen door. "It's just awfully important----"

The door banged to just then. Mr. Ring chuckled. He believed in letting boys alone.

Jerry sped down the dark walk and jabbed vigorously at the special doorbell, hurried a little bit by the fact that as he came through the wide gate he had a feeling that the big gateposts did not cause all the shadow he passed through. "I'm getting nervous since I saw those two men to-day," he reminded himself. "I'll soon be afraid of my own shadow--but I hope it doesn't take to whispering too."

Mr. Fulton came hurrying to the door, a big look of relief on his face when he saw who it was.

"I couldn't wait till morning, Mr. Fulton. I just had to tell you I knew the Skyrocket didn't fall of its own free will. I saw two men skulking in the woods. They both carried big rifles. I was sure I heard one of them go off just before the explosion came, and on the ground where they stood I found this!"

He handed Mr. Fulton the rifle shell.

"Good boy!" exclaimed the man, almost as excited as the youngster. "I'm beginning to see daylight. You keep all this under your hat, sonny, and come over as early in the morning as you can. We'll talk it over then, after I've had a chance to sleep on this." He indicated the cartridge. "Tell me, though--was one of the men a tall, lean chap with a sabre scar on his jaw----"

"They were both heavy-set, scowly looking----" "Hm. That makes it all tangled again. Well, it may look clearer in the morning. Chase along, Jerry; I've got a busy night's work ahead of me. No," he added as Jerry began to speak, "you couldn't help me any. Not to-night. To-morrow you can."

Jerry wanted to tell him about the whispering shadows, but hesitated because it sounded so foolish. His heart skipped a beat or two as he drew near the tall posts, but this time the gateway was as silent as the night about him.

"Some little imaginer I am," he laughed to himself as he skipped back into the house.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GAME BEGINS

The sun was not up earlier next morning than Jerry Ring. However, he waited till after breakfast before going over to rouse Mr. Fulton,

Who would, he knew, sleep later after his strenuous night's work. He spent the time in an impatient arrangement and rearrangement of his fishing tackle, for he had a feeling in his bones that this visit to Lost Island might be more than a one-day affair.

Mrs. Ring finally appeared on the scene, to tease him over his early rising. "I don't need to look for the fishing tackle when you get up ahead of me; I know it's there."

But Jerry only grinned. His mother was a good pal, who never spoiled any of his fun without having a mighty good reason. Now he saw her setting about fixing up a substantial lunch, and he knew that there would be no coaxing necessary to gain her consent to his trip. He slipped up behind her unawares and kissed her smackingly on the back of the neck--perhaps that was one reason she was such a good pal.

Breakfast over, Jerry caught up his pole and tackle box and hustled down the street. The Fulton house looked silent and deserted, he thought, as he reached up to push the secret button. The loud b-r-r-r echoed hollowly through the big house; Jerry sat down on the step to await the opening of the door, for he figured Mr. Fulton would be slow in waking up. But the minute he had allowed stretched into two, so he reached up and gave the button another vigorous dig. Still there was no response. Puzzled, he held the button down for fully a minute, the bell making enough racket to wake the dead. Vaguely alarmed, Jerry waited. No one came. Putting his mouth to the keyhole, he shouted: "Mr. Fulton--wake up--it's Jerry!"

Then he put his ear against the door and listened for the footsteps he was sure would respond to his call. Silence profound. Again he shouted and listened. And then came a response that set him frantically tugging at the door--his name called, faintly, as if from a great distance.

But the door did not yield. Jerry bethought himself of a lockless window off the back porch roof, which he and Tod had used more than once in time of need. He quickly shinned up the post and swung himself up by means of the tin gutter. In through the window, through the long hall and down the stairway he plunged, instinct taking him toward Mr. Fulton's bedroom-study. The door stood ajar. He pushed it open and looked in. A fearful sight met his eyes.

On the bed, where he lay half undressed on top of the covers, was Mr. Fulton, blood streaming down his battered face. "What has happened?" gasped Jerry, seeing that the man's eyes were open. But there was no answer, and he saw that Mr. Fulton was too dazed to give any account of the events that had left him so befuddled. Jerry got water and bathed and dressed the deep cuts and bruises as best he could. The shock of the cold water restored the man's faculties in some measure and he finally managed a coherent statement.

"It was your two friends, I guess. They broke in on me while I was working downstairs. One stood guard over me while the other ransacked the house. Then, when they couldn't find anything, they tried to force me to tell where my papers were hid. That was when I rebelled, and they pretty near did for me. I put up a pretty good scrap for a while, until one of them got a nasty twist on my arm. I guess the shoulder's dislocated; I can't move it. But I guess I left a few marks myself--that's why they were so rough. But all they got

was the satisfaction of beating me up."

"I wish I knew what it was all about," remarked Jerry. "I feel like a fellow at a moving picture show who came in about the middle of the reel. And there's nobody to tell me what happened before."

"I guess there's no harm in telling _you_--now. You see, Jerry, the big outstanding feature of the war across the water has been the work done by two recent inventions, the submarine and the aeroplane. That set me thinking. The water isn't deep enough around here to do much experimenting with submarines, but there's dead oodles of air. So aeroplanes it had to be. Now, the aircraft have been a distinct disappointment, except as scouting helps, because the high speed of the aeroplanes makes accurate bomb-dropping almost impossible.

"That was my starter. If I could perfect some means of stopping a machine in mid-flight, just long enough to drop a hundred pounds of destruction overboard with a ninety per cent chance of hitting the mark, I had it. Well, I got it. The _Skyrocket_ is the first aeroplane that can stop dead still--or was. I showed my model to the proper government officials, but even after I had cut my way through endless red tape I found only a cold ear and no welcome at all. I think the official I talked to had a pet invention of his own.

"At any rate I was plumb disgusted. I finally took my idea to the business agent of a foreign power--and the reception I got almost took me off my feet. Meet me halfway! They pretty near hounded me to death till I finally consented to give them an option on the thing, But then my troubles began. The man who had made the deal with me had to step aside for a couple of old fogies who can't grasp anything they can't see or handle. I was about disgusted, when a friend introduced me to a friend of his, who hinted that there were other markets where the pay was better. The upshot of it was that I gave this man--as agent of course for _his_ government--a second option on the invention to hold good if no deal was made with the first party before August first, when option number one expires.

"Mr. Lewis and Mr. Harris represent--well, the name of the country doesn't make any difference, but they hold the first option. They are cautious; they won't buy unless they can see a complete machine that works perfectly. The others are willing to buy the idea outright, just as it stands.

"Of course I have no proof that the two men you saw--and they are the same I am sure as the two who burglarized me--have anything to do with my invention, but I'd venture a guess that their aim is to prevent my being able to demonstrate my machine before August first. What do you think?"

"I think we'd better be getting busy."

"There's nothing to do. Of course, I don't lose any money by it--I gain some. But I hate to sell my idea to a gang of cutthroats and thieves. I resent being black-handed into a thing like that. But with Billings laid out, the _Skyrocket_ wrecked and myself all binged up, there's little chance. I suppose I could get a lot of mechanics and turn out a new plane in time, but I don't know where I could get men I could trust. Like as not those two villains, or their employer, would manage to get at least one of their crew into

the camp, and there'd be a real tragedy before we got through."

"I tell you what," suggested Jerry. "If you feel strong enough to manage it, you come over to the house and let ma get you some breakfast. Then you'll feel a little more hopeful--ma's breakfasts always work that way," he said loyally. "There is bound to be a way out of this mix-up, and we'll find it or know the reason why."

Over a savory pile of pancakes Mr. Fulton did grow more hopeful, especially when Jerry began to outline a scheme that had been growing in his mind. He began by asking questions.

"Do you have to have such skilled mechanics to make those repairs?"

"Well, no, not as long as I have skilled eyes to oversee the job. A good deal of it is just dub work. Most anybody could do it if he was told how. I could do the directing easy enough; but I'm not left-handed. However, I'll chase downtown and let Doc Burgess look me over; maybe my shoulder isn't as bad as it feels. But I'm afraid my right arm is out of the fight for at least a couple of weeks--and there's just two weeks between now and August first. I'd not be much good except as a boss, and a boss isn't much good without somebody to stand over. So there you are, right back where we started."

"Not on your life! We're a mile ahead, and almost out of the woods. If you can boss dubs, and get anything out of them, why I know where you can get at least nine of them, and they're all to be trusted--absolutely."

"Tod could help a lot, and I suppose you are one of the dubs, but where are the rest?"

"Phil Fulton and his Boy Scouts----"

"My nephew, you mean, from Chester? I suppose I could get him, but just what are these Boy Scouts?"

"You've been so interested in your experiments that you don't know what the rest of the world is doing. Never heard of the Boy Scouts?" Jerry, secure in his own recent knowledge, was openly scornful.

"Oh, yes, now that you remind me, I do remember of reading about some red-blooded boy organization--a little too vigorous for chaps like you and Tod, eh?" he teased.

"You'll see what happens before the summer is ended. But that isn't helping _us_ out any, now. Phil's patrol is down there with Tod right this minute, and I bet you they know a thing or two about mechanics. That seems to be their specialty--knowing something about most everything. I'm mighty sure that if you tell us what to do, we can do it. We may not know a lot about the why of it, but we're strong on following instructions."

"I'd be willing to take a chance on you fellows if it wasn't for the time. The _Skyrocket's_ a complete wreck. It took Billings a good many times two weeks to build her up in the first place----"

"But you're not losing anything. The boys would be tickled to death to tackle it, and if we do lose out finally, why we've lost nothing

but the time. It's like a big game----"

"Yes," observed Mr. Fulton dryly. "A big game, with the handicaps all against us. If we win, we lose money, and we have the pleasant chance of getting knocked over the head most any night."

"But that isn't the idea. A set of foreigners are trying to force some free-born Americans to do something we don't want to do. Are we going to let them?"

"Not by a jugfull!" exclaimed Mr. Fulton, getting up painfully from his chair. "I'll go on down to the doctor--I expect I should have first thing, before I started to stiffen up. You go ahead to Lost Island, and see what can be done toward picking up the pieces and taking the _Skyrocket_ over to the island. If there are enough unbroken pieces we may have a chance. I'll be along by noon."

He hobbled down the street and Jerry, after telling his mother what had happened, and getting reluctant consent to his extended absence, gathered together a few necessaries and made all speed for the interurban. There was no temptation to go to sleep this time, for his thoughts were racing madly ahead to the exciting plan to beat the schemers who had wrecked the _Skyrocket_. At the same time he was conscious of a disappointed feeling in his heart; why could it not have been the United States that had bought the invention? That would have made the fight really worth while. For, to tell the truth, the two unenthusiastic owners of the first option did not appeal to him much more than did the others.

He found the whole Boy Scout crew gathered about the _Skyrocket_, having given up a perfectly wonderful fishing trip to guard the airship. Jerry quickly told the story of the morning's events to Phil, interrupted at every other sentence by the rest of the excited Scouts. The whole affair appealed to their imaginations, and when he came to the proposition he had made Mr. Fulton, there was no doubt of their backing up his offer.

"Let's get busy!" shouted Dick Garrett, Assistant Patrol Leader. "We ought to be all ready to move across by the time Mr. Fulton gets here."

And he started toward the wreck as if to tear the thing apart with his bare hands and carry it piecemeal to the banks of the Plum.

"We won't get far, that way, Dick," observed Phil. "First of all we want a plan of action. And before that, we need to investigate, to see just how much damage has been done and how big the pieces are going to be that we'll have to carry."

"But we don't know the first thing about how the contraption works," objected Dick, somewhat to Jerry's satisfaction, for there was a little jealous thought in his heart that Phil would naturally try to take away from him the leadership in the plan. But Phil soon set his mind at rest.

"We don't need to know how it works. All we need to know is whether we have to break it apart or if we can carry it down mostly in one piece. First, though, we've got to organize ourselves. Jerry's the boss of this gang, and as Patrol Leader I propose to be straw-boss."

Anybody got any objections? No? Well, then, Boss Jerry, what's orders?"

Much pleased, Jerry thought over plans. A workable one quickly came to him. "First of all we'll follow out your idea, Phil. Let's all get around it and see if we can lift it all together. Dave, you catch hold of that rod sticking out in front of you--it won't bite. Give him a hand, Budge. All right, everybody! Raise her easy--_so_."

To their unbounded relief, nearly all the aeroplane rose together. One plane, it is true, gave one final c-c-r-rack! as the last whole rod on that side gave way; but the rest, twisted all out of shape and creaking and groaning, held together in one distorted mass.

"All right," commanded Jerry; "let her down again--easy, now. That's the ticket. Now, Frank--the two Franks--you scout ahead and pick us out a clear trail to the water. You'll have to figure on a good twenty-foot clearance.

"I guess we might as well finish the work you young Sandows started. I see that the right plane--or wing or whatever you call it--is just as good as gone. We'll cut her away and that'll give us a better carrying chance."

"Why not take her all apart while we're at it, Jerry?" suggested Phil. "We'll have to anyway to get her over to the island."

"Just leave it to me and we won't. I've got a little scheme. Who's got a heavy knife with a sharp big blade in it?"

"That's part of our Scout equipment," answered Phil proudly. "Come on, Scouts, the boss says whack away the right wing."

"Wing?" grunted Fred Nelson, hacking vainly at the tough wood. "Feels more like a drumstick to me!" Although the rods were splintered badly they did not yield readily to the knives. The two trail scouts returned long before the task of clearing away the plane was finished.

"There's a fairly easy way if we go around that hazel thicket and make for the road about a hundred yards south of here, then come back along the road to that cut-over piece by the little creek, go in through there to the river trail, and along that, south again, till we come just about straight across from here," reported the two.

"All right. Now one of you stay here and mount guard over the left-behinds, while the other goes ahead and shows us the way. How's the knife brigade coming on?"

"Ready any time you are. What's next?"

"Line up on each side the stick of the _Skyrocket_, and we'll pick her up and tote her to the beach. Back here, Dave, you and Barney; we need more around the motor--it weighs sixteen ounces to the pound. All set now? Right-o--pick her up. Lead ahead, Frank."

The unwieldy load swayed and threatened to buckle, and more than once they had to set it down and find new holds, but the winding

road picked out by Frank Ellery was followed without any serious mishap, until at last they stood on the high bank overlooking the wide stretch of sandy beach beyond which Plum Run rippled along in the sunshine.

"Set her down--gently, now," ordered Jerry. "We'll let her rest here while we bring up our reinforcements--and the rest of our baggage. Phil, you take three Scouts and go back and bring in the wings. Leave Frank there until you've gathered up every last scrap. The rest of us will stay here to figure out some way of getting our plunder shipped safely across to Lost Island."

"Go to it!" urged Phil mockingly. "You've got some job ahead of you. You figure out how a rowboat's going to float that load across--and let me know about it."

"Yes," challenged a new voice, "you do that, and let me know about it too."

Mr. Fulton had stepped unobserved through the border of trees and brush lining the river path.

"Huh!" bragged Jerry. "If that was the hardest thing we had to do, we could use the _Skyrocket_ for a fireworks celebration to-night!"

CHAPTER XIV

PATCHING THE "SKYROCKET"

But Jerry gave no explanation of the method he intended to use in transporting the unwieldy bulk across the narrow stretch of water. While Phil and his helpers disappeared, to bring up the rest of the aeroplane framework, he set his crew to work. The Scout camp, which was something like a hundred feet north, yielded a couple of trappers' axes; with these he soon had two stout saplings cut and trimmed to an even length of thirty feet. In the larger end of each he cut a deep notch, while to the smaller ends he nailed a good-sized block, the nails found in an emergency locker on the _Big Four,_ both it and the Boy Scout boat having been brought down and hauled up on the beach.

The two boats were now laid side by side, twenty odd feet apart. Across the bows he laid the one sapling, across the sterns, the other, so that blocks and notches fitted down over the far edges of the boats. Mr. Fulton at once caught Jerry's idea and nodded his head approvingly.

"All right," he said, "if the saplings will hold up the weight."

"They don't need to," explained Jerry. "The _Skyrocket_ will reach over to the inner edges of the boats; I measured the distance with my eye. All the sticks do is to hold the two ships together."

Phil's crew made two trips, on the second one bringing in Frank, who had wrapped up a weird collection of broken-off parts in a piece of

varnish-stiffened silk torn from one of the planes,

It did not take long to load the "body" of the _Skyrocket_ onto the saplings, the boats being still on shore. Then, all pushing steadily, the strange double craft was slowly forced across the sand and into the shallow shore-water of Plum Bun. Both boats settled dangerously near to the point of shipping water, so it was fortunate that the river was as calm as a millpond. At that, there was no hope that anyone could get in to row the boats.

"Strip for action!" shouted Phil. "The boss says we're to swim across. Likewise, the last one in's a rotten egg."

The splashing that ensued, as ten youngsters plunged in, almost in a body, nearly swamped the boats. After his first shout of alarm, Mr. Fulton waved his hand gayly and shouted:

"Go to it, fellows. If the doctor didn't have my arm in a splint I'd be right with you."

"All right, Scouts," assented Jerry, "but go mighty easy."

They were all good swimmers, and with hardly a ripple they propelled the _Skyrocket_ slowly but steadily toward the shore of Lost Island. As they drew near they saw that they had spectators on both sides, for awaiting them was the girl Phil and Jerry had seen not so long before, but under different circumstances. Now she waved her hand encouragingly.

"Oh, Liz-z-i-e!" shouted Phil, "where's the meat-axe?"

For answer she caught up a pebble and sent it skimming in his direction, so close that Phil felt no shame in ducking, even if it did bring a great shout of laughter from his companions.

But it was evident that "Lizzie" or Elizabeth Billings, as they soon came to call her, bore no ill will as she came down to the water's edge and awaited their coming. But the boys had no intention of making a landing so long as she was there, and Jerry was turning over in his mind just how to ask her to withdraw, when she apparently came to the conclusion that her presence was neither needed nor desired. At any rate, she left the beach abruptly and disappeared along the island path, only stopping to send a hearty peal of laughter in their direction.

"Next time across I guess well wear our clothes," snickered Budge. "The young lady isn't used to welcoming savages to her lonely isle."

"Try a little of your savage strength on that rod you're leaning on; nobody suggested that this affair was a lawn party," Phil reminded him. "Come on, fellows, let's get the old _Skyrocket_ up out of the damp."

After some maneuvering they decided to unload from the water, as the beach shelved gradually. Within five minutes they were ready to make for the other shore, being compelled to swim the boats back again, as no one had remembered to throw in the oars.

This time their load was hardly worth calling one so far as weight

was concerned, and four of the boys piled in, to row the boats across, nearly capsizing the whole arrangement in their efforts to outspeed each other. This time they were fully dressed. One of the boys brought the two boats back, and now all the party crossed over, with the exception of poor Budge, who again was the one slated to stay behind and guard camp. Perhaps his disappointment was only half genuine, however, as he was none too keen about the heavy job of freighting the wreckage to the center of Lost Island.

Tod was awaiting them when the last boatload beached on the island. It was easy to see that he had been greatly worried over the nonappearance of his father, and the bandages in which Mr. Fulton was literally swathed were not calculated to set his mind at ease. But Mr. Fulton's laughing version of the "accident," as he called it, soon relieved Tod's fears.

They made short work of the trip to the long, low shed Phil and Jerry had seen on their exploration of the island, and which they now learned was a "hangar," a place specially fitted for taking care of the aeroplane. When the big sliding door was thrown open the boys saw that inside was a complete machine shop, with lathes, benches, drills and punches, the whole being operated by power from the gasoline engine in the corner.

"The first thing to do," announced Mr. Fulton, "is to understand just what we're driving at. So I'll explain, as briefly as possible, just what this contraption of mine is. It's simply a device that enables me to reverse the propellers instantly at high speed. But that isn't all. The same lever throws in another set of propellers--lifters, we call them--just above where the pilot sits. They act as a kind of counterbalance. Now these planes, or wings, act in the same manner as the surfaces of a box kite, and aside from this device of mine, which has some details you won't need to know about, and a slight improvement I've made in the motor itself, the Skyrocket isn't any different from the ordinary biplane, which you all know about, of course."

"Of course we don't," blurted Jerry.

"Of course we do," exclaimed Phil. "There isn't one of the Flying Eagles who hasn't made half a dozen model flying machines, and Barney here won a prize with a glider he made last spring in the manual training department of the high school. But we've all studied up about aeroplanes--that's why we call ourselves the Flying Eagles."

"Another reason," chuckled Mr. Fulton, "why there ought to be a bunch of Boy Scouts in Watertown. How about it, Jerry?"

"Leave it to us. We'll challenge you Eagles to a tournament next summer, and you'd better brush up your scouting if you don't want to come off second best. Is that a go, Tod?"

"That's two go's--one for each of us."

"Well," suggested Mr. Fulton, "those of you who don't know the first principles of flying go into the second squad. You go to the office--that's the railed off space yonder--where you'll find plenty of books for your instruction. As soon as I get gang number one

properly started I'll come back and give you a course of sprouts."

Jerry and Dave and Frank went to the "office," from where they heard Mr. Fulton putting Tod in charge of one group, while he took the rest under his personal direction.

"First off," he advised, "we'll take the Skyrocket all apart. All the broken or strained parts we'll throw over here in this box. Anything that's too big we'll pile neatly on the floor. I want to know as soon as possible just what I'll have to get from the city. I can call on the blacksmith shop at Watertown for some of the hardest welding, and Job Western did most of the carpentering in the first place, so I know where to go for my trusses and girders. Examine every bolt and nut--nothing is to be used that shows the slightest strain or defect.

"Phil, you and I will tackle the motor. If she isn't smashed, half the battle's won."

Jerry sat back in the corner awhile, trying his best to get something definite out of the great array of books he found on a low shelf. Looking up and seeing Mr. Fulton's eyes on him, a twinkle in their depths, he threw down the latest collection of algebraic formulas and walked over.

"I guess I know enough about aeroplanes to unscrew nuts and nip wires. You can explain the theory of it to us after working hours."

So, with monkey wrench, pliers, hammers and screwdriver, he set about making himself as busy as any of the others--and as greasy.

Dark came on them before they had made enough headway to be noticeable. The boys were glad to see the shadows creeping along, for, truth to tell, they were all thoroughly tired and not a little hungry. Not a bite had any of them eaten since breakfast.

"Hope Budge has taken it upon himself to hash together a few eats," sighed Phil. "I feel hungry enough to tackle my boots."

"Eats?" exclaimed Mr. Fulton in surprise. "You don't mean to tell me that you're hungry?"

"Oh, no, not hungry. Just plain starved," clamored the whole outfit.

"Good. One of you go over and get your guard, and we'll see what those mysterious signals mean that Miss Elizabeth has been making this past half hour. She told me she'd cook us a dinner--if we could stand domestic science grub. This is the first time she ever kept real house. Let's wash up."

The supper that Elizabeth brought, smoking hot, to the long, board-made table the boys quickly set up in the hangar, did not smack very much of inexperience. Even Budge declared it was well worth the trip across the river. The boys were inclined to linger over the meal, and Dave started in to tell a long story about a hunting trip in which he and his uncle had been the heroes of a bear adventure, but Mr. Fulton stopped him, even if the yawns of his listeners had not warned him to cut the tale short.

"We're in for some good hard licks, men," said Mr. Fulton, "and it's going to mean early to bed and early to rise. That is," he amended, "if you want to go through with it."

"We'll stick to the bitter end," they cried. "What's the program?"

"Two weeks of the hardest kind of work. Breakfast at six; work at six-thirty, till twelve; half hour for lunch; work till seven; dinner; bed. That may not sound like much fun--it isn't."

"Suits us," declared Phil for the rest. "Do we get a front seat at the circus when the man puts his head in the lion's mouth--and a ride on the elephant?" he joked, pointing at the dismembered Skyrocket.

"I'll give you something better than that, just leave it to me," promised Mr. Fulton. "Where you going to turn in?"

"We go over to camp. You'll blow the factory whistle when it's time to get up, won't you?"

"No," teased Elizabeth, coming in just then, "I'll drop a couple o' nice smooth pebbles into camp as a gentle reminder."

It was a jolly party that crowded into the two boats and sang and shouted their way across Plum Run some ten minutes later, but within the half-hour the night was still, for tired muscles could not long resist the call of sleep.

But bright and early next morning they were all astir long before the hour of six and the promised pebbles. A swim in Plum Bun put them in good trim for a hearty breakfast, and that in turn put them in shape for a hard day's work.

And a hard day it turned out to be, for Mr. Fulton parceled out the work and kept everyone on the jump. Jerry and Tod were put at the motor, which had refused to respond to its owner's coaxing. They twisted, tightened, adjusted, tested, till their fingers were cramped and eyes and backs ached.

Lunch gave a most welcome rest, but the half hour was all too short. Every one of them welcomed Mr. Fulton's decision when he said: "We've got along so nicely that I think I will call this a six-o'clock day. Wash up, everybody, and let's see what Elizabeth has for us."

CHAPTER XV

A WILD NIGHT

That was merely the first of a whole week of days that seemed amazingly alike. Mr. Fulton tried to make the work as interesting as possible by letting them change off jobs as often as he could. But even then there was little that under ordinary circumstances would interest a regular out-of-doors boy. What helped was that the

circumstances were not ordinary. It was all a big game to them--a fight against odds. Perhaps at times the screwing of greasy nuts on greasier bolts did not look much like a game, nor did the tedious pushing of a plane or twisting a brace and bit look like a fight, but every one of the boys sensed the tense something that was back of all Mr. Fulton's cheery hustle.

They knew that his arm and shoulder hurt fearfully at times, but never a complaint did they hear from him, although he was all sympathy over the blood-blisters and cut hands of their own mishaps.

But the second week made up for any lack of excitement that the boys had felt. The week was up Wednesday night. On Thursday morning Mr. Fulton met them with a white face that somehow showed the light of battle.

"Guess you'd better arrange, Boss Jerry, to leave a couple of your Scouts on guard here nights," was all he said, but the boys felt that something disturbing had happened the night before. They questioned Elizabeth when she brought their lunch, which they ate from benches and boxes to save time, but she would give them no satisfaction. Tod seemed to know something, but he too was strangely mum.

Jerry decided to remain over that night himself, and Phil, who had dropped a steel wrench across his toes and so had to remain for medical attention anyway, offered to share the watch with him. After Mr. Fulton had left them at about ten o'clock, they talked for awhile together, but finally they both began to yawn.

"What'll it be?" asked Phil. "Two hours at a stretch, turn and turn about?"

"Suits me," said Jerry. "I'll take the first trick."

Phil's snoring something like fifty-nine seconds later was sufficient answer. All was still, and Jerry set about to await midnight, when he could hope for a brief snooze. After a while the silence began to wear on his nerves and in every night noise he fancied he heard steps. He sat still and watchful, hardly breathing at times, his finger poised above a push button that would ring a bell where Mr. Fulton lay stretched out on a pallet on the floor of the tiny cabin.

But midnight came and nothing had happened. He roused Phil and then hunted himself out a soft spot in which to curl up. But he had grown so used to listening that now he found he could not stop. He tried counting, only it was fish he was catching instead of sheep going through the gap in the hedge. It was no use. At last he got up and stretched himself.

"Guess I'll take a turn around in the cool air; I can't seem to sleep."

"Gee," grumbled Phil, "and here I can't seem to stay awake. Just as well have let me slumber on in peace."

"Well, don't slumber while I'm gone, sleepyhead."

Jerry walked across the open ground and after an undecided halt, broke through the bushes, heavy now with dew, and made for the shore. He stood for a long time on the bank, looking across to where the Scout camp lay quiet in the darkness, and then turned and was about to go back to Phil. But he paused; a steady creaking sound had broken the night. It was drawing slowly nearer. It was a rowboat.

"Great conspirators, they are!" sniffed Jerry. "They might at least grease their oars." He heard the mumble of low voices, the _sush_ of a boat keel on the sand. Reaching down, he caught up a big handful of pebbles; with a hard overhand swing he let them fly.

He heard a muttered "Ouch!" and then, after a moment's silence, once more the _creak-crook_ of oars. "Batter out" chuckled Jerry to himself as he scurried back to the hangar.

After that he slept.

The boys were all excitement when he told his story next morning, but that was nothing to compare with the exclamation that arose that same evening when they returned to camp to find that Dave, who had been left in charge, had disappeared, and that the place had been rifled and then torn all to pieces. Poor Dave was found not far off, tied to a tree. His story was somewhat lacking in detail. He had sat dozing over a book on aeronautics, when suddenly an earthquake came up and hit him over the head. That was all he knew till he woke up tied securely to a tree.

"That settles it," declared Phil. "We ought to have done it in the first place, but the boss didn't think it was worth while."

"What's that?" demanded Jerry, a bit sharply.

"Well, what's the idea of our coming over here every night to sleep, when there's oodles of room there on Lost Island, where we're needed? Huh?"

"What's that 'huh'? Boy Scout for sir?" cried Jerry hotly.

Phil jumped to his feet, but to the surprise of Jerry, who had put up his fists, the Scout Leader brought his heels together with a click and his right hand went to the salute.

"I stand convicted," he said simply. "You're the boss of this expedition. What's orders?"

"Orders are to break camp--it's already pretty well broken--and take ship for Lost Island. Patrol Leader Fulton will take charge of the job while Boss Ring goes off and kicks himself quietly but firmly."

They all laughed and good feeling was restored. The Scouts made short work of getting their traps together, even in the dark, and it was not many minutes before the first load was on the way to Lost Island.

Jerry, Phil and Dave followed silently afterwards in the _Big Four_ with the rest of the dunnage.

"You think _they_ did it?" asked Dave of no one in particular. No

one asked who they were, nor did anyone answer, but each knew what the others were thinking.

Mr. Fulton showed no surprise when told of their decision to camp henceforth on the island. "Good idea," was his only comment.

They were not disturbed that night, and the next day passed without incident, save that Budge had the bad luck to break a truss he had been all day in making. "Good!" said Mr. Fulton. "That wood might have caused a serious accident if it had got into the Skyrocket." Budge, knowing his awkwardness and not the timber was to blame, felt grateful that he had been spared the reproof that would have been natural.

They had been making good progress, in spite of their greenness; next day Mr. Fulton was planning to stretch the silk over the planes; it had already been given a preliminary coat of a kind of flexible varnish which was also a part of Mr. Fulton's invention. The carpenter had done his part handsomely. The launch had come down the day before with all of the heavier framework and trusses. A few rods were still to come from the blacksmith, and the rear elevator control was still awaited, but enough of the material had been mended and put in place to make the aeroplane look less like a wreck.

Jerry and Mr. Fulton had finally managed to master the secret of the motor; that is, they finally made it run as smoothly as a top, but neither one was ever able to tell why it had not done so from the start. Oiled and polished, it stood on the bench till a final brace should be forthcoming.

Camp had been pitched on the river side of the open ground, close beside the path. The second night of their new location Mr. Fulton and Elizabeth came over, Dick guarding the Skyrocket and Tod remaining at the cabin to look after poor Billings, who, thanks to the doctor's daily visits and his daughter's patient nursing, was growing steadily stronger. Elizabeth brought along a guitar, which she played daintily, singing the choruses of all the popular songs the boys could ask for by name. After a little bashful hesitation, Dave chimed in, while the rest of the boys lay back and listened in undisguised delight.

Into this peaceful scene burst Tod, frightened out of his wits. It was a full minute before he finally managed to gasp:

"They've come--they've been here! I didn't see them!"

"What in the world do you mean?" cried Mr. Fulton, shaking the excited boy with his left hand. "If you didn't see them, how do you----"

"I didn't. But it's gone--the motor's gone.----"

"What!" yelled the whole crew at once.

"Dick and I sat outside the doorway, listening to you folks having a good time, and I went in to see what time it was--and there was the hole in the side of the hang--hang--the shed, and the motor had disappeared. At least that was all we noticed was gone."

The last of this was delivered on the run, for all had set out for the machine shop, Mr. Fulton having promptly vetoed Phil's plan to put a circle of Scouts around the shore.

Sure enough, a big gap showed in the side of the hangar, where two boards had been pried loose. "Lucky you were outside," grunted Phil disgustedly, "or they'd have pulled the whole place down over your head."

"We've got to work fast," urged Mr. Fulton. "If they get away with the motor the stuff's all off. They're desperate men--I don't want any of you trying to tackle them. Scout ahead, and when you sight them, this is the signal:" He whistled the three short notes of the whippoor-will's call. "I've got my automatic, and I guess I can take care of them."

As they hurried out into the night they spread out, working toward the east side of the island. Jerry found himself next to Phil, and after a few yards he moved over closer to the Scout Leader.

"I say, Phil," he called guardedly; "you ready to listen to the wildest kind of a notion?"

"Shoot," came the answer.

"I don't believe our visitors came on the island for that motor at all. What good would it do them?"

"It'd stop our launching the _Skyrocket_, for one thing."

"But there are lots of lighter things that would do that. I don't trust those two ruffians--or their boss, either."

"Well, who does?"

"That's not the point. Mr. Fulton figures that they merely want to keep those others from buying his idea, so that when the first option expires, _they_ can. But if they could steal the plans in the meanwhile--get me?"

"I get you. Then you think that stealing the motor was just a blind, and that they are----"

"Getting us out of the road so they can take their time going through the workshop. If we're wrong, there's plenty of Scouts out trailing them--it'd be too late anyway, as it's only a few hundred feet to where they would have left their boat. What say we sneak back, see if there's a gun at the cabin, and take them by surprise when they start burglarizing the hangar?"

Phil turned about by way of answer, and stealthily they approached the cabin. A light showed dim in the invalid's room, and through the curtained window they could see Elizabeth's long braids bent over a book. She merely looked up when they stopped at the window, and at once came out the back door to where they stood.

"Is there a gun in the house?" questioned Phil.

"A thirty-two Colts," she replied. "Want it?"

"Quick as we can have it. _They_ are on the island."

But she did not wait to hear the rest of his explanation. In a jiffy she had brought them an ugly looking revolver. "Be careful," she said as she handed it to Phil; "it shoots when you pull the trigger."

The boys stole across the narrow space between the cabin and the hangar, and flattened themselves against the log walls as they wound their way toward the little "night door" near the other end. As they passed the big sliding doors they paused an instant and pressed their ears close against the planks, but all was still. Both had an instant of disappointment, for they were counting strongly on being able to crow over the rest.

But when they came to the crack where the two doors came together, and looked within, their spirits jumped up till they hardly knew whether they were pleased or frightened. For just an instant a flash lamp had lighted up the darkness!

Not quite so cautiously now, and a good deal faster, they made their way to the little door, guided by their sense of feeling, for the night was black as the pitch in the old saying. Jerry turned the catch firmly but slowly, and the door swung open without a creak. They stepped inside.

They were now in a walled off ante-room used for small supplies. It opened into the main workshop by means of a narrow doorway. Standing in the middle of the tiny room they had a full view of the whole place. Like two monstrous fireflies a pair of dark figures darted about, ransacking Mr. Fulton's desk, tearing open the lockers and cupboards, searching out every likely nook and cranny where papers might be hid, their flashlights throwing dazzling light on each object of their suspicion.

The two boys realized suddenly that the attention of the two had been focused in their direction, and Jerry jumped back behind the shelter of the door-edge just in time to escape the blinding rays of the flashlights. Phil evidently realized that their time of grace was over and there was nothing to be gained in further delay.

With raised pistol he stepped out into the light.

"Hands up!" he ordered gruffly. "Your little game is ended for to-night."

But he had miscalculated somewhat. With startling suddenness darkness closed in about them, there was a quick rush across the littered floor, a thud as a heavy body dashed against the shed wall and crashed through the inch boards. Phil's gun roared out twice. As the two boys hastened to the gap in the wall they could hear the crash of the pair as they tore madly through the brush. Then all was still again.

But not for long. Panting from the run, Mr. Fulton and three of the Scouts came chasing like mad through the darkness.

"What's happened?" he cried when he saw it was Jerry and Phil. He

listened as patiently as possible to their disconnected story, laughing grimly at the end. "Well, they'll swim it to shore, because we found their boat, and we sunk it under about a ton of stones."

"Yes, but----" began Jerry, a premonition of further disaster in his mind and on the tip of his tongue, when from the east shore of Lost Island came wild cries of rage and chagrin. "Just what I thought!" exclaimed Jerry, by way of finishing out his sentence.

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Fulton and Phil in a breath.

But Jerry did not answer. There was no need. Down the path came an excited group, shouting:

"Somebody's made off with the _Big Four!_"

CHAPTER XVI

TRICKED AGAIN!

Nothing else happened that night, but the boys had already had enough excitement to keep them awake long past their usual time for turning in. Some of them, indeed, were for starting out in pursuit of the _Big Four_, but Mr. Fulton promptly squelched the plan. There was little hope of finding the boat in the dense darkness.

Next morning, before breakfast, Sid Walmaly and Dave were sent out on a scouting expedition, but they were not gone long. The _Big Four_ had been found, barely half a mile down, stranded on a sandbar. A jagged hole in the side showed where the kidnapers had tried to scuttle the craft.

After this event, the boys settled to their work in high spirits, undeterred by the fact that the motor was still missing, although Mr. Fulton felt sure it could not have been taken from the island. Phil ventured to advance a theory, which the boys were inclined to scout but which Mr. Fulton finally decided was at least worth the time and effort it would take to try it out.

The men had had no time to carry the motor far, argued Phil. They had not gone to their boat, else they could hardly have made their way back to the hangar. They might of course have picked it up after they had been frightened away, but there had been hardly time for that. They had undoubtedly hidden it in the first place. The easiest place to hide the thing was in the river, and the closest trail to the river hit the extreme north end, where there was a steep-sided bay.

"Who's the best swimmer in the crowd?" asked Mr. Fulton. "I don't dare take very many away from the job, but we've got to have the motor"

"Jerry Ring's the best swimmer and diver in Watertown," announced Dave without hesitation. Mr. Fulton turned inquiringly to the Boy Scouts, but no one answered his questioning look until Phil at last

spoke up quietly:

"I'll go along if you need another one."

"I do. You two take the Scout boat and bring her around the point. I'll go through the woods--be there in half an hour or so, when I get things running smoothly here. Be careful you don't find the gas-eater before I get there," he jested.

But it was more than half an hour before Mr. Fulton came upon the two boys, stripped to their B-V-D's and at that instant resting on the bank. He came up just in time to hear Jerry say: "I used to think I could dive! Where'd you get onto it?"

"Just Scout stuff," laughed Phil, modestly. "Every Scout in the patrol's got swimming and diving honors."

"Good!" broke in Mr. Fulton. "Dive me up that motor and I'll get you a special honor as a substitute submarine."

"We've worked down from the point, scraping bottom for twenty feet out--that's about as far as they could heave it, we figured. We've just got to the place where I'd have dived first-off if I had only one chance at it. Here goes for that leather medal," as Phil rose and poised himself for the plunge.

It was as pretty a dive as one could want to see. He split the water with a clean slash, with hardly a bubble. A minute, another, and another passed, the two on shore watching the surface expectantly. They began to grow worried.

"He's been beating me right along" confessed Jerry. "I can't come within a full minute of his ordinary dives. This one is a pippin--there he blows!"

Spouting like a young whale, Phil broke the water and came ashore in long reaching strokes.

"I tried my best!" he gasped as he pushed back his hair and rubbed the water from his eyes. "But I couldn't make it!"

"Better luck next time," encouraged Mr. Fulton. "If you don't find her in two more dives like that, why she isn't in Plum Run, that's all!"

"Find her? I was talking about lifting her. Guess we'll have to get a rope on her--she's pretty well down in the mud."

"Hurray!" shouted Jerry, giving his chum a sounding smack on the wet back. "Man the lifeboats! I chucked a rope in the bow of the boat."

Mr. Fulton stood on the bank to mark the line, while the boys pushed the boat out to where Phil had come up, some twenty feet from shore. Jerry slipped over the side, one end of the rope in his hand. He did not remain long below.

Clambering in at the stern, he shouted: "Hoist away--she's hooked!"

And there was the motor, clogged with mud, to be sure, but

undamaged. Mr. Fulton stepped into the boat and they rowed quickly back to the "dock." While the two boys put on their clothes over their wet underwear, he hurried back to the workshop to see how things were going. A few minutes later they followed with the motor.

They felt, after this fortunate end of the adventure, that Mr. Fulton ought once more to be his own cheery self, but a look of gloom seemed to have settled down over his face, and his face looked haggard except when he was talking to one of the boys. Jerry finally decided to try to cheer him up.

"Luck was sure breaking our way this morning, wasn't it?" he exclaimed cheerfully as the man came up to where Jerry sat, removing the mud from their prize.

"Fine--fine," agreed Mr. Fulton, but without spirit.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Jerry, sympathetically. "Anything else gone wrong?"

"No--Oh, no."

"You look like the ghost of Mike Clancy's goat. Remember how you always used to be telling Tod and me to grin hardest when we were getting licked worst?"

"I sure ought to grin now, then."

"We're not licked--not by a long shot!"

"Yes we are--by about twenty-four hours. While you were gone I got word from the blacksmith. He says he can't possibly have that propeller shaft we found was snapped, welded before to-morrow afternoon late. Not if we're to have the other things he promised. He's lost his helper--quit him cold."

"No!" exclaimed Jerry, his heart sinking at least two feet. Then, with sudden suspicion, "Do you suppose----"

"I know it," interrupted Mr. Fulton. "Our two friends are working every scheme they know. Blocking our blacksmithing was one of their easiest weapons. I'm only surprised they didn't do it before."

"What can we do?"

"Submit gracefully. But I just can't face those two doubters. First they were so enthusiastic and then so suspicious, that I can't be satisfied unless I convince them. But the stuff's all off--and I told Lewis and Harris to come out to-morrow afternoon at three-thirty to see the Skyrocket make good all my claims!"

"Can't you beg off and get a little more time?"

"They'd be willing enough, I suppose. They don't seem to be in the slightest hurry. But there's that second option that begins operations after to-morrow. No, there's no loophole. All we can do is just peg ahead, and if the blacksmith comes through sooner than he expects, we may have a bare chance. I just sent Tod in to lend a hand."

The blacksmith did do better than his word, for Tod came back late in the afternoon bearing the mended shaft and two smaller parts that were urgently needed.

It took all the rest of that afternoon to lay the shaft in its ball-bearings and true it up. The propeller was still to be attached, but Mr. Fulton declared he would take no chances with that or with the final adjustments in the half light of the growing dusk.

The boys were glad to knock off. They had been working at high tension for a long while now and were beginning to feel the strain. They were all frankly sleepy, too, after the excitement of the night before. As a final precaution against a repetition of the surprise attack they all slept in the hangar, finding the hard floor an unwelcome change from their leafy beds in camp.

But the night passed quietly. With daybreak they were all astir, but the time before breakfast was spent in an invigorating swim in the Plum. Elizabeth had done herself proud in the way of pancakes this last morning, and the boys did full justice. It was almost eight o'clock before anyone returned to the hangar with any intention of working. After barely half an hour there, chiefly spent in polishing and tightening up nuts and draw-buckles, Mr. Fulton drove them all outdoors. "Chase off and play," he insisted. "Tod and I will give her the finishing touches; then you can all come back and help us push her out into the sunlight for the final inspection."

But Elizabeth called them before Mr. Fulton was ready for their services. Heaping platters of beautifully browned perch testified both to her skill and that of the boys.

"Lunch time already?" exclaimed Mr. Fulton in surprise. "Where's the morning gone to?" But he showed that if he hadn't noted the passage of time, his stomach had. As he watched the brown pile diminish under Mr. Fulton's vigorous attack, Phil threatened to go back to the river and start fishing again. "You oughtn't to be eating fish," he joked. "Birds are more your style. Better let me go out and shoot you a duck--or a sparrow; they're more in season."

But Mr. Fulton was at last satisfied, as were all the boys. He sauntered back at once to the hangar. "Guess you chaps can give me a shoulder now, and we'll take her out to daylight. After that you keep out of the way till the show starts--about four o'clock. All but two of you, that is. There's a bearing to grind on the lathe, and a couple of sets of threads to recut."

Tod could not have been driven away, so Jerry volunteered to be the other helper. The whole troop made easy work of running out the Skyrocket. After standing about admiringly a while, they all scattered, some of them, Jerry learned from their conversation, to try to teach Elizabeth how to catch bass. Jerry grinned to himself at this; he had heard Tod tell of the exploits of this slip of a girl, and no boy in camp could do more with a four-ounce bass rod than she could.

Tod and Jerry went at once at their grinding, and by two o'clock all was in readiness. Every rod and strut and bolt and screw was in place, tight as a drum. The nickel and brass of the bearings flashed

in the sun; the Skyrocket looked fit as a fiddle. There was still a little gasoline in the gallon can that they had been using for testing the motor, and Tod let it gurgle into the gasoline tank that curved back on the framework just above the pilot's seat.

"Try her out, dad," he urged.

"I'll try the motor," agreed Mr. Fulton, "but I'm not going up until there's somebody around to watch her go through her paces. I've got my shoulder out of splints to-day, but I don't dare use it when there's any danger of strain. Think you're going to have the nerve to go up with me, son?"

Jerry opened his eyes wide. This was the first he had heard of any such plan as that.

"Think I'm going to let you go up alone, with a twisted wing that might give out?" demanded Tod scornfully. "Huh! I'll take her up alone if you'll let me."

"I'll let you fill her up with gas, if you're so ambitious as all that. I see an automobile throwing up the dust on the last hill of the town road. I expect it's our friends. I'll let one of the boys row me across to meet them. Ask Billings, if you can't find the wrench to unscrew the cap of the gasoline reservoir."

Billings proved to be sound asleep, napping off the effects of over-indulgence in browned perch, so the boys decided to await the return of Mr. Fulton, a search of the workshop having failed to reveal the wrench, and none of the Stillsons being big enough to take the big nut that capped the fifty-gallon tank sunk in the ground on the shady north side of the hangar. So they sat down beside it and waited for Mr. Fulton to come back with his visitors.

They finally appeared, Lewis and Harris standing about and listening in unenthusiastic silence as Mr. Fulton glowingly explained the whyness of the various devices and improvements that made the Skyrocket a real invention. They did not even venture an occasional question, although it was easy to see that they were impressed.

"What are they made of? Wood?" exclaimed Jerry in fierce impatience. "Do you know--if it wasn't that we've simply got to beat out those other fellows, I'd almost like to see these two sleepies get left. I don't like them a little bit!"

"Huh! Ask me if I do. They give me the willies. Never did like them, and ever since they acted so nasty about that accident I just plumb hate 'em. You'd think dad was trying to sandbag them or something like that. Just listen to them grouching around. I'd hate to be a woman and married to one of them and have dinner late."

Jerry had seated himself on the top of the reservoir, the cap between his legs. He caught hold of it with his two hands. "It's too blamed bad your dad couldn't hitch up with Uncle Sam!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and if you believe what the papers say, we're going to need it, too. We might be mixed up in the big war any day."

"Well, I expect we'd better not sit here gassing any longer. Tod, chase over and ask your dad where that wrench is--unless you've got a notion I can twist this thing off with my hands." He gave a playful tug as if to carry out his boast.

"Say!" he cried, "what do you know about this!"

"About what?" asked Tod lazily, a dozen feet away on the way to his father.

"This," answered Jerry, giving the big cap a twirl with his forefinger. "Some careful of your gasoline you people are!" The cap was loose.

"Something funny about that," declared Tod, coming back. "I saw Billings screw that on last time myself--with the wrench."

There was something decidedly funny about it, as it turned out. At Tod's alarmed call Mr. Fulton came on the run. "It's been tampered with," was his immediate decision. "Screw on the pump, boys, and force up a gallon or so, if there isn't water in that gas we're the luckiest folks alive. I might have known those crooks had a final shot in their locker!"

"What's the idea?" asked Mr. Harris, with the first interest he had showed.

"Somebody's trying to block the game, that's what!" sputtered Mr. Fulton. "Here, boys, take the canfull in and put it in the shop engine. If she can take it I guess we're worrying for nothing."

For a moment or so it looked as if that were the case; the engine chugged away in its usual steady manner. But once the gasoline was gone that the boys had been unable to empty out of its tank, it began to kick a little. Within another minute it had stopped dead.

"Show's over," announced Mr. Fulton grimly. "It's way after three o'clock now, and we can't hope to get a new supply from town this side of dark. If we just hadn't sent your auto back!"

"You mean to tell us that you cannot go up--that there will be no flight!" cried Mr. Lewis, making up for all his previous lack of excitement in one burst of protest. "But, man--it's the last day of the option."

"It's worse than that," countered Mr. Fulton. "It's the day before the beginning of a new option, held by the people who watered that gas--and at least a dozen other sneaking tricks."

"But you told us that you would--why, you guaranteed us a trial flight."

"I said you didn't have to buy till you'd seen it work, yes. I'm in your hands, gentlemen. After midnight to-night I'm in other hands--and you're going to lose the chance of your lifetime to secure for your government something that may prove the deciding factor in that terrific war you're carrying on over there. I'm sure you don't doubt my good faith."

"Faith! It's performances we want."

"Give me gas and I'll give you a demonstration that can't help but convince you. I can't use my motor on water. I was willing to risk my neck--and my boy's--by going up and trying this contraption with my left hand--but I can't accomplish the impossible."

"But surely you don't expect us to buy a pig in a poke----"

"This is no pig--it's a hawk. Will you do this? Will you buy the machine and the idea on approval? I'm pledged. If it isn't sold by night to you, to-morrow those other people will come with cash in hand----"

"Harris, you know," drawled Mr. Lewis, "I half believe the fellow's trying to flimflam us, you know. How do we know?"

"How do you know!" Mr. Fulton's eyes flashed fire. "I'll have you know I'm a man of honor."

"Sure--sure," agreed Mr. Harris conciliatingly. "But that's not the idea, old chap. We don't buy this for ourselves, you understand. We're merely agents, and responsible to our chief. What'd we say if we came back with a bag of pot metal for our money?"

"What will you say to your conscience when your enemy drops destruction onto your brave countrymen in the trenches from the Fulton Aeroplane? That's what you'd better be asking yourselves."

"But we've got to be cautious."

"Cautious! If you saw the goose that laid the golden egg getting off the nest, you'd hold the egg up to a candle to see if it was fresh!"

"Well, now, Mr. Fulton----" began Mr. Harris, when he was interrupted by Jerry, who had been holding himself in as long as was humanly possible.

"Don't let's waste any more time talking, Mr. Fulton. Tod and I have got a scheme that will pull us out on top yet--even if it does mean helping these doubters against their will!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE BIG PLAY

"Look here, Mr. Fulton," began Jerry, almost stammering in his eagerness. "It wouldn't be any trick at all to get over to the interurban tracks in time to catch the four o'clock northbound. That gets to Watertown at four twenty-five--say half-past. We ought to be able to get the gas and rout out a machine to haul it in inside another half hour. That's five o'clock. Then an hour certainly would see us back here, with a good hour and more of daylight left."

"I've gone over all that in my mind a dozen times. But I've also

spent a little time figuring what these men would be doing in the meanwhile. There's just one place in Watertown that keeps any quantity of gasoline--the rest buy of him. And he'd die of fright if he should be caught with more than a hundred gallons at one time."

"But we don't need more than five!" exploded Tod.

"Sure, son, sure. But suppose somebody just ahead of you made it his business to buy the hundred--how about that?"

"But there's a chance," objected Jerry, returning to the attack. "We might be able to get away without their seeing us."

"Don't worry; they're watching every move we make."

"Then I've got another scheme. See if you can pick it full of holes too." There was more than a touch of impatience in Jerry's voice. "They're watching this side, that's sure; and they know we're bound to figure on either Watertown or Chester. We'll fool them. I'll swim across to the other side, reach a telephone, get my dad, who's at Corliss these days on business. There's a Standard Oil tank at Corliss. Dad'll start the gas out inside of twenty minutes----"

"Corliss is a good two hours' trip by auto, my boy. It would take at least half an hour to get the message through, and another to get the gas here from the road. That means at least seven o'clock, and it would be dark before we were ready to go up."

"All right," agreed Jerry, refusing to give up. "Suppose it does get dark: there's such a thing as flying by night, isn't there? All we've got to do is to build a dozen flaring bonfires to see by----"

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Mr. Fulton with sudden enthusiasm. "You've hit it. Not brush--that would smoke us out. But there are ten or a dozen open air torches here like those they use at street shows, and there's not enough water in the gasoline to hurt it for that purpose. Moreover, we can switch our engine onto that dynamo in the shop, and we'll string incandescent lights all through the trees; we've got plenty of them. There's at least a mile of bare copper wire about the place--what you two standing with your mouths wide open for? Thought you were going to get that gas! Where in thunder are all those boys?"

"Here they come--tired of waiting out there in the sun, I guess. So long, dad; I'm going with Jerry."

"You are not. You're going to be chief electrician. If Jerry can't put through his part of the job alone he doesn't deserve credit for having thought of the whole scheme."

The first part of Jerry's task proved easy enough. It took him well over the half hour Mr. Fulton had predicted, to find a farmhouse with a telephone, and Central seemed an unusually long time in ringing through to the office Jerry's father had been making his headquarters for the past weeks. Then it developed that Mr. Ring was out at a conference of business men. Jerry took the telephone number the girl gave him, and repeated it to Central, who again took her time in giving the connection. Jerry was about ready to drop with nervousness before he finally heard his father's gruff voice at the

other end of the line.

The words simply tumbled over themselves as Jerry told his story; fortunately, Mr. Ring was shrewd enough to guess the half that Jerry jumbled in his eagerness.

"Where are you--so I can call you back?" was Mr. Ring's only reply.

Fifteen minutes later the telephone rang. Jerry answered, to hear: "Ten gallons of gasoline, double strained, left here five minutes ago on a fast delivery truck. It ought to reach the road opposite Lost Island inside of two hours. You be there to tell them what to do. Good luck, Jerry--I'm going back to that conference. This skylark may cost me a five hundred dollar profit."

"It isn't a skylark--it's a sky_rocket_, and Mr. Fulton will pay you double over!" But it was into a dead transmitter he shouted it, for Mr. Ring had not waited.

Jerry did not wait long either, but raced across fields and through woods to the river road. He found a shady spot, which he established as his headquarters, but he was too restless to wait there long. They seemed a mighty long two hours. The sun sank lower and lower; Jerry heard a bell ringing far off, calling the farm hands to supper--he was getting hungry himself. Shadows began to darken, the clouds flared up in a sudden crimson, first low down on the horizon, then high up in the sky. The sun dropped out of sight behind the trees.

Away down the road sounded a faint drumming noise that grew nearer and louder until around the bend whirred a dust-raising black monster that came to a halt a few feet away from the boy who had sprung out, shouting and waving his arms. "You waiting for gasoline?" a grouchy voice demanded. "Are you Mr. Ring?"

"I sure am!"

"Well, come on back here and help h'ist it out. We're in a hurry to get back to town--why it's only a kid!" as Jerry came up. "Who's going to help you handle it? It's in two five-gallon cans."

"I guess I can manage it all right. I've got some friends waiting down on the river bank."

"All right; it's your funeral. There you are, sealed, signed and delivered." The motor roared out, then settled to a steady hum; the man backed and turned and soon was swallowed up in the dust and the growing dark.

Jerry braced his shoulders for the stiff carry to the Plum, a five-gallon can in each hand. He was willing to stop now and then for a breathing spell, but at last he set the load down on the narrow fringe of sandy beach. Cupping his hands about his mouth, he sent a lusty shout ringing across the water; he was too weary to swim it, and there did not seem to be much need for further concealment. There was an instant answer, showing that the boys had been awaiting his signal. The splash of oars told him that the boat was on the way, and he felt suddenly glad that he could now think of a few minutes' rest.

It proved to be Dave and Tod and Phil in the Scout boat. They made quick work of loading in the two cans, and then they all piled in, Dave and Tod at the oars. They were perhaps halfway across when Jerry asked, anxiously, it seemed:

"Can't you get any more speed out of her, fellows?"

"What's eating you? It's as dark now as it's going to get," answered Dave, at the same time letting his oars float idly up against the side of the boat.

"I'm worried, that's why," exclaimed Jerry, slipping over and pushing Dave out of his seat. "Do you hear anything?"

They all listened, Tod holding his oars out of the water. Sure enough, a purring, deeply muffled sound came faintly across the water. It was unmistakably a motorboat.

"Some camper," suggested Dave.

"It sounds more like--trouble," declared Phil, a significant accent on the word. "The enemy, I bet, and trying to cut us off."

"Well, we've got a big start on them. They're a long way off" again Dave volunteered.

"You mean you're a long way off. They've got her tuned down--she isn't over two hundred yards away and coming like blue blazes. They mean mischief--they aren't showing a single light. What's our plan?"

"Keep cool," advised Jerry. "They'll probably try to bump us. We'll row along easy-like, with a big burst of speed at the last second. Before they can turn and come at us again, we can make shore. Steady now!"

The drone of the motor was almost upon them. The dusk lay heavy over the water; they could see nothing. Louder and louder sounded the explosions, but now they had slowed up. A dim shape showed through the gloom.

"All set!" came the low command from Jerry, just as the boat, muffler cut out, the engine at top speed, and volleying revolutions and deafening explosions, seemed to leap through the water.

"Down hard!" cried Jerry, lunging with his oars. Tod grunted as he put all his strength into the pull. The Scout boat seemed to lift itself bodily out of the water as it plunged forward--only inches to spare as a slim hull slipped by the stern.

"Yah!" yelled Phil, jumping to his feet and shaking his fist wildly. "You're beat!"

The Scout boat hit shore just then, and Phil, caught off his guard, took a header and landed astride one of the gasoline cans. "I wonder if that was a torpedo," he grunted as he picked himself up.

"No," chuckled Tod. "Just a reminder not to crow while your head is still on the block."

The boys wasted no time in getting the gasoline out of the boat and up through the bushes, sending a lusty shout ahead of them to tell the waiting islanders that they were coming.

"Over on the far side of the clearing," directed Tod, who was carrying one side of a can with Jerry. "We hauled the _Skyrocket_ over there as the ground is more level and free from stumps."

They found the whole crew waiting about the airship, their eager faces lighted up by the flaring flames of one of the gasoline torches. "Hooray for Jerry, the Gasoline Scout!" they shouted as the boys dropped their loads at the first convenient spot.

"Bully for you!" exclaimed Mr. Fulton, coming over and clapping Jerry on the shoulder. "Have any trouble?"

"You better guess we did," broke in Dave. "A motorboat tried its best to run us down."

Mr. Fulton looked grave as he listened to the tale of their adventure. As Dave finished a spirited account of their narrow escape, the man turned to Tod with:

"Guess you'd better look after filling the tank, son, while I chase over to the house and get my goggles and my harness," referring to a leather brace the doctor had brought him a few days before to use until his shoulder grew stronger. Unfortunately, the thing was not properly made and it held the arm too stiffly, so Mr. Fulton used it only when he absolutely had to.

The boys all wanted to have a hand in this final operation and consequently it took twice as long as was necessary to fill the tank. Enough was spilled, as Tod said, to run the _Skyrocket_ ten miles. In the meanwhile, one of the boys took the small can and went the rounds and filled all the torches with gasoline, while another came close behind him and started them going.

Tod finally left the rest to finish the job of filling the _Skyrocket_, and disappeared in the direction of the workshop. Within five minutes the boys heard the steady chugging of "Old Faithful" as they had named the shop motor. An instant later the whole field was suddenly lighted up as the twenty incandescent lights flashed up brightly.

"_Some_ illumination!" cried Jerry, delightedly, turning to Mr. Harris, who happened to be nearest him.

"Yes," agreed the man coldly, "but it's all on the ground."

"Sure. Because there's nothing up in the air to see. Wait till the old _Skyrocket_ shoots up," and Jerry walked over to where the boys were standing. "Old grouch," he said to himself. "You'd think he didn't want to see us win out."

Tod came hurrying back from the hangar. "Where's dad?" he asked.

"Hasn't got back yet."

"That's funny. I saw him leave the cabin as I went in to start up the dynamo. He called something to me about hurrying so as not to give those fellows any time to think up new tricks. Who's that over there with Mr. Harris?"

"Phil, I guess. Your dad hasn't come out yet or we'd have seen him-- it's light as day."

"What's the cause of the delay now?" came from behind them. Mr. Lewis had approached the group unobserved.

"Waiting for my father," answered Tod. "Guess he's having a hard time with his harness. I'd have stopped for him only I thought he'd have come back ahead of me. I'll chase over now and see if he needs any help with his straps."

Tod ambled off across the torch-lighted open. It was a weird sight, that flaring line of torches, the paler gleam of the electric lights hung high in the trees, the animated faces of the excited boys, the two stolid men, and the adventurous looking _Skyrocket_, its engines throbbing, the tiny searchlight ahead of the pilot's seat sending a fan-shaped road of white light into the trees. It was like a scene on the stage--just before the grand climax.

Tod furnished the climax for this scene. Hardly had he disappeared within the door of the cabin, before he came running out again, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Fellows! Quick!"

There was a note in his cry that went through the boys like an electric shock. It was anger and fear and a dozen other emotions at once. They fairly flew across the hundred yards or so to the cabin, crowding in till the main room was filled.

"What is it, Tod?" cried Phil, as his cousin flung open the door to the tiny lean-to bedroom. Tod's face was pasty white and his eyes bulged out.

"They've--_got_ dad! I'm afraid he's--killed!"

"No!" exclaimed Jerry, pushing past.

But the first look made him believe the worst. On the floor, toppled over in the chair to which he had been bound, lay Mr. Fulton, his injured shoulder twisted way out of place, his distorted face the color of old ivory. Gagged and tightly laced to the bed lay Mr. Billings, his features working in wildest rage.

But Mr. Fulton was not dead. He came to under the deft handling of Phil and his fellow Scouts, but it was Mr. Billings who told the story of the attack.

While Mr. Fulton had been struggling with the strap that held his shoulder-brace in place, two burly men had burst through the doorway and quickly overpowered him, handicapped as he was by his useless arm. They had bound him to the chair, and then, after gagging and tying Billings, had calmly proceeded to ransack the room, one holding a pistol at Fulton's head while the other searched.

Papers scattered about on the floor, wrecked furniture and broken boxes, testified to the thoroughness of the hunt. But they had found nothing until they had thought to go through the bed on which Billings lay. Under the mattress was a portfolio packed with blueprints and plans. That was when Mr. Fulton had fallen; he had tried to free himself from his bonds and get at the two, no matter how hopeless the fight.

As Mr. Billings finished the story, Mr. Fulton opened his eyes weakly. "Tod----" he gasped--"where's Tod?"

"Here, dad," coming close beside him where he lay on a big pile of blankets.

"Look quick and see if they found the little flat book--you know."

Tod rummaged hastily through the disordered mess of drawings littered over the bed and floor. "Not here," he confessed finally.

The man gave a deep groan. "We're done for, then. It had the contract folded up in it. And it had the combination to the safe at the house, and there was the list of the specifications Mr. Billings made out for me when we packed away the first draft of the _Skyrocket_."

"What difference does that make, if they've already got the blueprints'?" asked Jerry.

"Oh-h!" cried Mr. Fulton, despair in his voice, "don't you see? The aeroplane itself was made here; Billings did all the work on it. But Tod and I did all the experimental work at home. All the data concerning the invention is back there in the safe!"

"And they're already halfway there in their motorboat!" groaned Phil.

But Mr. Fulton made no answer. His eyes were closed; he had fainted dead away.

Tod jumped up from where he had been kneeling beside his father. "Look after him, Phil," he directed briskly. "Jerry, you come with me. Those villains have got the contract and they will soon have dad's secret--it means that we're cleaned out. There's only one thing to do in a tight place like this, and you and I are going to do it--if you've got the nerve!"

"I've got it," responded Jerry quickly. "What is it?"

"We're going after those crooks in the _Skyrocket_!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A CLOSE FINISH

The incidents of the next hour or so would be hard to picture from the standpoint of Jerry's emotions. As they half ran over to where the _Skyrocket_ stood ready, snorting like an impatient racehorse, his heart was filled with a kind of frightened determination. Once he was strapped into his seat, his pulses stopped galloping so fast, but as Tod began an endless fumbling with levers, plainly as nervous as his chum, Jerry's nerve oozed out at his fingertips; he might have climbed out had it not been for the straps--and the two men, who now came forward and insisted that the boys give up their hair-brained plan. Jerry would have been killed by inches rather than give in to them.

A sudden terrifying lurch, a dizzy parting company with solid earth that almost made Jerry part company with his stomach. He yelled, but it might easily have been through excitement rather than fear. He hoped the two and Tod would think so. He dared not look down--all he could do was grip the rod before him with a death-defying clutch. Faster and faster, higher and higher they mounted, the air whistling by them like mad.

"Can't you slow her down a little?" he yelled in Tod's ear, but Tod gave no answer. He could hardly have heard above the roar of the motor and the sickening whine of the propellers--not to mention a steady drumming of taut wires and tightly stretched silk. "Can't you tune her down?" Jerry yelled, louder this time, "and get her level?"

"Can't!" shouted Tod. "I've forgotten which handle to pull, even if I knew which way to pull it!"

He tried first one and then another, but although they lurched dangerously, first this way and then that, they kept mounting into the sky. Finally there was but one chance left--Tod cautiously drew the lever toward him, then with an "Ah!" heard above all the noise, brought it all the way. The _Skyrocket_ quivered, dropped to an even keel, and then turned her nose earthward. But Tod was ready for that. Halfway back he shoved, the lever and once more the _Skyrocket_ rode level.

They had left Lost Island far behind, but in which direction they could not be sure. A long streak of flame to the left told them that a railroad lay there, and it could be none other than the Belt Line that ran into Watertown. Through a rift in the clouds a cluster of stars showed briefly--the Big Dipper. "See!" shouted Tod. "We're headed north, all right"

They were going much slower now, and the noise was not so deafening; they could talk without splitting their throats. Dimly they made out Plum Run directly beneath them, while a haze of lights indicated Watertown, the goal. Even as they watched it seemed to be drawing nearer.

"Were you scared?" asked Tod.

"Stiff," confessed Jerry. "You?"

"Should say. Bet my hair's turned white. Where'll we land?"

"Where can you?"

"Don't know. River, most likely. Say, we're lucky we're alive. I thought I knew how to run it until we got off the ground. Then I found I'd forgotten more than I ever learned."

"Did you ever run it before?"

"With dad watching, yes. Once, that is. But I've faked running it a hundred times there in the hangar. Suppose we could come down in your back lot? It's level--and big enough, maybe."

"We might hit a horse. Dad's got Daisy in there nights."

"We'll have to chance it, I guess. But you hold on good and tight, because I'll probably pull the wrong strings at the last minute. Where are we now?"

"That's the mill yonder, I think. We want to swing west a little now. Suppose they are at the house by now?"

"Most likely. They had a good start. Shall we get your dad?"

"Uhuh. And several others--with guns. Better have old Bignold." Mr. Bignold was the only night policeman in Watertown. "There's the city limits, that switch-tower on the Belt Line. Hadn't we better come down a bit. I don't like the idea of falling so far."

Tod obediently let the Skyrocket slide down a few hundred feet, till they were just above the tree-tops. They could see that their arrival was causing a commotion below. They could even hear the cries of alarm. "Bet they think we're a comet," chuckled Tod.

Now he began to circle a bit, for it was hard to identify houses and streets in the dark and from this unfamiliar view. At last Jerry gave a shout of joy. "There's our house--and I bet that's dad coming out to see what's up. Hey, dad!" he yelled, but the running figure below made no answer.

"Well, here goes for Daisy!" chuckled Tod, at the same time pointing the Skyrocket earthward so sharply that it made Jerry gasp. Down, down they shot, the black underneath seeming to be rushing up to crush them. At the last Tod managed to lessen their slant, but even then they struck the ground with a force that almost overturned the machine. Over the rough ground the landing wheels jolted, but slower and slower. A final disrupting jar, and they stopped dead.

Not so the object they had struck. With a wild squeal of fear poor Daisy struggled to her feet and went tearing out of sight and hearing at better speed than she had shown for years.

"That'll bring dad on the jump," declared Jerry, climbing painfully from his seat. "Say, to-morrow I'm going to take a good look at this rod I've been holding to; I'll bet it shows fingermarks."

"What's the meaning of that rumpus out there?" demanded a stern voice.

"Oh, dad--we need you the worst way."

"That you, Jerry? What in tarnation you up to anyhow?"

"We're not up any longer--we're glad to get back to earth."

"Eh?" said Mr. Ring, perplexed, as he came up to them. "What ye driving at? What was that thing that just sailed over the house? Did you see it? I heard Daisy going on out here like the devil before day--or was it you two who were pestering her? What's that contraption you're sitting on?"

"The same thing that just sailed over, dad," laughed Jerry, then, unable to hold in any longer: "We came from Lost Island in Mr. Fulton's aeroplane that he's just invented, and there's robbers in Mr. Fulton's house, and we want you to get a gun and Mr. Bignold and all the neighbors, and go down and get them!" Jerry stopped, but only because he was out of breath.

"Get them? Who are them? And what in thunder you two doing in an aero----" "Oh, dad," Jerry almost screamed in his fear that delay might make them too late, "don't stop to ask questions. Let's get to the house and Tod can be telephoning while I tell you what it's all about." He caught hold of his father's arm to hurry him along. "There are two men breaking into Mr. Fulton's safe this minute, most likely, and we mustn't let them get away."

"Well, what in thunder's Fulton got in a safe that any robber would want?" grumbled Mr. Ring, but stepping briskly along nevertheless. "Two men, you say? Guess Bignold and I can handle them. I've got my old horse-pistol--if it doesn't blow out backwards."

They had reached the house, and Tod went in to telephone, while Mr. Ring went upstairs to get his revolver, which, instead of being a horse pistol, was an automatic of the latest type. Jerry stopped him for a moment at the stair door. "I'm going ahead. I'll be just outside the gate over yonder, keeping an eye on the place to see they don't get away." He was gone before Mr. Ring could object.

But the house was dark and silent. Not a sign of unwelcome visitors was to be seen. All the windows were tightly closed; both doors were shut. Jerry felt uncomfortable. Suppose there was no one there--had been no one there? The two men would roast him and Tod unmercifully. He heard a light step on the walk behind him and turned, expecting his father. His words of greeting died in his throat.

Two men, looking unbelievably big and threatening in the darkness, were almost upon him. He tried to shout for help. His tongue seemed paralyzed and his throat refused to give out a sound. Jerry was scared stiff. He knew at once that these two were the men they had come to capture, and somehow he had a feeling that they knew that, too.

Not a word was said. Jerry had backed up against the gatepost, his fists doubled up at his sides.

The two pressed in close against him. He felt powerful hands reaching out to crush the life out of him, but still he made no outcry. Then one of them spoke.

"You came in the airship?"

Jerry started, for the man's English was perfect, though heavy and foreign sounding in an unexplainable way. He repeated his question when the boy did not answer at once.

"Yes--yes," stammered Jerry, hoping that perhaps he might gain time.

"You came alone?" insinuated the same speaker as before, but now an ominous note of threat in his voice.

Jerry was in a quandary. He realized that if he told them that he had come alone, that they would kill him. On the other hand, if he told them the truth, they would get away.

"Answer!" commanded the man, catching Jerry by the throat and shaking him till the back of Jerry's eyeballs seemed to be red, searing flames. A sudden rage came over him, numbed as he was by the pressure on his windpipe. With a mighty wrench he freed himself. Kicking out with all his might, he caught the farther man full in the pit of the stomach. He fell, all doubled up. But the man who had choked Jerry, laughed scornfully as he caught the boy's arms and gave the one a twist that almost tore it from its socket.

"More spirit than brains," he laughed derisively. "I'll break you in two over my knee if you make another break like that."

"You'll kindly put up your hands in the meanwhile," suggested a pleasant but firm voice which Jerry could hardly recognize as that of his father. "I think I'll take a little hand in this game myself."

"Look out, dad--there's one on the ground!" warned Jerry. "I kicked him in the stomach."

"Pleasant way to treat visitors. Why didn't you invite them into the house, son? Oblige me, gentlemen." He waved his automatic in the general direction of the Fulton front porch. "I'd ask you to my own house, but, you know, womenfolks----"

Jerry stepped out of the way. His assailant passed him and turned to go in the gateway. Then something happened, just what, Jerry was not sure. Afterwards it developed that he had been picked up bodily and hurled full at his father. Mr. Ring went down like a tenpin when the ball hits dead-center. As he fell, his finger pressed the trigger and six roaring shots flashed into the air. When father and son regained their feet, they had a last dim glimpse of two forms in rapid flight. Then the darkness swallowed them up.

"We bungled it," said Mr. Ring, ruefully feeling of a certain soft spot in his body where Jerry's weight had landed.

"And here come Tod--and Chief Bignold, just a minute too late."

"Hi there, Mr. Ring," called the burly constable. "What is it--a riot?"

"A massacre, but all the victims escaped. Two blooming foreigners trying to steal an airship out of Mr. Fulton's safe down there in his cellar--wasn't that what you said, boys?"

The boys tried to explain, but both men seemed to insist on taking the whole affair as a joke, though they talked it over seriously enough when the youngsters were out of hearing. Tod opened the door and let them inside the house, but did not go in himself, motioning to Jerry to stay beside him.

"You two youngsters chase along over to the house and tell Mrs. Ring to give you your nursing bottles and put you to bed."

"Huh," snorted Tod, "we daren't leave the _Skyrocket_ unguarded."

"Why it's Fulton's kid," exclaimed Bignold, for the first time recognizing him. "Say, you tell your dad that he's been stirring up this town till it's wild with excitement. Three telegrams this day, not to mention a special delivery letter that they've been hunting all over the country for him with. And on top of that, an important little man with brass buttons and shoulder-straps, struttin' all over the place and askin' everybody if he's Mr. Fulton, the inventor. When'd your dad get to be an inventor?"

"Well, he had to be born sometime," answered Tod dryly.

"Eh? Well, you'd best tell that same little busy-bee where your father can be found. And the telegrams; don't forget them."

"I won't," answered Tod, starting off toward town on the run. "Watch the old _Skyrocket_ till I get back, will you, Jerry?" and he was gone.

* * * * *

Two stiff, sleepy, disgusted boys sat up in their nest of blankets and looked at each other through the framework of the _Skyrocket_ next morning at something like seven o'clock.

"And you said you wouldn't go to sleep," each said slowly and accusingly to the other, then both grinned sheepishly.

"Oh, well, the machine's still here, so why grouch over a couple hours' sleep?" Tod defended. "Huh--I suppose not. But I'll bet dad had a good laugh over us when he came down here about breakfast time. What's that pinned to your blanket?"

Tod crawled out of his nest and pulled loose the scrap of paper that had been pinned in the region of his big toe.

"It's a note. Want to hear it? It says, 'Mother Ring tells me pancakes are ready for you when you've finished your guard-mount. Signed--A Burglar.' That's sure one on us."

It was scant justice that the two did to breakfast that morning. Four telegrams were burning holes in Tod's pockets; he could hardly keep from tearing them open, so curious was he to know their contents. Even the newspaper that Mrs. King brought in and laid beside their plates, could not entirely hold their attention, in spite of the startling news headlined on the front page. "BREAK WITH GERMANY--U. S. on Verge of Being Drawn Into World War."

"We'll take it with us and read it after we get there. No--not

another cake, Mrs. Ring. Excuse us, please--we've got to go."

"It seems a shame----" began Tod, when they were once more outside, then asked abruptly: "Willing to take a licking, Jerry?"

"And go back on the _Skyrocket_? Did you think we were going any other way? And leave the machine here for anybody to come along and study out--or steal? Not much! I'll take a dozen lickings!"

But he didn't. When the _Skyrocket_ finally circled about Lost Island and settled down over the narrow landing field as easily as a homing pigeon, to come to a stop with hardly a jar, it was bringing news to Mr. Fulton that was bound to soften the heart of any dad.

Tod's father was out in front of the little cabin, a bit pale and shaky, but cheerful. His face lighted up wonderfully when he saw the _Skyrocket_ aground and the two boys safe. He tried to rise to greet them, but had to be satisfied to wave his hand instead. The two boys came running over to where he sat, eager to tell their story.

"What's happened?" Mr. Fulton asked excitedly before they could begin. He was pointing at the newspaper Jerry had been waving wildly as they raced across the open.

"War--maybe--with Germany! But we've more important news than that--for us just now, at least. Telegrams--four of them--look. And an officer's been looking for you----"

"Police?" asked Mr. Fulton gravely.

"Army!" exploded Tod and Jerry together. "Bet it's about the----"

They paused, for Mr. Fulton was not listening to them. He had torn one of the telegraph envelopes open and was reading the brief message, his face going first red and then white.

"What's all the excitement?" demanded a slow voice in which there was a trace of resentment. It was Mr. Harris, who had appeared in the doorway of the cabin.

"Nothing much," answered Mr. Fulton. "Nothing at all. In fact, the excitement's all over. I'm certainly very glad that you balked yesterday on buying that 'pig in a poke,' my dear baronet. It seems," flapping the opened telegram against his other hand, "it seems, my very dear sir, that the American government, being confronted by a situation which bears more than a promise of war, has offered to buy the ideas which are embodied in the _Skyrocket_."

"Hooray for Uncle Sammy!" shouted Tod.

All the boys had come crowding around, slapping Tod and Jerry wildly on the back and cheering till their throats were hoarse. It was fully five minutes before anyone could make himself heard above the din. Finally Mr. Fulton raised his hand for a chance to be heard, and after one rousing shout of "Three cheers for the Scouts of the Air!" the noisy crew quieted down.

"Phil asked me one day if I'd promise you all a front seat at the circus and a ride on the elephant. Well, I'm going to keep my word,

I've got a piece of timber about forty miles up the river from here, and on it there's a log cabin and one of the greatest little old fishing lakes in the country. I'm going to take you all up there for a month of the best sport you ever had."

"Bully for you, dad!" shouted Tod, then turned to Jerry with:

"And while we're there, what say we learn the first principles of Boy Scouting, so that when we get back to Watertown we can organize a patrol of----"

"The Boy Scouts of the Air!" finished Dave and Frank and Jerry in a breath.

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